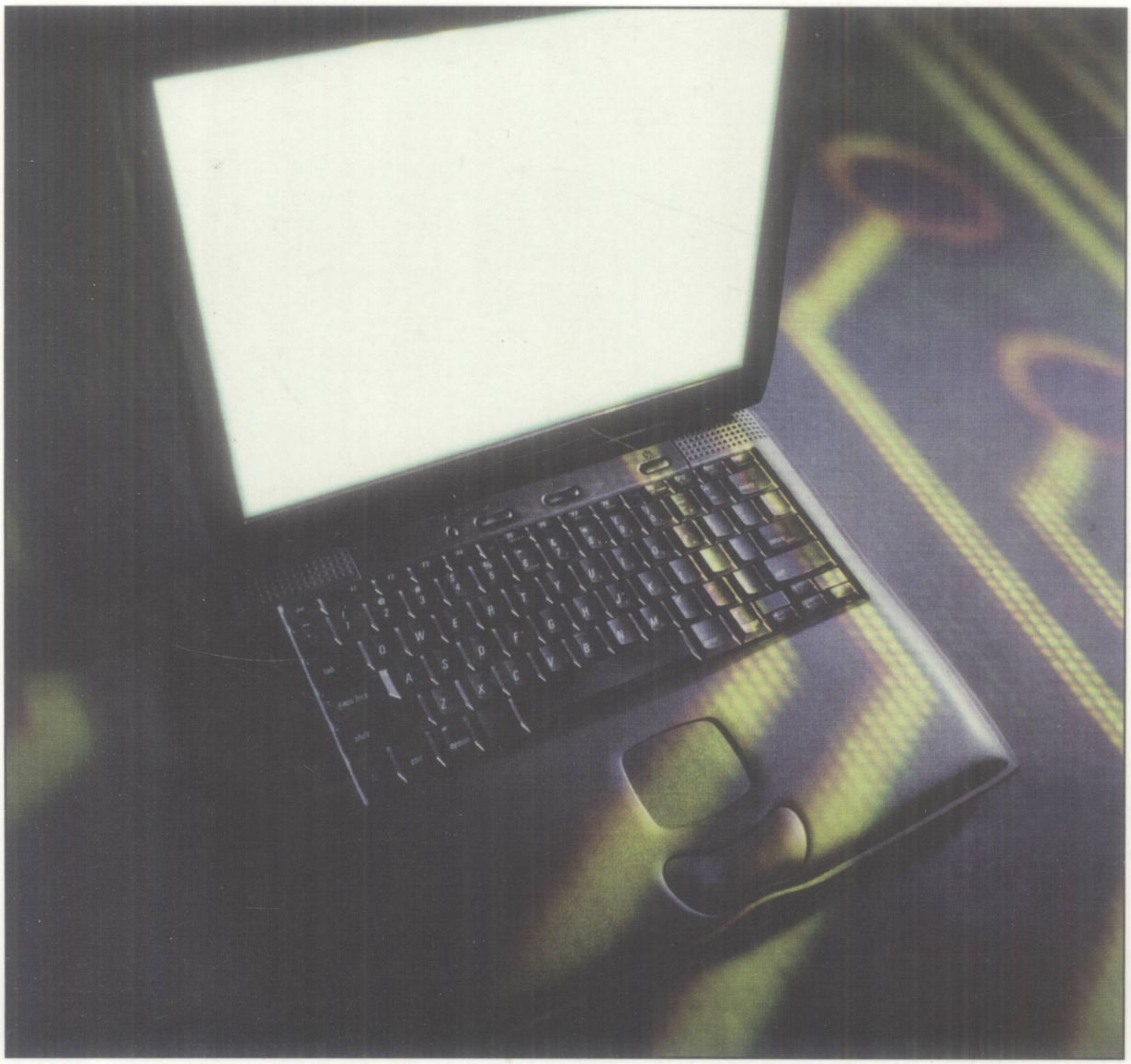
HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON

Virtual Workplaces and the New Nature of Business Practices



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Pavel Zemliansky
James Madison University, USA

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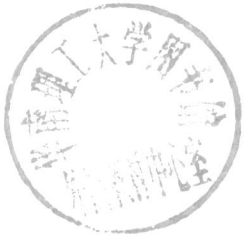

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Foreword

The thing about virtual workplaces of any kind is that, thus far, they are always new—or at least, that is my experience.

Twenty years ago, as part of a pilot to determine the efficacy of connecting homes, schools, and retailers, GTE offered all households in West Lafayette, Indiana, a computer and intranet access. I had never used a computer. I had never even heard of an intranet (which to me sounded like something out of outer space, really). And in fact, I didn't know much about the pilot. So I did the perhaps not-predictable thing: I said yes.

I said yes because I like connections, and at bottom or across the horizon, this project was about connections. I would not pursue computer-aided anything for my own purposes, but I would to do so to connect with my child's school. I wasn't planning on any more shopping, but I was not opposed to learning more about what was available or making shopping easier. And I knew that I would learn something in both processes.

Fast forward 7 years: I am a member of Portnet, a group of 10 faculty members from around the U.S. who share an interest in researching the effects of writing portfolios on students. From that project came many presentations, several publications, and at least some of what we know about print portfolios. Interestingly, when we began, we mailed student portfolios to each other, and we seemed more like a collection of individuals than a group. But that changed once we created our own listserv: Portnet as group *and* site *and* research project was born. Because the electronic environment was new, we had to learn new ways of behaving, and because we did not know everyone in the group, initially, we had to be particularly sensitive to that which we could *not* see. When the project concluded—and like many collaborative and virtual projects, it had a lifespan—we had learned more than about portfolios, as important as that research was. We also understood something about how to make such work "work"—the structures that supported it, the rhythms we established and the ways those influenced how our project progressed, the verbal signals we sent each other, and the ways that those were interpreted. It was a learning experience in *many* ways.

Fast forward 7 years and I'm working with Barbara Cambridge on a book on *electronic* portfolios. The book, published in 2001, marked not the end of interest in the topic, but rather an incentive for more information, it seemed, in part because as a concept, electronic portfolios are both robust and flexible. And what we learned, too, is that they are used world-wide. To support and develop this interest, particularly in terms of e-portfolio effects, we created the National Coalition on Electronic Portfolio Research, which has become the *Inter*/National Coalition on Electronic Portfolio Research. Teams from over 40 institutions in several countries have joined the Coalition and work in parallel and in concert on diverse research projects, all of which is being documented in various media and communicated in various channels. Collectively, we are learning how to work across different kinds of projects, across different time zones, across different cultures, and across different spaces—through blogs and f2f meetings, chats and Web meetings, print reports and listservs. In the work, we are widening our understanding of portfolio—and of ourselves.

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All of which is to say that on a much larger scale and in much more detail, this volume provides the help I might have used back in 1987 when I was just learning about virtuality, and the help I need now in my current e-portfolio project, when I am often virtual—because if there is one lesson when it comes to virtual learning, it is that we are all learners.

Kathleen Blake Yancey
Tallahassee, Florida

***Kathleen Blake Yancey**, Kellogg W. Hunt Professor of English at Florida State University, directs the graduate program in rhetoric and composition studies. Past president of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, she is also a past chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Currently president-elect of the National Council of Teachers of English. She also codirects the International Coalition on Electronic Portfolio Research. She is the author, editor, or co-editor of numerous chapters and articles as well as of 10 books, among them* Portfolios in the Writing Classroom *(1992),* Assessing Writing across the Curriculum *(1997),* Teaching Literature as Reflective Practice *(2004), and* Delivering College Composition: The Fifth Canon *(2006).*

Preface

At one time, the office was a physical place, and employees congregated in the same location to work together on projects. Within this context, one's coworkers were defined by physical proximity and collaborative work generally involved visiting a colleague's office or cubicle to ask questions or discuss ideas. Under this paradigm, the idea of distributing project teams across vast, geographic distances would have seemed the acme of inefficiency—if not downright insanity. The advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web, however, not only made the unthinkable possible, it forever changed the way persons view both the office and work.

Today, online media has transformed the idea of the workplace from a physical location to, essentially, a state of mind. Communication technologies such as e-mail and instant messaging let coworkers in different regions exchange ideas in a fraction of the time it would take to walk from one office to another. Similarly, blogs, wikis, and online chat groups allow entire teams of geographically distributed workers to discuss, debate, and update project plans on a virtually unlimited scale. These same technologies also allow companies to move distribute directly to a global consumer base via a variety of file sharing technologies and software downloads. The result is a workplace—if not an overall work paradigm—in which the office is but a mouse click away.

ADVANTAGES OF THE VIRTUAL WORKPLACE

The ability to transcend physical space means virtual workplaces offer a variety of advantages to organizations that adopt such approaches. To begin, there is the rather obvious advantage that project teams can now be configured based on the expertise of employees vs. the proximity of individuals to a particular office. Similarly, the ease with which information can move from one location to another means virtual work groups can move more efficiently and effectively than could the employees of the pre-Internet era. Moreover, the ability to make quick, easy, and direct contact with prospective clients as well as colleagues means the consumer can actively become a participant in the overall product development process—a factor that was almost unthinkable only a decade ago.

Virtual work environments also offer a range of advantages related to employee attitudes. Certain studies, for example, reveal that individuals involved in some degree of virtual workplace activity seem to display improved employee loyalty to the organization, increased productivity, and decreased absenteeism (Pinsonneault & Boisvert, 2001). Such work environments also seem to enhance an organization's knowledge management activities, and allow for a greater degree of flexibility combined with the ability to respond more rapidly to a variety of situations (Burn & Barnett, 1999; Ruppel & Harrington, 2001).

For these reasons, it is perhaps of little surprise that the use of virtual workplace models is on the rise. Some researchers, for example, have pointed out that almost half of all companies in North America

allow their employees to participate in some kind of virtual workplace arrangement (McClosky, 2001; Pinsonneault & Boisvert, 2001). Other researchers have noted that the advantages—particularly in terms of speed and flexibility—of virtual workplaces means that tens of millions of workers currently participate in some sort of virtual work environment (Scott & Timmerman, 1999). In fact, the advantages of such approaches have led some experts to predict that almost one third of the adult workforce will partake in some form of virtual workplace activity by 2020 (Scott & Timmerman, 1999). This expansion, moreover, is taking place on a global scale and is making virtual workplaces increasingly international environments.

PROSPECTS FOR GLOBAL EXPANSION

Participation in virtual workplaces comes down to one key factor: online access. Thus, as more nations gain such access, a broader international range of employees can participate in virtual workplace activities. And while les than one fifth of the world's population currently has online access (roughly 1.1 billion persons), that number is growing at an almost exponential rate (Internet Usage Statistics, 2007). The number of Internet users in Australia, for example, increased by almost 400,000 between June and August of 2004 alone (Active Internet Users, 2004). At the same time, almost half of the adults in Japan have online access while some three fourths of the citizens of South Korea have access to broadband connections (AsiaBiz Tech, 2003; Forsberg, 2005). This increase in access, paired with the rise of multinational organizations and globalization, creates ideal conditions for virtual workplaces to become international entities. Moreover, the growth of international outsourcing—particularly skilled, knowledge-based work—as a core business practice could also mean virtual workplaces will involve individuals from developing as well as industrialized nations (Beyond the Digital Divide, 2004; Relocating the Back Office, 2003).

VIRTUAL WORKPLACES: DECISIONS AND DIRECTIONS

This context brings with it an almost mind-boggling array of choices for organizations interested in using virtual workplaces. It creates a similarly complex situation for employees considering participating in such environments. For example:

- Which technologies should an organization or an individual use for virtual office work and why?
- What are the best uses of these technologies?
- Who should participate in such environments?

Moreover, the pressure to answer such questions quickly and effectively means both organizations and individuals need some sort of resource or reference to help make informed decisions in relation to virtual workplaces. The purpose of this edited collection is to serve as such a reference or resource.

To achieve this objective, this handbook has been divided into three major sections. Each section, in turn, presents information, ideas, and opinions on a particular aspect of virtual workplaces. Through such a three-part approach, the handbook provides individuals with a foundation both for understanding the factors that affect virtual work environments and for making effective decisions related to the effective adoption an the efficient operation of such environments.

OVERVIEW OF THE SECTIONS OF THE BOOK

The book consists of four sections. The first section, entitled "Foundations of the Virtual Workplace," addresses fundamental issues essential for successfully organizing, managing, or participating in a virtual workplace. These issues range from such broad concerns as establishing the right atmosphere for employee collaboration to more specific topics, such as managing stress in the age of "ubiquitous connectivity" or accommodating the needs of virtual employees with disabilities.

The concept of the virtual workplace is still relatively new. Anyone hoping to function in a virtual workplace will have to rethink and adjust some of the basic ideas and assumptions about work. To help with such a transition, competent and timely training of new virtual workers is absolutely essential. In the second section, "Education and Training for the Virtual Workplace," the authors discuss research on the theory and practice of successfully training present and future employees for the virtual workplace. The chapters included in this section will be useful both for practicing virtual workers, such as managers and business owners, as well for college and university faculty and administrators interested in preparing students for success in the virtual workplace.

Despite the relatively young age of the virtual workplace, virtual workers have developed an impressive array of techniques and tools that allow them to accomplish a variety of tasks. The third section of this volume, "Tools and Environments for Virtual Work," covers the tools available to members of virtual workplaces. These tools range from such traditional ones as e-mail and instant messaging to such more recent arrivals on the virtual workplace scene as collaborative writing environments and virtual worlds. We hope that the chapters included in this section will prove useful both for practicing virtual workers and managers and to students of the virtual workplace.

The final section of the book is called "Implementation of Virtual Workplaces Across Professions and Academic Disciplines." It covers the different ways in which professions and academic disciplines use, adapt, and appropriate the theory and practice of the virtual workplace. The fields and professions discussed in this section include business, medicine, politics, education, and others. We believe that this broad scope of disciplines and professions emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of the study of the virtual workplace. In addition, it stresses the need for any employee, manager, or scholar to keep up-to-date on the topic of the virtual workplace. As editors, we hope that this book will help our readers accomplish that goal. We are sure that the experts who contributed to this collection want to achieve the same goal.

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