



From “Oh?” to “Oh!” to “Oh ...”:

The Emergence, Evolution And Impending Disappearance Of Telecommuting/Telework

by Gil E. Gordon

On a recent airplane trip in January 2003, the person next to me asked the inevitable question: “what do you do?” I told him I consulted with employers to set up telecommuting programs so some of their employees could work from home. He paused, looked at me, and said, “Is that still in vogue?” That question summarizes my reasons for writing this paper more succinctly than any executive summary ever could.

Join me, if you will, for a bit of time travel as I take you through the last twenty-five years of the development of the work practice¹ known as telecommuting or telework². This time period coincides with but slightly exceeds my involvement with this field – a time during which I have watched telecommuting³ grow quite nicely. The good news is that telecommuting has grown, and the unsettling (though not necessarily bad) news is that it may be growing into obsolescence as a distinct concept.

Three “ Oh’s” in a Row

When I announced in the spring of 1982 that I was leaving the corporate world to begin a telecommuting consulting business, virtually everyone I spoke to responded with an “Oh?” – shorthand for “what is that?” or “telewhat?” or, perhaps under their breath or to themselves, “Are you crazy?” The term had barely appeared in the business or popular media at all; though the practice of having office-based employees do some of their work part-time from their homes or elsewhere wasn’t really new, it was certainly not commonplace. Alvin Toffler’s book *THE THIRD WAVE*, published in 1981, was the primary media lightning rod for attention to telecommuting, or as he called it in the book, “the electronic cottage.”

¹Is it a “work practice” – or is it a technology application, a real estate strategy, a family-friendly benefit, a traffic- and air pollution-reduction method, a customer-service enhancer, or? The fact that it can, in chameleon-like fashion, quite legitimately take on all these functions may be part of its undoing. More on this later.

²Is it “telecommuting” or “telework” or “mobile work” or “flexiplace” or “remote work” or “virtual office” or ...? The fact that it can, in chameleon-like fashion, quite legitimately assume all these names may be part of its undoing. More on this later also.

³For the purposes of this paper, I’m going to use the term “telecommuting” simply out of habit and because it remains the most commonly used label for it in the U.S. I do so at my own risk, knowing that many readers firmly believe “telework” to be the far more suitable term..

Those were the days of some early experimentation by a few banks and technology companies – Control Data Corp. and Continental Bank of Illinois in the U.S., and F International in England, to name a few – and of the beginnings of the personal computer revolution. Telecommuting was driven almost entirely by pure novelty and a “gee whiz, look what we can do” kind of techno-fascination.

We marched ahead through the mid and late 1980's with more and more successful trials and pilot programs, and a rapidly growing list of employers who learned it was not only possible but also actually feasible and desirable to separate the activity we call “office work” from the place called “the office.” The more telecommuting was used, and the more vendors started paying attention to it and helping promote its use, the more it began to drift into the realm of recognition.

Thus, whenever I spoke with people about telecommuting in the late 1980s and early 1990's, their reaction was usually an affirmative and sometimes enthusiastic “Oh!” – as if to say, “Yes, I know what that is. It's a great idea.” A steady flow of media coverage and the growing likelihood that most people knew or knew of a real, live corporate telecommuter meant that the novelty stage had passed; we were moving into the period of dispersion and growth.

As we moved ahead to the mid and late 1990's we began to see a slight fraying around the edges in that growth pattern. We experienced (some would say “endured”) a few cycles of media follow-up stories that seemed intent on uncovering the seamy, dark side of telecommuting. Tales of widespread isolation, employee abuse, financial hardship, and employer disillusionment came out – or at least, assertions about these ills came out. We didn't have the common sense to recognize these for what they were: the media's search for a “man bites dog” news angle on an idea that had been frequently reported over the previous ten years as a fantastic new workplace revolution⁴.

This last stage was characterized by reactions of the “Oh ...” variety – shorthand for “yes, I know about that. So what, what's new, and why should I be thinking about it - it's old news already.” I don't mean to imply that telecommuting had become old hat or passé by this time; it simply had developed to the point where it was so well reported, understood,

⁴I cringe every time I think of “telecommuting” and “revolution” being used in the same sentence – yet that's exactly what some of us telecommuting insiders did or at least colluded with as the media hyped the concept. The only thing revolutionary about telecommuting is its role as a wake-up call for managers who had for decades lapsed into the complacency of managing with their eyeballs instead of their brains. All the rest – the technology, the real estate innovations, the work-life balance aspects – were much more evolutionary in nature.

and used that it began fading into the corporate woodwork. This doesn't mean it was universally accepted or adopted by any means, but only that it was taking its rightful place along with other non-traditional approaches to organizing and doing work.

The "Oh ..." reaction wasn't, and still isn't, universal. There are plenty of managers and employers today who ask the same basic questions about telecommuting⁵ and who, in my view, will remain in the backwaters of corporate innovation⁶. They are the corporate analogs of the ancient dinosaurs who made lots of noise, made life miserable for those around them, and eventually were displaced by more advanced life forms⁷.

Morphing vs. Weakening vs. Disappearing

A few years ago I wrote an article titled "The Morphing of Telecommuting From Home to Anywhere," in which I argued that the traditional understanding of telecommuting (as work done at home instead of in the office) had become far too limited – and limiting. Technology had developed to the point where more people could do more kinds of work from more locations than ever before. The issue was no longer the choice between working in the office vs. working at home – it was about working in the office vs. working someplace else, and the "someplace else" could be just about anyplace. For many it would, in fact, remain the home.

This transmutation of telecommuting from an either-or choice of office vs. home into a much broader kind of mobile or remote work was, and still is, a very logical next step. It

⁵Insert your favorite one – "How will I know they're working?" or "What about Worker's Compensation liability?" or "How can I let some but not all employees do it?" – and the list goes on. At times I am greatly troubled by the repetitive nature of these questions, which seems to imply there has been little or no cumulative learning. The bad news is that we've seen less progress than we'd, but the good (?) news is that this is not unique to telecommuting. When I pick up any human resources magazine today I find topics and debates that I remember engaging in back in the early 1970s. Perhaps each new crop of managers must rediscover these issues anew.

⁶An important explanatory note here: I assert they belong in the dinosaur category not because they don't embrace telecommuting, but because their failure to do so – even on a limited, controlled basis – is a proxy for a more serious underlying characteristic. Strip everything else away and telecommuting comes down to one issue: control. Managers and employers who dig in and cling to their right to exert control over nearly every aspect of organizational life are going to fail with today's workers and today's customers, separate and apart from their beliefs about telecommuting.

⁷I decided long ago that I was tired of nursing my bruises from beating my head against these brick walls, and I readily and willingly cede to someone else the challenge of opening the eyes of those who otherwise fail to see.

is consistent with – some would say a cause of – the anytime-anywhere workplace⁸. It is also the key reason why the grammatical or philosophical debate over the choice of “telecommuting” vs. “telework” is becoming totally irrelevant in my view. Both words have tele as their root; that root implies distance, as in “distance from the office” or “working at a distance.” But mobile work is often not distant from any other workplace; wherever the mobile worker is working at the moment is the workplace.

I recently heard my friend and colleague Eddie Caine use the following Chinese proverb in his presentation at the North Texas Technology Council telework conference (January 2003): “Calling things by their right name is the beginning of understanding.” It may be with telecommuting and telework that our attempt to settle on one “right” name has in fact stood in the way of our understanding the concept itself.

Readers who remember the original mid-1970's writings about telecommuting from people such as Jack Nilles know that telecommuting was never intended to be about working from home per se. It was about decentralizing the workplace, and in doing so making a major shift from the placed-based work that was at the heart of the agricultural, industrial, and early part of the information, eras. It's time for us to reach back to those roots and remind ourselves that the decentralization and dispersion of the workforce is still the fundamental concept to keep in mind.

We are witnessing the evaporation of telecommuting as a distinct concept in part because it has become subsumed under the broader umbrella of remote work, and in part for two other reasons I will explain shortly. First, it is important to consider some points I've seen in a few recent articles that could signal an interesting anti-telecommuting undercurrent. I believe these are harbingers of what may – may – be a shift in the collective telecommuting mindset among employers. These are highly isolated and by no means representative observations; they're included here only because they jumped off the page at me. They are food for thought, not the basis for action - not yet, at least:

⁸As important as it is to take this broader view, we can't lose sight of the fact that the at-home form of mobile work – what I often refer to as “classic telecommuting” – does have some unique characteristics and issues. When you “work and live under the same roof” there are some work-life and work-family boundary considerations that simply don't arise, or at least not to the same degree, as when you're working in a hotel room, at a Starbucks, or on an airplane. (Incidentally, Paul and Sarah Edwards deserve credit for that “under the same roof” phrase though they generally don't receive it. It was the subtitle of their landmark book WORKING FROM HOME.)

- The ECONOMIST's "The World in 2003" annual preview issue notes that "2003 will be an unglamorous year to be in business. After the nasty jolts delivered by falling share prices, corporate scandals and slower economic growth, the new business world will take on an oddly old-fashioned look. The dependable, the trustworthy and the solidly profitable will all be back in demand again. Overall, it will mean a partial return to values that we thought were gone forever."

- Further in this same article – titled "Return of the Fountain Pen" – comes this assertion: "The rise in flexible homeworking may prove to be a false dawn. As companies tighten up their operations, and as levels of trust decline, managers will be less willing to allow their staff to work from home whenever they feel like it. Employees may even be grateful: working from home is not all it is cracked up to be. 2003 may underline the fact that there is no substitute for working with people, however loud or infuriating they are, rather than with just your laptop."⁹

- The NEW YORK TIMES of January 19, 2003 included the article "New Interview Uniform: Gray Means Business" which said that "With a glut of highly skilled candidates to choose from, hiring managers say they are paying far more attention than just a year ago to appearance." The article concludes by noting "In the dot-com economy, younger people wore double-breasted jackets, thinking they would become C.E.O.'s. But in today's stagnant market, you want to look like you've evolved from the old casual to the new conservative."

- Abby Ellin begins her essay "So, Let the Rat Races Begin!" in the same issue of the TIMES as follows: "I have developed a craving for the corporate cafeteria, the corporate desk, the water cooler and the copy machine. I want to wake up each day, deck myself in Armani and join the throngs of workers with a defined purpose, or at least have a place to go in the mornings besides Starbucks." Ellin, a freelance writer, cites her reasons for yearning for the sense of belonging that comes with

⁹Before my telecommuting colleagues attempt to deflect that criticism of working at home because it implies full-time telecommuting and the employees' ability to telecommute "whenever they feel like it," let me say that after nearly 25 years of our having banged the drum about selective and appropriate use of telecommuting this image taken up by The ECONOMIST still seems to prevail. Have we failed in getting our message across? Not necessarily. Like it or not, however, this kind of mythology is still all too pervasive, and for reasons I just can't understand.

good old-fashioned employment. "It's not about money," she notes, "although I'm a big fan of the steady paycheck. It's more about belonging and the desire for responsibility and community. It's also about identity."¹⁰

Those observations obviously reflect the down-ness of the world economy and of the psyche of many workers. Face it – it's been a very tough last two years. We're well advised to keep in mind that things are no more desperately bad now than they were exuberantly good a few years ago. While the euphoria of the mid to late 1990's has been replaced in large part by malaise and gloom, we are only a pendulum-swing away from better times. I don't think we should infer too much from this kind of journalism – certainly not that telecommuting is to be buried forever. But it's undeniable that something is different now.

Two Reasons Why the "T" Word Will Disappear

I haven't seen a regular paycheck for 21 years now, but thanks to telecommuting I have seen regular deposits into my checking account and, very fortunately, a lifestyle quite far removed from poverty. I've had some good years, some great years, some bad years, and luckily none that made me rush to fill out any job applications for full-time employment. To paraphrase an often-cited Garrett Morris line from a vintage Saturday Night Live show, telecommuting has been very, very good to me.

I think, however, that the party is slowly but surely coming to an end. This does not in any way mean that all the office workers are going to dutifully return to their desks and cubicles and regress to the old nine-to-five world – in gray suits or otherwise. It means that the days of thinking and talking about telecommuting as a distinct construct with its attendant set of advocates, advertisements, and admonitions are disappearing. The reasons why are captured in two words: maturation and integration.

First, let's discuss maturation. A mark of an innovation that has progressed from the "Oh?" through the "Oh!" to the "Oh ..." stage is the replacement of ad hoc, customized implementation with standardized, institutionalized policies, practices and products:

¹⁰Yes, I realize that Ellin's lament is based on the downside of self-employment as much as on the downside of working at home. But I detect something else here – something about a retreat from the precipice, from the plunge into what Dan Pink called the "free agent nation." Telecommuters who were and remain salaried, fully entitled employees in many ways have a lot in common with entrepreneurial free agents, and perhaps Ellin's comments give us a window into a psychological shift away from the "adventure" of these kinds of work and their loosely-linked relationships to the mother ship.

- Twenty-five years ago you probably couldn't have found more than one or two "telecommuting policies" – but today you can find dozens nestled in the public domain of the Internet waiting to be downloaded, edited, and implemented;
- Twenty-five years ago you probably couldn't have found more than one or two "telecommuting consultants" – but today you not only can find dozens of them but quite possibly you don't need them¹¹;
- Twenty-five years ago if you wanted to find a technology solution to allow employees to work from home, more often than not you had to invent them by cobbling together mismatched products and services from recalcitrant and quibbling vendors – but today you will rarely face a pure technology obstacle to effective telecommuting.

These and other progressions signal the shift of telecommuting from a novel and leading-edge curiosity to a well-understood and institutionalized¹² work practice.

One very clear indication of the degree of this institutionalization was the level of "instant telecommuting" that emerged after 9/11, compared to what happened after the two most recent major California earthquakes in 1987 and 1992. There was no panicked rush to discover and learn about telecommuting after 9/11; the people and employers who needed to do it just did it. The technology and experience infrastructure was in place, and lots of telecommuting began to happen all by itself.

Another aspect of this maturation process is the naming nemesis. I have often cited Tom Miller as having explained to me years ago that societies invent terms to describe new and strange technologies in terms of old technologies with which they are more familiar. His favorite example was the "horseless carriage" label used for the first automobiles. When the first cars appeared, nobody could really grasp the idea of a motor-driven personal

¹¹Don't take this to mean that I'm going out of business or that you shouldn't call me. I often explain this assertion by saying that having a telecommuting consultant is the difference between trying to make a perfect soufflé by yourself with a cookbook vs. having a professional chef standing at your side. Truth be told, there are lots of terrific telecommuting cookbooks out there today; having that professional by your side just isn't as necessary as it was before, but that doesn't mean it's completely unnecessary. Even if you do decide to buy the cookbooks yourself, there is a tradeoff between the time it takes to read and digest them and the cost of importing expertise as needed. Today's downsized, do-more-with-less organizations simply may not support lots of reinvention of the fine points of making the perfect telecommuting soufflé. Keep those cards, calls, and emails coming, folks.

¹²Note that "well-understood and institutionalized" isn't the same as "ubiquitous and completely accepted." The former terms refer to where we are on the adoption-of-innovation curve; the latter terms refer to the extent to which any given employer has a business need for which telecommuting is a good solution. A work practice can be institutionalized without being completely accepted, but in my view the opposite cannot be true.

vehicle – but everyone could understand the idea and imagery of a “horseless carriage,” i.e., a horse-drawn carriage minus the horses. In the same sense, telecommuting (and telework, and mobile work, and all the other labels) are terms of transition – terms meant to help us manage our discomfort and dissonance about this bizarre new idea of having office workers do their work away from the office.

Many have noted that “work is not some place you go – it’s something you do,”¹³ using that phrase as a shorthand way to connote the location-independence of work – i.e., that work exists on its own without necessarily being defined or having to take place in a particular location. If that is the end state to which we are evolving – as I have argued earlier that it is – then the “telecommuting” lexicon is our horseless carriage. For the same reason that our grandparents quickly stopped calling cars and automobiles “horseless carriages,” we can now start stopping our practice of referring to work based on where it is done. It’s all just work - period.

Now, on to integration. Here I will cite the following observation by Michael Bell in a Gartner Research Note dated November 27, 2002 titled “Integrated Workplace Management Takes Hold in 2003”:

“In 2003, cost pressures and an increasingly distributed workforce will accelerate the trend toward a more comprehensive (and more integrated) approach to workplace services,” the research note begins. “The ‘place’ in workplace is increasingly becoming a virtual location. Therefore, management of the workplace must adapt to two major trends,” and he goes on to cite the growth in telework and in virtual interaction as the drivers. More important, Bell predicts that “The IS organization takes ownership of the workplace; it drives coordination with the human resources and corporate real estate staffs.”

In the parlance of an old Western movie, “them’s fightin’ words” to many in the HR and corporate real estate professions, and probably to some in IS as well. Bell notes, though, that IS will simply (well, not so simply perhaps) be the integrator or orchestra leader¹⁴

¹³That’s another popular phrase whose author is rarely credited. For the record, it’s Woody Leonhard and it comes from his irreverent, excellent and largely unread and underrated 1995 book THE UNDERGROUND GUIDE TO TELECOMMUTING.

¹⁴My only quibble here is that every IS (or as you may prefer, IT) department I’ve encountered or read about is as overloaded and understaffed as any organizational unit is these days. Where these IS groups will find the time and energy to take on this integrative role is a big question in my mind. But if top management comes to understand the technology-as-focal-point basis for entrusting this to IS, then the staffing levels will follow.

but not the control-based “boss” in a traditional sense:

“The IS organization alone cannot transform the workplace from a traditional place-based model to a virtual model. The transition requires close coordination between the IS, corporate real estate and human resource groups to ensure an integrated approach in the enterprise. This convergence in workplace responsibility will lead to new governance models, new organizational re-alignments, new workplace planning and delivery processes, and more integrated asset management applications that integrate data between facilities, technology and human resource assets.¹⁵”

This is the basis for the kind of integration of telecommuting I argue for, and which I believe is not only inevitable but also essential. It isn't that telecommuting the activity is going away – it's that telecommuting the stand-alone construct is going away because it is being folded into the whole of which it has always been a part.¹⁶

(Where) Do We Go From Here?

That's the big question. Do we all just pack up our telecommuting tents and agree that this chapter in the history of workplace development has been written and sealed into the archives? Not hardly. No, we're not just going to fade away; we're going to experience and be part of this integration process Bell describes.

Telecommuting will still happen, but it won't carry the same label and same air of novelty and uniqueness that it has for the last twenty-five years. It will still require appropriate technology solutions – and they are available. It will still require the right human resource practices (policies, training, administration) – and they are available, and increasingly will be folded into other organizational policies rather than standing alone¹⁷. And it will still require – more than ever, perhaps - innovative approaches to managing and configuring the corporate real estate portfolio – and they are available as well.

¹⁵What a mouthful – one that Word's grammar checker clucked its electronic tongue about when I first proofread this paper. Knowing and respecting Mike Bell as I do, though, I defer to him over the Microsoft grammar police. In that one carefully and no doubt tediously crafted sentence he has captured what I believe is the single most important workplace trend we will see in the next five years.

¹⁶My thanks to Wendell Joice for bringing to my attention the TQM (Total Quality Management) movement as an analogy for this kind of maturation and integration – and as an example of what can happen when something that should be integrated into other workplace efforts is set aside as a unique process with its own forms, processes, jargon, and so on.

¹⁷John Edwards commented at the North Texas Technology Council Telework Conference (January 2003) that we should stop trying to develop telecommuting-specific policies and instead simply fold them into

Last, let me offer a disclaimer that perhaps should have been at the beginning rather than the end of this paper. There have been many times in the last six months or so when I found myself saying the same words, reading the same articles, and answering the same questions about telecommuting that I have said, read and answered literally hundreds if not thousands of times since 1982. A little boredom has begun to set in, as has some frustration with some of the lack of progress we have made.

I wrote this paper in part as a catharsis¹⁸, perhaps to release the doubts, questions and uneasiness that rattle around inside me of late. I would like to think – and comments from early readers confirm this, fortunately – that what I've written here is more than a personal exorcism of my own telecommuting devils. I believe in the fundamental benefits and value of <?>¹⁹ now more than ever. I just think it's time for a long-overdue reassessment of where we are and where we should be putting our efforts and emphasis.

END²⁰

existing policies that address relevant issues – selection, remote access, etc. – and make those policies more “telecommuting-friendly.” In many ways I agree with him, and there are good examples of this in areas such as ADA, EEO, employee assistance programs, FMLA, and other (typically regulation-based) workplace programs. However, there still may be the need for some specific telecommuting policies or procedures that are just not addressed at all in an organization's overall HR or IT policies.

¹⁸I'm reminded of a comment made by Prof. Larry Williams, who I was fortunate enough to have for a class in 1972 at Cornell's School of Industrial & Labor Relations: he described most typical graduate-student writing as “squid-like” which he defined as “moving slowly backwards while discharging large quantities of ink.” Substitute “toner” or “electrons” for “ink” and his critique is updated. And perhaps applicable here, though I hope not.

¹⁹A number of years ago the singer Prince re-launched himself and his career by giving himself a new name in the form of a symbol that was meant to be pronounced “the artist formerly known as Prince.” Maybe we need to do the same with telecommuting – thus, my use of the <?> could be pronounced “the workplace concept formerly known as telecommuting.” Then again, it's probably not wise to take my lead from Prince.

²⁰My thanks to Michael Bell, Eddie Caine, Michael Dziak, Wendell Joice, Jack Nilles and John Vivadelli for their comments on the themes in this paper and/or for their comments on earlier drafts.