Workplace Continuity:
Realigning Nuances of Workplace to Fundamental Changes in
Working Patterns, New Realities and Technology

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In the early 1990's, technology pundits overseeing the development of IT applications that were still in their planning stages began making bold predictions about how the adoption of such technologies would radically change well-established patterns of society. The degree of this change would be so profound that some even suggested large cities would actually lose their relevance as greater numbers of workers shifted to a more remote and decentralized economy. Today cities still thrive and continue to move forward, but technology has created an entirely new generation of workers who can be just as productive, it not more so by working from decentralized locations. The equation has however become more complicated given a spade of both unexpected and expected events that have occurred over the past ten years. The list of these events includes the following:

- commercialization of the internet
- the new working patterns of a new generation of knowledge workers
- the rise and fall of the dot-coms
- the terrorist attacks of 2001
- the increasing profile of business continuity planning within organizations
- increased globalization and outsourcing
- the resurrection of a much more well thought-out and practical tech sector
- the blackout of 2003
- the proliferation and increased ubiquity of broadband

Set against this backdrop of rapidly evolving events and the consequences of those events, organizations must rethink the ways in which their workplaces are configured in order to properly align with new realities. Amidst this change, it is important to not only recognize and identify each of the operational cylinders that play an important role in change, but take a holistic approach and articulate the strategies that meaningfully connect them together. It is out of these circumstances that the concept of *Workplace Continuity* has emerged. This term can be generally described in the following way:

"The reconfiguration of organizational structures to align with the principles of decentralization, sustainable development, business continuity and remote technology, resulting in enhanced security, better redundancy, greater competitiveness and enhanced worker productivity, flexibility and retention."

In order to provide a meaningful description of how the concept can be applied to organizations, it is perhaps useful to begin by describing some foundational issues. This begins with the mega-operational model, a framework describing how larger organizations addressed cost and span of control issues by concentrating large numbers of employees in large central locations. Although such a configuration yielded some very tangible benefits, substantial drawbacks emerged as well. For instance, tremendous pressure was now placed on HR departments to consistently staff such a facility. Also, there were also pressures placed on real estate

departments who in the face of economic downturns were charged with disposal of large chunks of space.

Of course these concerns seemed somewhat trivial in the face of the terrorist attacks of 2001. Perhaps the most important lessons learned from that day were the risks associated with concentration of large numbers of people in one location. Almost immediately after September 11, organizations started to craft elaborate plans to ensure the continuity of operations in the face of events of mass disruption. Indeed, business continuity planning had squarely been moved to organizational front burners, and facilities became a crucial element of these strategies. Within a very short order of time, large institutions (especially firms in the financial sector) began making plans to decentralize operations across several locations.

It was believed that an event of the magnitude of the terrorist attacks would provide the impetus necessary for organizations to follow suit and build there own comprehensive business continuity plans. However, over the past three years, some firms have expressed reluctance to allocate substantial resources into comprehensive risk mitigation strategies – in fact, some managers go as far as to call business continuity planning a "grudge spend". From a facilities standpoint, the first logical step in creating risk mitigation strategies is to look at multiple locations, but the costs associated in maintaining "hot" sites (i.e. fully operational and fully-staffed backups) or "warm" sites (i.e. partially operational and staffed) can be substantial. But in order for decentralization to take hold, it seems as though more cost-effective solutions are required.

As the changes described above evolved, so too did the nature of our economy. Indeed, western societies over the past twenty years have been making the shift from a production-oriented economy to one that is more knowledge-based. As this has occurred, organizations have become flatter, with much fewer layers of hierarchy, thus greater ability to workers to communicate more directly with decision-makers. This phenomenon has coincided with the emergence of email into what is arguably the most valuable business tool. The simultaneous unfolding of these circumstances has predictably created a shifting in organizational mindsets and made programs such as teleworking a powerful organizational strategy. In turn it has also forced real estate managers to consider a changing facilities landscape.

The changing real estate landscape was also affected by the North American power outage of 2003, as it demonstrated the degree to which many critical organizational systems are reliant on an outdated power grid. This is important because despite the broader goal to create a more decentralized, the central facility still plays a critical role. Given this importance, planners need to carefully consider a wide range of "Smart Building" technologies and strategies that can create a greater degree of self-reliance from external systems. By committing time and resources to smarter facilities, an organization can then meaningfully connect that facility to decentralized strategies such as teleworking.

The emergence of teleworking shows how entirely new organizational models emerge and develop with well thought out refinements. Strategic alternatives to workplace configuration are expanded when new technologies combined with the organizational need to remain competitive and create redundancies allow us to integrate teleworking as a cost effective substitute for comprehensive facility-based backup locations suggested in the early days after September 11.

The challenge it seems is twofold. First, institutionalized stigmas associated with teleworking need to be overcome through well-supported management initiatives, and to make these initiatives sustainable, management need to completely redesign the structural nodes of the organization. In regard to the first point, first generation teleworkers were often considered an oddity, with a limited range of functional ability. There were also problems associated with loss of camaraderie, connection to other workers, and isolation. Today, new technologies combined with the development of broadband have dramatically expanded the range of tasks that can be carried out by a remote worker.

As of today, therefore, the ideal organizational structure must combine fundamental elements of redundancy, mobility, connectivity and sustainability. It moves along a continuum that begins with a central facility, which then moves to dispersal using multiple facilities, and then addresses concerns associated with cost by substituting separate facilities with intelligent teleworking solutions. Much has changed in the past two or three years, and much more change is to be expected, but if configuration issues are strategically devised, those strategies ensure a greater degree of workplace continuity.