

Does The Business Need The Workplace Anymore?

by Julien Eymeri

A consultant within the Eurogroup Consulting firm, Julien Eymeri questions the levers of business development in a global cost reduction. Having focused for many years on structural, organizational, financial and human subjects, the time has come to tackle the problem of space by approaching it with fresh eyes, to think of the workspace as a subject –its utility– rather than an object –its surface– and make the company a platform to make connections and facilitate lifelong learning; a source of innovation and performance but also of attractiveness and talent retention. A new organization of space must facilitate the time between connection and exchange and that of concentration and taking a stand back—a breath now essential to all forms of creation.

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From Office to «Slow, Open, and Social Office»

WHEN THE OFFICE BECAME THE WORST PLACE TO WORK

Jason Fried, co-founder of the firm 37Signals in California, is a young entrepreneur preoccupied with the well-being and efficiency of his colleagues. An influential iconoclast, as Silicon Valley knows well how to produce, he defends a model of pragmatic management, of «common sense reasoning.» To discover the means for rendering his firm more successful and to confirm an intuition of his—that the office is paradoxically not the best place for work—he surveyed his employees about the environment that they would select in order to work most effectively, with the aim of obtaining—truly—the full result from their efforts. The responses revealed a wide variety of supposedly productive spaces for work: a physical public site (the library, a cafe) or private site (a room in their home), a transitional space conducive to isolation (the train, the airplane, the car), or also a defined moment (early in the morning, late in the evening, the weekend). In summation, not only does the office not appear as a favorable place for efficient work, but the responses indicate a desire to flee from all that

the office represents: a dedicated and fixed place, invested in a pre-determined and collective time period (the «office hours»). Thus, at the hands of important real estate agents employed by businesses to provide a home for and—as they believe—to favor the activity of such employees, what are the reasons that drive the employees to reject the vision of the office as the site of the essence and excellence of work? It is that, according to Fried, the office is in reality the daily theater of disruption. The solicitations are numerous: the circulation of information is incessant, relayed by the technologies that follow and track the employees into the remotest corners of the office, to which can be added the inopportune interventions of managers coming to inquire after the progress of a project and the multiple invitations to «work» gatherings. In effect, to work assumes a change, a creation, a production. The result could be semi-immediate or, more commonly, requiring some time. In the first case, work acts to unite different components or competencies, in a precise place, at a given moment. It is followed by projects of creation, within which a phase of «brainstorming» is generally necessary. This space—that one could qualify as a co-thought exercise supposing collective free association—demands the

physical presence of participants and therefore a real space of work, available for a pre-determined period of time. Inversely, in certain other situations, the quality of work demands concentration and a level of maturation on a given subject and therefore the possibility for the worker to withdraw, at least to break away. And yet businesses and the management cultures which run them, invite their employees to seek more and more openness with others, with the world. The «management charts» of large groups, as representative of an institutionalized culture, well demonstrates this demand—proving that additionally, there is a resemblance that renders them paradoxically interchangeable. It is necessary to be reactive, open to others, open to the world, and with these incessant changes, agile and engaged. If these «values» could appear as positive (preferenced over «common sense reasoning»), their translation into the daily functioning of a business could pose problems. Open office, telephone with a direct line, smartphone, and above all, computer connected to the world, could appear merely as potential disturbances, other ways of intrusions and of interruption in the process, sometimes necessarily long, of work. Thus, for good work, there is no option but to flee the office.

In consideration of this, how can employees become reconciled with their office? How can collaborators be assisted in applying reason to work and forming new guidelines that contribute to productivity in an environment under constant change? Can we not investigate the very modern work structures that are at the same time the origin and the response to the questioning of the office as the supposed ideal work space? Finally, how can we conceive of the spaces of work

as a subject (its utility) even as an object (its surface in square meters)?

THE RISE OF BOUNDARIES

The classic model of the business has fizzled out and with it, the office. The stage for the corporate theater is being revised, abandoning, little by little, the trifecta that had defined it: a place, a space-time, and an action. In itself, the office represents therefore a system within which the characteristics constituting it act as boundaries for the employees: determined activity (relative to the duties called for by the position and relevant to the function contributing towards a finished product) realized within a limited time-frame (a production or management cycle) within a precise physical location (the repartition of spaces of work generally being responsible for the translation of the functional and hierarchical organization of a business). These boundaries are today being questioned, made anachronistic by the rapid evolution of the economic system and of a type of production in which a primary characteristic is the rupture of all established forms. The first disconnect of the current guidelines is structural. The question of «Where am I?» has arisen from the dilemma of organizations having become increasingly complex over the course of the last thirty years. To be able to know and to respond to this question, is essentially to know one's position in an arrangement—via the most prosaic of manners, by an organizational chart—and at the same time be able to grasp this same sense of organization within one's team. While businesses are appearing more and more like clusters of multiple gradations and incessant mutations (multinational expansions, fusions, successive buys and sales of subsidiaries, disassociations

of management teams and ownership of the business), the individual agents encounter difficulties in finding a place of their own within them. The classic organizations, hierarchical and functional (simple schemes, therefore) have progressively replaced in businesses «by the project,» multiplistic, and complexified. Establishing such an organizational matrix requires a reconfiguring according to several dimensions (by function or job, by product, by geographic region), each encompassing a spectrum of levels of necessary responsibility. This multiple bearing, pluralistic, implicates therefore a temporary link to structure («I work here, now. Tomorrow, elsewhere...»), evolving along with the nature of the projects. The life of a company will be read by its organizational chart and the semi-permanent arrangements—rarely are companies able to pride themselves in having these seating charts «by day.» With a hierarchical progression presiding as law throughout the complete course of careers, a so-called horizontal mobility (between different professions or jobs) tends to develop, heightening an impression of the dynamism of the system. This continuous movement, however, bears certain perverse effects, take for example the rotation of positions: a swap every three years—a rule that has been instituted in a number of teams—, makes the first year dedicated to learning about one's new responsibilities in the company, the second actually productive, and the third preoccupied with the next change of post. Furthermore, this sense of instability is accentuated by the frequent transfers of personnel between companies, with a position seen as complete for a company after going through a single production cycle.

Next is the question of time. Everything is going faster. Companies burn out in succession, without a sigh, commercial marathons and sprints. The rhythm of production accelerates (the compression of time between the formulation of a concept and its market inception), the management cycles cut short (performance, largely measured by trimester or month, is watched in certain industries by the week), new technologies permit a constant, real-time circulation of information. These temporal dynamics radically change the conventions defining the reality of work. To not recognize and integrate this risks making a big mistake (for example, with making a strategic decision) of missing major corporate revolutions, or at a minimum to become left behind by the competition. This implies that each colleague must be attentive to news that could concern him or herself and use this to impact their work habits. The most modern communication technologies possess the power of democratization, permitting each contributor to keep up-to-date with the companies and vocational sector trends and developments. Immediate effects are considered over the perennial. The certainty of the test of time can no longer exist and the calm that it endowed has dissolved. A manager passes his or her days with eyes riveted to BlackBerry, waiting for latest developments, what may cause a new rupture, a new change that he or she must satisfy. Existence within a hierarchy is read largely by the position one has in the communication web of the company, more so now than square meters or the thickness of carpet in one's office. This new dialogue with immediate time also shatters boundaries of working hours and times at work. The flexibility required by the employer (following at best the pulse of activity, forced to improvisa-

tion) or abided by employees (taking into account constraints and personal aspirations) leads to the dissolution the collective time to the benefit the emergence of a collection of individual times. Only legal or conventional references continue to provide identifiable classification, however, certain categories (especially white collar workers) are more easily labeled, by preference or by force, aided by the tools which are at their disposition, allowing them to remain connected day as night, seven days a week.

A final boundary to disrupt, the sense of action. The evolution of jobs accelerates, notably exacerbated by the continual renewal of methods and technologies, and by the desire to always bring increasing value to the client (the logic of differentiation) at decreasing costs. The banalization of products and services is rapid, in a globalized system which imposes upon companies an impetus to keep relevant with new advances. Companies are under a succession of restructuring strategies—often incoherent—dictated by short-sighted financial schemes and the evolution of jobs driven by employees, by choice, increasing in polyvalence (richer in responsibilities at a constant salary) or, conversely, with an extreme rationalization towards hyper-specialization. Taylorism has not disappeared; it has just replaced factories with offices, aided in this by the informational management tools which are complex and well-integrated. These two ways of redefining the perimeters of work risk, as are they are poorly apprehended and implemented, losing the employee: What reason drives this multiplication of responsibilities? What will come of my working? How will my work contribute to the results of the company? The conviction and the individual and collective engagement, which are well known drivers of

good performance, rest largely on the amount each one is invested in his or her work, specifically, the application by which the leadership shares and explains these developments to their colleagues.

The dialogue about space, time, and of the very content of work evolves, conventions seem more blurred, less «contained.» Therefore, in response, the employee—if the concept of employee is still pertinent—is largely driven to (re)discover these boundaries within an increasingly virtual environment. Companies must think of offices both by physical and virtual plan and insure the coherence between the two places of work: What is their added or complementary value? What are some redundancies to reduce between these two work spaces? What rules of access need to be defined? And of course all of the other questions which must define the conception of the working environment and that require the attention of both architect and computer technician. In this new environment, every contributor, from employees to the CEO, must be considered, with new accommodations and etiquette to allow these two worlds to coexist in harmony. This constitutes a major new responsibility for Human and Resource Development (HR) Departments. The static units characteristic of the work of yesterday are replaced by dynamic units. This must be used to envision the work of tomorrow.

WHEN SOCIETIES ARE OVERRUN BY THE SOCIETAL

The conception of work has profoundly changed during the course of the last ten years, at least within our western societies, in a societal context under complete transformation.

The new generations of executives no longer enjoy the same professional level within the company; the same companies did not hesitate, when need arose, to fire in a brutal manner their senior employees (waves of dismissals which particularly affected French executives at the start of the 1990's). The link between employer-employee has become fragile. Moreover, existential and political questioning interferes in the heart of the company. The office is no longer an impenetrable bubble to its context. The ecological and societal concerns are closely followed by companies which are dedicated to a mission of «social and environmental responsibility»—often directly influential on the larger general direction of the company. The question of sensibility increases in scope, until it is beyond suspicion, and with it, the new pillars of engagement («My work is justified within an ethical cause, my contribution to the collective project is appreciated in a manner balanced between statistical objectives and a subjective value, and I am awaiting a reward of the knowledge of doing the right thing rather than simple financial retribution.») are progressively substituting, likely irremediably, the classic triptych: respect of norms and rules, objective measure of performance, and an associated remuneration. This development epitomizes the values of the generation which has just entered the workforce, the «Generation Y», generation «Why.»

Respecting the balance between private life and professional life, reconsidering hierarchy (in its usual sensibility) and, above all, giving priority to apprenticeship, are major trends demanded by employees of this generation which are progressively being met by their superiors. These white-collar workers are not asking to work

less as much as for the liberty to structure their work time in consideration of their personal constraints (family activities, sports practices, cultural events and holidays). The rhythms of work vary according to the will of individual preferences. It's a demand for flexibility but above all of the accountability which jostled habits and representations of prior generations, more loyal, legitimized, and engaged, sometimes to an excess. Elsewhere, the employees of current generations are at the same time more connected and more autonomous—together, they establish and refine the very law to which they conform. Other times, only the manager has the power of decision, a power legitimized by the position which he occupies.

We are progressively entering into an era of mandatory co-elaboration. Collective work responds to a real need for sharing this and allowing for faster response and reflection. Without also talking about well-being or comfort, this can constitute an avenue by which teams can take ownership of a project and stick with it.

Finally, this generation seeks, above all, to learn, and this remains a major drive. If the youngest employees find themselves in an environment where they have the feeling of not being able to learn more or not make new encounters, they will live there. Thus, as there is no collective (and therefore no projects) without a sense of loyalty, companies must strive to create for their employees an atmosphere of perpetual growth and learning, and not just a position which just must be maintained and guarded. This new demand has been well-integrated as can be attested by the proliferation of «campus» or «Corporate University» typologies—the choice of vocabu-

lary is not innocent. These structures pay, moreover, particular attention to their development and construction and equipment facilities (real and virtual), presuming an «ideal» organizational model, as a sort of laboratory for the new world of work. Their localization is meticulously selected (an agreeable setting), the building is the object of an original architectural concept with a marked identity (the campus acts as the window of the organization), the activities which undergo there rely most often upon the principal of interactions (between pairs, with an external knowledge source) and the «project mode» which reigns, nourishing a sense of community, facilitated by the alternation between production and idea generation.

FROM THE COMMUNAL CLOUD
TO «SOCIAL OFFICE»

A new model of company is progressively emerging—which has been called by some the «Company 2.0»—taking into account a new style of work which principal characteristics are real-time management and a focus on collaborative and collective activities.

A metaphor of biology and ecology is increasingly relied upon when talking about the company and its components. Ecosystems, DNA, living organisms, viruses...The images are not lacking for alluding that the company—as is the trend—is «organic.» Within this realm, the community occupies a central position. The success of social networking has made the communal dynamic creep into, little by little, the corporate universe and not only within the start-ups in Silicon Valley. The relationship of manager-managed is also being interrogated. Notions of authority

and legitimacy are evolving, as is the need for recognition. What is actually observed is a progressive «horizontalization» from this need, notably by the rise in power of networks and two person teams, replacing the parental figures as the only sources of identity. Instead, teams coexist, sharing the managerial duties. The adhesion to a community within a company is, as within private life, an affair of personal volition or by group pressure. Beyond defining an associative identity, the communities constitute, in themselves, a space of reflection, of sharing, and finally of work. Companies have well incorporated such teams, in the place of the dynamic teams, into their organization, notably in light of young recruits. The singularity of these systems is in the possibility that they offer the possibility for employees to seize upon a topic and work on it while not making it the a priori in their domain of work. Communal and collaborative work lean upon a certain porosity of organizations and the recognition of talent, known or hidden, put to the disposition of the community.

The company 2.0 therefore appears not only as a place of learning but above all of encounters. It must allow for creative interactions, sometimes unexpected or unobserved, out-of-the box, logical, and of fresh models of thinking. These meetings are left to be determined by a manner virtual (collaborative platforms hosted on the web) or real (spaces and moments of encounters managed by the campus model, for example), and allow for a certain level of serendipity, and of risk. This need to «make community» for the company of tomorrow requires that offices are not as limited to being simple sites of physical or intellectual production. The community spirit necessitates a sharing beyond mere professional aims:

it acts to fuse other linkages allowing for mutual comprehension, confidence, and a desirability of working as a group. Offices must also be hubs for social life, cultural life, or athletics. The development of work into a «community of projects» will impel the development of the «social office,» or the office which aims to structure an economic production while comprising a social life less and less distinguishable from the performance of the company. The «social office» takes upon the flavor of the day of linkages and of the sense of sharing without which all economic activity becomes unsteady.

TO MANAGE OR THE ART OF BREATHING

The position of the manager has forcibly evolved. From the source of orders, organizer of work, and controller of finished product, the manager has progressively transformed into a producer who must incorporate into his or her project the right resources at the right moment in the manner that works best. For the manager, it is essential to know how to maintain the balance, for him or her as for his or her team, between connectivity and concentration.

Connectivity drives a project-style of working, absorbing a constant flux in information, with necessary interactions, adjusting to various points of view or actions of each participant. Offices must be open, physical or virtual meetings must be open to improvise, wherever, whenever. Offices must offer multiple sources of information (screens, Wi-Fi internet connection, meeting rooms), allowing the management of several connections at the same moment (we have already achieved this by tapping on our BlackBerry during meetings...).

Welcome to the «open office.»

Concentration, in arms against the bombardment of all of these forms of information, sorts out, in stepping back, more meaning than by listening. This concentration requires calm, a certain form of isolation in the aim of slowing our attention and our brain for getting to the heart of things. Offices must therefore be quiet, like a library that has nothing but the most essential works. There is no need for meeting rooms, open space, multiple connections—only small spaces of tranquility which allow a slowing of our accelerated pulse: telephones, Wi-Fi, and meetings will be banned from these spaces. Welcome to the «slow office.»

These two spaces, both still largely imaginary, correspond to these two times of working by which we will be increasingly confronted: the time of inspiration, open to the world and to others, curious of external factors; and the time of exhalation during which we must draw upon analysis, extracting valuable information from the millions of facts which bombard us to be able to make the right decision and act intelligently. Companies must provide the avenues for their managers to be able to manage, at their measure and their rhythm, these moments of respiration with their teams.

The last revolution in the world of offices is called open space. Invented by two German consultants, the Schnelle brothers, at the end of the 1950's, it has been progressively and largely adopted around the world (today some 60% of French employees no longer work in a private office and 14% share «open space» with more than four people). This idealistic model of de-compartmentalization and opening—supposedly—

with others, responds above all to the demands of economic rationalization (work spaces, necessary supervision) is today maligned due to its overwhelming side-effects (difficulty of concentration, a pervasive anxiety and sense of surveillance, the social conformity it induces). Little by little, businesses are driven to installing spaces of protection and isolation, palliative to the pathogenic atmosphere that constitutes these work environments. These adaptations are certainly necessary but not enough. A revolution is strongly awaited in response to the necessity of rethinking our physical spaces of production, integrating concepts of «open office,» «slow office,» and «social office.» Using experiences to enlighten this discourse, we can envision an adaptation for the new managerial styles that have developed from a production that is more and more relational and dematerialized. These experiences will give birth to a dialogue between employees and architects such that they can collaboratively model and construct the physical and virtual infrastructure that will welcome them.

*Translated from French
by Heather Tipton*