

It's work, but not as we know it

Chill-out zones, napping cubicles and two-day weeks might sound like science fiction, but experts are predicting dramatic changes in the office by 2017. Liz Hollis reports

The harsh lighting and banks of cubicles have gone – replaced by a home-from-home vibe with giant communal desks, showers, chill-out zones and even a specially-designed pod where you can power nap after your 2am virtual meeting across time zones.

It's a comfortable office now, designed to entice the army of e-lancers to actually come in to headquarters, but you only work there two days a week. Time sheets have long gone and these days you decide when you want to go in. With the new permanent connection to a voice-activated "super-web", you are free to work where and when you feel like it, as long as you meet the deadlines.

This is how the office of 2017 might look. It's work, but not as we know it, because the workplace will have changed beyond recognition.

"Expect a quantum shift in the world of work," says Anne Lise Kjaer, chief executive of Kjaer Global and a futurist who predicts upcoming trends. "Within a few years, the very phrase 'going to work' will be meaningless. Work will be what we do, not a place we go to."

She says a raft of social trends will drive the changes, including increasing spiritual and emotional awareness, smart technology, globalisation, the rise of Asia and the new economies, and female empowerment.

Futurist Ray Hammond agrees that we will see mindblowing advances in technology at work. "We will be permanently connected to a ubiquitous super-web that will utterly blur the lines between corporate life and personal life. Homo sapiens is about to become homo virtualis."

He says that Google will grow exponentially into the equivalent of a functioning world brain. "If you think Google is pretty good now, just wait and see how it develops over the next decade. It will become like having a super-intelligent companion with you at all times that replies to your voice-activated questions in a natural tone.

Future perfect?

Pervasive connectivity You will be permanently connected to a ubiquitous, voice-activated "super-web".

Spiritual awareness New emphasis in the workplace on holistic wellbeing, environment and ethics, as well as empowerment and fulfilment.

No-cubicle culture The banks of desks and cubicles will be replaced by enhanced communal areas.

The rise of the "yepie" A new breed of employee who is motivated by collecting experiences, not material goods.



Google, known for its innovative office environments, also looks set to shape our working lives in other ways during the next decade Chris Gascolgne/VIEW

You'll have it wherever you are; at the pool, on a bus, sunning yourself on a Caribbean beach." Unfortunately, it will be almost impossible to switch off and escape from your job.

Technology will see companies outsourcing more tasks, and every worker in the UK will be on first-name

terms with a colleague in India or China. A company's core workforce will be much smaller and there will be more independent virtual working, or "e-lancing".

Alongside the technological advances, futurists predict a radical shift towards a more spiritual and emotional era. Kjaer says we are entering the "emotional decade", and ethics and spirituality will prevail in the workplace. "People have discovered that money alone doesn't buy happiness and they will be looking elsewhere for meaning. A good salary package won't be enough to keep staff. Companies will have to empower workers and enhance their physical and mental wellbeing, too. We will want work to be life-enhancing and the companies we work for to be ethical. We will be looking for emotional connection and empowerment on all levels," she says.

She also predicts the rise of a powerful new breed of worker, called the yepie (young experimenting perfection-seeker). Unlike yuppies, their goal in life is to accumulate experiences rather than worldly goods. Yepies will expect to work for a company that offers life-enhancing perks such as charity

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work sabbaticals in Africa, a Polar expedition to test body and soul, life-coaching, pampering treatments and nutritious snacks and meals.

By 2017, the physical environment at work will have changed drastically, too. Offices will encourage more collaboration by banishing the isolating cubicles and bringing in more communal areas and break-out zones. "People will never stop going to the office completely, because they like human contact. But most people will only need to go two or three days a week," says Hammond. "Those days will be spent ideas-sharing and collaborating."

Companies will have to work hard to entice workers in, and this will see

workplaces that look more like homes, with kitchens, showers, living areas, chill-out zones and even nap stations.

Andi Gibbs, director of Art Architecture, which specialises in innovative office design, suggests we are entering a new era of "lifestyle at work". He predicts the rise of the no-cubicle culture, with offices of the future encouraging far more collaboration between workers than exists today.

"The best design will ensure nobody is hidden away in isolation. Instead, the workplace will operate more like a hub, removing office boundaries – merging the public with the private and bringing in inspiring communal areas, such as a staff meeting area that doubles as a public art gallery and cafe."

The future is also bright for female and older workers. Drastic skills shortages will see companies desperate to retain mothers and 50-plus employees in the workplace. Jobs will be sculpted to fit lives as workers organise their own work patterns and jobs become more autonomous.

"I am optimistic about the workplace in 2017," says Kjaer. "I think it will be a better place to be."