

/TREND/

## Virtual Work

It's not just for members of the Jedi Council.

By Eva Kaplan-Leiserson

GOOD NEWS OR BAD? Technology is increasingly allowing us to work from anywhere. The plusses and minuses are still being tallied, but the fact is that it's happening. Maybe one day we'll be able to attend meetings in hologram form, as members of the Jedi Council do in *Star Wars Episode III*, but, right now, videoconferencing, online collaboration software, cell phones, email, Wifi, and other technological tools are contributing to a burgeoning number of virtual companies and teams.

**Virtual companies.** The Herman Group reported in one of its Trend Alerts that "Over the past decade, technology has emerged making . . . physical facilities where people come to work practically obsolete." Already there are companies—many small businesses, for example—that don't keep headquarters. Employees simply work out of their homes. Some larger companies have made parts of their workforce virtual. JetBlue broke new ground in 2000 with its call center made up primarily of stay-at-home mothers. According to a case study by Blue Pumpkin, a workforce optimization supplier JetBlue worked with for the initiative, the strategy helped the airline see "performance improvements that resulted in \$1.2 million in benefits the first year alone."

The Herman Group says the increasing number of virtual companies (and, by extension, parts of companies) will attract people who are looking for increased freedom and independence or the ability to better integrate their work with family responsibilities.

Young people will be particularly attracted to virtual employment, the group says, because of their independence and technology fluency. Learning online will have prepared them for this type of work. However, the risk is that young people who only know virtual employment may not develop the social skills that they'd practice in a face-to-face workplace.

**Virtual teams.** Those who don't want to work in a virtual company, preferring "congregate workplaces," as The Herman Group calls traditional work spaces, may still find themselves part of a virtual team. Because of the distributed nature of business today, more and more work groups are spread out over a country or the world, requiring them to employ many of the same tools as virtual companies.

### New skills and strategies

A recent survey by Right Management Consultants found that virtual teams that exist over the long-term (more than a year) run a strong risk of declining performance due to team burnout. To oper-

ate successfully for longer periods of time, both virtual companies and virtual teams will require new strategies and skills. Many are still being discovered, but here are a few examples.

**Out: hours in the seat.** According to The Herman Group, in virtual companies performance measurement will become increasingly based on results rather than hours worked. The group also says that new ways of working developed in the virtual realm will begin to cross over into traditional employment.

**In: new leadership competencies.** Right Management Consultants says that virtual team leaders will need special leadership competencies, including sensitivities to "interpersonal, communication, and cultural factors, to overcome the limitations of long-distance teaming." The organization suggests rotating leadership to reenergize teams. In its survey, virtual teams that agreed that "new leadership talent emerges as necessary" were found to have higher performance than those who didn't agree with the statement.

**In: teambuilding.** Groups that invested in some type of teambuilding activity performed better than those that didn't in Right Management's research. The 35 percent of virtual team respondents that reported having an effective teambuilding session scored significantly higher on leadership, decision making,

innovation, and team performance.

**In: face-to-face meetings.** Virtual teams and companies should still get together in person from time to time. Slightly more than half of the people in the virtual team survey met at least once per year. Those team members who had face-to-face interaction with their colleagues scored highest on effective team leadership, creative ideas and approaches, and managing multicultural differences.

It's easy to see that virtual work requires some new approaches (as well as heightens the importance of traditional ones). But you don't have to study the ways of the Jedi to prepare yourself for the virtual world. Here are some resources that can help.

- The Bumble Bee is a Weblog covering virtual teams and collaboration. It promotes a new model derived from nature: bioteaming.

[MORE/www.bioteams.com](http://www.bioteams.com)

- Virtual Support Services provides training, mentoring, and support for virtual business owners.

[MORE/www.vsscbyerooffice.com](http://www.vsscbyerooffice.com)

- Interview USA offers a virtual video interview service, called Vivid.

[MORE/www.interviewusa.com/aim.html](http://www.interviewusa.com/aim.html)

- *The Manager's Handbook for Virtual Teams: 24 Exercises to Take Your Team to High Performance* includes activities for four different stages of team maturation.

[MORE/www.zeislerassociates.com/virtualteamhandbookorder1.html](http://www.zeislerassociates.com/virtualteamhandbookorder1.html)

## More

- on JetBlue's call center: [www.bluepumpkin.com/customers/success/JetBlue.pdf](http://www.bluepumpkin.com/customers/success/JetBlue.pdf)
- on virtual companies from the Herman Group: [www.hermangroup.com/alert/archive\\_3-16-2005.html](http://www.hermangroup.com/alert/archive_3-16-2005.html)
- on the Right Management survey: [sal@buchananpr.com](mailto:sal@buchananpr.com)

## /NEWS FLASH/

### Aging U.S. Workforce Jeopardizes Organizational Knowledge

MANY U.S. organizations are failing to both capture critical knowledge and experience from retiring workers and transfer knowledge to younger employees. So found an Accenture survey of U.S. workers 40 to 50 years old.

The following steps can help companies meet the challenge of knowledge transfer:

**Understand the extent of the problem and the organization's ability to tackle it.**

Address what skills will be lost, in what volume and where, the profile of the workforce that remains, and what skills and competencies are required to achieve the company goals.

**Develop an overall strategy.** To capture and transfer core skills from retiring employees and to identify, attract, and retain new workers with skills critical for the company's future, you need a strategy. It should include a systematic approach to managing and improving individual performance—from goal setting to appraising and rewarding performance to developing new skills.

Ideally, organizations will combine talent management programs—such as mentoring and coaching plans with incentives for knowledge sharing—with new technologies, such as electronic knowledge management tools.

**Manage and measure progress of the entire effort.** Identify an executive sponsor, define success and the end state, and determine milestones and metrics for all programs.

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[MORE/www.accenture.com/xd/xd.asp?it=enweb&xd=\\_dyn\dynamicpressrelease\\_835.xml](http://www.accenture.com/xd/xd.asp?it=enweb&xd=_dyn\dynamicpressrelease_835.xml)

## /GLOBAL 360/



### New Zealand Faces Severe Skills Shortage

It's a preview of what the future might look like for the rest of the world. In New Zealand, the global skills shortage that experts have been predicting for years has already hit.

"The greatest constraint on expansion for New Zealand businesses is lack of . . . a skilled workforce," says Darel Hall, executive director of the country's Industry Training Federation.

The skills shortage is at 50 percent in New Zealand, which Hall says is almost twice the global average of 28 percent and shows that the shortages in his country "are amongst the most severe in the world."

Recent Department of Labour research in New Zealand investigated the skills shortage in 16 trade occupations and found "genuine skill shortages" in all but one of them, according to Hall.

But training and learning can help. "Embedding a culture of lifelong learning is of critical importance if skill shortages are to be tackled," Hall says.

"According to the International Labour Organization, 80 percent of all persons [who will be] working in 10 years' time are already in the workplace. If we want to advance economically, we have to upskill ourselves and work smarter."

To that end, the New Zealand government has targeted raising participation in industry training, setting a goal for 250,000 workers to take part in programs by 2007.

[SOURCE/www.scoop.co.nz](http://www.scoop.co.nz)

[GOTO](#)/"Mind the (Talent) Gap," April *T+D*

## Develop a Highly Resilient Workforce

In today's rapidly changing world, resilient organizations have a competitive advantage. Leaders in such companies get more work done, of higher quality, in less time, with fewer people, with a reduced budget, while managing nonstop change. The following executive actions can help develop workforce resiliency in your organization.

**Read reality rapidly.** When hit by extreme disruption, your chances for survival and resiliency are increased the more quickly you comprehend the new reality.

*Executive action:* Create teams of volunteers to conduct a quick "read" of the new circumstances. Bring groups of people together from every level of the organization and ask them for their assessment of the new reality and what actions they think should be taken.

**Emphasize both problem- and emotion-focused coping.** Pioneering resiliency research conducted by Richard Lazarus in the 1960s established that resilient people respond to unexpected difficulties with both problem- and emotion-focused coping. Highly resilient people bounce back faster than others because they focus first on problems that must be dealt with, and, when the time is right, they take time to talk or write about their feelings on what has happened.

*Executive action:* Increase workforce resiliency with workshops on effective problem solving covering logical left-brain methods, creative right-brain methods, group brainstorming, and ways to find simple, practical solutions. In addition, human resources staff and EAP counselors should coach employees on how to express their feelings in healthy, appropriate ways.

**Free the organization from the illusion of stress.** Surprisingly, stress disability claims often increase after people take stress management workshops. Those classes can teach people to see more stress in their lives.

*Executive action:* Have HR and EAP professionals offer resiliency workshops, not stress workshops.

**Increase self-reliance and feelings of control.** Self-motivated people who feel in control of their lives are more hardy and resilient than people who feel controlled by external forces. Salvatore Maddi's innovative research into hardiness shows that people who can work under high levels of pressure and nonstop change without becoming ill have three key attitudes. They

- know they can control or influence what they do
- are committed to something they feel is important
- look forward to change as an exciting challenge.

*Executive action:* Give people choices and control over what they do. Create and support transition teams using guidelines. Remove autocratic managers from positions of control over work groups. Manage self-motivated people with questions, not instructions.

**Increase positive feelings.** Resiliency and cognitive skills are increased by positive emotions and decreased by negative emotions. Feelings such as enjoyment, playfulness, contentment, satisfaction, and affection all increase resiliency. Negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, fear, and helplessness decrease resiliency, narrow a person's range of thoughts, and limit their action choices.

*Executive action:* Place high value on employees' job satisfaction. Remove autocratic managers who manage with fear.

**Balance negativity and positivity.** Most managers with positive attitudes have a negative attitude about negative attitudes. But managers who suppress disagreement and negative thinking during group discussions create a condition called groupthink, in which groups make bad decisions. Resiliency is increased by balancing positivity and negativity.

*Executive action:* Follow Peter Drucker's advice for effective executives. If you don't have a case against your proposed course of action, you don't know what you're getting into. Convert negativity specialists into resources.

**Develop your counterbalanced personality traits.** The flexibility and adaptability that is the benchmark of resiliency is derived from a wide range of counterbalanced personality traits such as pessimistic optimism, extroverted introversion, selfish unselfishness, playful seriousness, and more. These counterbalanced qualities allow you to respond in multiple ways.

*Executive action:* Power is derived from being at the choice point between counterbalanced forces. A sign that you've developed advanced emotional intelligence is that you are comfortable with and can manage the complex, counterbalanced forces essential for resiliency in your organization.

**Al Siebert** is director of The Resiliency Center and author of *The Resiliency Advantage: Master Change, Thrive Under Pressure, and Bounce Back from Setbacks* (Berrett-Koehler, 2005); [www.resiliencycenter.com](http://www.resiliencycenter.com).

**/FUN AND GAMES/**

## Ten Best Things to Say If You Get Caught Sleeping at Your Desk

10. "They told me at the blood bank that this might happen."
9. "I'm practicing the 15-minute power nap we talk about in the time management course."
8. "Whew! Guess I left the top-off-of-the-Wite-Out. You probably got here just in time."
7. "I wasn't sleeping! I was meditating on the mission statement and envisioning how to align training with the company's business strategies."
6. "I was testing my keyboard for drool resistance in case any employees fall asleep during e-learning sessions."
5. "I was rehearsing a highly specific yoga exercise to relieve workplace stress. We're going to roll out this exercise to employees next week."
4. "Why did you interrupt me? I had almost figured out a new strategy to measure training return-on-investment."
3. "Did you ever notice sound coming out of these keyboards when you put your ear down close? That might be distracting to our e-learners."
2. "Who put decaf in the wrong pot?"

And the number **1** thing to say if you get caught sleeping at your desk:  
Raise your head slowly and say, "Amen."

**SOURCE/adapted from an email forward**

**/HOW TO/**

## Take on an Odorous Task

ALMOST TWO-THIRDS of HR professionals have had to talk to an employee about his or her offensive body odor, found an online poll by Business and Legal Reports. BLR, which provides HR answers and tools online through its [hr.blr.com](http://hr.blr.com) website, says 74 percent of respondents have had to confront a worker about the issue.

The company's online subscribers often ask for help in talking to employees delicately. Although there's no set of rules for bringing up the topic, these tips from BLR can help:

- Talk to the employee personally, privately, and with as much sensitivity as possible.
- Realize that diet or a medical condition could cause the problem. You might suggest that the person visit a doctor, or you can include the company nurse in the conversation.
- Emphasize that this isn't just a personal issue; it's a workplace disruption that must be resolved.
- Don't be surprised if the worker tries to cut the conversation short out of embarrassment. Schedule a follow-up meeting a few days later to ensure that the person is taking steps to resolve the problem.

BLR says that, ultimately, it's worth making one employee uncomfortable in order to keep others.

**MORE/**[www.hr.blr.com](http://www.hr.blr.com)

**/TREND/**

## New-Collar Worker

COMPANIES ARE FINDING it difficult to understand and motivate younger workers, found a recent study by Novations/J. Howard & Associates. Values and goals of these less-experienced employees are different than those in previous generations, says the company's president and CEO Mike Hyter.

But market research organization Synovate thinks it has a fix on at least one category of youth workers. A recent study found that 53 percent of the U.S. population aged 18 to 25 is working class, but not all of those young people can be classified under the traditional blue-collar label. A new category of working class youth is emerging, the company says. It calls them "gold collar" workers. Here are some of the distinctions between the two types of working class youth.

**Blue collar workers.** (61 percent of U.S. working class youth)

- work in industries with union membership, often following family tradition
- reject consumption for status
- resist social change
- keep constant friend groups, social pastimes, and hangouts
- value having families and look forward to settling down
- value independence: more likely to pay rent than live with their parents.

**Gold collar workers.** (39 percent of U.S. working class youth)

- work in new industries (often service), and have no clear career path, but many options
- are often new to the United States, as recent immigrants or children of immigrants
- determine status through high-end fashion, technology, and so forth
- put independent living on the backburner to avoid sacrificing consumerism
- aspire to middle class or celebrity occupations.

T+D talked to Ian Pierpoint, global head of Synovate youth consultancy, about these two types of youth workers and the implications for organizations:

**T+D:** *What is the significance of working class youth characteristics to employers? How should employers adapt to embrace this general category of workers?*

**Pierpoint:** [Members of] this group will be very loyal employees if they're treated reasonably well. Employers should treat them as adults who have a long-term need for employment, not as kids who can't be relied upon.

They are very different from students who have a short-term orientation (for example, just for the summer). They are worth the investment in training as they are looking for stable routine positions.

The gold collar group will be very motivated by cash bonuses, even small ones. The blue collar group will be motivated by any benefits related to helping them buy a home earlier.

**T+D:** *You write that, according to your research, working class youth use technology less frequently and are later adopters. Do they need remedial training in technology to keep up—either from employers or from community colleges or elsewhere?*

**Pierpoint:** Yes, many would benefit from computer or technology training. Because they aren't as frequent users, they would need training to increase their capabilities and efficiency.

**T+D:** *If gold-collar youth work in relatively new service industries without mentors or experienced colleagues to learn from, how can companies support them and promote their development?*

**Pierpoint:** Bring in speakers from other parts of the company to show where you can go as you grow up. For example, if someone is a barista at Starbucks, offer mentoring or seminars where people from other parts of the company talk about what they do.

Have team training that facilitates best service practices with people from other stores or franchises—for example, retail sales seminars where employees connect with each other and learn how to do their jobs better from others in their positions.

Wal-Mart does this kind of thing very

well, and the team attitude really comes through. Wal-Mart employees take their jobs seriously, no matter what the position, because they feel part of a larger team.

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**/COOL TOOL/**

## Cubicle Privacy at Last

A device that sounds like an office worker's fantasy is set to become a reality this summer, as the Babble box is launched by Sonare Technologies, a division of furniture company Herman Miller. The small device essentially scrambles a user's voice so that listeners even a few feet away can't hear phone conversations. The technology turns a single voice into the kind of background hum produced by a group of people, so that individual words can't be distinguished.

The device is about the size of a tape dispenser and can plug into any outlet. It will cost about \$400, which some office workers would say is a small price to pay for privacy.

Babble is targeted not just at the individual worker but also at companies who want to keep sensitive information secret. A Herman Miller representative pointed out the device's uses for conversations on HR matters, and said the company had conducted a successful focus group with that type of audience.

At press time, the Sonare website stated that Babble would be available late July at Herman Miller dealers, and eventually online.

**SOURCE**/www.sonaretechnologies.com/babble.html