



Reprinted from *Future of Work Agenda*
September 2009

Compass: Going Mobile Overnight

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It's fall here in North America, and the flu season is upon us. Most of us know there's a greater risk than normal this year because of the H1N1 virus, commonly known as Swine Flu. Clearly, we all hope it won't turn into a pandemic, but that possibility remains very real.

However, this isn't a plea for you to get a flu shot (though you should, and we certainly plan to). Rather, it's a reminder that unlikely but possible events like a pandemic, a hurricane, an earthquake, a transit strike, or—heaven help us—a terrorist attack could play havoc with your business. As Alvin Toffler pointed out many years ago, it's those low probability/high impact external events that can create genuine "future shock" if you haven't included them in your thinking.

While many organizations do have detailed business continuity and risk abatement plans, our experience suggests that very few of those plans include the best response of all: a remote/mobile work program.

We realized recently that most of our research and consulting has been focused on the business benefits of remote/mobile work programs, along with defining the management practices that are essential to guiding an organizational transition into a long-term, fundamental shift to flexible work arrangements.

But many organizations aren't ready to launch the major organizational changes needed to implement a flexible work program (we've suggested why in our 2006 white paper "[How Come Distributed Work is Still the Next Big Thing](#)" – downloadable at no charge). Yet those organizations are no less vulnerable to the risk of a sudden, unexpected event that prevents their employees from getting to their normal workplaces.

Even if we haven't yet convinced you of the value of distributed work as a way of life, you need to be thinking about—and preparing for—the possibility that you will experience a disruption of some kind that could require your workforce to work remotely, even if for just a few days.

(For our arguments in favor of a more fundamental commitment to mobile work, see "[What Are You Waiting For?](#)" from the July/August newsletter. It's our most recent thinking about the business case for just doing it. And take another look at "[Fleeing the Cuckoo's Nest](#)," from October 2008.)

Do you remember the anthrax scare that closed the Senate office building in Washington, DC, shortly after the 9/11 attacks? Impressively, thousands of federal government employees shifted to working remotely over a weekend. Of course that didn't just happen; it was possible because the federal IT organization had anticipated the possibility and set up both technology and management procedures that enabled those employees to access their digital files and communicate with each other remotely (see Chapter 8 of [Consumer Evolution](#), Wiley, 2002, by Charlie and Judy Carr, for more details about this story)

And in April 2007 the San Francisco Bay Area experienced a serious disruption to normal commuting when a tanker truck overturned, caught fire, and brought down a section of a highway ramp leading to the Bay Bridge. There were the usual offers of free rides on mass transit ("[Free rides today as transit leaders work on plans](#)" – San Francisco Chronicle, April 30, 2007). But thousands of workers simply stayed home and participated in conference calls, worked on their own computers, emailed documents back and forth, and remained reasonably productive.

We're sure you can come up with many similar stories. Earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, ice storms, blizzards, and other natural disasters have caused plenty of commuting difficulties over the years. Organizations have spent millions of dollars on backup data centers, disaster recovery plans, employee phone trees, and other means of ensuring business continuity.

But how many executives think of distributed work as a form of insurance? Even if your "normal" workplace strategy is to have most, or all, of your employees "in the office" on a regular basis, you also should be able to flip into a remote/distributed mode instantaneously, and on a moment's notice (in our humble opinion, that's another example of what our 2007 book [Corporate Agility](#) was all about).

Don't forget that the very concept of the Internet itself is that a distributed network with no real "center" can't be destroyed by either natural or manmade disasters. If part of the network goes "down" traffic just gets rerouted. The Internet was "invented," or evolved, as a national defense mechanism to ensure continuity of communications and information access. Shouldn't your business follow the same model of distributed assets?

We started thinking more seriously about this need for "instant mobility" a few weeks ago, after a conversation with our friend **Eric Bensley**, associate product marketing manager for [Citrix Online](#) and contributor to the [workshifting.com](#) blog. Eric told us that the company offers an "insurance" version of its remote access product [GoToMyPC Corporate](#).

Organizations can purchase a special version of Citrix Online's software called the "GoToMyPC Corporate Business Continuity Option" at a relatively low price. It sits on employees' desktops unused but ready to be launched at any time it's needed (Disclaimer: we don't normally mention or endorse specific products, but this is a Very Important Idea, and we want to acknowledge Eric as a primary source of our thinking about mobile work as "organizational insurance").

What are **you** doing to make sure your business can survive a disruption? Given today's technology capabilities, there's simply no excuse for not having a remote/mobile work plan in place, even if your business strategy and/or your corporate culture still requires most employees to be "at the office" most of the time.

[Please also send your comments directly to us.](#) We look forward to learning from you.

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

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