

4-1983

New Workplace Techniques: Can They Benefit Your Firm?

Carole B. Cheatham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/wcpa>



Part of the [Accounting Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cheatham, Carole B. (1983) "New Workplace Techniques: Can They Benefit Your Firm?," *Woman C.P.A.*: Vol. 45 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/wcpa/vol45/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archival Digital Accounting Collection at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Woman C.P.A. by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

New Workplace Techniques

Can They Benefit Your Firm?

By Carole B. Cheatham

There is a quiet revolution going on in the work environment of the office. In places where people used to come in at 9:00 and go home at 5:00, new things are happening. Although many still work on a standard schedule, some are now working an eight-hour day starting and finishing at hours more convenient for them. A golfing enthusiast may start at 7:00 and leave at 3:00, in time to be on the golf course at 4:00. The office night owl may come in at 11:00 and go home at 7:00. Still other employees may not work eight hours at all. The desk occupied by Jim in the morning may be used by Susan in the afternoon in a job sharing system. Others may work in permanent part time positions.

In the new office environment some employees may, in fact, not be there at all. Some may be working at home from computer terminals and some may be away on sabbaticals and cumulative earned leave programs. The purpose of this article is to explore some of the new workplace techniques along with the technology that makes them possible. The benefits and hazards to employers seeking to im-

plement these techniques will also be examined.

New Workplace Techniques

There are a host of new workplace techniques. Some are new in the true sense and some are just new in a professional setting. The following list gives some idea of fresh alternatives although it is by no means exhaustive.

Flexible Scheduling. Flexible scheduling or flexitime means that an employee can choose his or her own starting and quitting time as long as eight hours are worked. Lunch hours are also flexible to allow for no lunch at all or a long break period to allow for exercise or shopping or other personal activities. Newer versions of flexitime are even more flexible. They allow employees to work a flexible schedule as long as a certain number of hours are worked in a week, a month or even a year. The latter arrangements are particularly attractive to employees who want to accumulate blocks of time for child care in the summer or for vacations or personal projects.

Job Sharing. Job sharing means that two people share a full time job, working out the hours between them so that an eight-hour day is covered. More innovative approaches allow for four people to split three jobs or other ratios that apply in a particular situation. The latter arrangement is probably more properly called work sharing. In some cases work sharing has arisen as an alternative to cutting back the work force. A small refinery, faced with cutting back the number of employees, gave all employees the choice of working six-hour days rather than dismissing some. The employees elected the six-hour day and continued the practice even after the crisis passed.

Permanent Part-Time. Permanent part-time positions are obviously not a new idea, but they are new in career track positions. The idea of not getting sidetracked from their careers is particularly appealing to mothers with younger children, but students and single parents and others appreciate the permanent part-time arrangement. Maintenance of fringe benefits is another important aspect of this type of position.

Task System. The task system is an arrangement that works well when certain well-defined tasks have to be performed. This system allows people to perform their task, usually a group endeavor, and go home when it is complete. Although the task system is probably more adaptable to a production situation, it can be used in offices in which the work is well-defined and self-limiting.

Home Office. The home office has been used by professionals for years. In most cases the home office was thought of as supplemental to, rather than substituting for, an office at the regular place of business. The exciting activity in this area today is in the new technology. Communication links allow workers to use computer terminals and word processors many miles away from the office rather than just down the hall.

Sabbaticals. There is a great deal of new thinking in the area of retirement today. People are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that after age 65 may not be the best time to have free time. As pointed out by Edith L.

The paperless office is not that far distant in the future.

Stunkel of the Kansas State University Center for Aging, "Time...is a resource, and the distribution of free time may be even less equitable than the distribution of income in a person's lifetime. Free time is most heavily concentrated in the retirement years, but for most people it would have far greater value if it were distributed throughout life."¹

Several innovative approaches to retirement, or allocation of free time, have been proposed. One proposal is for sabbaticals. Sabbaticals have long been used in the academic world as a means of self-renewal. The traditional sabbatical is allowed every seven years and is usually used for professional updating, research, or other self improvement.

Cumulative Earned Leave. Cumulative earned leave is a flexible plan which allows the employee to earn time off from work in addition to vacation time. Covering all employees on Social Security, cumulative earned leave would be transferable from job to job and would allow retention of seniority and fringe benefits during periods of leave. As proposed by L. L. Suhm in 1969 the plan would be funded equally by employers, employees and the federal government.

Phased Retirement. A somewhat less radical approach to retirement is phased retirement. In phased retirement the employee works fewer hours per week as retirement approaches. For example, a worker between 60 and 65 works 32 hours a week, between 65 and 67 he or she works 24 hours a week and between 67 to 70 the transition is made to 16 hours a week. Such a plan prevents the abrupt change

from working life to complete retirement and allows the employee to develop outside interests gradually.

New Office Technology

The new office technology may even be more exciting than the new work environment. Technological innovations in office equipment will make possible the new environment. The new technology makes the environment possible in two ways: 1) the communications revolution allows office workers to work wherever they are rather than forcing them to be in an office building, and 2) new techniques allow workers to be more productive, giving them more free time to be allocated in innovative ways.

Anyone who has ever been buried in computer printouts or a backlog of correspondence will appreciate the "paperless office." In the paperless office the desk becomes a work station complete with a personal computer terminal and word processing equipment. Letters, memos, accounting records, source documents, research data can all be stored internally in the computer. Likewise they can be retrieved for reference or updating and can be sent or referred to other work stations. With the new communications links, other work stations may be down the hall, at an employee's home in the suburbs, or across the country.

The paperless office is not that far distant in the future. Richard Matteis of Citibank's Wall Street office has discussed how new techniques have speeded up the issuance of letters of credit. He points out that, using a variety of computer-controlled equipment and storage, it takes one person less than a day to receive a request and issue a letter of credit. Formerly it took more than thirty processing steps, involved fourteen people and generated a large amount of paper including a variety of forms, tickets, and file folders.²

Perhaps even more radical than the paperless office will be the electronic briefcase. The electronic briefcase will open to display a video screen with a touch sensitive electronic keyboard in the briefcase lid. The necessary hardware, including the electronics, memory chips and batteries will be in the other side of the case. A place will be provided for sensitized paper to make hard copies from the screen. Although it may call up visions of Max-

well Smart talking into his shoe, a phone unit will be available to communicate with a data network or for dictation. There will even be space for the executive's lunch if he or she chooses to brown bag.³

Busy executives will also be thankful for intelligent telephones. Not only will these phones be able to serve as links with computers, but they will serve the executive in a variety of ways—screening calls so that only a specified number can come through, putting out a "do not disturb" signal and making collect, third party and credit card calls unassisted. Teleconferencing will be popular in the future, including not only audio conferencing, but also computer conferencing in which conferees communicate through computer terminals and video teleconferencing in which participants can see each other on video screens. Videotapes of these conferences can be retained for later reference. Mobile communications over long distances will be possible through satellite networks, allowing executives to keep in touch with their offices wherever they are.⁴

Offices of the future, if they continue to exist, may also contain a variety of robots. Webster's dictionary defines a robot as, "an automatic apparatus or device that performs functions ordinarily ascribed to human beings or operates with what appears to be almost human intelligence." Certainly in this sense there are robots at work in offices even today. One word processing system can check the spelling of some 50,000 English words, for example. If robots are used in the office of the future, it is doubtful they will look much like R-2, D-2 or other science fiction models. Robots in automotive factories are not humanoid in appearance but they can perform the welding necessary for body assembly. At Nissan's Zama factory in Japan 96% of the welding is done by robots. Japan, incidentally, produces 45 cars per human worker per year while the United States produces 25 cars per worker. Japan is not the only country to use robots in auto assembly, although it is the most highly automated. General Motors, for example, increased production 20% at its plant in Lordstown, Ohio, when it started using robot welders.⁵

Robots can be used in a variety of production tasks. General Electric uses them to spray the coating on

refrigerators and expects to have as many as 1,000 robots performing a variety of tasks by 1990.⁶ If robots can be used in delicate production tasks, then it seems likely that some office functions can likewise be done by robots. *Robotics in Practice* tells of one robot worker in an automotive plant which the human workers referred to as "Clyde the Claw." One day "Clyde the Claw" suffered the robot equivalent of a nervous breakdown. By the time repairmen came to the robot's aid, Clyde was heaped with flowers and get well cards.⁷ Perhaps in the not-too-distant future a group of office workers will have a welcoming party for "Willie the Word Processor" or a retirement party for "Clara the Copier."

Hazards and Benefits of the New Workplace Techniques

The new workplace techniques are frequently extolled from the standpoint of the employee with little attention to the advantages and disadvantages to the firm employing them. Questions that occur to employers are concerns such as "Will productivity increase enough to justify the increased costs?", "Will any workers have to be dismissed?", "Can I evaluate the performance of a worker I seldom see?", "With a host of communications links to my data bases, can I be assured of adequate security controls?", "How do I motivate workers and will some try to beat the system?". These are legitimate concerns and questions that employers must ask before implementing any radical new office systems.

Productivity. Productivity of the office has lagged behind that of the factory dramatically. During the 1970s office productivity increased only 4% while factory productivity rose 85%. By the same token, only \$5 to \$10 per white collar worker was invested in capital equipment for the office while \$100 per blue collar worker was spent for capital equipment in the factory.⁸ The moral is that the office is ripe for productivity increases, but more money must be spent to gain these increases. Obviously, there is no simple answer to whether or not a particular project is worth the cost. A careful analysis through use of capital budgeting techniques or cost/benefit ratios is required. The fascination with some of the new tools is so great that some executives may be motivated to

purchase unnecessary equipment just to be the first to have it, to keep up with competitors, or because it is fun to use.

Displacement. Worker displacement in the face of automation is a problem that is as old as the Industrial Revolution. There is no doubt that increases in office productivity will bring about some worker displacement in the short run. However, in the long run productivity increases should bring about new jobs and shorter hours for those who continue to work. The productivity increases will make possible the new systems of phased retirement, sabbaticals, cumulative earned leave, and other innovative approaches to work scheduling.

Temporarily the adjustment may be painful as old jobs are adjusted or eliminated. Lest anyone should think that the adjustment will merely affect clerical workers it might be noted that, according to a study done for the British government, the jobs most likely to be affected by the microelectronics revolution are accountants, financial analysts, and administrators along with secretaries, billing clerks, keypunchers, filing clerks, and twenty other occupations.⁹ In *The Micro Millennium*, Christopher Evans points out that, by the late 1980s, books can be available in microchip form and encyclopedias can do their own research and act as study partners. He predicts this will lead to the erosion of such professions as doctors, lawyers, teachers and accountants.¹⁰

Performance evaluation. Theoretically performance evaluation should be based solely on performance, and it should not matter whether the supervisor has face-to-face contact with the employee at all. Thus, it should not matter that a particular employee is only in the office a few hours a week or that he or she is not there at all. Most managers have a little difficulty in accepting the total elimination of subjectivity in the performance evaluation process. Although objective measures may suffice for consideration for merit raises or bonuses, it is difficult to assess whether or not an individual has the maturity to move on to a more responsible position by just evaluating his or her work. An individual may handle programming well but be at a total loss if put in an administrative position.

Accountants and administrators can be displaced in the microelectronics revolution.

The other side of this coin is that employees who have little contact with the office may find this a significant career barrier, in the same way that someone in the home office may be promoted before an equally qualified individual in a distant branch just because the boss knows him.

Security. Security is a concern no matter where employees work; but the more communications links there are, the more security of data becomes a problem. Control of input devices has always been one means of internal control with computers and this control is decreased when terminals are at remote locations. Besides security of data, security of the equipment itself is a concern. Not only may thieves break in and steal the video terminal, but the toddler may dump an ice cream cone into the word processor.

Privacy is a somewhat related concern. Legal restrictions on privacy require controls on a great deal of personnel and customer data. As with security, the problems multiply with the number of communication links. William Renfro tells of one office system that allowed executives to call on the phone and dictate memos. In this way it was possible to get a memo done in a few hours. However, the system was not used because nobody trusted its privacy. This type of situation may occur when workers are at dispersed locations.¹¹

Not having face-to-face contact with employees makes it difficult to maintain security and privacy controls. Employers are still prone to trust people they know more than people they never see or see infrequently. This trust is important to a good working relationship. If the informal control of

knowing the employee cannot be utilized, then a great many formal controls must be built into the system and these are expensive.

Motivation. One motivating factor to perform in an office is the supervisor's eye. If employees are to work at remote locations such as at home, on a plane, or in a hotel room, other motivation must be present. Anyone who has worked at home can vouch for the difficulty of maintaining concentration while other family members go about their business. Even when alone it is hard to ignore other tasks and distractions.

An office has a sense of community and, to varying degrees, a sense of working toward common goals. These are also motivating factors that are lost to a person working at a remote location. When a good day's work is finished at an office somebody is usually there to recognize it. For the employee at a remote location there can only be self-recognition.

Motivation is also a problem for workers who take off several days in a row through one of the flexible work scheduling or cumulative earned leave systems. The phenomenon of the Monday morning slump can be even worse after several days absence. The "head of steam" gained through an extended period of several consecutive days of work may be more difficult to maintain with some of the new plans.

The motivation problem is not likely to be solved by any kind of incentive plan although bonuses, merit raises, and variations of piecerate systems

may help some. The problem with incentive plans is that they represent "pie in the sky by and by" and what the home worker or the employee who is facing Monday morning blues needs is a way to get motivated until lunch.

The key to the motivation problem lies in the selection of the employee in the first place. Some people are self-starters and can maintain a strict self-discipline. Others need a more structured atmosphere to do their best work. The increased freedom of the new plans will be motivating to some individuals, but it will be a disincentive for others.



Carole B. Cheatham, CPA, Ph.D., is professor of accountancy at Mississippi State University. She is a former associate editor of *The Woman CPA*, is the author of a book entitled *Cost Management For Profit Centers*, and has published in various accounting journals.

Implications of the New Workplace Techniques

The new workplace techniques will soon be a fact of life. Some will, of course, be more popular than others. The firm that wishes to compete for quality people will need to consider the work environment because the firm offering flexitime or the task system or some other innovative scheduling will have a distinct advantage. Now is the time to become aware of the new systems with a view toward implementing them when it becomes advantageous to do so.

FOOTNOTES

¹Edith L. Stunkel, "Let's Abolish Retirement," *The Futurist*, Vol. XIII, No. 6 (October 1979), p. 326.

²Colin Norman, "The New Industrial Revolution," *The Futurist*, Vol. XV, No. 1 (February 1981), p. 38.

³Marvin Kornbluh, "The Electronic Office," *The Futurist*, Vol. XVI, No.3 (June 1982), p. 40.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

⁵Norman, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Joseph F. Engelberger, *Robotics in Practice: Management and Applications of Industrial Robots*, AMACOM, New York, 1980, cited by Colin Norman, "The New Industrial Revolution," *The Futurist*, Vol. XV, No. 1 (February 1981), p. 35.

⁸Kornbluh, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁹Norman, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁰Christopher Evans, *The Micro Millenium*, Viking Press, New York, 1980, cited by Colin Norman, "The New Industrial Revolution," *The Futurist*, Vol. XV, No. 1 (February 1981), p. 38.

¹¹William L. Renfro, "Second Thoughts on Moving the Office Home," *The Futurist*, Vol. XVI, No. 3 (June 1982), pp. 45-47.

