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978-1-107-46011-9- The Internet in the Workplace: How New Technology is Transforming Work

Patricia Wallace

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THE INTERNET IN THE WORKPLACE: HOW NEW TECHNOLOGY IS TRANSFORMING WORK

The Internet, and all the netcentric innovations that emerge from it, has transformed the workplace and our working lives in a very short time. The net added a window to the world on worker's desks, and made 24 by 7 connectivity to the workplace a reality – blurring the line between work and time off. It triggered new styles of teamwork, new leadership challenges, new modes of communicating, new job roles and employer–employee relationships, and new, alarmingly effective tools for workplace surveillance. The capabilities offered by netcentric technologies might seem to eliminate the need for a physical workplace altogether, but the workplace remains, and in fact, the physical appearance of a typical office looks about the same. Nevertheless, the psychological characteristics of the workplace have changed considerably. Workers, from the mail room clerk to the CEO, are learning new skills – to capitalize on the net's power, but avoid the egregious blunders that the net so dramatically amplifies. In *The Internet in the Workplace*, Wallace shows how netcentric technologies touch every kind of workplace, and explores the challenges and dilemmas they create.

Patricia Wallace, Ph.D., is Senior Director, Information Technology and Distance Programs at the Center for Talented Youth, Johns Hopkins University.

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For Rhea, Chris, and John, and in memory of Loretta and Julian Wallace

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page xi</i>
1. THE INTERNET TRANSFORMS THE WORKPLACE	1
Internet in the Workplace: A Brief Tour	2
The Context of Change: The Evolving Netcentric Economy	6
Information Asymmetries	7
Disintermediation along the Value Chain	11
The Disintermediated Fight Back	16
Extreme Disintermediation: The Case of Digital Products	19
Business Models, Strategies, and Industry Competition	20
The Workplace in the Middle	24
2. THE NETCENTRIC TECHNOLOGIES EMERGE	27
Waves of Technological Transformation	27
The Internet at the Core: Design Principles	30
Technologies at the Edge	35
Security and Netcentric Technologies	47
Swimming Inside the Netcentric Wave	51
3. WORK, NONWORK, AND FUZZY LINES BETWEEN THEM	53
Are We Working More?	55
Why Are Some People Working Longer Hours?	57
Netcentric Technologies and the Anytime/Anywhere Workplace	67
4. BUSINESS COMMUNICATION	78
From Sender to Recipient and Back	79
The Range of New Choices	81
Describing the Communication Channels	83
	vii

viii	CONTENTS
Attitudes about New Media	88
Email: A Case Study	89
Business Communication across Cultures	106
Instant Messages in the Workplace	109
Extending Netiquette	112
5. LEADERSHIP IN THE INTERNET AGE	113
Leadership under the Microscope	114
Leadership Styles in the Internet Era	118
New Challenges for Internet-Age Leaders	120
Leaders of the Future	133
6. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT	135
The Origins of Knowledge Management	136
What Is Knowledge?	138
Creating Information and Explicit Knowledge for the Organization: Pre-Internet	141
Post-Internet Knowledge Management	142
Knowledge Discovery and Data Mining	144
Knowledge Management Practices and Projects	146
The Knowledge Management Hype Cycle	151
Social and Psychological Factors in Knowledge Management	153
The Future of Knowledge Management	155
7. VIRTUAL TEAMS AND COMPUTER-SUPPORTED COOPERATIVE WORK	157
Technology Support for Teamwork	158
Expanding the Radius of Collaboration for Teamwork	159
The Context of Teamwork	162
Group Dynamics in Virtual Teams	165
Group Dynamics for Problem Solving and Decision Making	171
The Performance of Actual Virtual Teams	178
What Will Make Virtual Teams More Effective?	181
Tomorrow's Virtual Teams	189
8. E-LEARNING	191
E-Learning: A Virtual Tour	192
Defining the Terms	198
Advantages of E-Learning Programs	200
How Effective is E-Learning?	202
The Challenges of E-Learning	206
Is Less More?	213

CONTENTS	ix
9. WORKPLACE SURVEILLANCE AND PRIVACY	215
How Are Employees Being Monitored?	216
Why Monitor the Workplace?	222
Concerns about Productivity	226
Electronic Performance Monitoring	229
The Internet and Disinhibition	233
Developing and Implementing Monitoring Programs	235
Workplace Privacy: An Oxymoron?	241
10. THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF EMPLOYMENT	246
Employment Trends and Technology	247
Changing Employee – Employer Relationships	252
Challenges in Managing New Employment Relationships	255
Changing Organizational Forms	258
The Volunteer Organization	262
11. THE NETCENTRIC WORKPLACE: FUTURE TRENDS	267
The Internet and Productivity	267
Transforming the Economy, Old and New	269
Offices of the Future	274
The Internet in the Workplace: A SWOT Analysis	281
A Social Dilemma	287
Extending the Sphere	289
Index	291

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Preface

The workplace and our working lives have been transformed by the Internet and the netcentric innovations it has brought. Although the new gadgets that connect to the net are part of the transformation, they form only one element in a major transition that affects the nature of work in an organization and the employee’s role. Oddly, the transformation may not even be apparent from a quick glance at the physical office. Most offices have not changed very much and an office worker transported from the early twentieth century would easily recognize most of the room’s features. Even the computer would not seem entirely strange, because the keyboard looks so much like a typewriter’s keys. However, the fundamental nature of the workplace – from communication patterns to management styles, and from approaches to teamwork to employer–employee relationships, have changed dramatically.

Netcentric technologies bring a host of new tools and capabilities to workers, especially in the areas of information access, communications, and collaboration. People can open a window to the digital world on their desktops or laptops, and they have access to a limitless supply of information and business intelligence. Twenty-four-hour connection to coworkers, clients, and the information resources of the workplace itself is commonplace. Team members can use collaborative technologies to work together regardless of physical location. E-learning enables workers to improve their skills and earn degrees without commuting to classes. These new capabilities bring extraordinary advantages to employees and their organizations, but as their use grows, we see their disadvantages emerge. Constant connectivity, for example, blurs the line between work and nonwork and has implications for work-life balance.

Beyond the new capabilities the Internet offers, netcentric technologies create fundamental changes in the economic context of work, and the need

for certain kinds of companies, skills, or occupations. They created a wave of disruption that changed what employees – and the organizations in which they work – must do to add value to a product or process. The demand for certain kinds of work and particular skills is skyrocketing, but many occupations, companies, and whole industries have all but disappeared. More will follow as netcentric innovations reach further into every industry. These waves trigger other kinds of changes in the workplace, such as more job instability, new organizational forms, and looser relationships between employees and employers.

The Internet in the Workplace examines the many ways in which netcentric technologies have transformed our working lives, and presents both the positive and the negative consequences to employees and their organizations. The influence is not one-way, however, and people have many opportunities to influence and guide future technological developments, as well as the policies that govern how netcentric capabilities are used within the organization.

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