

Article by Lucy Ward published in The Guardian in July 2005.

The office desk, as we know it, may have had its day.

A large study on the future of work in the UK predicts the rise of the "mobile worker" moving - laptop and mobile in tow - between office, home, hotel, airport lounge or motorway service station as the needs of a job demand.

Today, more than 5 million people, almost a fifth of employees, already spend some time working at home or on the move, according to the report published by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Tomorrow Project, a charity studying future trends. That number will shoot up over the coming decades, the researchers say, with mobile work becoming one of the fastest-growing types of employment.

"Individuals will not necessarily see themselves as working from home," according to the study, *Working in the Twenty-First Century*, extra copies of which have been ordered by Tony Blair's office in Downing Street. "They could equally be working from the office. But they will be on the move from place to place, working at various times of the day, for much of the week. For a substantial proportion of workers, work in 20 years' time will be more about movement than staying put."

The rise of the mobile worker, and the continuing development of home working, has significant implications. While the office itself will not disappear, despite many predictions of its demise, "mobile work and home working will involve a shift from personalised space to personalised time," the study concludes.

Rooms or desks belonging to an individual and often personalised with photographs and plants will, it forecasts, increasingly be replaced by "the collective office" in which employees will "hot desk" on anonymous work stations.

For workers, this loss of personal space will be offset by greater control of time, allowing them to use technology to work late in a hotel while on the road, the study argues.

But it concedes that managing time will be an issue for this growing section of the workforce, with the boundaries of work and leisure time becoming less distinct, potentially adding to family conflict. "Once work weaves into all the nooks and crannies of your life, deciding when to work will be increasingly difficult. Getting the job done will compete with the family."

The report warns: "The job will intrude on moments of personal reflection. Whatever the statutory limit on working hours, fluid time will help work to burrow into more of your time." Managers of mobile workers will find new ways to "control" staff, it adds.

The office worker

35 Julie Babbs, 47, an accounts and administration manager:

"I've got my own little space at my desk; my own little home. I've got a photo of my children. Then I have a pen by my phone that's just for show: it's a pink fluffy emu. I work here 9am to 5.30pm, five days a week. Mobile working or home working wouldn't be for me. I wouldn't want to be stuck at home all day, and I wouldn't want to 40 be living out of a suitcase."

The mobile worker

Caroline Woolley, 31, is an accountant:

"I'll often work in a cab, or on a train or at the airport - all dead time which saves me time," she says. "But it wouldn't be true to say having this technology makes me work 45 for far longer than before. A few weeks ago I was waiting for a document, but I went to a friend's birthday party and checked email from there. They didn't know I was in a bar, and it meant I could get on with my plans. I also have two mobiles, one for work and a personal one which goes on at night. With any of these things, you can still turn them off."