

## **“Life, don’t talk to me about life!”**

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A friend of mine works for a mobile phone company. One evening at about eight o’clock, he and his wife were out for a stroll around their pretty Cotswold village when his mobile phone rang and a work colleague launched into a fifteen minute business discussion on some project they were working on. The conversation having been completed successfully, the guy on the phone then asked where my friend was. On finding out that he wasn’t still in the office and was out strolling the Cotswolds, a further discussion then ensued on how my friend really had his life sorted out, as he still had an hour and a half drive home from the office. His closing strap line was “you’ve really got your work-life balance sorted out”. My friend’s wife then reminded him that it was now eight thirty in the evening and he was still making business calls. In the case, the balance, if it exists, is clearly in the eye of the beholder!

So technology has amazing power to transform our working lives. Through innovations in laptops and PDAs, telecommunications, mobile communications, the Internet, e-mail, and collaboration technology and so on, we can work anyway, be anywhere. At eLearnity, we’ve used a virtual office service for six years and even people that know us well, get confused when they realise they are talking to you in your car or the Cotswolds, or anywhere ... still not managed sitting by the pool in the bahamas yet though!

Technology, and particularly recent changes brought about by the Internet and mobile communications frees us from the limitations of physical location, frees us from being at the office, from flying to every meeting outside the UK, and from travelling to hotels for every course. This freedom is not only changing the way we work, it is changing the way we think about work. For most people, work used to be something you did by going somewhere. Now work mainly comes to you, and sometimes you go to it.

Although this is not a new discussion. Teleworking has been talked about for many years, but it seems to really have become a reality for many corporate people. Not necessarily every day, but certainly a consistent part of the working mix rather than just a marketing dream for the telecommunications companies. Many more corporate workers are based from home, or from an office they hardly go to. They do now work from home to finish that report or to catch up on their growing mountain of e-mail. Most large companies already provide remote dial-in capabilities for their employees, and some companies run primarily on mobile phones rather than fixed lines.

But all this is happening at a price. As well as freeing you from the physical constraints of where work can be done, technology enables work to intrude on you outside your place of work, seemingly extending your hours of work at the same time. By changing the boundaries between work and non-work (unassuming titled “life”), technology is starting to integrate work into life rather than just changing where you do it. So you now take your mobile phone on holiday, and do your e-mail at eight o’clock in the evening. There are of course many plus points as well. You don’t always have to be at the office. You can work from home and still be a fully functioning member of the team. Especially as corporate cultures evolve to accept that not being in the office often means you are working harder, the potential to change your real patterns of work become quite profound.

For learning & development, all this also has significant implications. Like it or not, technology is also changing the way people access learning, and the way companies are thinking about learning. Through corporate learning portals, I can find out about and access learning objects regardless of my location. Using virtual classroom tools, we can attend virtual learning sessions from home or the office. Blended learning is deconstructing block face-to-face training courses, transforming how it is delivered and integrating it into the workplace. But learners must take more responsibility for their

learning, something that turns out to be surprisingly difficult for the rank and file. Technology can also dislocate learning, and dissociate learners from their peers.

Most profoundly, as well as the boundaries between work and "life" changing, so are the boundaries between work and learning. Maybe what we need is a work-learning-life balance.

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