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## How Come Distributed Work is *Still* the Next Big Thing? Part Two

by Jim Ware and Charlie Grantham

*This is the second article in a three-part series that addresses the question in the title: how come Distributed Work isn't being embraced to the degree many of us have thought it would be by now? We fully intended to address the question and answer it in one article. However, as we began writing it became apparent that we were tackling a Very Big Issue – one that reminds us of the 1990's quandary about collaborative software: why should anyone use it, what gets in the way of widespread use, and what can be done to promote it?*

*We believe the same three questions have to be asked – and answered – regarding Distributed Work. (1) What makes it compelling in the first place?(See [Part One](#), which appeared here in September, for our views on why Distributed Work should be much more widespread than it is). (2) Why isn't it being embraced more quickly and more widely? And (3) what can or should be done to promote its adoption?*

*In Part Two, below, we go after the real issue: how come senior executives aren't embracing Distributed Work, especially when it makes so much business sense?.*

In Part One of this series (see the [September Future of Work Agenda](#) for [that article](#)) we identified the six primary reasons that organizations should be embracing distributed work:

1. Reducing basic workforce support costs;
2. Increasing workforce productivity;
3. Attracting and retaining talent;
4. Increasing organizational agility;
5. Reducing the business risk of disruption from terrorism or a natural disaster
6. Reducing traffic congestion, air pollution, and environmental impact more generally

As we've stated many times, we believe those reasons are incredibly compelling. So we continue to be more than a little puzzled about why there isn't more widespread acceptance of distributed work programs (or what some call "alternative workplace strategies") within the corporate community (we've also been tracking the emergence of distributed work programs among public sector organizations; the issues there are somewhat different but the results are very similar).

Actually, we are more frustrated than puzzled, since "organizational inertia" and resistance to change is actually nothing new. In this case, however, the economics are so compelling that we think there ought to be shareholder revolts at every corporate annual meeting. Indeed, it may take that kind of pressure from outraged owners to get senior executives to exercise the kind of leadership and stewardship they're being paid for.

But the only way we're going to convince those leaders to get off their duffs is to understand what's behind their resistance to change, and then knock off their "Yeah, but" excuses one at a time.

We think there are at least eight primary reasons why Distributed Work isn't yet the Big Thing it should be. And, by the way, these are not all "irrational" or "emotional" barriers that can simply be overwhelmed with aggressive leadership.

Distributed Work *is* different than what most people are used to, and some of their fears of the unknown are actually highly rationale given their current circumstances. Distributed Work actually does require new skills, new attitudes, and new management systems (but we're getting ahead of ourselves; see Part Three next month for our action recommendations).

Here's the eight barriers to Distributed Work that we're going to address here and now:

1. Inherent human inertia against externally imposed change
2. Organizational inertia
3. Management habits and Industrial-Age thinking
4. Fear on the part of middle managers
5. Fear on the part of front-line workers
6. Uncertainty about communication and relationships in a distributed environment
7. The CEO "Edifice Complex" that leads to visible corporate facilities
8. Plain old complexity – Distributed Work is truly a Big Change

Let's look at these things one at a time.

## **1. Inherent Human Inertia Against Externally Imposed Change**

We are decidedly not of the opinion that people just naturally resist change. Every organization we've ever worked with has been full of people who are actively seeking change and improvement. The issue isn't with change *per se*; it's with *imposed* change. Our view is that people resist being changed, because that means loss of personal control and generates an unknown future where they fear being less successful than they are in the present.

Actually, resistance to being changed is very normal, and basically rational. When someone is told they're going to be thrust into a new situation (especially with little or no preparation, or even an opportunity to think about why the change might actually be good for them), all kinds of fears and questions come bubbling up: "What will it be like? Will I be able to be effective? What if I don't like it? What if my boss expects me to be more productive, but I don't have the skills she expects? Why can't we just do it the way we've been doing it – which doesn't take a whole lot of effort on my part?"

For people who are used to coming into an office every day, Distributed Work places a huge premium on self-reliance and on being productive and work-focused even in the absence of the work-culture "messages" that every corporate facility sends nonstop.

Most of us have grown so accustomed to those messages that we don't realize how much "pressure" they impose. Just think about a typical office where most of what you see is others "at work," and the boss walking down the hall every now and then, and you are surrounded by

all the physical reminders that this is a workplace: a lobby with a receptionist and secure doors; ID badges around everyone's neck; cubicles and conference rooms; institutional furniture; bland paintings on bland walls; rows of filing cabinets; a big nondescript wall clock; large fluorescent lighting; wall-to-wall tinted window glass, dark carpeting, etc., etc.).

Being suddenly thrust into a totally different physical setting (like a spare bedroom at home) can be jarring, and it takes time to learn new behaviors in the face of familiar surroundings that in the past were never associated with "work."

## **2. Organizational Inertia**

Most (though admittedly not all) organizational cultures are strongly biased towards stability, predictability, and efficiency. That, after all, is what the Industrial Age, when most large organizations were born and grew up, needs and rewards.

But even though a bias for stability in today's Information/Innovation Economy is the next worst thing to calcification, it's also the reality that permeates every large enterprise these days. And when all the cultural as well as the physical signals point towards stability and away from change, that's what you get.

Distributed Work represents a Very Big Change (see Barrier 8, below), and that's exactly what organizations have learned to fend off, fight, and actively prevent.

## **3. Management Habits and Industrial-Age Thinking**

Industrial-Age managers, and even Information-Age managers who grew up in the Industrial Age (and that's just about every one of us) have been taught that "management by walking around" is essential. It's important to interact with your staff on a regular basis, and not just about work-related activities. Walking the halls, stopping to share a cup of coffee or tea, observing pictures of kids and recreational events – that's what "good" management is all about. Organizational effectiveness is, after all, about people, motivation, and inspiration. And we all believe basically that face-to-face human interaction is the best way to understand and solve problems, build relationships, and guide behavior.

Distributed Work flies in the face of that conventional wisdom. One of the underlying – and usually unstated – assumptions about Distributed Work is that with today's IT capabilities we can communicate and interact with others no matter where they – or we – are.

So, once again, moving to a Distributed Work environment where people are out more than they are in, where you rely on conference calls and emails for communication, is a Really Big Change. It may come naturally for some kinds of people (and of course some folks have been working that way for years), but for many who are used to life in traditional corporate facilities, it is a very difficult transition.

## **4. Middle Management Fear**

Which leads right to the next source of resistance: the fear factor. Middle managers in particular, who remain accountable for organizational performance no matter what new

“program” is being implemented, fear Distributed Work because it removes opportunities for direct observation and interaction with their subordinates, it requires new behaviors and skills on their part, and it creates a very understandable concern that they may not be successful in the “new world.”

They fear not only obsolescence, but also irrelevance. One thing we’ve learned over the years is that for individuals to operate successfully as remote or mobile workers they must become much more independent and self-reliant. That means everything from starting to work in the morning even if no one is “watching” to learning how to install your own software and do your own debugging when the computer or the modem crashes. It’s only natural that such self-reliant workers actually require less formal “management,” and therefore fewer managers.

Our research clearly shows that distributed work organizations can operate very successfully with a much higher management span of control (meaning that you literally need far fewer front-line managers in a distributed work environment).

And that, of course, is what it’s really all about: control. It’s actually much more difficult (or at least it *feels* much more difficult) for both frontline managers and senior executives to imagine how they can “control” (or guide, or even influence) remote workers who aren’t regularly visible.

Make no mistake about it: maintaining a sense of being part of the organization, and of understanding what the company is all about, is definitely more difficult with a widely dispersed workforce – even though today there are plenty of Internet-based tools that enable managers to communicate to and with those distributed workers frequently and effectively (but see Barrier 6, below).

Finally, there is one very logical, and wholly understandable, management fear: the risk of losing critical information either because of a lack of network security or because one of those distributed workers loses a laptop crammed with proprietary software and databases. Network security is nowhere as serious a threat as many uninformed managers think it is, but it is a serious issue that requires careful attention. And there seems to be a news story every other week of some remote worker who has had a laptop full of data stolen from a car, an airline club, or a hotel room. That’s a very real risk that will never be completely eliminated, no matter how careful the company is with backup, awareness building, and password-protection schemes.

So those middle management fears are actually very well-founded – and, again, relatively rational.

## **5. Front-Line Workforce Fear**

The mirror image of managers’ fears about Distributed Work is the anxiety experienced by those front-line workers who suddenly find themselves spending a lot of time away from the corporate “womb.” Not only are there new skills to master, no familiar work environment cues, and no co-workers to provide social stimulation and work-related norms of behavior, but on top of all those changes there is also the fear that “no one will see what I’m doing.”

Perhaps the biggest fear of individual distributed workers is that the organization (and in particular the next level of management) will more or less forget about someone who isn’t there

everyday actively demonstrating how hard he or she is working and how committed they are to the company.

While those who have learned to work independently typically come to love Distributed Work for its freedom, convenience, and self-control, those who haven't yet experienced it are almost always genuinely afraid of the changes it represents.

## **6. New Forms of Communication and New Media**

In spite of the virtues of modern information technology that seems to enable any-time, any-place work, there is plenty of evidence that the medium does matter (to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan).

The two of us certainly continue to believe that for some kinds of communication and problem-solving there really is no substitute for face-to-face interaction and same-time, same-place work.

But when we rely on electronic media for communication in a distributed work environment (as virtually all remote and mobile workers do), there is a substantive difference in how our messages are received, understood, and accepted. Like it or not, a telephone call is less "rich" than a face-to-face exchange, and an email conveys far less information than a phone call. And so on.

These differences have a significant impact not only on day-to-day communication but, more importantly, on the formation and evolution of the relationships that create context for communication and problem-solving. That's why we always insist on scheduling face-to-face meetings at key points in the life of a distributed project team. You just can't sit down and "break bread together" when you are separated by miles and miles of geography.

In our experience, most people who move into distributed work environments understand this "The medium is the message" reality intuitively, and it understandably makes them uncomfortable and uneasy (at least at first).

## **7. The CEO "Edifice Complex"**

Like it or not, senior executives, who are more or less human beings most of the time (sorry ,couldn't help that cheap shot), find value and take pleasure in seeing the company name on a big and impressive office complex.

There is something very visceral and very real about this need to make a statement about the company's (and therefore the CEO's) success. And more than just the name on the building, there's a strong need to see the workforce streaming in every morning and filling up all those empty spaces.

This need to see the physical manifestation of the company's success – its people, its activities, and its physical structures – is very real, and completely understandable. And it's not just to make the senior executives feel good; the physical reality of the company is also important to customers, investors, and industry analysts; the presence of the buildings and the workforce make the company seem substantial and successful.

It's certainly a lot harder to "show off" a distributed workforce.

## 8. Complexity: Distributed Work is a "Big Change"

As we've said several times already, moving to a distributed work environment involves many kinds of change, on many dimensions (and we haven't even mentioned the need for significant business process reengineering to accommodate location-independence in work flows). In short, it's a big job when it's done right, and the very complexity (and cost) of the transition means it's often done poorly.

This reality, coupled with the fact that many organizational attempts to implement Distributed Work have floundered or outright failed, leads a majority of senior executives to be (rightfully, we think) cautious and a bit conservative about the whole idea.

But while caution is commendable, we believe the opportunity cost of failing to take advantage of the benefits of Distributed Work is inexcusable. As we discussed in Part One, the economic benefits are enormous, and we believe the additional advantages of becoming a preferred employer, of drawing on a global workforce, and of attracting and retaining talent, far outweigh the risks.

Next month we'll look at some of the genuine success stories of companies that have already implemented significant distributed work programs, and we'll catalog a set of guidelines to help you lead the way in your own organization.

Please direct your comments and questions to [comments@thefutureofwork.net](mailto:comments@thefutureofwork.net). We'd love to publish your reactions and suggestions.

*We'd like to acknowledge the contributions of several readers who sent us comments on Part One, or posted Comments on our blog. Thanks in particular to **Barry Tuchfeld**, **Stuart Oliver**, **Cathie Jennings**, and **Harold Jarcho** for taking the time to share their thoughts with us.*

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

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