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Virtual life in the office

Virtual working is being heralded as the way forward for business. Technology is laying the foundations to let people work when, where and how they like.

Soon, colleagues will be a face on a computer screen, rather than a living, breathing person at the next desk. People won't clock into work, they will log on to a computer anywhere in the world, switch the webcam and the Skype on and start working.

But is this use of IT the future for our working practices or is it taking the humanity out of business?

Andy Dent, managing director of IT specialist Innovit believes that it could be, especially when technology is being used for technology's sake.

"Technology is always at the cutting edge of the world's innovation, with new products being developed all the time with increasingly sophisticated applications," he said.

"In the arena of conferencing the changes have been very dramatic. While a large number of businesses still use conference calls very effectively, technology aware companies are using video conferencing, combined with data collaboration to host virtual meetings.

"These systems have long been in use in America where vast distances dictate the need for an alternative to colleagues meeting up.

"The innovation was pioneered, as is often the case, by Microsoft with the launch of NetMeeting Version 3, which allows data collaboration, video

conferencing and the use of a virtual whiteboard which all delegates can access.

“There have also been significant developments in the area of pure video conferencing. Companies such as Maratech can now offer multipoint conferences through their own network, which allow delegates to see not only the speaker but other delegates.

“This allows them to see not only the speaker but how other people are reacting to what they are saying.”

This highlights one of the biggest shortfalls in the use of technology in conferencing, according to Andy.

“The fact is people need to be able to see other people to read their body language and to a great extent to bond with them,” he said.

“It would be a very simplistic comment to say that people come to work to earn money. They come to see colleagues, to interact and to share experiences and ideas, often for long hours every week. So using too much technology can take this away from them and leave people feeling lost and at risk of becoming just a number.

“It might seem odd for an IT company to have this view. And I have to be honest, as an organisation, we have embraced virtual working to the point that we don’t have an office. We use an Internet portal to share files and information, we have online task lists and PDAs which allow people to pick up emails wherever they are.

“And we have clients who work in very similar ways – a firm of solicitors we work with regularly host online meetings between regional offices, rather than pull fee earners away from their desks and lose hours in travelling time.

“With the ever increasing energy costs, a lot more companies are turning to home working and virtual offices as a way to cut overheads.

“The ‘Star Wars’ concept of a virtual meeting where you are represented by a hologram is not as far fetched as it may seem.

“But what we constantly make sure we do is bring people together. It could be members of staff, suppliers and customers of ours, but we make the effort to meet face to face. Because even with all the technology innovation in the world, nothing can replace being in the same room as someone and having a face to face conversation.”

Andy Dent is managing director of Innovit