

FASTCOMPANY

Workplace 1.5

Managing teleworkers--at home, at work, as Starbucks.

From: [Issue 100](#) | November 2005 | Page 105 **By:** Christopher Percy Collier

For more than a decade, people have been talking about virtual offices and saying we're all going to telecommute. If the cubicle farm's ever going to go belly up, now's the time, thanks to wireless technology and broadband Internet. This year, there are 19.5 million "distributed workers." That's up from 10.9 million in 2000. But how do you manage all those workers beavering away in places and at times you can't control? To find out, we spoke with Jim Ware and Charlie Grantham, the cofounders of Work Design Collaborative LLC.

What are the benefits of a distributed work model?

Jim Ware: Most companies see it as a chance to take out a significant operating cost. But there's pretty clear evidence that distributed workers are more productive. They're not spending as much time commuting, in hallways gabbing, or in meetings that are fairly unproductive. And people tend to give that time back to the company.

Charlie Grantham: If an executive were to come up to me and ask, "Do you think my company would benefit from moving to this new operating model?" the first question I'd ask is, To what degree does your company depend upon creativity and innovation for competitive advantage? There's a wealth of talent out there that normally can't be tapped into if you have to move the people to the work.

How do workplaces change with distributed workers?

CG: Sun Microsystems has a program called iWork: a network of 127 remote work sites around the world. Employees can go to one of these locations for part of the workweek to plug in. Once Sun gave people this opportunity, getting them to come back to their assigned workplace was very difficult. These workplaces look and feel more residential. We're already starting to see

housing developments with separate community offices attached in places like suburban Atlanta.

JW: Leaders need to start thinking of corporate offices like town halls--a gathering place where people come only when they need to be together, while being a place that evokes a sense of company identity when you're there.

Are town-hall meetings how you compensate for a lack of face-to-face interaction?

JW: You have to start making explicit some of those informal implicit interactions--the coffee breaks and the lunch breaks and walking down the hall.

CG: It drives some managers nuts. They see this as goof-off time that's nonproductive. They don't understand that having this social capital pays off in the long run. The payback comes when a problem arises and somebody says, "Why don't we call Charlie? He has some experience with that." The stronger the social network, the more productive the team.



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