

January 1996

The virtual office

If you let your fingers take a walk through any business directory, you will find dozens of companies that have exploited the language of the new in their titles.

The combinations prefixed by techno and compu are as popular today as those which in earlier days may have used auto and aero. One word which seems to be making this breakthrough into business nomenclature is 'virtual'. It feels as modern as . . . well as 'modern' did in the 1960s.

So if you prefix whatever you do with the word 'virtual', it gives it the feel of a bang up-to-date enterprise.

But what does this new application mean? It emerged with computer simulation giving the impression of moving within a three-dimensional landscape, hence virtual reality to denote the illusion of reality. Now it is being linked with almost anything. Had this type of usage been around during the consumer revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, we might have had virtual coffee and virtual potatoes.

Instead we have something called the virtual office. The concept has been around in companies for a while, covering everything from hot desking - multiple user desks - to technical systems which can maintain communications with workers who are constantly on the move, whose office can be their hotel room or company car. Now it can be bought 'off the shelf' to provide the illusion of big company back-up to the self employed.

Richard Nissen has bundled the ideas together into a business he has called, not surprisingly, The Virtual Office. Nissen has an inventive mind which he inherited from his grandfather, who brought us the Nissen hut, or what today might be called the virtual living space.

Nissen has progressed from the hut to a smart address in Piccadilly which he uses to rent out temporary office space to anyone who needs it. A progression from this was to establish a switchboard and telephone system which can take in and transfer calls, messages or mail anywhere in the world. There is also an area he calls a 'touch-down space', not much bigger than a broom cupboard, which can be rented by the mobile worker to make telephone calls, send or receive faxes, or plug a lap-top computer into an electricity supply.

This arrangement, therefore, allows an individual to create the illusion of being in more than one place at the same time. Nissen has some 266 clients using his virtual office. One of them, Jane Deuser, of Deuser Clarkson Business Development, is travelling regularly between London and New York with business in both countries. Deuser runs a consultancy advising people how to get a business off the ground, including devising business plans and finding venture capital.

While she can work from her home in New York or her office in Tooting in south London, she often needs to come into the centre for meetings with clients. The virtual office gives her a temporary base. Calls to either her office in New York or the UK are routed through the Tooting office to wherever she happens to be.

She says: 'When I'm in London, I can come in here and take a couple of phone calls. I can meet people here as if it was my business address. I can even hire out a meeting room upstairs by the hour if I need one. I have a full secretarial back-up and I'm on Compuserve so I can take and send E-mail messages.

'It's important for me to have the image that I'm everywhere at the same time. If people in the UK think I'm in New York, they won't call me. But with this system there is no need for me to say that I am out of the country.'

Deuser reckons the service works out at about £125 a month. It costs her £75 a month to maintain, with the cost of telephone calls on top of this. It is also flexible.

'I had a huge project in the states which lasted six months so I did not take the service during that time,' she says.

Nissen has now invented his own recruitment system which he calls Job Sort. He used it successfully to recruit a book keeper.

The system works like this: the job is advertised in a newspaper, asking the prospective candidate to phone a particular telephone number. When they call, they hear a recorded message asking them to outline a few details, such as name and address, and to give a three- minute presentation explaining why they would be right for the job. The uncommitted ones hang up and do not return. The clever ones who want the job hang up and work at their presentation before calling back.

Nissen can then play back all the recorded presentations to draw up a shortlist. He hopes to develop the idea in partnership with someone with human resource experience who could make the system marketable as a recruitment tool.

© 1996 The Financial Times. All rights reserved