

THE FUTURE IS A SATELLITE NEAR YOU

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Are you an office worker? Were you stuck in a four mile traffic queue this morning? Did you crawl to work in a stifling overcrowded bus or train. How long was your journey time? An hour - longer? Were you late for work? Did you arrive stressed out and in a lather of sweat? Or did you get up early to miss the rush, leave before your children were up and return after they had gone to bed? I have none of those problems. You need not have them either.

Our choice of where we live is governed by house prices and availability, schools, family ties and amenities - rarely proximity to our place of work. We live where we can find houses and we work where we can find work. Our salvation over the next fifteen years is going to come not from improving transport but from changing the way we work.

A very high proportion of communication even within the modern office is by phone or e-mail. Increasingly even face to face meetings take place on a monitor rather than over a desk. It makes very little difference if the person you are speaking to is in the next room, on the next floor, in another building or even in another country. We already have the virtual office but to enjoy the freedom it offers it needs to be liberated from the building in which it is imprisoned.

This does not mean we should all work from home. For some people this is fine. For the majority home is a refuge from work. Working there is too isolated from social interaction, peer pressure and group motivation. It is full of distractions. So, ideally, we should work not from home but from an office location very close to home.

Imagine a network of offices where space can be rented by companies and head office workstations replicated to suit employees living locally. Ideally they would be located no more than ten minutes walk from anywhere within the residential area they serve - about the same distance as the local primary school. They might be conversions of other buildings or they might be purpose built. They might simply be within existing offices with space provided on a workplace swap basis between enlightened employers.

This is not as radical as it may seem. Planners have long been advocating mixed development - business premises mixed in with housing. But with no linkage between the two, people working in the business space probably still travel from miles away and nothing is gained. The difference being proposed here is local workspace specifically for local residents.

The benefits are far more wide ranging than just giving a few employees a big proportion of their day back. It would give them all their travel costs back. It would

reduce stress. It would give them wider social contacts from meeting people at work who live locally, whose children go to the same schools and who share the same recreational facilities. How many at the moment even know their neighbours?

Reduction in travel would have huge environmental and economic benefits from reduced fuel consumption, reduced pollution, fewer accidents and less need to expand expensive transport infrastructure.

Sterile dormitory areas would become sustainable communities. They would not depopulate during the day. Crime would reduce. Services would spring up in support of satellite office space. Rural communities could have access to employment with city centre salaries injected into their economies. There would be less need for migration to the cities.

It would enable young mums and older people to continue their careers part time. It would provide disabled people with far easier access to work. It would facilitate evening training to enable people to maintain their skills or learn new ones.

For most employers this might seem a daunting prospect. Employees and infrastructure spread all over the place - a management nightmare. In fact it is likely that management systems designed to operate satellite working would make companies more efficient. New protocols and line management would improve communication and periodic head office meetings would be reinforced by on screen video conferencing. The management of space allocation is relatively easily resolved by posting availability on the internet and optimising new office requirements by mapping employee's residential post codes.

The advantages for employers would be considerable - less stressed employees, less lateness, less disruption from transport delays (estimated by the Financial Times to cost city companies £130m a year), no relocation costs, attracting the best employees, attracting employees from a wider geographical area and a lower overhead cost per workstation.

This concept obviously does not suit all types of office work. Nor does it suit those for whom the city centre is the oxygen of life. But the number of people it will suit can reduce commuter congestion significantly and free up transport systems for others who have to use them.

To reap the benefits we need more than just an enlightened attitude from employers - we need to change planning strategies. Already huge swathes round our cities are carpeted with housing. As long as every redundant building and every vacant site is sold for further housing there will be nowhere for satellite offices to go. We either need to allocate land and redundant buildings specifically for the purpose or we need to ensure that some ground floors in new residential apartment blocks are retained for this purpose.

The solution for our congested cities is staring us in the face. If you doubt that developments in IT, or the capacity of people to learn new ways of using it, will

radically change the way we work, just think how you were working fifteen years ago and project the same rate of change over the next fifteen years. To manage the change to our advantage we should be planning for it now - not just moaning about loss of work/life balance.

Oh, and why do I not have those problems? I live two minutes walk from my office.

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