Work-Life Integration and Workplace Location: Sustainable Strategies to Reconcile Employee and Corporate Objectives
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The traditional distinction of life domains – work, family, leisure, separated the domestic and workplace realms. This arose in an ideological and demographic order of men predominant in the workplace, supported by wives undertaking shopping, food preparation, child- and eldercare in Europe. Contemporary knowledge economies now function with high levels of female labour. Work norms have also changed, with long term careers replaced by “just-in-time” labour procurement. ICT has presaged new values about work, favouring portability, informality, dissolution of fixed time, place and tenure and an interest in work-life balance.

The spatial context of work in the former era involved spatial distance from residential areas. Built settings endure beyond cultural change, and many contemporary workplaces involve considerable travel from employees’ homes. This heightens the challenge to negotiate family and job, especially with small children, although powerful financial centres like New York and the City of London reward the compromises involved in such commutes.

The technopoles and business parks of the 80s onwards are also spatially segregated, in part by their scale. Scale is inherent in making these places of value for their developers and tenants, but these homogeneous ex-urban clusters lack the complexity that supports workers’ lifestyle needs in established urban centres, and their locations typically involve demanding travel. Ironically these settings developed alongside ICT, the catalyst weakening the corporate grip on lifestyles and careers. The resultant patterns of corporate settlement are disjointed from today’s cultural needs and preferences.

ICT expands occupiers’ corporate real estate options by creating more footloose conditions, and uncoupling people from “fixed place”. If the company’s location involves onerous travel, with negative impacts on productivity or personal wear and tear, people can work remotely. Utilisation studies routinely show that 40-60% of office personnel works at their workplace. If organisations provide the technology and cultural endorsement for virtual operation, and if agility supports work-life alignment, why is more work not dispersed?

Employers benefit from face-to-face contact in its potential for knowledge and information transfer, and reinforcing cultural ties and corporate loyalty. Employees come to the workplace for collaboration, sociability and also because home is not always a suitable workplace. Technology may be a “friend” of work-life balance, but is not a total answer to inconvenient workplace locations. And for those who are “always on”, technology threatens work-life balance.

The gap is for real estate solutions that bridge the requirements of employer organisations and employees. Creative exemplars show the scope and viability...
for workplace buildings that are more distributed relative to residential settings, reconciling “work and life”, whilst generating value through imaginative location strategies and development concepts.

Chiswick Park, West London, was conceived as a “mid-urban” campus, typologically evolved from a business park. Located by a London Underground station and entered from a busy mixed high street in a district of residential, employment and retail uses, the site is fully accessible to local people who also use its high standard of landscape, restaurant, gym and other facilities. Post-occupancy research highlights tenants’ business value in leveraging the park’s image and high quality of amenity. The concept of integrating the park more closely with “life” is strongly endorsed by evaluation with employees, and the park’s proximity to housing facilitates living and working at close range.

Another variant is Pentland Lakeside, an owner-occupier development by a brand and fashion company that built its headquarters in suburban North London, demonstrating that a company does not lose its creative edge by shifting employment closer to housing, schools and the general fabric of life.

These innovations involve outward shifts from the centre. However, there is also scope to soften the interface between work and life in urban centres. The new Kings Place development sits beside the major Kings Cross transport hub in walking and cycling distance of vast numbers of residences. It changes workplace concepts – with music performance venues, rehearsal rooms, box office, sculpture and visual arts galleries, restaurant, café and bars in one building that mostly comprises office space. It neighbours the massive Kings Cross redevelopment, a full cross-section of integrated urban fabric – housing, dining, education, leisure and retail facilities, as well as offices. Kings Place shows that the vision for mixed use has relevance to individual buildings as well as large sites.

The exemplars promise improved work-life alignment, essential for personal and social sustainability. The approaches work economically for developers and occupiers. The environmental gains with shorter distances are inherent. The paper points to polycentric strategies, combined with mixed use at a fine grain, and more intricate interfaces between corporate and public realms to enhance sustainability and expand choice in work-life alignment.