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The Workplace In The Era Of The Jetsons:
A Look At How Technology Has And Will Continue To Change Our Lives

Joel R. Hlavaty
Moderator
FRANTZ WARD LLP
Cleveland, Ohio
jlavaty@frantzward.com

Overview

The Jetsons, Dick Tracy, Blade Runner, Star Wars and numerous other fictional characters and stories forecast a picture in the 1960's and 70's of what our future world would look like with computers, robots, communication devices, holograms and other "whimsical" inventions. We are now seeing these fantasies of the past become our reality as smart phones, tablets, laptops and virtual meetings have become commonplace, if not necessary, in our personal and work lives. Given all the advancements we've seen in technology in the last 10-15 years, as well as the adjustments we all made to how we worked during the pandemic, everyone is wondering what other technology changes are on the horizon and how they will affect our personal and professional lives, and those of the next generation. This roundtable will take a brief look back and a long look forward as we discuss advances in technology that can/will assist people in where and how they perform their jobs, and what we think the workplace will look like in the next 10 to 15 to 25 years.

Office Technology Through The Years

Offices and the way they operate have changed substantially in the last 60-70 years. For example, in the 1960's (think "Madmen"), offices were male-dominated, employees typically worked 9-5, workstations were generally uniform, and technology was rudimentary by today's standards, such as corded telephones and manual typewriters with carbon paper, as there were no copy machines.

In the 1970's, typewriters were still the norm, but now they were electric, which helped to reduce noise in the work environment.

The 1980's saw the advent of the first desk computers with floppy disks and more women entering the professional workforces versus the clerical workforce.

In the 1990's, computers continued to evolve and fax machines became prevalent. Copy machines also advanced from making single copies to making multiple copies, collating, stapling, hole punching, and binding.

The 2000's saw substantial improvements in computers, with laptops coming into use. The internet also became widely available, and cell phones advanced from the "phone in a bag" and the "brick," to more compact designs that allowed for more mobile work.

Today we cannot imagine a workplace without laptops, tablets, smart phones, email, electronic documents, electronic filing with courts, blue tooth capabilities in our vehicles, copy machines that do everything but draft a document for you, and virtual meetings.

Current Trends In The Workplace

Telework Versus Remote Work Versus Virtual Work

Telework typically refers to arrangements where an employee is expected to report to work on a regular and recurring basis at one or more sites that are not the employer's main office. It is most often done at the request of the employer.

Remote work typically refers to a situation where an employee is working from his/her living space, whether it is their regular home, a vacation home, or temporary quarters. There is not necessarily an expectation that the employee will work remotely on a regular or recurring basis. It is most often done at the request of the employee, with the permission of the employer.

Virtual work is similar to remote work in that an employee is not working in the office environment, but rather is working off-site. The main difference with remote work is that virtual work typically involves being tied to a team and the team members staying in contact with other during the course of the workday.

Another trend is for employers and employees to use a hybrid approach, whereby an employee may be expected to work from their regular office on certain days of the week, and be allowed to work remotely, typically from home, on other days of the week.

Hoteling Versus Hot Desking

Hoteling is an alternative work arrangement where an employer sets aside one or more "generic" offices that are not dedicated to any one person, but rather are reserved for use by employees who are not in the office on a regular basis, such as senior or semi-retired employees. The workspaces are in the employer's primary facility and they are typically outfitted with a computer docking station, and also typically provide access to a phone line, copy machine and printer. They may also provide access to secretarial support. Companies typically require that a reservation be made for use of one of the hotel offices, as they generally do not have as many hotel offices available as there are senior or semi-retired employees.

Hot desking is a more free-wheeling version of hoteling. With hot desking, the number of available offices and amenities may be the same, but reservations are typically not required, as the offices are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Future Trends In The Workplace

What the future holds for technology and the workplace is anyone's guess. We doubt that in the 1960's people envisioned a world with the internet, or an office with the laptops, smart phones and virtual technology that currently exists. While we can speculate as to the use of robots, artificial intelligence and holograms in the future, the one thing of which we can be certain is that the workplaces of 2048 and 2073 will undoubtedly not look anything like the workplace of 2023.