

A colourful new reality

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Prelude

One of my favourite films is "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" (1969). It starts off in black and white with an old newsreel quality. Ever so slowly, almost imperceptibly, colour begins to seep in and as the action picks up before you are aware, you are watching a full colour story. This is how new realities sometimes assert themselves. They recolour the world around us while we are too busy living. And, if my "institutional" view was the black and white newsreel, **wework** is a *colourful new reality* that has appeared around me.

The wework experience

If I needed convincing that I am working in the 21st century, my time at **wework** has convinced me of a new paradigm at work and about work, and I like it! We have all no doubt heard of the working environments pioneered by Apple, Microsoft and the other Californian tech companies where bean bags replaced office chairs and open hot desks replaced closed in work stations. **wework** brings this sensibility with pragmatic elements that cater for lots of different activities. Reception is in the main area and the receptionists are extremely friendly and go out of their way to be helpful. They get you online and complete formalities with a minimum of fuss.

This main area is open plan, with couches, benches and tables. It is very easy to find a working space that suits your working style. As I sit here there are small groups of people sitting around tables, a nearby billiard table is tempting but two people are engaged in a very skilful game, 'telephone booth' (remember them!) spaces for private conversations and individuals working away at their laptops.

The WIFI is very quick and able to accommodate all its users and there is a kitchen area with tea and coffee, mugs and utensils and a fresh fruit bowl, with free beer after 2.00pm. However, I have to say that everyone is very professional about this, and the work ethic remains strong. There is also an outdoor area for enjoying the sun when it comes out. While we haven't taken advantage of them yet, there are offices available for booking if a more formal environment is required. In the post-COVID world the **wework** environment represents a brilliant half-way house from the comfort of working at home and the infrastructure and social interaction of the office.

wework 'chic' is broad and inclusive. From sandals, shorts, Hawaiian shirts and ponytails to the odd jacket and tie (me and my colleague). With t-shirts and slacks the "robes du jour", there is a relaxed but industrious vibe. The individuals and companies using these facilities are an amazingly varied group. There are tech companies providing online support, international visa operations, insurance, marketing, web-design, construction procurement,

lawyers and a large, well-known food delivery service which has its entire operation based here. Some are long term, some, like ourselves, are waiting on renovations to be complete.

Steve is perfect example of the flexibility **wework** offers. He is the CEO of a scaffolding company based in the Philippines and he has offices with **wework** Manila. With family studying in Australia, he can run his business while on the move. **Elizabeth** on the other hand is a Danish Master's student who is also running her graphic design business out of **wework**. She was in Melbourne during the lockdowns and **wework** offers her the opportunity to separate work from home and study. Everyone here has their own story and the **wework** model and the way it is run allows itself to be part of those many stories.

Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard et. al. iwork v wework

How then does this new reality relate to higher education? It would be extremely foolish to dismiss the history and achievements of the elite educational institutions. They have contributed to the knowledge of humanity in ways too numerous to list. However, for the vast majority of higher education students in the world, those places are essentially remote and offer a fantasy of university life. More often than not they appear as the backdrop of movies. For most of us who had access to higher education, it took place in Universities and Colleges that did not have worldwide brand recognition, but were suburban or regional and scattered across countries. They did however, study the same philosophers, poets, mathematicians and scientists as the elite institutions.

Thus the "I" in **Iwork** stands for institutions. The templates created by those historically revered bodies have served as aspirational models for learning, what it has to look like, how it has to function, even in radically different contexts. Identity and branding are integral to the success of higher learning organisations and these historically have been linked to a geographical position and the buildings at that spot. An interesting observation is how the elite organisations call the buildings after famous alumni, naming them to imbue them with the qualities of the individual. This adds to the sense of legacy and history which is one of the selling points to international students particularly.

However it is what happens inside "Redmond Barry" that is more important than the bricks and mortar. The model, which I call the "Whateley Paradigm", understands that the true capital in an educational institution is - its people. High quality education, where students are engaged and genuine learning takes place, can occur in any setting. I have taken part in programs organised by Professor Whateley in Jupiter's Casino and Seaworld on the Gold Coast, in film studios and in the virtual world. Once you break free of the bricks and mortar concept, much more creative learning is possible. Your classroom can be anything you want it to be.

Another extension of the Whateley paradigm is the *Knowledge Piazza*. This is an idea where the **wework** concept is brought to bear on higher education. Imagine a purpose built facility in the CBD that contains a range of learning spaces, from large lecture theatres to small class tutorial rooms, including shared virtual spaces, all available for rent short or long term. The Knowledge Piazza could be shared by a variety of institutions each of whom would have a reception desk to welcome their students. Large central screens would inform students that "UoM Law Lecture 'Criminal Behaviour' Room 21, 10.00am", "UBSS MBA Tutorial 'Marketing' Room 5, 11.00am" and so on. In a truly collaborative model, cross-institutional courses and credentialing would be possible. So students could attend an MBA lecture in Marketing in a classroom under the Deakin marquee and then a lecture in Project Management run by

UBSS in a different room at the same location. The testamur would have branding from all institutions involved. This in turn would require the larger bodies to swallow their pride and work for the benefit of students. But there are bottom line returns through lower maintenance costs, shared utilities and security, not to mention access to a more diverse group of students.

Such co-operation seems far-fetched at the moment, but then so did a shared office concept at one time. We have already begun to see the move to CBD campuses by Universities, teaching in the typical city building with high rise offices, lifts and all the accoutrements of "office life". Haileybury, the largest secondary school in Australia, have a multi-storey campus in Melbourne's CBD while down the road in Docklands, Victoria's first vertical Primary School is successfully operating.

I think I thought I knew

The powerful driver behind these changes has been, and continues to be, technology and specifically the internet but also the rise of powerful portable computing whether the laptop or phone. This technology and these devices have dissolved the barriers of time and physical distance. While these changes were well entrenched before COVID, the pandemic brought the online experience to the fore. People simply did not need to be in the office. Again, it is not that the office as such has no value and will no longer exist, but the perceptions around it, its shape and its function are now under scrutiny and being tested. For a certain cohort of entrepreneur and business person, a laptop and phone and a wifi connection constitute the key components required to function.

Today, knowledge per se is, if not obsolete, is a far more ephemeral concept. In an article on *Industry Tap*, the author notes that

'not only is human knowledge, on average, doubling every 13 months, we are quickly on our way, with the help of the Internet, to the doubling of knowledge every 12 hours. To put it into context, in 1900 human knowledge doubled approximately every 100 years. By the end of 1945, the rate was every 25 years... [now] every 13 months'
(Schilling, 2019)

So, knowing 'stuff' is less important than knowing where 'stuff' is and how to find it. Again, while 'knowledge' is not dead, the traditional view of the major universities as bastions of knowledge and fortresses of learning has evaporated as information and knowledge creation have become more diffuse.

This is reflected in the language of educational aspiration where literacy and numeracy are now embedded. These terms suggest an active skill with a process rather than mastery of specific content.

The increased level of technical specialisation in the workforce has also impacted on ideas about knowledge, requiring curriculum development and modes of delivery that meet the requirements of workplace and professional requirements.

The fate of the elite institutions has been made even more precarious by the sudden availability of artificial intelligence which upon request can take all of the knowledge on the net and supply you with any variation you request. As a personal example, I cannot write

computer code, I asked ChatGPT to write a program in the Python language to send bulk emails. Within three minutes it produced it for me and I got the instructions from a YouTube video on how to set it up. It worked. The mysterious art of computer programming is no longer the sole province of techs hidden in dark rooms. The important skill was how to ask the right question to get the information I required.

But there are broad and still unrealized implications for education to which we need to be alive and eventually adapt. The danger for the world famous institutions is that they turn into world famous tourist destinations, the background for selfies and/or, the destination for status hungry seeking an impressive testamur. They will be the victims of their own reputations

SHERRIF (to Butch and Sundance) It's over! Don't you get that, Butch? Your times is over

There is an ironic parallel to the Butch and Sundance movie. Unknown to them, they are surrounded by hundreds of armed Bolivian soldiers. A small town in Bolivia, hiding in a barn, Burch and Sundance are surrounded by armed soldiers crouched close together by a window, peering out toward the setting sun,

BUTCH

I got a great idea where we should go next.

SUNDANCE

Well I don't wanna hear it.

BUTCH

You'll change your mind once I tell you---

SUNDANCE

It was your great ideas got us here. I never want to hear another of your great ideas, all right?

BUTCH

All right.

SUNDANCE

Good.

BUTCH

Australia.

(He just looks at Butch)

BUTCH

I figured secretly you wanted to know so I told you: Australia.

SUNDANCE

That's your great idea? Australia's no better than here!

BUTCH

That's all you know.

SUNDANCE

Name one thing

BUTCH
They speak English in Australia

SUNDANCE
They do?

BUTCH
That's right, smart guy, so we wouldn't be foreigners. And they ride horses, and they got
thousands of miles to hide out in --- and a good climate, nice beaches, you could learn to swim

SUNDANCE
Swimming's not important, what about the banks

BUTCH
Easy ripe and luscious

SUNDANCE
The banks or the women

BUTCH
Once we get the one we'll get the other

SUNDANCE
It's a long way though, isn't it

BUTCH
(Shouting) Everything's always gotta be perfect with you!

SUNDANCE
I just don't wanna get there and find out it stinks, that's all

[They run out of the barn, where the picture freezes and we hear a hail of gunfire]

This then is the new reality; the lightweight workspace and a higher education environment saturated with information. If we don't acknowledge and adapt we face an untimely end and unlike those two we can't run to Australia.

References

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