Work-Life Integration and Workplace Location: Sustainable Strategies to Reconcile Employee and Corporate Objectives

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How Individuals “Weave their Lives”: Changing Constructs

The distinction of life domains – work, family, leisure – and separation between them have long been established in developed economies, conspicuously in the US, with issues generated in the domestic realm formally regarded as off limits in the workplace. These are “personal matters”, not intrude on workplace performance. They are the employees’ responsibility and concern, not the employers’ “problem”.

The boundaries in question developed in association with an ideological and demographic order in which the workplace was dominated by males, presumed to be supported by marriage partners whose role was inferred as looking after their spouse and their children. My own recollections of early postgraduate employment scenarios include an iconic “IBM man” – backed up by his wife. In this model, shopping, food preparation, child care and care for elderly relatives is assumed to be addressed without any demand or impact on the workplace. Of course, women did have formal workplace roles, typically: single women without concurrent childcare obligations – often employed as secretaries and in other processing or administrative roles, low paid service workers like office cleaners and catering staff whose work tends to be part-time and arranged by contractors, and a small proportion of well educated “high flyers” who could purchase the necessary domestic cover to free them for rewarding career involvement.

No social paradigm is ever entirely congruent with the facts on the ground, and nor was this one, but it had substantial relevance. It no longer rings true, certainly not in Europe. The advent of feminism in the 70s began to erode its legitimacy as a model, and post-baby boom shifts in demography and regulation followed. Women are now not secondary participants in the workplace (even if their financial rewards and representation in senior management still lag behind men). Contemporary knowledge economies could not function competitively without the high level of female participation that is now experienced in the labour force. It is for this reason – to facilitate the interface between skilled economic activity and family involvement – that governments promote work-life balance. The work-life agenda is pertinent to national productivity (Strelitz and Edwards 2006).

There are further currents of influence. People study longer and delay both their entry to the workplace and the transition to parenthood if they have children at all. The decline in child-bearing, the delay in parenting and a marked increase in longevity all converge to reconfigure the social pyramid that society long took for granted as “natural”. The current structure comprises fewer young people providing a support base for an expanding elderly population. At the same time, the improved health and agility of the post-retirement cohorts, coupled with the fragility of pension provisions, highlight both the scope and the need for older people to continue in economic activity after their formal retirement age. Whilst work possibilities for the healthy, active “young old” are expanding, the requirement of elder care for the “old old” is an increasing social and economic conundrum. Notably, the trends described are driven by demographic and labour market conditions, rather than by the equality and human rights legislation that increasingly supports workplace diversity (Strelitz and Edwards 2006).

The original research that documented the separation between life strands and the consequent strains and tensions that this generated – particularly for pioneering “dual career families” – stemmed from an era with norms regarding the nature of work significantly different from today’s (Rapoport, Rapoport and Strelitz 1977). Former long term bonds between corporations and their employees have given way to the more atomised work milieu we now observe, with employment loyalties challenged by employers as well as employees. At the heart of this shift is the influence of ICT, facilitating the operation of global markets, and the implementation of off shoring and outsourcing knowledge work with outputs deliverable in rapid cycles of real time. The strategies benefit businesses with cheaper labour, lower fixed costs and a shift from the obligations of long term employment that meant “careers for life” to “just-in-time” procurement of input.
From the workers’ perspective, ICT presaged an era of new values, in which individuals, especially young people, seek to experiment, sample variety in their pursuits, and work on a portfolio of assignments – either serially or simultaneously. The development of e-business in particular heralded a change in the culture of work – to portability, informality, early prospective rewards for creativity, self-confidence setting terms, and the dissolution of fixity – in time, place and tenure.

Research for an international accountancy firm highlights how these shifts find expression even within the portals of a very successful company – with young employees who have sought and taken up employment. Working with the real estate arm to explore the characteristics of its “Future Working Environment”, attention was directed to the views of its young people, on the basis that establishing the meaning of work for people who represent an organisation’s future is important in informing strategy. The research design involved five successive age-bands of young employees, from entry level to pre-directorship, covering the ages of 23-34, and encompassing qualitative one-to-one interviews on core topics: “Why I work”, “What I look for from work”, “What I come to work for”, “How work relates to the other aspects of my life”, “What I want from life”, “How I see my relationship to work evolving”. The data indicates the varied perspectives of employees of different ages and stages. Particular features are employees’ concerns, as they progress up the ladder, regarding their potential to accommodate family interests and commitments alongside the intensity and volume of work and the demands of commuting, and the wish of younger employees to be attentive and actively engaged with their children when they become parents. Notably, this aspiration was expressed by male as well as female employees. Separately, men critiqued what they perceived as an imbalanced, overly work-focused pattern adopted by their fathers, expressing a desire for more family involvement when they become parents in future (Strelitz and Harrington 2004).

The data reported above is from the UK. Other data suggests that these trends play out with some variation across the different geographies and the diverse operational terrain of multi-nationals. For example, the same accountancy firm reports stronger employee assertion of work-life balance issues in the PR of China than in Hong Kong. Work with other firms suggests a more traditional approach in their established West European operations than in the Emerging Markets.

Spatial Context of Workplace: Separation, Agglomeration and Cultural Time Lags

Individual and social lives are conducted in built settings, and buildings tend to outlast the current contracted cycles of social change. What kind of environment formed the context when life constructs were predicated on a sharp distinction between family and work? Every city is not functionally compartmented, and some – like Paris and Barcelona – endure with a rich traditional mixed fabric of live, work and play that encompasses the central core. Elsewhere, as in the City of London’s financial district (“the City”), where residential development has long been highly limited, housing forms a very small proportion of the functional and building profile. The City is essentially a place by day, Monday to Friday (notwithstanding the element of round-the-clock activity that now relates to global business across varied time zones, and the 24/7 deal-making that takes place in London’s corporate law firms).

The City’s magnetic pull is enormous, and its far employment reach into residential districts and other towns at considerable distance from London involves 8.2% of the 3,742,908 people whose travel to work is at least in part inside London (Greater London Authority 2007). The 310,116 people commuting into the City of London (Ibid.) represent over 95.0% of the City’s daytime population (Office for National Statistics 2001). Almost the entire workforce of the City – 99.0% – travels into its boundaries to work (Greater London Authority 2007). The average travel to work distance for people who work in London is 16.2 km, whereas City workers’ average travel distance is 25 km, with one in five City workers travelling over 40 km compared with fewer than one in ten in London generally (Ibid). This data evidences the City’s strong pull.

How do people negotiate the interface between family and job with these daily travel and distances? Do parents travel with their infants on crowded trains to use the relatively scarce childcare facilities in the City? With the distances involved, do parents find it viable to work a shortened day in the office, in order to get home in time to be with their older children when they return from school? The mounting public policy and media discourse on these issues indicate that these key components of social structure are struggling to hold together.

New York and the City of London are world financial centres generating very large rewards for many of those who work there. The fact that the price may be right, that

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people will opt to avail themselves of these employment opportunities and accumulate wealth before retiring relatively young and prosperous (if not burnt out), and that everyone does not consider themselves as having viable choices, should not eclipse the significant spatial disassociation between life realms and spatial milieus. The major financial agglomerations present significant challenges to work-life balance if not to economic standard of living. Other cities, lower down the world city pecking order, may be more facilitative of people trying to weave their lives, but strong central clusters disproportionately comprising employment functions pose inevitable strains on work-life alignment, especially given equality of gender participation in employment.

At least as significant, if not more so, are the technopoles and business parks that mushroomed from the 80s onwards. These are modern day successors to the old industrial zones that were segregated from general living conditions because of their noxious activity, and in part through their large scale of operations. In contrast, these new business settings accommodate “clean” activity, and their component buildings are not inherently large. These settings are not isolated from other activity. They are aggregations of similar uses, homogeneous clusters. We all know them – close to the airport from Diegem Brussels to London Heathrow – anonymous runs of office blocks, distinguished externally only by signage that reinforces their similarity – Hitachi, Sony, SAP, FedEx, DHL, etc, edged by strips of grass on which no one sits, beside the odd fountain that no one cherishes, and interspersed with the occasional shop – typically associated with a petrol station – the latter a vital element in this urban setting that is almost entirely car-borne.

Developed contemporaneously with ICT, the irony is that these relatively young concentrations of corporate life have arisen over the same period in which the corporate grip on individuals’ life styles and career paths has been weakening. In large part, the products and services that the occupiers accommodated in these buildings sell are the very ones that have catalysed a strong sense of individual autonomy and possibilities for work styles that are better aligned with active family involvements and personal interests outside work. The resultant patterns of corporate settlement are disjointed from the cultural outcome of the activities that they house.

The dissemination of ICT has involved step changes in society, with rapid transitions, not all clearly foreseen. The new settlement phenomena of the techno pole and business park were exciting concepts when they first emerged. Working on such projects in the 80s, I was captured by their promise of “the future”. The development of large tracts of business buildings outside traditional business cores was largely speculatively led. The benefits grasped by occupiers were good access for road and air travel, improved ratios of car-parking, the scope for larger floor plates than were commonly available in central business districts, and lower rent levels. There was also a sense of zeitgeist – the modernity of these new business types as hybrids of office and industrial uses (although time has shown that they are well suited to office buildings more than to factory specifications).

What drove their agglomeration? A key benefit to their developers was value-creation on sites – including waste tips and other brownfield settings – with potential for new uses. Spatial scale is pivotal in making places. The benefits of synergy for occupiers were also championed by those promoting these developments. Out of town locations offered the critical mass of a campus, where occupiers could harness the flexibility to scale up or down and limit their risk on real estate commitments, whilst projecting a larger presence than individual buildings permit, and avail themselves of shared facilities like restaurants. For smaller occupiers the particular benefit was conferred identity, being associated with big company names and a physical cluster with a stronger image than they could achieve in any siren. For emergent corporate players, for companies establishing a new presence in another country, and for those developing an out of town presence as a complement to an established operating base in the central business area, the advantage of identity by association is attractive.

The ways in which different spatial settings respond to employees’ lifestyle needs was recognised when much of this development was built. But the requirements that were identified did not encapsulate the work-life agenda as we now regard it. Lifestyle, and debate over lifestyle issues and choices, has received increasingly explicit attention in recent years. The focus in the 80s and 90s was on getting what were perceived as basic employee needs met in the new workplace locations – breakfast, lunch, stamps, birthday cards, and the curious category with the tell-tale name of “distress items” – headache pills, candy and replacement tights! In essence these are needs that support individuals in their capacity as workers, enabling them to continue working whilst at their place of work.
A post-occupancy study with the population of a new bbc building in West London in 2004 demonstrates that people’s “life needs” relative to work are more complex than their needs whilst at the workplace alone (Strelitz 2007). In relocating employees from buildings a few minutes’ north of London’s busy Oxford Circus – with its access to the extensive richness of the West End’s cultural and leisure facilities – to the new Media Village that augmented bbc’s existing presence in the then very poorly serviced district of White City in West London (soon to be vitalised after a drawn out programme to develop a large scale retail destination), the corporation recognised that it should provide more amenity than typical. The bbc’s development incorporates a pedestrian street, accommodating a small supermarket, Starbucks, juice bar, wine bar, salad bar hairdresser, post office and massage studio – all also available to the social housing residents who live behind this new development. In addition, extensive employee facilities are provided inside the Media Village buildings, for use by bbc personnel.

But despite this provision being considerably better than the range of facilities usually associated with new office development, it does not replicate or even mimic city centre conditions. Employees who were interviewed had not moved residence following the relocation of their workplace. The journey to the new office location takes significantly longer for everyone, except for some of those who were already living to the west. People had previously travelled to the central office location by a wide variety of train and underground routes, often walking from their station on arrival in Central London, and now many miss the opportunity for this walk. And in addition to significantly increased travel time, the errands that they could previously do at lunchtime must now be done at weekends. The cumulative effect of the change in locations on their work-life balance is significant.

This echoes the response of employees who were relocated from Central London to the out-of-town development of Stockley Park close to Heathrow. Stockley Park was developed in the 1980s as a pioneering business park, a concept then new to the UK. It was delivered with very high quality external landscaping and a central amenity building with fine restaurant, gym, bar and other outlets. The research showed that employees missed the convenience as well as the character that city centre complexity had previously afforded them. Additionally, now journeying to work by car instead of train, they reported negative impacts on work-life balance – arising from the uncertainty of vehicular traffic congestion, leaving home earlier to provide the extra margins to deal with this, often getting back home later, and the stress of seeing accidents on the way or getting caught up in jams.

Such data highlights the divergence between the factors that affect employees’ work-life alignment and employers’ real estate decisions, driven by factors such as cost, airport access and image. As spatial and cultural considerations are both central to locational decisions and impacts, national and regional norms play a part here too. This is evident in comparing the differences in spatial scale surrounding the local sites of global corporate organisations. While Cisco employees in Belgium, for example – given the country’s overall size – are likely to come to the office most days, at least for part of the day, if not for lunch, the travel required to cross London’s large metro area militates against “popping in” for short periods to the company’s offices close to Heathrow. Nevertheless, keeping in touch on a face-to-face basis is widely considered to add value in its potential for knowledge and information transfer, as well as to affirm and reinforce cultural ties and a sense of corporate loyalty across all sectors of business.

Technology, Distributed Working, and Work-life Alignment

In theory as well as practice, ICT expands occupiers’ corporate real estate options by creating more footloose conditions, and uncoupling employees from “fixed place”. If the company’s location involves onerous journey to travel, and when employees judge to be too great an impact on their productivity or personal wear and tear, why can they not work at home? The reality is that many people do now work remotely, for some of the time at least. Utilisation studies routinely show the proportion of workers actually present in their workplace building as ranging between 40-60%. A high proportion of those who are not on site are working elsewhere – some of these at home. And change management strategies, aimed at increasing workspace utilisation by breaking employees’ expectation of a specific allocated desk, now promote the notion that the sophisticated corporate warrior is no longer the person with the corner office, but the light-footed virtual operator with a laptop who is happy to touch down anywhere.

If organisations are enabling their members with the technology to facilitate virtual operation, as well as endorsing this in terms of corporate culture, and if freedom from working in a fixed place supports improved work-life alignment, why is more business activity not dispersed? When workers can work anywhere, why do they come to the workplace?
There are answers for employers and answers for employees. From the organisation’s perspective, the scope for added value from interactions and exchanges between its people is considered to be more likely and of better quality if contact is face-to-face rather than virtual. This is widely accepted as regards participation in scheduled meetings which are always harder to arrange and which always lack potentially significant input if all the relevant participants are not available at a sufficient number of overlapping times. The point also applies to informal help, guidance and advice – an observation that has been made repeatedly in research on work styles and the value of people’s physical presence in the workplace. Less experienced colleagues are far less likely to make virtual contact with a more senior colleague or mentor who is physically remote at the moment when their input could be useful. The third respect in which people’s presence in the workplace benefits the organisation is the scope it allows for chance encounters – swapping ideas, leads and experience, or sparking thoughts – because you saw someone at the fertile moment.

For employees, key reasons to come to the workplace are the need for collaboration and the desire for sociability. Frequently, sociability at work is described not just as a wish, but as a “need”, and not just as a personal need, but as a condition for working more effectively. The research has identified numerous additional reasons why people seek to work at their workplace: “I like coming to work”, “My partner works from home and there’s no room for us both the work from there”, “My children are at home in the holidays, so that’s distracting to me and unfair on them if they have to be quiet”, “I get lonely working at home”. None of these reasons concerns deficient technology at home. Indeed, the organisations in which I have researched employees’ stance on these issues include companies where people are well enabled with technology, as in Cisco and PricewaterhouseCoopers.

The reasons cited above are all relevant to work-life alignment. Whilst the motivations concerning loneliness, sociability, and partners’ and children’s competing claims on “home space” are obviously related to work-life balance, so too are the reasons relating to quality of work and work processes. The term “work-life balance” is itself inappropriately conceived. Work is not pitched against life – it is part of it. Satisfaction with work performance and life satisfaction are strongly linked.

So whilst technology may be a “friend” of work-life alignment, providing a basis for work styles that involve a mix of going to one’s workplace and working remotely to take the pressure off the rigid need to travel to work day in and day out, it is not a complete alternative to inconvenient workplace locations. The further point needs to be registered, that in liberating employees from fixed place and time, technology is in fact the enemy of work-life balance for people, who – through invasive corporate expectations or their personal inability to set limits – find themselves “always on”. Clearly technology is not a panacea and reliance on it will be a false messiah.

Productive and Sustainable CRE Strategies for Employers and Employees

The gap is for real estate solutions that are more organic in bridging the requirements of employer organisations and employees. Given the drivers that generated the spatially distinct workplace clusters that endure today, what is the scope and viability for workplace buildings that are locationally more distributed and in a gentler spatial relationship with residential settings?

Immediate and significant breaks in pattern are not obvious in internationally-facing financial service operations of the type one finds in the City of London, where the economic cluster effect generates very powerful forces in the variety of markets involved – labour included. However, experience is a strong reminder never to say “never”. Footloose is footloose, and the hiving off of back office operations to lower rental and satellite locations is now familiar in the financial services sector – witness the former Wall Street operations in New Jersey.

Contemporary exemplars suggest the potential to reconcile “work and life”, with instructive solutions that show the scope to widen choice in workplace location, and incorporate inclusive approaches to both function and use. They break established paradigms and illustrate the value that can be generated by imaginative location strategies.

Chiswick Park was conceived as a “mid-urban” campus. Typologically its lineage is a business park, with important evolutionary adaptations. It is located opposite a station of the London Underground system and entered directly from a busy mixed high street in a West London district that encompasses a full range of residential, employment and retail uses. The development is spatially coherent, but not gated, and though privately owned and managed, is fully accessible to local people.
The buildings are arranged in pod-like format around a central landscaped area that is entirely allocated to pedestrian use. All vehicle access is round the perimeter of the development, with no vehicular access to buildings. The central area is landscaped to an exceptionally high standard, with water, lawns, timber boardwalks and a substantial events arena. The restaurant, gym, swimming pool and coffee bar are open for use by anyone, not just people who are employed in companies occupying buildings on the park. Indeed, the external market supports the commercial viability of these facilities at the range and standard offered – especially in the park’s initial phase of development. As further buildings are constructed, additional amenities will follow. The companies based on site include a wide range of business: from r+g, telco, and television production and transmission, to specialist call centre and residential property sales.

Post-occupancy research with business leaders at Chiswick Park highlights the positive value for their operations in leveraging the park’s attributes – its strong profile and image, and the high quality of amenity for employees that the agglomeration affords. This endorses both the advantage of identity by association and the benefits that can be achieved by critical mass.

The developer’s concept of integrating the park more closely with “life” is strongly endorsed by post-occupancy evaluation with employees. They enjoy its range of facilities and activities, and the proximity to the wider mix of facilities on the nearby high street (as the park is at the quieter end of the street, access is facilitated by the loan bicycles that the estate management make available). Employees positively value the relationship with the external community. A typical sight from an office building is of parents strolling with young children in tow, appreciating the landscape, looking at the ducks. This signals the park’s proximity to housing. Residential relocation involves ruffling “personal ecology”, and by implication the ecology of others where family is involved. A trend, following companies taking up occupancy at Chiswick Park, is for some employees to move residence to the locality and for new recruits to be local residents, facilitating the further possibilities of cycling and walking to work. People welcome the opportunity for a calm working environment coupled with close access to other life needs – and all of this available in London! In terms of development value, the speculative development at Chiswick Park has made highly efficient use of the site, with the building footprint forming a higher proportion of the site than typical. Its masterplan has created the tight development grid as well as the expansive pedestrian realm at its centre. Both are pivotal in generating value for the developer, the occupier corporations, their employees and local people. The vision to develop the project in this location, and its cultural platform to align work and life, are other key ingredients.

Another variant is Pentland Lakeside. This is an owner-occupier development by a private company that specialises in branded sports and fashion items. Fashion and design are central to this business, in which image is key in attracting, retaining and stimulating its design staff. The business has pushed boundaries by developing its headquarters in a suburban area of North London. Located amidst prosaic residential development, Pentland’s fine building and landscaped setting show that a company does not lose its creative edge by shifting employment closer to housing, schools and the general fabric of life. On the contrary, this has opened options for employees as they become parents to avail themselves of an easier interface between home and work. The fact that Pentland has a workplace nursery on its site also helps. This location for a child care facility makes for a more feasible and pleasant journey to work for an employee with a small child in tow than travelling into central London on crowded transport. Research indicates that Pentland people find it less challenging returning to work after becoming parents if they can easily pop into the nursery at lunchtime, overcoming the emotional strain of separation from one’s child the whole day.

These innovations in location both involve outward shifts from the centre. There are other possibilities for softening the interface between work and life. Urban centres can also change, and corporations have a role in changing them. Several London districts have raised their profile as locations for employment in recent years – Southwark, Clerkenwell, Shoreditch, Paddington. A new development, Kings Place, immediately north of Kings Cross Station where it sits immediately beside a major transport hub as well in walking and cycling distance of vast numbers of residences, changes the concept of workplace buildings by bringing two high quality music performance venues, rehearsal rooms, box office, sculpture and visual arts galleries, restaurant, café and bars into a single building that mostly comprises office space. The building is on the edge of the Kings Cross Railway Lands, poised for massive redevelopment comprising a full cross-section of urban land uses: housing, dining, education, leisure and retail facilities, as well as offices. This enormous site commands being treated as comprehensive integrated townscape, and its development vision is appropriately as mixed use. The Kings Place building,
envisioned and delivered by a different speculative developer, shows that the vision for mixed use has relevance to individual buildings as well as to large sites. The proof that the appetites of corporations as well as of employees are congruent with this vision is in the commitment to lease half of the building’s 27,870 sq m office space prior to construction, as the new operational quarters of The Guardian newspaper.

Greener Living and Working

The promise of these exemplars is in enabling people to weave lives that are more easily lived. This is at the heart of personal and social sustainability. The exemplar projects also show that these approaches work economically – for developers and occupiers. The paper establishes these significant potential gains on sustainability without explicit reference to environmental drivers. The evidence points to polycentric strategies, combined with mixed use at a fine grain, and more intricacy in the interface between the corporate and public realms as the basis for enhanced sustainability and expanded choice in work-life alignment. That this is also a useful response to the environmental agenda makes it the more compelling.

References


Pentland Lakeside: immediately adjacent to suburban housing
Credit: nickwoodphoto.com

Pentland Lakeside: high quality of staff amenity and building design exerting appeal to creative staff and transcending the suburban ethos
Credit: nickwoodphoto.com
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bbc: lively pedestrian street with retail provision at bbc Media Village for shared use by employees and local people
Credit: zza Responsive User Environments

Chiswick Park: office campus permeable to local people and well aligned to “life”
Credit: zza Responsive User Environments
Chiswick Park: a value-adding location for business
Credit: z3x Responsive User Environments

Chiswick Park: aligning work and play
Credit: z3x Responsive User Environments