

How is technology impacting the workplace?

In the last decade, technology has changed the workplace environment beyond recognition. Jason Connolly, director at Next Generation IT, looks at some of the changes and how they are benefitting the workplace environment



In the future driverless cars will effortlessly whisk us to work, computer chips implanted in our brains will directly connect us to the internet, enabling us to subconsciously communicate, eliminating the need for computers, phone and workplaces. Not long afterwards artificial intelligence will replace us in the workplace entirely, and (if we can avoid the near-inevitable war with the

machines leading to a dystopian post-apocalyptic ‘Terminator-style’ existence) will significantly increase productivity, living standards and allow us much more free time. This is all well and good, but how is technology enhancing the workplace in the here and now?

Following the industrial revolution, the use of technology in the office workplace has steadily grown, with electronic calculators and typewriters being superseded by mainframe computers and eventually the personal computer. The use of technology has led to the computerisation of financial transactions, correspondence and record-keeping, enabling globalisation, international finance and ultimately technology has enabled the Channel Islands to generate the wealth that we all enjoy today.

Since the advent of the personal computer, software programs have automated and streamlined the tasks of office workers, significantly reducing paperwork. Email systems have almost entirely usurped posted letters and faxes, scanning/document management systems have replaced photocopying and paper filing, and accounting and practice management systems have replaced hard-copy book-keeping and record-keeping.

The continued development of these systems is further adding value, for instance workflow systems allow customisable electronic workflows to be created that automate repetitive tasks. They also minimise data-entry by ‘gluing together’ disparate systems, improving productivity and reducing errors in data-entry.

This can be taken one step further by collaborating with parties outside of the organisations, for example by publishing electronic forms via the internet to introducers and potential clients to allow them to fill in their own details. This ‘on-boarding’ of client information reduces errors, increases productivity, improves service levels and also provides a more personal and interactive service to the client. Plus organisations can securely push information back to the client, for instance by publishing regular statements.

Technology is making it easier to work in other more practical ways. Increases in the speed of computing and communications are reducing frustrating wait times for equipment to start up, open applications, display web pages and send print jobs. As we carry out a larger proportion of our work on computers, screen sizes have grown and a good 22-27 inch screen makes it easier to work with multiple documents or applications open at the same time. Even better, many people use dual screens to enable easy switching between applications, for instance writing an email while referring to information in a spreadsheet or document. Some organisations are now starting to introduce adjustable workstations that allow staff to stand while working, which aim to reduce the health risks associated with sitting still for long periods.

As nearly all organisations are now so dependent on IT for the smooth running of their day-to-day operations, for many staff, managers and business owners the biggest positive impact that IT can have on their environment is for it to ‘just work’. IT has the ability to make work more effective and less stressful by providing reliable and fast systems. This is often achieved by doing the basics well, ensuring a stable and reliable system that provides email, internet access, practice management systems, remote access and reliable backups. That is a straightforward and effective strategy, especially when backed up with responsive support to quickly fix issues, should they occur.

Of course many businesses do not have the expertise in-house to provide such a system, and want their staff to focus entirely on their core business. Cloud computing is an effective way of outsourcing the provision of an organisation’s IT systems and support, with the added advantage of freeing up office space by eliminating the need for servers onsite. This can enhance the office environment by eliminating cost of building and running a computer room and freeing up space for staff. Just be sure to speak with a local IT business to ensure your important and sensitive data is stored in a local datacentre to avoid any jurisdictional issues.

I started this article by suggesting that technology will eventually eliminate the need for the office workplace and that work can be carried out whenever and wherever it is required. This trend has already started with hot-desking, Wi-Fi, mobile devices and remote access which give staff the flexibility to access IT systems not just sat at their desk, but in meeting rooms, from other offices, from home, while travelling, in fact from anywhere on any device with an internet connection. Just beware of time-travelling cybernetic assassins sent from the future.