

# **Business Computing: the Second 50 Years**

**The Guildhall conference for business  
leaders**

**The Guildhall, London**

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## **Conference e-workshop report**

### **Virtual Organisations**

Chairman: Professor Clive Holtham, City University Business School

Rapporteur: Dr Edgar A. Whitley, LSE

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## eWorkshop: Virtual Organisations

Chairman: Professor Clive Holtham, City University Business School  
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10 delegates attended

A range of topics were covered, and many anecdotes revealed. In general, no single answer to any issue was forthcoming and so the presentation of the discussion is intended to reflect this.

### **What has happened to organisational structures? What are the consequences?**

Flatter organisational structures are a feature of particular types of interconnected, virtual organisations

Organisations are already much flatter

Organisational change has gone too far: We are all managers, there are no workers left

What happens when one of our managers is off sick? Can the rest cope with double the management load?

Senior staff in major corporations are doing all their own typing and badly managing their time

Too many support staff have been lost in recent years

Is it possible to read 600 e-mails a day? Human filters are particularly important in these cases

Call centres are often run by 3 or 4 people, managing 600 agents.

These are typically staff with limited discretion in their work

They are often grouped into tens for the human element to have a boss? (someone who knows your name, who you call in to if you are ill etc.)

**Are there any special effects when projects consist of individuals brought together for a particular task?**

Virtual organisations of this kind need technology	Working together for projects has always existed	Technology allows people to attempt new forms of projects that couldn't even be considered beforehand. Communication technologies are especially important	Hey, yes its possible, and there have always been problems with doing this
Need to have a shared view of where you are going / what you are trying to do	Need to have a good mix of procedures and processes  Internet technologies allow a richer / standardised interface to data	More partners leads to more problems? must have a clear, joint definition phase  Components are virtual, organisation is still real	Shared understanding is still problematic, even in small companies
Are people now prepared to work apart??	What about portfolio careers, where people spend one day a week in 5 different organisations? All too often, they are still considered like internal employees with expectations of commitment and workload for a full week	Is this anything to do with changed organisational structures?  Virtual organisations are not a solution to existing management problems: they still need to be sorted out	Organisations should be considered as people, then processes then technology  Sort out people, tasks and values

## Is teleworking something different?

Not necessarily virtual, could be hierarchical

Meetings are still important, people need to go out and meet other people

Are some people / living spaces unsuited to telework? Will we have a new disenfranchised section of society?

Can you separate your physical space at home between work and play?

Problems of information overload

Is there clarity about organisational structures?

Some people go into the head office? *not* for formal meetings but simply to meet with colleagues

Existing homes may be unsuitable (enough rooms, insufficient cabling (planning constraints)).

Can you separate your social time at home between work and play?

Helping people select the right information is the future

Is it scaleable?

Is this a generational thing? Would a child who is now 5 only ever work in a virtual organisation? Could the need for office socialisation be avoided?

New wired living spaces are being developed

Teleworker puts on suit at start of day, to signify work time

Filtering software is starting to exist for incoming e-mails

May need to hide your teleworking (if small business)

How would the change come about in the next 15 years so that this person's first job would be virtual? How do you change the existing work practices?

Families are tending to buy houses larger than they need. You could always move the bathroom back to outside

Geography is still important. Could you be a successful futures dealer working from your home in the Welsh valleys?

Teleworker puts on suit to make sure that some work is done that day

Entrepreneurs want total command of the ship and therefore won't want filtering

**Will there be a new digital divide in twenty years time between the poor who are very electronic and the rich who have no use of electronics and receive services from humans?**

We are analog beings

There were initial discussions about whether digital technology would ever take off? for example, there were concerns about how very jerky flight simulators would be

IBM introduced the term 'virtual' memory as it sounded better than 'paged' memory

Low value customers speak to the computer

High value customers speak to a person (costs more but they are valued more)

High value customers are time poor therefore would prefer to use electronic sources

Ba or 'The Bar' for knowledge sharing

There was a formal vote of thanks for the chair for such an entertaining session.