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## How Come Distributed Work is *Still* the Next Big Thing?

Prepared by:

James Ware

Charles Grantham

The Work Design Collaborative, LLC

[www.thefutureofwork.net](http://www.thefutureofwork.net)

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## Executive Summary

This White Paper explores the fundamental question in the title: how come Distributed Work isn't being embraced to the degree many of us have thought it would be by now? This is a Very Big Question – one that reminds us of the 1990's quandary about collaborative software: why should anyone use it, what gets in the way of widespread use, and what can be done to promote it?

We believe the same three questions have to be asked – and answered – regarding Distributed Work. What makes it compelling in the first place? Why isn't it being embraced more quickly and more widely? And what can or should be done to promote its adoption?

We've divided our response to these questions into three major sections. Part One looks in depth at what we consider to be the compelling business case for Distributed Work. Part Two deals with the sources of resistance – all the factors that help explain why so many organizations have not embraced Distributed Work even in the face of powerful financial and management reasons for doing so. Finally, in Part Three we provide several suggestions and guidelines for leading an organization into a productive transformation towards more distributed work patterns.

### **About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda***

*Future of Work* is a global network of resources – practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, and senior consultants – who are committed to building and implementing physical, social, and technology-based work environments that are cost-effective, socially and environmentally responsible, and personally satisfying.

We are focused on defining the future of work and helping our members and clients achieve new levels of workforce and workplace productivity. *Future of Work* produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work. The Work Design Collaborative, LLC, provides leadership and infrastructure services for the *Future of Work* community.

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Direct inquiries to either Charles Grantham at +1 928.771.9138, or [charlie@thefutureofwork.net](mailto:charlie@thefutureofwork.net), or James Ware at +1 510.558.1434, or [jim@thefutureofwork.net](mailto:jim@thefutureofwork.net)

## Part One: The Business Case for Distributed Work

Okay senior business executives, here we go again: just what is it about distributed work that you don't get?

We've been studying and writing about distributed work and its impact for years (see, for example, Charles Grantham and Larry Nichols, [\*The Digital Workplace: Designing Groupware Platforms\*](#), Nostrand-Reinhold, 1993; Jim Ware, "[Understanding Distributed Work](#)," *Future of Work* White Paper, 2003; and "[Understanding the Hidden Economy](#)," *Future of Work Agenda*, October, 2005). And while there's a lot more remote and distributed workers today than there were even a few years ago, we continue to puzzle over why the adoption rate seems so slow.

There are, after all, plenty of economic and other benefits that have been well-documented over the years, not only by us but others who are even stronger advocates for telecommuting/distributed work/remote work (or whatever you want to call it) than we are.

So we've decided it's time to revisit the business case yet again. But this time we're going to go further and also discuss the sources of resistance to change and what the advocates of distributed work need to do to promote what seems to us to be incredibly obvious.

Now don't get us wrong: we're not saying that remote/distributed work is right for everybody, or for all jobs – and we actually believe that it's not right for *anyone* all the time.

So with those caveats, we're first going to discuss why distributed work is a good idea and identify the business case for embracing it. Then we're going to explore why even after forty years it hasn't become an overnight success. Finally, we'll talk about what distributed work advocates and believers can and should do to increase its rate of adoption in their organizations.

### What's the Business Case?

This is the easy part. There are at least six solid reasons why just about all organizations should establish distributed work programs:

1. Reducing basic workforce support costs;
2. Increasing workforce productivity;
3. Attracting and retaining talent;
4. Increasing organizational agility;
5. Reducing the business risk of disruption from terrorism or a natural disaster
6. Reducing traffic congestion, air pollution, and environmental impact more generally

Let's consider each of these factors briefly.

## **Bottom-Line Economic Benefits**

Our own research and a number of real-world company experiences confirm that an Alternative Workplace Strategy or program can reduce workforce support costs by 40% or more. The biggest and most obvious source of cost reduction is real estate and corporate facilities costs. Companies like Sun Microsystems, Cisco Systems, and IBM have been able to reduce their investments in real estate and facilities by up to 50%, driving costs down by \$50 million or more per year.

Sun Microsystems' iWork program was based largely on the discovery that over one-third of Sun's office-based employees did not "badge in" to their assigned office building on any given day. They were already working at home, traveling, or attending meetings in other Sun facilities. The obvious conclusion was that there was simply no need to Sun to maintain all those empty offices, and the iWork program was created to move thousands of Sun employees into shared workplaces, or "touchdown" facilities that many different people would use over the course of a day or a week.

But there are other, more subtle workforce support cost savings opportunities that go well beyond real estate and facilities. In almost every infrastructure area, from IT to HR to Administrative Support to Management Span of Control, remote/mobile workers operate more independently and need less support than do traditional office-based workers. In order to survive "in the field" distributed workers *have* to learn to work on their own, and to solve their support problems quickly and inexpensively.

True, there are usually some increased technology costs as remote workers go online, making greater use of laptops, cell phones, and PDA's, but in our experience these added technology investments are minuscule relative to the real estate and facilities cost savings. Historically, remote telecommunications access costs were excessive, but recently as high-speed, reasonably-priced Internet access had become almost ubiquitous, added technology cost is no longer a significant issue.

## **Increasing Workforce Productivity**

While the measurement of knowledge worker productivity is a difficult and complex subject, we are convinced from our own research and consulting work with individual organizations that distributed workers are clearly more productive than their office-bound colleagues. We have conducted numerous studies of the productivity differential at both the individual and the group level, and they have consistently shown gains 15% or more for distributed workers.

Just think of the time-wasters that remote workers can avoid: commuting (and the fatigue and stress that goes along with it); inefficient meetings; long lunches and coffee breaks with peers; and the distractions, interruptions, and disturbances that inevitably come from one's cubicle neighbors in traditional office settings.

We've tracked the time that distributed workers spend "on the job" and there is no question that they almost always give back to the company more than 50% of the time they save by not commuting. Moreover, they typically achieve their work goals and produce agreed-on

results in fewer hours – and it’s usually of higher quality too (as reported both by themselves and by their supervisors).

Distributed work really is a win-win for the company and the individual worker. It’s truly a case of getting more done with less effort.

### **Attracting and Retaining Talent**

Our original research on working patterns (conducted over five years ago) was driven by our conviction that knowledge workers today want – no, demand – extensive control over where and when they work. And distributed work – getting things done from wherever they are or want to be, gives them exactly the kind of control they are looking for.

And those knowledge workers – what Richard Florida dubbed “the Creative Class” – are increasingly in the driver’s seat. There is no question that the United States (and most other advanced economies) will be experiencing a severe workforce shortage over the next decade, driven largely by the impending retirement of millions of Baby Boomers with far fewer workers in the following generations. Combine that with the increasing criticality of knowledge and innovation as sources of competitive advantage, and you’ve got a recipe for a “sellers’ market” when it comes to labor. (see, for example, [“Closing the Talent Gap,”](#) *Future of Work Agenda*, January, 2005; and [“The Coming Talent Shortage: It’s Here, and Will Get Much Worse,”](#) *Future of Work* weblog, March 26, 2005).

Not only that, but that scarce talent is also choosing where to live before worrying about who to work for. (see [“In Our Humble Opinion: Reality Bites,”](#) *Future of Work Agenda*, July, 2006; [“Attracting the Young, College-Educated to Cities,”](#) CEOs for Cities, June, 2006).

That’s one more very compelling reason to embrace distributed work – it may be that the only way to get that scarce talent working for you is by hiring “location-independent” employees who have chosen to live in smaller communities far removed from your corporate facilities. As we’ve said over and over, it’s a whole lot less expensive to let the work “go” to the workers than it is to require the workers to come to the work.

### **Increasing Organizational Agility**

This is an easy one. With a large number of remote/distributed workers your business is inherently more flexible and agile (see [“The Agile Workplace,”](#) Gartner Group and MIT, July 2001; [“Enabling Work in a Networked World: Must-Have Intelligence on the Emerging Global Workplace,”](#) CRE2010, CoreNet Global). Your fixed costs of real estate and facilities are minimized. And your business can grow (or shrink) quickly and relatively inexpensively since finding (or disposing of) office space is less likely to be a time-consuming and constraining factor.

With a distributed workforce you are also far more able to respond to local business opportunities, get someone to a client site anywhere in the country more quickly, and better able to tap into local pockets of unique talent (it’s no accident that western Michigan and South Carolina are centers of furniture design talent, New York City is awash with financial experts, Silicon Valley is the place to go for software innovation, and Los Angeles is filled with acting talent, producers, directors, and digital film experts).

## Reducing Business Risk

This one is obvious too. We all know that one of the primary design objectives of the original Internet was to create a redundant network with no mission-critical “center.” If some portion of the Internet is down because of hardware or software crashes, the rest of the Net picks up the slack by rerouting messages and data. Similarly, a distributed business model is far less susceptible to disruption from any kind of disaster, whether it’s terrorism, a hurricane, a snowstorm, an earthquake, or an old-fashioned power outage. With your workforce operating over a wide geographic region and not needing to come into a central facility to be productive, business continuity is a given, not a challenge.

## Minimizing Environmental Impact

This too is an obvious benefit to having your workforce operating in a distributed fashion. The arithmetic here is simple: if every company in a major metropolitan area encouraged (or actually required) its entire workforce to work from home or a in neighborhood satellite facility just one day a week instead of commuting to the central office, the number of cars on the road, and their energy consumption, will drop by 20%. Just think what we could do for energy independence in the United States if we could shift to distributed work models (see [“What Will a World of \\$5 Gas Be Like?”](#) *Future of Work Agenda*, April, 2005).

## Pulling It All Together

So the case for distributed work isn’t only compelling – it’s overwhelming. In fact, we are reminded of something Alvin and Heidi Toffler said way back in the 1970’s in their landmark book *Future Shock*: one of the most unproductive things we do in the entire economy is move millions of bodies into central business districts every morning and then back home again every evening.

In the Industrial Era, given the technologies of that time, there was no choice. Factory workers had to be in the factory to work. Not only that, but all the points on the assembly line had to operate in sync; the activities were tightly interconnected, and highly dependent on each other.

Now, of course, that is no longer true. While a percentage of knowledge work still needs to be done in real time, and in face-to-face settings, certainly much of it can be done asynchronously, and remotely as well. And collaborative technologies are getting better all the time at simulating face-to-face interaction. While there is still no substitute for “being there,” things like [Hewlett-Packard’s Halo videoconferencing systems](#) are beginning quite literally to compete with air travel. And in the current geo-political climate the video system is just likely to win out.

Okay, distributed work is a good thing – economically, socially, environmentally, and for reducing business risk while increasing workplace attractiveness. But it still hasn’t taken off like we think it should (and even HP’s own CIO, Randy Mott, is currently pulling his IT professional staff back from distributed work and requiring them to commute into HP offices every day of the work week).

Sorting out all the costs and benefits of a significant Alternative Workplace Program is difficult; while you may save significant real estate and facilities operational costs, you will most likely incur additional technology and HR expenses (though much of the increased HR cost for training and related transition activity will most likely be offset by reduced recruiting and relocation costs). We've developed a proprietary [ROI Calculator](#) (patent pending) to help provide insight into a range of possible scenarios about the future business profile.

To date every time we've used the ROI Calculator it shows very dramatic gains from moving to a distributed work environment; the Internal Rate of Return of these investments is anywhere from 25% to 70% and more.

In Part Two we're going to take a hard look at why so many companies and their senior executives resist Distributed Work. It's not a pretty picture, but that resistance is a reality that those of us who believe in the value of distributed work have to understand if we ever expect to move beyond ideas and business plans that gather dust on CEOs' bookshelves.

## Part Two: Resistance to Distributed Work

In Part One we identified the six primary reasons that organizations should be embracing distributed work:

1. Reducing basic workforce support costs;
2. Increasing workforce productivity;
3. Attracting and retaining talent;
4. Increasing organizational agility;
5. Reducing the business risk of disruption from terrorism or a natural disaster
6. Reducing traffic congestion, air pollution, and environmental impact more generally

As we've stated many times, we believe those reasons are incredibly compelling. So we continue to be more than a little puzzled about why there isn't more widespread acceptance of distributed work programs (or what some call "alternative workplace strategies") within the corporate community (we've also been tracking the emergence of distributed work programs among public sector organizations; the issues there are somewhat different but the results are very similar).

Actually, we are more frustrated than puzzled, since "organizational inertia" and resistance to change is actually nothing new. In this case, however, the economics are so compelling that we think there ought to be shareholder revolts at every corporate annual meeting. Indeed, it may take that kind of pressure from outraged owners to get senior executives to exercise the kind of leadership and stewardship they're being paid for.

But the only way we're going to convince those leaders to get off their duffs is to understand what's behind their resistance to change, and then knock off their "Yeah, but" excuses one at a time.

We think there are at least eight primary reasons why Distributed Work isn't yet the Big Thing it should be. And, by the way, these are not all "irrational" or "emotional" barriers that can simply be overwhelmed with aggressive leadership.

Distributed Work *is* different than what most people are used to, and some of their fears of the unknown are actually highly rationale given their current circumstances. Distributed Work actually does require new skills, new attitudes, and new management systems (but we're getting ahead of ourselves; see Part Three next month for our action recommendations).

Here's the eight barriers to Distributed Work that we're going to address here and now:

1. Inherent human inertia against externally imposed change
2. Organizational inertia
3. Management habits and Industrial-Age thinking
4. Fear on the part of middle managers

5. Fear on the part of front-line workers
6. Uncertainty about communication and relationships in a distributed environment
7. The CEO “Edifice Complex” that leads to visible corporate facilities
8. Plain old complexity – Distributed Work is truly a Big Change

Let’s look at these things one at a time.

## 1. Inherent Human Inertia Against Externally Imposed Change

We are decidedly not of the opinion that people just naturally resist change. Every organization we’ve ever worked with has been full of people who are actively seeking change and improvement. The issue isn’t with change *per se*; it’s with *imposed* change. Our view is that people resist being changed, because that means loss of personal control and generates an unknown future where they fear being less successful than they are in the present.

Actually, resistance to being changed is very normal, and basically rational. When someone is told they’re going to be thrust into a new situation (especially with little or no preparation, or even an opportunity to think about why the change might actually be good for them), all kinds of fears and questions come bubbling up: “What will it be like? Will I be able to be effective? What if I don’t like it? What if my boss expects me to be more productive, but I don’t have the skills she expects? Why can’t we just do it the way we’ve been doing it – which doesn’t take a whole lot of effort on my part?”

For people who are used to coming into an office every day, Distributed Work places a huge premium on self-reliance and on being productive and work-focused even in the absence of the work-culture “messages” that every corporate facility sends nonstop.

Most of us have grown so accustomed to those messages that we don’t realize how much “pressure” they impose. Just think about a typical office where most of what you see is others “at work,” and the boss walking down the hall every now and then, and you are surrounded by all the physical reminders that this is a workplace: a lobby with a receptionist and secure doors; ID badges around everyone’s neck; cubicles and conference rooms; institutional furniture; bland paintings on bland walls; rows of filing cabinets; a big nondescript wall clock; large fluorescent lighting; wall-to-wall tinted window glass, dark carpeting, etc., etc.).

Being suddenly thrust into a totally different physical setting (like a spare bedroom at home) can be jarring, and it takes time to learn new behaviors in the face of familiar surroundings that in the past were never associated with “work.”

## 2. Organizational Inertia

Most (though admittedly not all) organizational cultures are strongly biased towards stability, predictability, and efficiency. That, after all, is what the Industrial Age, when most large organizations were born and grew up, needs and rewards.

But even though a bias for stability in today's Information/Innovation Economy is the next worst thing to calcification, it's also the reality that permeates every large enterprise these days. And when all the cultural as well as the physical signals point towards stability and away from change, that's what you get.

Distributed Work represents a Very Big Change (see Barrier 8, below), and that's exactly what organizations have learned to fend off, fight, and actively prevent.

### **3. Management Habits and Industrial-Age Thinking**

Industrial-Age managers, and even Information-Age managers who grew up in the Industrial Age (and that's just about every one of us) have been taught that "management by walking around" is essential. It's important to interact with your staff on a regular basis, and not just about work-related activities. Walking the halls, stopping to share a cup of coffee or tea, observing pictures of kids and recreational events – that's what "good" management is all about. Organizational effectiveness is, after all, about people, motivation, and inspiration. And we all believe basically that face-to-face human interaction is the best way to understand and solve problems, build relationships, and guide behavior.

Distributed Work flies in the face of that conventional wisdom. One of the underlying – and usually unstated – assumptions about Distributed Work is that with today's IT capabilities we can communicate and interact with others no matter where they – or we – are.

So, once again, moving to a Distributed Work environment where people are out more than they are in, where you rely on conference calls and emails for communication, is a Really Big Change. It may come naturally for some kinds of people (and of course some folks have been working that way for years), but for many who are used to life in traditional corporate facilities, it is a very difficult transition.

### **4. Middle Management Fear**

Which leads right to the next source of resistance: the fear factor. Middle managers in particular, who remain accountable for organizational performance no matter what new "program" is being implemented, fear Distributed Work because it removes opportunities for direct observation and interaction with their subordinates, it requires new behaviors and skills on their part, and it creates a very understandable concern that they may not be successful in the "new world."

They fear not only obsolescence, but also irrelevance. One thing we've learned over the years is that for individuals to operate successfully as remote or mobile workers they must become much more independent and self-reliant. That means everything from starting to work in the morning even if no one is "watching" to learning how to install your own software and do your own debugging when the computer or the modem crashes. It's only natural that such self-reliant workers actually require less formal "management," and therefore fewer managers.

Our research clearly shows that distributed work organizations can operate very successfully with a much higher management span of control (meaning that you literally need far fewer front-line managers in a distributed work environment).

And that, of course, is what it's really all about: control. It's actually much more difficult (or at least it *feels* much more difficult) for both frontline managers and senior executives to imagine how they can "control" (or guide, or even influence) remote workers who aren't regularly visible.

Make no mistake about it: maintaining a sense of being part of the organization, and of understanding what the company is all about, is definitely more difficult with a widely dispersed workforce – even though today there are plenty of Internet-based tools that enable managers to communicate to and with those distributed workers frequently and effectively (but see Barrier 6, below).

Finally, there is one very logical, and wholly understandable, management fear: the risk of losing critical information either because of a lack of network security or because one of those distributed workers loses a laptop crammed with proprietary software and databases. Network security is nowhere as serious a threat as many uninformed managers think it is, but it is a serious issue that requires careful attention. And there seems to be a news story every other week of some remote worker who has had a laptop full of data stolen from a car, an airline club, or a hotel room. That's a very real risk that will never be completely eliminated, no matter how careful the company is with backup, awareness building, and password-protection schemes.

So those middle management fears are actually very well-founded – and, again, relatively rational.

## **5. Front-Line Workforce Fear**

The mirror image of managers' fears about Distributed Work is the anxiety experienced by those front-line workers who suddenly find themselves spending a lot of time away from the corporate "womb." Not only are there new skills to master, no familiar work environment cues, and no co-workers to provide social stimulation and work-related norms of behavior, but on top of all those changes there is also the fear that "no one will see what I'm doing."

Perhaps the biggest fear of individual distributed workers is that the organization (and in particular the next level of management) will more or less forget about someone who isn't there everyday actively demonstrating how hard he or she is working and how committed they are to the company.

While those who have learned to work independently typically come to love Distributed Work for its freedom, convenience, and self-control, those who haven't yet experienced it are almost always genuinely afraid of the changes it represents.

## **6. New Forms of Communication and New Media**

In spite of the virtues of modern information technology that seems to enable any-time, any-place work, there is plenty of evidence that the medium does matter (to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan).

The two of us certainly continue to believe that for some kinds of communication and problem-solving there really is no substitute for face-to-face interaction and same-time, same-place work.

But when we rely on electronic media for communication in a distributed work environment (as virtually all remote and mobile workers do), there is a substantive difference in how our messages are received, understood, and accepted. Like it or not, a telephone call is less “rich” than a face-to-face exchange, and an email conveys far less information than a phone call. And so on.

These differences have a significant impact not only on day-to-day communication but, more importantly, on the formation and evolution of the relationships that create context for communication and problem-solving. That’s why we always insist on scheduling face-to-face meetings at key points in the life of a distributed project team. You just can’t sit down and “break bread together” when you are separated by miles and miles of geography.

In our experience, most people who move into distributed work environments understand this “The medium is the message” reality intuitively, and it understandably makes them uncomfortable and uneasy (at least at first).

## **7. The CEO “Edifice Complex”**

Like it or not, senior executives, who are more or less human beings most of the time (sorry ,couldn’t help that cheap shot), find value and take pleasure in seeing the company name on a big and impressive office complex.

There is something very visceral and very real about this need to make a statement about the company’s (and therefore the CEO’s) success. And more than just the name on the building, there’s a strong need to see the workforce streaming in every morning and filling up all those empty spaces.

This need to see the physical manifestation of the company’s success – its people, its activities, and its physical structures – is very real, and completely understandable. And it’s not just to make the senior executives feel good; the physical reality of the company is also important to customers, investors, and industry analysts; the presence of the buildings and the workforce make the company seem substantial and successful.

It’s certainly a lot harder to “show off” a distributed workforce.

## **8. Complexity: Distributed Work is a “Big Change”**

As we’ve said several times already, moving to a distributed work environment involves many kinds of change, on many dimensions (and we haven’t even mentioned the need for significant business process reengineering to accommodate location-independence in work flows). In short, it’s a big job when it’s done right, and the very complexity (and cost) of the transition means its often done poorly.

This reality, coupled with the fact that many organizational attempts to implement Distributed Work have floundered or outright failed, leads a majority of senior executives to be (rightfully, we think) cautious and a bit conservative about the whole idea.

But while caution is commendable, we believe the opportunity cost of failing to take advantage of the benefits of Distributed Work is inexcusable. As we discussed in Part One, the economic benefits are enormous, and we believe the additional advantages of becoming a preferred employer, of drawing on a global workforce, and of attracting and retaining talent, far outweigh the risks. In Part Three, below, we offer our advice on just how to accomplish those goals.

## **Part Three: Making Distributed Work “Work”**

In Part One, above, we discussed the reasons why distributed work should be a Big Thing. We highlighted six benefits of distributed work:

1. Reducing basic workforce support costs;
2. Increasing workforce productivity;
3. Attracting and retaining talent;
4. Increasing organizational agility;
5. Reducing the business risk of disruption from terrorism or a natural disaster; and
6. Reducing traffic congestion, air pollution, and environmental impact more generally

When you think about it, there's your basic business case – just take those six factors and apply them to your own organization.

But of course it's never that simple. First you need to know what business challenges your organization is facing. What's important to your senior executives right now? Which of those six factors hold the most promise – the biggest bang – for your organization?

Once you are clear about your business priorities, then you can think seriously about whether a distributed work approach would help solve those problems, enable your strategy, or otherwise strengthen your position in the marketplace. It's absolutely essential to look at distributed work in the context of your business requirements.

Okay, so you've clarified what matters to the business and you believe personally that an a more distributed approach to work makes sense. What next?

In our experience, you should conduct three important analytic exercises, each one designed to deepen your understanding of how distributed work will affect the organization and its workforce. And each one addresses an important question that your senior executives will want answered:

1. What are the economic and organizational opportunities that a transformation to distributed work offers?
2. Which jobs, and which people, could be distributed?
3. Are we ready for change, and capable of achieving the changes necessary to move into a distributed work program?

Let's consider these questions one at a time.

### **What are the economic and organizational opportunities that a transformation to distributed work offers?**

This is a critical question for any organization. Senior executives want to know – and certainly should demand to know – how this kind of transformation will affect the organization's operations, both financially and in terms of staffing levels, technology requirements, and HR programs and policies.

The challenge is that the kind of changes required to move successfully into a distributed work environment are complex and interdependent. There are often obvious savings in real estate and facilities costs, but those savings are typically offset at least partially by increased expenditures in technology, training, and other IT and HR costs. We've seen far too many distributed work programs derailed because no one had sorted out the second- and third-order budgetary and staffing consequences of the change.

Here again we've developed an analytic tool to help project all the potential financial consequences of the distributed work program. Not incidentally, our "ROI Calculator" also helps define the overall business case for the transformation.

The ROI Calculator is a decision support tool that enables management to consider and examine a wide variety of options, including changes in the number of employees who move into distributed work arrangements, the number of "touchdown" spaces provided in the corporate facilities, changes in support staff levels, investments in training programs, and so on. The tool even recognizes our long-time observation that once distributed workers settle into their new routines their productivity is typically about 15% higher than their "office-bound" colleagues.

### **Which jobs, and which people, could be distributed?**

While the ROI Calculator can give you a good overall feeling for the business benefits of distributed work in your organization, it won't help you determine in any operational detail which jobs and which people would thrive in such a new work arrangement.

Furthermore, every organization will have a different "portfolio" of jobs, tasks, activities, and people who are right for distributed work. Many knowledge-based jobs can be moved into part-time or full-time distributed work environments because they involve:

- ◆ significant amounts of "heads-down" individual work;
- ◆ communication with others that is most frequently via telephone, email, or instant messaging;
- ◆ projects that include team members who are already remote;
- ◆ frequent travel to other locations, within the company, or with clients or service providers ;
- ◆ significant variety in work activities – moving back and forth between individual and group work, between data collection, analysis, and report writing.

Just as important as the dominant work activities is the preferred work style of the individuals doing those activities. Some people prefer to work more alone and without interruption, whereas others are more effective when they are in constant interaction with others. Some of us are naturally introverts, while some are extraverts who really crave being surrounded by others.

We have developed a [Workforce Survey](#) that helps to identify the work activity patterns that individual workers are currently following, as well as their preferred ways and places of

working. We find it a useful and insightful component of a distributed work program, in that it not only provides you with important data about jobs and individual knowledge workers' preferences, but it also provides those surveyed with an opportunity to express their needs and their desires regarding their work environments – and that's an important aspect of engaging them in the work design effort.

### **Are we ready for change, and capable of achieving the changes necessary to move into a distributed work program?**

As we suggested in Part Two, embracing and implementing distributed work amounts to a big and complex change in organizational systems, procedures, processes, culture, and management. It's not something to be undertaken casually.

No matter how compelling the case for distributed work may be for your organization, if you don't have the fundamental experience, skills, and leadership required to achieve the needed changes, you won't succeed. So we've also developed what we call the "[Organizational Assessment System™](#)," or OAS, to determine how prepared and capable the organization is for change.

The OAS is designed to provide decision makers with a reliable, quantifiable assessment of a work group's *potential* for successfully making a transition to a new way of working. Whatever the vision of the end state of an organizational change process is, you have to know:

1. How well is the direction of the workgroup articulated and communicated to the talent in the group?
2. How much human capital exists and how is it developed?
3. How well does the group deliver on its value proposition to its customers?
4. How close are its information systems to 'state of the practice'?
5. How well does its planning and improvement process operate?
6. What is the availability of, and potential to provide, appropriate physical facilities to support emerging forms of work process?

### **Summary**

If you can develop a proposal for a distributed work program that effectively addresses these three questions and provides your executives with "hard" data in each area, you will be well on your way to gaining executive approval and sponsorship for the program.

However, answering those questions is really just the beginning. Once the case has been made, and you have determined that the organization is capable of making the transition, then you've got a major planning and implementation task ahead of you. And of course there are plenty of speed bumps on the road to the future. But if you've done your homework and spread the word along the way, the journey shouldn't be too painful.

There's an Aikido principle that the best way to overcome resistance is to deflect it. We think that's a good strategy for building support for distributed work (or alternative work

programs). Overcome the natural preference for the status quo by generating a desire for something new and better. Overcome tradition by building on it, not destroying things that work just because you've advocated doing something different. Lastly, overcome fear of the unknown by enabling executives, managers, and the broader workforce alike to help create their own future.

We'll close with just a few broad implementation lessons we've learned (often the hard way) in working with a number of organizations over the past several decades. Of course there's a long story behind each of these guidelines, but we'll leave those details for another time.

- ◆ Organizational readiness and capacity for change is a gating factor in distributed work programs. You just can't be too well-prepared for change.
- ◆ Convincing people of the business benefits is critical to success.
- ◆ Be clear and consistent in all your messaging.
- ◆ Publicize success stories for both employees and managers. Make new heroes of those who make distributed work work.
- ◆ Training and communication for *all* managers and employees (not just those directly affected) are essential components of an alternative work program
- ◆ Remember: cost recovery is related to speed of implementation.
- ◆ Plan to reinvest a portion of the initial savings during the first twelve months to fund the implementation effort.

Finally, if you are interested in pursuing this topic further, we can recommend several additional sources.

First, for a somewhat more detailed description of WDC's own analytic tools, please visit the "Products" page of our website, at [http://www.thefutureofwork.net/what\\_products.html](http://www.thefutureofwork.net/what_products.html)

Second, for a lengthier and more conceptual look at distributed work, read our white paper "[Understanding Distributed Work](#)," also available on the website.

Finally, for a somewhat more formal discussion of how to develop a workplace strategy, see our article in the [May 2004 issue](#) of the *Future of Work Agenda* newsletter, "[Workplace Strategy: How Do You Do It?](#)"