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## Future-proof your office



Automated systems: use of bots will increase in the office of the future CREDIT: GETTY

By Hazel Davis

1 JUNE 2016 · 12:30PM

The office you work in now (if you work in one at all, that is) probably looks very different from the one you worked in 10 years ago. It probably looks quite different from the one you could be working in in 10 years' time.

We already know that more people work from home. In fact, according to recent research from collaboration software company Unify, 52pc of "knowledge workers" now work in virtual teams and 42pc believe virtual teams can be more effective than face-to-face ones. For 69pc, the office is not as important as in the past.

Stephen Ball, SVP of Europe and Africa for Aspect Software, agrees. "The rise of the so-called millennial is already presenting a number of challenges to the traditional office environment.

"This is a generation more comfortable and more conversant with social media as a means of communicating. More and more people are bringing their own devices into the workplace – and expecting to be able to use their own smart phone, iPad, smart device or laptop.

"We have seen the near merger of private and professional lives."

### “Employers now need to juggle the family demands of the individual with their own needs for high productivity and cost effectiveness”

Where in the past you might have had an office manager or PA, Mr Ball foresees an increase in chatbots, workplace bots acting as AI assistants, able to organise employees' schedules, queries and absences through an automated client.

He explains, "If an employee is sick and cannot come into work, they can simply text their 'AI assistant' to let their employer know. The chatbot can automatically log the interaction, and adjust colleagues' schedules to accommodate for the absence."

The physical attributes of an office are likely to continue to alter, dictated by emerging technology which not only allows teams to work together on an ad-hoc basis where required, but for individuals within those teams to be based anywhere in the world.

Nick Riesel, managing director at office sourcing service FreeOfficeFinder, thinks the workplace of the future will be a much more co-operative environment – "anything from serviced offices within business parks to local pubs and community centres.

"Employers now need to juggle the family demands of the individual with their own needs for high productivity and cost effectiveness. Hot-desking meets both these needs, and we have seen the number of employers adopting this practice increase substantially in recent years."

Sam Sahni, head of workplace consulting at Morgan Lovell, says: "Our occupancy research shows that, on average, desks have an average utilisation of 54pc.

### “The office will gradually replicate the freedom and access that agile working already provides”

"Of this, only 39pc of the time is active use, while the remaining percentage shows what we call 'signs of life': the monitor is on, a jacket is over the chair but no one is actively occupying the space.

"This internal mobility means that almost half of all desks in a workplace are wasted space."

Mr Sahni says there's a much bigger focus on *Bürolandschaft* – the development of "workplace communities" – and on giving employees the opportunity to be more agile in their approach.

He says: "By encouraging a disconnect from the desk, staff are now able to, and will increasingly be able to, work in ways which suit them best and help them to be most productive – good work is not necessarily confined to one space."

But Graham Bird, head of research and development at workplace consultancy Baker Stuart, thinks that as levels of remote/agile/flexible workers grow and human contact decreases, the physical office will be critical in maintaining the declining face-to-face interaction.

"The future office will evolve to create an environment that will facilitate workers' needs with eateries, shops, coffee bars, crèches, gymnasiums and social spaces," he says.

"As a result, the office will gradually replicate the freedom and access that agile working already provides, creating a convenient environment with easy access to both the social and professional benefits of interacting with colleagues."

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