



Reprinted from *Future of Work Agenda*
November, 2008

Compass: Do I Really Need to be There?

By Charlie Grantham

This is a short piece meant to whet your appetite for more in-depth work. The question presented to us a couple of week ago was, essentially, “Just what *is* the business value of ‘presence’?” It was posed in the context of a question that many others having been asking for years: why hasn’t video conferencing really taken off? What are the more interactive 3D technologies going to do differently?

Here’s our short answer.

As we emerge from the valley of despair in the technology world, we return to a long-sought-after goal. How can we use technology to improve the performance of people working together while apart (i.e., at the same time but not in the same place)? The core of that goal is to provide reliable, realistic three-dimensional interactivity over the Web to a desktop or off-the-shelf laptop. The proponents of a technology solution are seeking a genuine sense of *presence* (ie, “just like being there”) that has been missing in all other software applications.

The business problem that 3D Interactive technologies will solve is the need for integration of virtual and real workplaces. The psychological makeup of human beings demands an ability to move seamlessly back and forth between the virtual world and the real “physical” one.

One of the broad goals of any business is to reduce the cost of these kinds of interactions without sacrificing the effectiveness of the communication. That’s a key idea stressed by Tom Malone of MIT in his 2004 book [The Future of Work](#) (not to be confused with my own [1999 book](#) with the same title).

Why is this need become important now? Two things are happening simultaneously in the new economy. The kind of work we do is different, and the way in which we organize ourselves to do that work is also changing. What’s missing are effective tools that directly support this new way of working. The point is that because they meet people’s psychological needs for a felt sense of presence, 3D interactive technologies will be more effective at promoting highly creative and complex team interactions than even the best collaborative tools we’re using today.

What is Presence?

Presence is that emotional feeling that tells you that you are in the same place at the same time with others. In the two-dimensional world of movies and television we sometimes get close to that when we become almost total absorbed in a movie theatre (especially with Imax technology) or with some large-screen, surround-sound home units.

Our striving for this level of involvement is evidenced by the increasing popularity of 3D interactive game environments. While these games are getting better all the time, they are still somewhat crude today. But they do illustrate the principle that people desire, and find comfort in, the feeling of social presence. A perception of “presence” is a necessary precursor to a psychological sense of shared reality. And a mutual negotiation of social realities, community identity, and trust can come only from a genuine sense of a shared reality.

And we’re convinced that this “shared reality” is about to get a whole lot better. We’ve recently seen a couple of powerful examples. First, at a recent meeting of our Workplace Innovation and Performance Network group (visit the [Executive Networks website](#) for more information about the WIPN group), we were treated to a demonstration by **Jim Young**, the CEO of [Teleportec](#), that brought a life-sized 3D holographic image Young to the end of conference table even though he was in another room several yards away.

Teleportec has been used to enable **Raymond Kurzweil** to deliver a lecture to an audience in Germany while he stood behind a lectern in Boston, Massachusetts. The audience experienced Kurzweil as if he were there, while he could see the entire audience and interact with them in a completely normal way. It’s the best simulation of “being there” we’ve seen yet.

We also point you to [Integrated Virtual Networks](#), an online application that puts images of real people, in real time, into a virtual world – creating a pseudo-reality in which everyone is “virtual” but interacts as if they were all in one place.

And of course the most well-established virtual world is [Second Life](#), a system that creates entire virtual worlds with “avatars” representing individual people and under their control.

While neither of these virtual worlds comes close to replacing our “first” real world, they are incredibly compelling, and we know that many companies are starting to hold real but distributed meetings using these virtual worlds.

We’ve also had the pleasure this year of experiencing Hewlett Packard’s [Halo videoconferencing system](#), which along with Cisco Systems’ similar [Telepresence system](#), has redefined “plain old vanilla” videoconferencing by relying on high-definition video and high bandwidth networking to produce images that so real it’s easy to forget that the people you’re talking to may be thousands of miles away. Our experience

included a video conference between Palo Alto, California, and London, England, that had absolutely no discernable delays or degradations of either video or audio.

We have written a longer white paper on this topic, which we'd be happy to share with anyone who is interested. That paper explains the social psychology behind this effect and offers some rudimentary design guidelines for designing a technology that really and truly meets end user needs for presence. Please [contact me directly](#) if you are interested in receiving a copy of the paper.

Please also [send your comments directly to us](#), or post a comment on the blog version of this article. We look forward to learning from you.

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

Future of Work is a global network of resources – practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, and senior consultants – who are committed to building and implementing physical, social, and technology-based work environments that are cost-effective, socially and environmentally responsible, and personally satisfying.

We are focused on defining the future of work and helping our members and clients achieve new levels of workforce and workplace productivity. *Future of Work* produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work. The Work Design Collaborative, LLC, provides leadership and infrastructure services for the *Future of Work* community.

Future of Work Agenda is a free monthly electronic newsletter produced by the *Work Design Collaborative*. To sign up for a subscription to *Future of Work Agenda*, please go to: http://www.thefutureofwork.net/news_newsletter_register.html.

Direct inquiries to either Charles Grantham at charlie@thefutureofwork.net, or James Ware at jim@thefutureofwork.net.