

The Networked Individualist

Redefining the Workplace for the 21st Century

Farmer...factory laborer...white-collar employee...knowledge worker... Has the predominant type of work really changed that much over the last two centuries? The 19th century farmer and the 21st century

the most powerful way for business leaders to improve profitability.

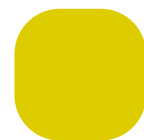
But should we picture the high-performing 21st century worker as a loner working on a mountain top?

predecessors. Transportation and technology have made it possible to travel farther, faster and to stay connected to people and data sources easily and inexpensively.



knowledge worker share an important trait: autonomy. The independence that was lost during the industrial age and the era of the bureaucratic “organization man” is finally making a comeback. Employers now see the advantages of unleashing the creative spirit in each and every one of their workers. Giving employees the freedom and the infrastructure to make smart choices about where and when to work is

No. Today’s knowledge workers and their industrial era counterparts have something in common: they make a more valuable contribution by teaming up with others on complex tasks. Being part of a larger system, whether on an assembly line or a global project team, has significant payoffs for individuals and for companies. The workers of today and tomorrow, though, have some unique advantages over their



Cynthia C. Froggatt is the author of *Work Naked: Eight Essential Principles for Peak Performance in the Virtual Workplace* (Wiley, 2001) and Principal of Froggatt Consulting in New York. She works from her home office advising Fortune 500 companies on aligning their workplace strategies with their business plans.

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Our greatest challenge is to transform work and the workplace to optimize the performance of the “networked individualist.” Highly autonomous, mobile, and creative, the networked individualist wants to earn a living by making a unique, meaningful contribution in collaboration with others. Full-time employees, free agents, and business owners agree, day-to-day survival is no longer the primary motivation to work. Work is expected to be a rewarding expression of themselves rather than grueling drudgery.

However, as work has evolved to become less physically taxing and more emotionally satisfying, it has become more psychologically stressful. Ambiguity and uncertainty have replaced the predictability and security of the industrial age. The Internet offers great connectivity, but can lead to information overload. Workers complain that they never catch up and do not have enough time to spend with family and friends, eat a balanced diet, exercise, or get the right amount of sleep. We need to address these downsides of today’s workstyles.

The farm...the factory...the office... the virtual workplace... The ideal context for high-performing networked individualists is more broadly defined than the physical settings of yesteryear. The virtual workplace is a combination of technology, services, and places

Technology: Provides mobility and connectivity, and screening features can be used to direct attention to the most essential, reliable information sources.

Services: Ongoing education programs, help desk, travel, copying, graphic design, and other specialized services let each individual make best use of their talents while capitalizing on others’ areas of expertise.

Places: Workers need access to a wide range of physical settings that inspire creativity and concentration and are located in a way that allows employees to waste less time commuting on a daily basis, but be productive spending more time traveling to faraway places on an annual basis.

that allow people to do their best solo and collaborative work while integrating their work and personal lives.

Catering to the networked individualist requires removing layers of conformity that assume that one workstyle fits all. The specific components of the virtual workplace will be different for everyone: some

should spend more time working from a home office; some need to go to a distinctly different place, such as a corporate office, to do their best work; and others would be most creative if surrounded by the background noise and activity in cafés, parks, and other public settings. Problem is, many workers are unaware of which workstyle would optimize their performance because they’ve followed the 9-to-5 office routine for so long.

Fortunately, there is a strong correlation between where a person liked to study in school and where they should perform their solo work now. Think of class time as comparable to meetings or other face-to-face collaboration at work and study time as similar to the hours you now spend concentrating on solo work such as writing, reading, and e-mail. When you were in school, where did you prefer to study? If you studied in your dorm room or bedroom because you liked to control the environment (light, temperature, music), work at odd hours, and intentionally blur the boundaries of school work and personal life, you may be happiest doing your solo work from a home



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office. If you headed off to the library to find quiet without feeling isolated you may be more comfortable using a workplace outside your home. Likewise, if you preferred to study in the student union or local diner because you wanted to avoid the distractions of your dorm room, but needed more stimulation than you could find in the library, you should avoid doing solo work from a home office.

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Face it, college campuses do a much better job of accommodating differences in workstyles than today's work settings. Employer-sponsored workplace should support collaborative activities for all workers and provide the ideal setting for the solo work of former library and student union studiers. Few offices, though, are as quiet as a library or as invigorating as a public gathering place. What is the point of having the freedom to choose where you work if there are very few legitimate options? We need to give workers access to a wide range of workplaces that are re-designed to meet specific needs and support particular kinds of work. The network of places that comprise the virtual workplace may or may not be owned and operated by corporate employers, but all will have one thing in common — they will be compelling attractions that successfully compete for users. The responsibility will then lie with the networked individualists to leverage their freedom and self-knowledge to maintain high performance and lead a satisfying personal life.