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Notes from the Field: Will the Office of the Future Include Furniture?

By *Michael Dunlap, Michael A. Dunlap & Associates.*

The Industrial Revolutionaries is the title of a new book written by British author Gavin Weightman. It offers an insightful view of many of man's inventions starting in the late 18th Century. He points out that some inventions have truly changed the world and others that may seem trivial have allowed us to transform simple ideas into life-changing events.

Some are still with us and in every-day use. Others have been transformed so often that they cannot be compared to their original form. Many are hardly relevant, or so common that we may see them more from their historical perspective than their current use.

The first steam engines were so huge their only use for transportation was in steamships. It took nearly two decades to transform them to be small enough for use on railways. After Henry Bessemer's process allowed steel to be produced by the ton, it greatly expanded the demand for iron and coal. The resulting expansion of the rail systems throughout the world provided the perfect path for telegraph—later telephone—lines that forever transformed our communications systems.

The lower cost of transportation during the mid 19th Century reduced prices so that carpeting, books, china, and other items reserved for only the wealthy could now be found in the homes of an expanding middle class.

Thomas Edison's extraordinary inventions of barely 100 years ago—the incandescent light bulb, the phonograph, and motion picture camera—have already been replaced by new technologies. Conversely, more “trivial” inventions like the riding stirrup (18th Century), tea bag (19th Century), and Velcro® (20th Century) remain fundamentally unchanged.

Everyday life in 1780 probably wasn't much different than it was 1680. The same cannot be said for 1880, 1980, or 2009.

The so-called “Industrial Age” of the 19th Century accelerated the world's growth, transformed it several times during the 20th Century, and has led to at least one transformation during the less-than-10% of the time passed so far in the 21st Century.

- ◆ The first communications satellite was launched barely 50 years ago.
- ◆ The picture tube-based, analog, color television of 1959 is effectively extinct.
- ◆ The popular launch of the fax machine was just 25 years ago but it is now functionally obsolete.
- ◆ The use of e-mail was a novelty just 15 years ago.

- ◆ The trademark names of *Google®*, *Facebook®*, and *izzydesign®* didn't exist ten years ago.
- ◆ The installation of "wired" telephones has declined (globally) during each of the past five years.
- ◆ The popularity of SUV's has disappeared in favor of the "Hybrid" in less than two years.

These dramatic changes in technology, communication, travel, and innovation have me wondering what the "office of the future" will look like.

I still have my grandfather's office chair from 1910, when he was a telegraph operator for the Grand Trunk Railroad. It has four (not five) casters, (spindle) height adjustment, and back angle and back height adjustments. It is made mostly from sustainable (oak) and recyclable (cast iron) materials. I also have his telegraph key. It functions similarly to a computer mouse—"click to send"!

Think for a moment about where and how we work in 2009.

- ◆ Fewer people "go to an office" to work every day.
- ◆ We don't need file cabinets to store all of our information.
- ◆ We don't need conference rooms to have meetings.
- ◆ We don't need laptop computers to send e-mail.
- ◆ We don't need desks to rest our computers, telephones, or paper.
- ◆ We don't need ergonomic chairs when we are working from an airplane, train, or automobile.

The most recent economic recession has dramatically impacted the office and contract furnishings business. Recovery is going to be a slow and evolving process.

New "open plan," free standing, easily-configurable products are a breath of fresh air compared to Dilbert's "cubicles." The expanded use of sustainable and recyclable materials will probably help our planet. Enhanced ergonomic features on seating products may improve the productivity and health of the occupant.

Just as there are few markets today for a *new steam engine*, an *improved telegraph*, a *better film camera*, or a *more efficient incandescent light bulb*, the furniture designed and manufactured today for the "office of the future" cannot simply be an improved version from the past. It must be reinvented to meet the needs of **how** we actually work, not how the designers, engineers, and manufacturers would **like** us to work.

That's how I see it, "From Where *I* Sit!"

Mike Dunlap is Principal of Michael A. Dunlap & Associates, LLC, a business consulting services firm that focuses primarily on issues that involve the office furniture industry. Dunlap has more than 25 years experience in the industry. Contact him at (616) 786-3524, e-mail mike@mdunlap-associates.com, or visit the Web site at www.mdunlap-associates.com.

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Direct inquiries to either Charlie Grantham at charlie@thefutureofwork.net, or Jim Ware at jim@thefutureofwork.net.