

Most would agree that the future workplace in any country is determined by the speed of technological change. Yes, offices are going to disappear, employees become digitally independent and we will be sending messages to each other at the speed of light, but there is another element and that is demographics. For example, if technology or economic recession eliminates 25 % of jobs by the year 2020 and the population of the world increases by 10 %, there will be considerable social changes taking place. We were not prepared for the technological explosion which has taken place in the last 10 years. Let us hope we are prepared for the social changes which may hit us in the next 20 years. The ageing of the population will also have major implications and there is expected to be a revolution in social services worldwide.

The growth in technology will, and already is, changing the education system, and more changes are expected. The education system is giving students the opportunity to educate themselves in the same way as employees are managing their own careers, future generations will become more and more independent and because of the Internet will be more entrepreneurial. It will therefore become increasingly difficult to "manage" employees as successive generations become more "knowledgable" than their managers. Demanding employee compliance is also expected to become more difficult and as employees and future managers alike become more independent they are more likely to demand a stake in their employer's business as in the case of stock options at the moment.

Before we get carried away into thinking that employees are going to take over their employers, another key change is occurring. As we have observed it is impossible to achieve much success without using the Internet, either for commercial use or as a search engine for economic, business or environmental research. The percentage of people who have access to the Internet currently varies between 20-50% in most countries of the world. This will slowly increase but other things are happening like faster speed, improvement in international links and the removal of trade barriers through organizations like the WTO. The 80/20 rule is still likely to prevail and whilst 20% of the population moves ahead, the remaining 80% will probably stay well behind, thus creating a huge workforce for more routine work, for which there may be less demand in 2020.

The social development which we all fear therefore is unemployment. In today's world this is not well handled anywhere and lengthy periods of unemployment amongst large numbers of people can cause both economic and social unrest. This will be a major challenge in most parts of the world and it will continue to be a major issue in Africa and Asia.

Technology is providing most of us with a cellphone, a PC, a PDA and a remote Internet connection which is creating a virtual world for us, but it will become even more so a real world. In this real world we will become absolutely independent and those with skills in demand will be able to choose their own employment and more and more will be running their own businesses and providing the services which they have learned from previous employers. The advantages of working independently are that it provides an opportunity for individuals to choose their own working hours and ironically although they may be working longer hours more real time may be spent with their families. It also gives gifted people the freedom to operate and create ideas without the restrictive influence of the traditional office organisation structure.

Governments, banks, insurance companies, telecommunications companies, food companies and pharmaceuticals will continue to be the major employers of people and technology is expected to maximize the efficiency of their products and services. Mergers and acquisitions will continue if only because most mergers tend to be successful in reducing costs and improving services and one of the ways in the Western world of avoiding take-over is by increasing market capitalization.

What will the workplace look like for the average employee? Well, it will be somewhere that skills and commitment will be demanded at all times. In 20 years time opportunities for unqualified people may disappear altogether, such will have been the surge in the demands for skilled people. The level of productivity an employee achieves is likely to outweigh in importance the number of working hours he completes. Productivity in fact will become all important and excessive demands will encourage highly skilled workers to set up their own businesses.

Schools and universities will focus more on providing students with independence and developing technical and business skills at an earlier stage in their careers. Even today it is possible in some parts of the world for a 15 year old to run his own business through the Internet in his spare time and this will intensify as more and more young people become Internet-literate at an earlier age.

Technology will be providing more and more information for decision-makers who will be able to focus even more on profitability and productivity. Competition therefore will intensify to such an extent that only people with multiple skills will survive at a senior level in the company.

Will the workplace be better ? Well, it will be better for some and not so good for others, exactly as it is today but what is very clear is that it will be very different.

## THE FUTURE WORKPLACE



by Paul Hawkins