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FIRM MANAGEMENT

Work is What You Do, Not Where You Go!

Whether we like it or not, cloud and mobile technologies are catapulting us toward an anytime/anywhere work environment. No longer are we bound by the four walls we call "the office" to check things off our to-do list. This shift of work being completely about what you do, and not about where you do it is a significant one.

Jim Boomer • Apr. 29, 2013



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The alarm goes off at 6am and, if you're like many today, you grab for your smart phone (after all, it is your alarm clock). But you also use it to check email and your calendar and so much more, so you might as well get a head start on your day, right?

And you likely get some additional work done on another device or two like an iPad or laptop before you ever step foot in the office. You may even stop into the coffee shop on your way in for some uninterrupted time to knock out some emails.

Whether we like it or not, cloud and mobile technologies are catapulting us toward an anytime/anywhere work environment. No longer are we bound by the four walls we call “the office” to check things off our to-do list. This shift of work being completely about what you do, and not about where you do it is a significant one.

It’s not just the shift of our physical location but it also requires a mental shift – for the worker, the manager and the entire team. And, despite some recent moves by major companies like Yahoo! and Best Buy to reign remote workers back in to the office, I don’t see the spread of virtual employees slowing down anytime soon.

Important Trends

How does this impact you and your firm? This shift is driving a number of trends in our profession that will have lasting impacts into the future.

- First, we are seeing more firms (and businesses in general) give up the brick-and-mortar altogether and move to a virtual office. At the 2013 Winning is Everything Conference, Rebecca Ryan, Founder of Next Generation of Consulting, shared the statistic that from 2011 to 2012, the percentage of virtual firms doubled from 4 to 8 percent.
- Second, and somewhat related to the first, is the fact that the cloud has lowered the hurdle for new startup firms. There is no longer the burden of huge up-front technology capital expenditures on the hardware or software side. Just solidify your client list, fire up a monthly subscription to a number of cloud solutions and you can be in business the next day.
- Third, many firms that do choose to maintain physical locations are looking at office space from a very different perspective. Rather than build out huge spaces that guarantee offices and cubicles for every employee, they are now looking into hoteling where desks are unassigned and employees select an available spot for a certain period of time (a practice employed by the larger firms for many years).

Change in Thinking

The biggest challenge in making the shift from work being less about the physical office to more about results regardless of location is the mindset. As I previously

stated, it's a different ballgame for the worker, their manager and for their teammates. Let's look at each individually.

- **Worker** – Not everyone has the self-discipline to be effective outside of a structured office environment. Work-from-home wasn't meant for everyone. You must be a disciplined, organized self-starter to be effective in this environment. With no one looking over your shoulder, you must rely on yourself to get you going. Equally challenging is the discipline to turn it off and return to your personal life.
- **Manager** – Despite all the great management theory that is out there, many managers still rely on some of the easiest metrics to measure – the activity they can see with their own eyes. As a virtual manager, you have to be much more proactive in communicating with your employees about the projects they are working on. You no longer have the regular face-to-face meetings to get updates but, just as importantly, to build relationship. You almost have to over communicate in a virtual environment and ensure that you make time for the small talk. Establishing expectations and a structure of accountability is also important. We use 90-day game plans and quarterly accountability reviews to ensure projects stay on track.
- **Team members** – The entire team must also adjust because the ad-hoc meetings that happened in the office or the drive-by discussions need to be intentional rather than spontaneous. Much like the manager, teams need to be proactive in their communication and ensure that they don't get sucked into their own little worlds. Video conferencing can be a great tool to communicate face-to-face when you can't do so physically.

The trend of firms moving toward less office space (or no space) and offering options for employees to work remotely continues to grow. It is becoming a differentiator for some firms in the hiring process and I believe it will be a deal-breaking criterion for some candidates. Now is the time to start having the internal discussions and planning from both technology and mental perspectives for the shift to a more virtual workforce. If it hasn't arrived in your firm yet, it's likely coming soon.

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