

## **Working from anywhere – The devil's advocate or a paradigm shift?**

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WFA is already happening. This paper is not about how to do it but about what it all might mean. What are the wider societal implications of emerging WFA/WFH developments? Will WHA eventually change more than just our places of work?

### **The Earth on Fire**

It was just a little while before Melbourne's full lockdown restrictions finally ended that, on my way to a board meeting, I found myself alone in the CBD. Eerily, it was midmorning and midweek. Once upon a time, at that time of day, the streets would have been heaving and jostling with office workers – but no. Just me- until I crossed into Swanston Street where a few other masked figures were scurrying by. People could have been busy in their offices, I suppose – but it transpired that most had chosen not to make the journey into Melbourne's centre on that day. Or on most days of any week.

I felt a bit like Peter Stenning (the journalist in the 1961 British movie, 'The Day the Earth Caught Fire'). In it, the world is in the grip of a global drought caused by too many atomic bomb tests. London is baked dry, and the river Thames has dried up. During the opening sequence, Stenning walks through London's empty streets just moments after a further nuclear detonation has taken place – this time to try and correct the Earth's wobbling orbit, etc, etc, etc. The question for Stenning on his solitary CBD stroll is, '*Will the Earth survive and human life return to normal?*' My question was much smaller, '*Is going to the office a thing of the past?*'

Well, perhaps it isn't such a small question. At the time of writing still only 38% of Melbourne's city workers have returned to their offices and many of this travelling 38% may only be visiting their city bases sporadically. In fact, nearly all of my friends and acquaintances are now WFH/WFA aficionados. One admitted that his productivity had actually improved – as his normal city 'office day' usually revolved around frequent coffee shop chats with his various groups of colleagues and reports. And although his social life had clearly deteriorated, he was still easily able to achieve his work targets and report reviewing – whilst going nowhere near his city office or (sometimes) even his home.

### **Will Melbourne's CBD recover?**

Ultimately, the extensive and continuous lockdown culture of recent years has delivered a potentially lethal blow to the 'going to the office' routine. Unless state and federal governments produce legislation demanding the return of knowledge and office workers to their original shared workplaces – things are unlikely to change much at all. And as state and federal governments comprise politicians who are keen to remain popular, re-elected and employed – workplace legislation of the kind required isn't at all likely.

### **So where does all of this leave us?**

Like the climate change questions raised (and left unanswered) in the 1961 film, *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, sometimes we just never seem to know how or if society will be impacted by any given sociological trend or technological development. Terrorism, for example, in the 1970s transformed the experience of aviation forever. It had significant and continuing impacts on how we travel and how we protect our air services – but (depending

on where in the world you live) it didn't really change most people's everyday routines significantly. Conversely, the smart phone has had immense consequences for human communications and social interactions. (Just think about dating apps and swiping left or right! Unheard of in our parent's day.) Smart phones are now an ever-present factor influences people's existences. And they continue to change and effect the way human beings behave and engage with the world. And they slipped into our lives with a whisper and not a bang...

### **WFH/WFA – Represents Major Societal Change and Business Opportunities**

WHA/WFH seems a small change – but it isn't. When it comes to WFA possibilities the obvious implications are numerous. Some 62% fewer people are, at this point in time, making journeys into the Melbourne CBD and metropolitan regions for work purposes. That is a 62% reduction in people movements. A significant decrease in employers' workspace, heating and lighting needs. A major decline in CBD footfall for cafes and restaurants formerly serving the CBD workforce. Reduced parking, tram, bus and train requirements. This list goes on and on – and if the WFA movement continues – what will change in our cities? Inevitably, it will change many things – including the employment of some and the property/investment portfolios of others. But what, ultimately, will it also mean for you and your future employability?

Sometimes simple observations and ideas lead to major shifts in how we think and behave as a society. In 1971, the Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich proposed revolutionary alternative sites for learning to take place in – places other than schools. His basic premise was that much of 'schooling' and 'learning' was, in his view, concerned with institutionalisation-learning your place in established social and cultural hierarchies and in students being controlled by the power structures of school establishments – particularly in religious schooling settings. At that time, irrespective to where your politics located you in response to Illich's notion of **deschooling society**, there were, in actuality, very few viable alternatives available in respect to providing adequate replacement learning engagement opportunities for children. A great number of other sociologists and philosophers have also contributed to this critique of schooling in what amounted to a popular *thought-wave* of change.

None-the-less, the idea and philosophy of 'deschooling', potentially influenced some significant educational developments:

- Home schooling approaches became much more popular in the 1970s and that movement still continues to grow.
- Community schooling also became an alternative to standard comprehensive schooling.
- Some quite unconventional private schools sprouted up (particularly for early years child development) - offering radically different student centred (flexible) engagement. (*Children studied what they wanted to at their own pace, etc.*)
- Much educational pedagogic experimentation took place, and some *ideologically driven*, theoretical modes of analysis (such as deconstructivism) became embedded in various teaching methodologies.

Fast forward some 50 years to today. Covid school closures (particularly in Victoria) demonstrated that now, more than ever before, schools are considered as essential for *minding children whilst their parents (ostensibly) go to work*- as well as also being important places of student learning and education. However, Covid also demonstrated that most students did manage to successfully study online *at home* whilst their parents were with them throughout lockdown. (*It wasn't always popular though*).

## Many, Many More Parents Working & Child Minding from Home?

So, with 62% more urban adults now WFA or WFH, could schooling, like the office work experience, actually change even further through utilising educational WFA technologies? Could Covid prompted WFA approaches radically alter the current experience of schooling – as it is doing with University and Higher Education in general? Could WFA be the ultimate mechanism for *even more home-schooling*? And might a more technologically supported home-schooling or partial home-schooling environment also be part of a solution for the struggling state school system and its teacher shortages?

I, of course, don't know what will happen with WFA, but I am confident that such a major shift in travel, work behaviours and freedom from static workplaces does in itself imply a massive cultural transformation with business opportunities burgeoning for those who can invent ways of capitalising on the trend. Shifting some schooling to being a mixed mode (at school face to face and also some offered through location free WFA) relationship might be a start. I have a few ideas on how schools and classes could be beneficially reduced in size and cost (*de-structured*) through WFA/WFH approaches - without losing the desirable elements of student socialisation we often associate with children learning from other Children. But the real societal changes yet to be made in this area (as with Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Tesla) will most probably be driven by business entrepreneurs - not educators or philosophers. So now is the ideal time for the business savvy to see where they can take a WFA driven future.

## References

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## About the Author

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