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Working alternatives after 9/11

Wall Street traders went back to work this week with flags in their hands and a sense of purpose that might in the normal course of events have been missing in their lives. They were out to make money, as always, but also to make a point - that work and life would go on.

Old habits die hard and restoring the familiar routines is an important part of the catharsis for those who live and work in New York. This is unsurprising in a workforce suffused with the Protestant work ethic.

It is far too early to gauge whether the attack on the World Trade Centre will transform attitudes in the workplace but one outcome may be a greater willingness among employers to look at alternative ways of working. How many survivors, for example, will entertain the prospect of working again in a tower block? How many will look for alternatives when once they would have flown to meetings without a second thought?

Massing tens of thousands of people together in multi-tiered boxes the size of a town is no longer necessary for many types of work, including trading on the financial markets. Licensed software applications exist that could allow people to trade from their living rooms if they wished.

Conglomerating people in offices has become a habit but many of the supposed efficiencies of this work have disappeared with the arrival of the modem and the internet. Richard Arkwright, the 18th century English cotton spinner and one of the pioneers of mass production, brought workers together in large mills, partly to make economies of scale - he could use a single power source to run his machines - and partly to prevent scrutiny of his machines by those who would copy them in defiance of his patent. Most significantly perhaps, it allowed him to control and to profit from this concentration of production.

The factory system that characterised the industrial revolution was expanded on a grand scale by those, like Henry Ford, who introduced moving assembly. At the same time, office systems proliferated to handle the masses of paperwork demanded by trading and accounting systems. Factories remain a necessary constituent of manufacturing - but the office in its traditional sense is surely becoming obsolete. Its main function today appears to be to maintain a sense of workforce cohesion.

Various studies in the past few years have highlighted the importance of communications and maintaining relationships among workforces, yet relatively few employers have been bold enough to design workplaces to take account of such needs. Close working relationships are unlikely to develop among people sitting at their desks, staring at screens eight hours a day yet this is the reality of much desk-bound working.

A new wave of ergonomics research and legislation in Scandinavia is transforming the office. Most of the new desks bought for workplaces in Denmark today allow people the choice of standing or sitting at their workstation. Peter Kurstein, a Danish-based expert in ergonomics, working with the Office Institute in Denmark, says: "People need variety in their work. They want to chat to their colleagues near the coffee machines and they like to stand in groups as they would in the street or in a

bar."

This is the way relationships are forged in an organisation but static desk work, where a colleague may e-mail a simple request from a few yards rather than speaking, erodes such relationships. If people need variety at work why can't they mix their jobs so that they do some work at home, and other work - such as essential meetings and social encounters for the trading of gossip - in the workplace? Some people need the hubbub of the office to do their best work, others need to be more detached. But people should have more choice, where possible, over where and when they work. Too often such variety and flexibility is opposed by control-hungry managers who want their staff where they can see them.

The need for a shared experience in response to the events of last week may underline the gregarious nature of work. People were talking this week of the need to get back in to work. But some are likely to harbour deep reservations about tower block working, high above the ground.

If the loss of the World Trade Centre leads to changes in workplace design or working conditions it will not be unprecedented. Ninety years ago, in 1911, a fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist company in lower Manhattan, New York. Women were packed into overcrowded workshops in the top three stories of the high-rise Asch building. Fire spread so quickly that avenues of escape were blocked. Many women, some with their clothes alight, jumped to their deaths rather than face the fire. Some 146 died. The tragedy led to new workplace arrangements, regulations and safety laws that still exist today.

Unlike the case of the 1911 fire, no-one is saying after last week's catastrophe that employers were negligent or that people worked in poor conditions. But, in spite of designs to withstand the impact of a large aircraft, the World Trade Centre could not survive the explosive impact of fuel-laden jets.

Many newer workplaces, particularly call centres, have been created in single -storey shed-like structures on the outskirts of towns and cities. The high rise phenomenon has prevailed where space is limited and city authorities have been convinced that financial businesses need to be in close proximity. How much of this need, I wonder, is born of habit and the herd instinct?

Workers in specific occupations historically have always chosen to congregate, sometimes for safety, sometimes to find new work if one source of work disappears. Networking is still an important feature of the job market so it may be unrealistic to expect any widespread dissipation of companies in the financial markets. The need to stay in touch is evident, even among the more solitary professions. In trading houses it is vital. But much of the contact is telephone-based, following the diurnal rhythm of the international markets.

Fear of losing out to competition was stimulating the latest generation of high rise plans. It may be that different fears - for human safety - must be considered if the high rise office is to overcome emerging phobias arising from the terrorist threat.

When the understandable gestures of defiance displayed by New York's financial workers gives way to some sober reflection the slavish attachment to the office may begin to evaporate. If so, companies already concerned to keep their best people may need to be increasingly inventive in their definitions of the workplace. Greater choice and imagination about workplace flexibility would be a step in the right direction.

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