

emerging technology in the office



Summary

It is difficult sometimes to appreciate the sheer scale of the change that has occurred in office workplaces over the last few decades. Perhaps the best way to illustrate just how far we have come in how short a time is to consider a hypothetical worker now on the brink of retirement. In the past forty years, we have moved from typewriters, IBMs, hand written reports and cheques, to high speed electronic, mobile systems of work which can be accessed via the cloud from remote locations, as well as in the office. The miracle of the Internet means that a world of information is available at our fingertips at the click of a mouse.

What then is the next step for technology? What will our offices look like by 2020? Will offices as we know them even still exist? Read on to find out.

The Future in the Present – WiFi Hotspots and Cloud

Cloud storage sounds suitably mysterious and creates an image of information stored in some ethereal fashion, without an earthly manifestation. The truth is rather more prosaic. It is, in fact, a way of storing information with a third party and something which is easily accessible either in a location with a server or a place with Wi-Fi hotspots. What makes it a source of great possibilities is that this cloud storage information is accessible anywhere where there is an internet connection available.

As many people could affirm, cloud storage is not fully functional in every workplace in 2014. We must assume, however, that the near future will see the proliferation of Wi-Fi hotspots, which in turn will further facilitate the use of cloud storage. This will result in what has been termed as “the destruction of distance”, a poetic way of describing the effect of immediate communication and access. As a result, the office may well become a place where most workers need only visit, rather than spend all their time at, as they are able to access all the information they need remotely via the cloud.

Remote Workers as Robots

By 2020, mobile phone networks and the speed of Internet connections are expected to cause a rise in telecommuting. As a result, technology will have to keep up. Telepresence robots may well be used in the office, controlled by remote workers. The remote worker can control the robot to move around the office in order to perform tasks and can keep in touch via a camera and microphone attached to the robot.

Suitable technology has already created a Beam “telepresence” robot which can be controlled remotely. Could the office of 2020 be a sparsely populated one, with robots carrying out the majority of tasks?

The Use of Sensors

By 2020, voice sensors should have become so sensitive that they will be able to pick out key information from a conversation and note it down, for instance the date of a meeting or key figures. At the same time, facial recognition devices should

allow a computer owner instant access to his device without the need for a password. Such developments will cut down on the time taken in the office to carry out routine administrative procedures, thus freeing up more of the working day to focus on projects and driving business forward.

3D Printing

The world of design is set to change radically as the result of the invention of the 3D printer. This technology enables 3D objects to be created via a special computer-generated design. Designers will be able to make prototypes quickly, at their desks, thus speeding up the design process and making it cheaper than using conventional manufacturing techniques. Whilst 3D printing may not be a development suitable for the majority of offices, its very existence is symbolic of the rapid and widespread changes currently occurring in the world of technology, many of which will one day affect working practices.

Gesture Control

Mice and keyboards may well soon be things of the past, as gesture control devices have been developed which enable users to control computers using hand gestures. This technology should facilitate a natural experience when people interact with computers, particularly when carrying out tasks such as giving presentations or demonstrations. Again, by cutting down on the time spent performing routine procedures, office workers will be able to focus on the more important aspects of their work.

Wearable Enhanced Reality

The Google Glass device is a small, portable and wearable computer. Photos can be taken directly from it, and a wearer can access useful information, such as directions or information, directly. Set to launch later this year, the implications of such a device are limitless, both for the office and the world in general.

Conclusion: Implications for the “Office”

With all these advancements, the office of 2020 looks like a very different place to the one we know now, thanks to the proliferation of cloud storage, Wi-Fi hotspots and rapid technological developments. Indeed, we may start to wonder just how necessary conventional places of work are at all. If tasks can be assigned, carried out with access to all the relevant information, sent to the appropriate destination and received and checked, all without it being necessary for the worker to set foot in an office space, then why have an office at all? The presence of robots in the workplace, Google glass or 3D printers as office tool may even seem unnerving to the employees of today.

However, we must also bear in mind that all of these developments are aimed to make work easier and more fulfilling. Being able to work remotely will be a blessing to many, and having quicker and easier access to computer technologies will make one’s job easier to carry out. It seems unlikely that offices will become empty spaces populated by robots in the near future. Perhaps the offices of the future will, on the other hand, become streamlined versions of the offices of today, ideally suited to the challenges of tomorrow.

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