

The Virtual Workplace

The virtual workplace has been defined as a workplace that is not located in any one physical space. It is best described as a network of several workplaces that are not limited by geographic boundaries, and which are technologically connected. It is at this point that the conversation commences with respect to the existence of digitalization. Digitization allows for persons to work from home using the internet. The move to work using digitalization was not an overnight creation, but rather was a calculated development that evolved with the introduction of the phenomenon known as globalization.

There is now the haste by many businesses to abandon the traditional form of work where there were established offices, to having virtual workplaces. This would appear to be a simple process to follow but it depends on the nature of the individual business. In contemplating the change to a virtual workplace, it becomes necessary to weigh the pros and cons of doing so. Certainly, it cannot be business as usual if the business requires that there is direct contact with the public. A case can well be made that some parts of a business can function with extensive use of digital platforms. This is quite reasonable and can be pursued if it is feasible to do so. The idea that the virtual workplace is the modern trend and therefore it is the way to go, may be pursued by some, and to do so consistent with the proverb, 'keeping up with the Joneses.'

Those who are seeking to make the change, should give thought to how the new arrangement would impact their business. For most, the bottom line is about the promotion of efficiencies which may be derived through the reduction of operating costs and the staff complement. Further, there is the apparent benefit of having a reduction in the overall management responsibility to their employees, including a sense of relief of not having to engage with trade unions in arriving at a collective bargaining agreement. If this one-sided approach is taken in making a determination on the move to a virtual workplace, then the strong possibility exists that some bad decisions will be made. The move to a virtual workplace cannot take place without giving serious consideration to the initial investment required to make the move to digitalization. Decisions have to be made on the appropriate technology to be put in place, and the management of the technological platforms which require the entering of service agreements. Security becomes another serious issue, and with the knowledge that there are many professional hackers around, it is imperative that security of information is taken seriously.

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The coming on stream of the virtual workplace, brings with it a new set of problems with the employer – employee relationship. It starts with the level of control which the employer has over the employee. This is likely to be an emerging problem where the employee is working on an individual contract in providing a service. Out of this comes the problem of the reduced level of organization which the employer had in a face-to-face organizational environment. As a consequence, the possibility exists of strained relationships. As it is often said, one thing leads to another, and so with the level of independence the employee now has, conditions are now more favourable for the turnover of staff. Employers will have to take into consideration that in a competitive market, they may be forced to pay a high price in order to recruit, hire and maintain highly skilled specialist in the labour force. In an environment where labour retention can be a problem, there must be a budget for continual investment in training. In the face of the glamour of having a virtual business, there must be concern over the issues of productivity and customer service. With employees operating as independent contractors and in instances where employees operate under a flextime arrangement, there could be problems experienced in meeting deadlines, targets and in making responses. All of these pose problems for the delivery of good customer service and the maintaining of service excellence.

It is essential that employers recognize the value of having workers on board in a virtual workplace, considering that they are the face of the business, which plays a big part in driving customer support. Technology has and will maintain its role and importance with the development of the economy and society, but to date and going forward in the future, it will never replace the value of having employees. The classic example of this is reflected in driving the use of technology in the virtual workplace that requires connectivity and accessibility. There remains a dependency on workers at the front and back end to deliver services.