

Office ORACLES

Predicting what's going to happen is never an easy task, but OPI asked three brave souls to put forth their ideas on the workplace of the future – by *Michelle Sturman*

Before March 2020, if you had asked anyone to describe how the office would operate over the coming years, they would probably have been able to rattle off quite a few trends with no problem. Then came the pandemic which, as we all know, turned things on their head in terms of pretty much everyone's working life.

But the big question is whether COVID-19 really has radically altered any original workplace trends that we expected

to happen over the next decade or so, or if it has simply fast-tracked the inevitable?

To try and answer this, the following pages feature an interview with futurist Liselotte Lyngsø about changes COVID-19 has wrought on her office 2030 predictions, while Brother UK's Phil Jones imagines the workplace of 2040. Finally, FSoffice's Beth Freeman investigates the opportunities changes may present for dealers.

LISELOTTE LYNGSØ, MANAGING PARTNER, FUTURE NAVIGATOR

Back in 2018, futurists Liselotte Lyngsø and Yesim Kunter offered insights into the office in 2030 and the 2100s, covering aspects such as workplace culture, design, attire, and women in the workforce (*read the original article 'Office Space Timeline: Past, Present and Future' on www.hubblehq.com*).

Pretty much all the predictions were spot on in terms of the direction the office was headed, ie a sustainable, individualised and creative workspace where technology will be prevalent, coupled with more co-working and homeworking.

OPI recently talked to Lyngsø to find out what, if anything, has changed regarding the future of the office following the coronavirus pandemic.

OPI: What are the biggest changes to the office you've noted that have been brought about by the ongoing COVID-19 crisis?

Liselotte Lyngsø: What I've really noticed is a new trend in employees taking their pets to work. There was a big surge in buying dogs for companionship during the lockdowns and while working from home, and they now want them in the office. It's providing people with so much happiness that businesses don't want to compromise on this. There is, of course, a flipside in having to deal with potential allergies, etc.

Another interesting aspect is the change in eating arrangements. When employees are together in the office now, they want break times to be something a little more special. Because of this, we'll see a lot more open space used as areas to eat together, relax and socialise, or conduct a working lunch. It will certainly be more than just grabbing the odd cup of coffee.

OPI: In 2018, you mentioned how the 2030 office would be greener and more sustainable. The latest IPCC report is fairly scary. I would imagine this puts sustainability even higher on the agenda.

LL: Absolutely. And sustainability has many faces. We obviously need to be serious about dealing with our CO₂ emissions. In addition, it is about spending less time travelling overall, but increasing mobility and providing flexibility when we finally do hit the road. On this last point, we really need to figure out how to be much better at conducting online meetings.

It's equally vital to talk about eco-buildings. For example, the use of smart ceilings that track where we walk, or sensors able to personalise indoor climates. This kind of technology can help with hygiene protocols, but also the environment, as the building is only heating or cooling places where people actually are.

Other aspects involve smart cleaning where intelligent robots, for instance, will detect where people have been and only disinfect or sanitise those areas. All of this will become increasingly important, especially as we are much more aware of office cleanliness and hygiene because of coronavirus.



I think it is interesting to see that we're moving away from just measuring company success purely in monetary terms. In other words, calculating the performance of the business more holistically and factoring in sustainability and how well people are thriving.

As humans, we must continually learn new things so it's crucial for us to think about the future office like a fitness centre. When you go to your place of work, it needs to make you stronger mentally, physically and socially, which feeds back into the brand and cultural connection with the business. It will become essential for a company's workplace to illustrate its fitness as the main competition will be somebody's home.

OPI: Talking of the home, the move to hybrid working was most certainly accelerated because of the pandemic. I imagine this has clearly changed the trajectory of the office of the future.

LL: It's like the cork has popped out of the champagne bottle and everybody's having a party. However, the principles of hybrid working vary considerably, from country to country, culture to culture, and business to business. Some employees are working in an extremely controlled environment, while other employers have embraced it. Much of it comes down to trust.

I'm Danish, and the Danes have a very high level of trust in each other which has worked well for homeworking. In other countries, such as the US, there is more distrust which has led to employers remotely monitoring their staff.



PHIL JONES, MANAGING DIRECTOR, BROTHER UK

In the past 18 months, you could argue that we've seen a seismic shift in the way organisations are run. Much of the working practice change was predicted long ago and has accelerated due to the pandemic. But what of the future beyond 2021? Is there more we can anticipate in terms of developing our businesses and propositions to stay relevant?

Back in 2013, we asked the Future Foundation to imagine an office in 2040. Some of the insights help inform the direction of travel for how companies may be ordered in the future. Let me share some of those with you.

Four major themes within workspaces were predicted in the coming two decades:

1. Human/human (asynchronous technologies which allow us to work effectively).
2. Human/space (synchronous environments for human creative output/collaboration).
3. Human/information (how data is dynamically served).
4. Human/machine (the role of AI/RPA and machines).

A lot depends on whether people are working to a clock – the time slaves, or a compass – the time owners. The latter relates to people who decide how, when and where they want to work. So now, we're starting to see battles between the time owners and the time slaves.

However, we're not going to simply move from one model to a different one. The best way to explain this is by looking at hotels and Airbnb. Before Airbnb, our choice was whether to sleep in a three-star or a five-star hotel and have room service or not. Overall, hotels were pretty much the same. With Airbnb, you can sleep in a tree or on a boat, or have a fully-equipped kitchen. Hotels realised there were many ways in which people wanted to sleep.

The same is happening now with hybrid working as businesses start to understand there can be a multitude of different types of workplaces. One category that's exploding right now is co-working spaces – they are certainly interesting options for digital nomads. Offices are places for socialising and collaborating, even if it's just at a local pop-up space.

As a futurist, I've been talking about the reshaping of the office for ages, wondering when it's going to happen. It's great that employees are finally actually talking about the workplace of their dreams.

OPI: Any final thoughts?

LL: Office products suppliers mustn't keep telling the same old story to a new world, but transform their communications as well.

HUMAN/HUMAN

Getting the most out of people will move on from motivation to understanding 'health' using advanced analytics. With robots performing repetitive task-based work, the value of human creativity will increase and with that, so must our ability to appreciate those within our businesses.

We are only a small step away from the ability to aggregate employee health data, understanding sleep or an underlying pattern of stress. Just look at the individual analytics we can now derive from Apple Watches, Fitbit or Whoop devices such as heart rate variability and stress scores. This rich data is the future currency of health and well-being initiatives.





If employers had access to such information at any time, health and well-being interventions could be prescribed at entity and/or individual level. However, there are many moral issues to discuss around this type of use of personal data.

Taking health data one step further is the example of electronic ink wallpaper. If the wallpaper senses a high-stress score or low levels of sleep, it will change the atmosphere in a room to lift your mood – all of this happening through the intelligent use of real-time information. The ability to not only create the right environment, but also provide the tools and measure sentiment dynamically will be key.

Things to watch out for/consider:

- Smart wallpapers
- Real-time sentiment analysis
- Real-time micro-manufacturing for fast prototyping

HUMAN/SPACE

The concept of an 'office' will become quite fluid given the number of destinations we will end up in as future 'roam' workers, wandering all over the place in the active pursuit of our day-to-day responsibilities.

Described as 'liquid workspaces', they're not just about the physical but also the virtual and how they intertwine. The role of a physical location is becoming diluted with massive ramifications for cities, the property market and employers.

A workspace will become fully virtualised, digitally recreating what you currently tangibly experience, 24 hours a day, with co-workers from all over the globe.

Things to watch out for/consider:

- Virtual reality meeting spaces/organisations
- Retinal displays (images projected straight onto your retina via laser)
- Always-on business models

HUMAN/MACHINE

Even with the presence of robots, the worth of human beings is still strongly felt: someone needs to write the code, come up with the ideas, run the organisations and deal with the people.

The march of the robots is clearly building momentum and it will present many issues for society, eradicating a generation of blue-collar and administrative workers. It's the so-called 'white-collar apocalypse'.

For industry, it's about where the 'human premium' lies and how that is monetised/optimised. Finding the right balance to stay competitive will be key.

Things to watch out for/consider:

- Fully automated point-to-point supply chains (machine-controlled logistics including final mile drone delivery)
- Automated workplace monitoring (observing stress, environment, output)
- 'Virtual colleagues' – AI avatars (think virtualised Siri)

HUMAN/INFORMATION

With the data dizziness we all now experience in our daily lives, imagine a future where the volume of that information you need to process doubles, triples or quadruples – and our already frazzled brains being asked to do more.

Real-time visualisation will be key, as well as access on the move. This will require a seamless integration of technology built on data networks. From the moment we step out of the door, the expectation is that the fabric of data networks will be seamless, strong and synchronous regardless of where we are.

Things to watch out for/consider:

- Advanced AI data simulations integrating all areas of our life
- Wearable computing/explosion of Internet of Things devices (everything connected)
- Ubiquitous high speed, global data links

“ A workspace will become fully virtualised, digitally recreating what you currently tangibly experience ”

WHAT ROLE DO WE AS AN INDUSTRY HAVE TO PLAY?

The enormous coming together of technologies and data to provide integrated work/life experiences is emerging very quickly. A granularity that will be hard to come back from, but the journey there will likely be quite arduous given the privacy issues it will entail.

We'll see the death of distance when it comes to recruiting people to join our businesses. Instead, we will be chasing the sun around the world, and switching on our support services, sunrise by sunrise, in markets we never dreamed we could access. That's an exciting prospect, but will bring many cross-cultural ramifications and potentially a whole new line-up of global competitors in your backyard.

The industry needs to be able to consult with employers about such macro issues, their back-office systems and organisations. Services will be key, alongside consulting and deployment – EaaS or Everything as a Service. The mantra will be skills, skills, skills.

Maybe the legacy to leave is a sector full of digitally capable individuals with a shared mental map of the future that delivers on the opportunities and drives new, recurring revenues.

The future is bright. It's digital. It's ubiquitous, and it's coming. See you there.

BETH FREEMAN, EVP, FSIOFFICE

After 18 months of remote work and rapidly changing environments, most of us are ready for some stability. Then comes the realisation that this is probably not likely to happen any time soon. As companies are still determining what a return to work may resemble, many of us in the office products industry are trying to look further ahead to imagine what the workplace might look like in five to ten years. Will we even still need them? If only we had a crystal ball...

First, let me cover myself by admitting I'm no expert here, so don't hold me to any of this! Having said that, I believe there are three main areas to consider when thinking about the future of the office: environment, technology and people. While these are probably not too surprising, I'm convinced that they will have a major impact on the workplace in the broadest sense over the next decade.

“ **People are the most complex piece of the 2030 office of the future puzzle** ”

ENVIRONMENT

The Europeans have led the way in terms of sustainability, with the rest of the world playing catch up. However, now there is finally a growing emphasis in the US as well, backed by large corporations with more than just words. A key factor behind this is the pledge from car manufacturers to go all-electric over the next decade, if not sooner.

With more people working from home and the related reduction in road transportation and people in the workplace, creating truly sustainable offices is becoming more realistic.

TECHNOLOGY

We are all far more comfortable with technology that connects us around the world than we were prior to COVID-19. As a result, it's easier to work from anywhere, so there is less need to go into the workplace or even gather in one space – this will ultimately reduce the number of people regularly occupying the traditional office space.

However, when you *are* in the office, technology will play a more critical role than before. While we know that businesses

will only continue to reduce the amount of paper and paper-based products used, they will also become increasingly wireless. This brings opportunity for us!

PEOPLE

People are the most complex piece of the 2030 office of the future puzzle. The current work-from-anywhere wave will remain a permanent mode of working for some. However, people need people. During lockdowns and the more intense periods of the pandemic, there have been serious mental health implications stemming from the isolation created by our physical worlds shrinking so quickly and drastically.

This effect – from a work perspective – has probably been the most pervasive in younger generations who have struggled immensely with being alone. Knowing this, companies will seek ways in which to provide connections for employees, and the office is the best place for this.

As such, the office of the future will cater to the need for people to interact as there's little point in travelling to work to do the very same thing you can do from home: work with a screen and hold video calls all day. It will once again become a vibrant place to be that encourages live, face-to-face interactions.

OFFICE 2030

All these environmental, technology and people requirements will come together to create the 'new' workplace. We will likely see comfortable spaces for people to casually gather. Due to fewer employees in the office on a daily basis, larger spaces for training and meetings may also be incorporated, so that organisations can accommodate their workforce for in-person events. In some cases, these may even be shared with or rented out to other companies.

Wireless technology will continue to increase and with it will come an array of desirable products in the office for easier charging, presenting and sharing. This is definitely an area where the business supplies industry has an opportunity to grow, along with sustainable items which will perhaps be mandated, rather than just desired, by customers.

These are just some ideas of what we may see in 2030. One thing is for sure – the office will continue to evolve, and our industry will continue to progress alongside it.

