

## The shifting sands of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Workplace

It's inescapable that the landscape of the working world has undergone a seismic shift in recent years. The old days of one job-one life are long gone and with new pension rules and an extended working life facing the younger generations new ways of working and living are surfacing. The gold watch or the clock for the mantelpiece have ticked their last tock.

Indeed as an article in issue 53 of *ipse* (Inspiration for Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed) *magazine* argued, on this very topic: 'full-time permanent contracts as characterized by the 1950s manufacturing-based economy are disappearing as career paths become multifaceted with the average working life encompassing periods as an employee, some years of self-employment and inevitably also times of unemployment.' Or, put another way, 'Fings 'aint wot they used to be.'

But it's not only the younger generations having to come to terms with a new order. The baby-boomers (particularly those born post 1950) are also finding themselves sinking in economic quicksand – a factor that has contributed in no small way to:

### The Rise of the Grey Entrepreneur

No longer simply silver surfers, the over-50s are diving headfirst into business ownership. Sometimes through choice but often through necessity.

For me personally it's the latter. Compulsory early retirement when I was in my early 50s combined with the changes to state pension age forced me to rethink my life. So I went off to university as a full-time mature (very) student and got myself a joint English BA Hons degree. Now, pushing sixty, and with the skills and experience acquired from my degree I'm working hard to establish [AA Editorial Services](#), my proofreading and writing business. Make no mistake – I absolutely love what I'm doing – but it is nevertheless a case of necessity being the mother of invention because I've been prevented from retiring by the new pension rules.

For others though, as this [2013 Guardian article explores](#), many 'grey entrepreneurs' are people already retired but who 'swap sipping sangria in the sun' because they are bored and miss the buzz of business and working life. While for others, similarly to me, their main motivation for starting a business is financial. As the article suggests: "New [analysis of HMRC figures shows](#) UK workers can expect to see their incomes plummet by more than a third when they reach retirement, while in some areas of the UK the fall is almost to a half."

## **Soaring self-employment**

But of course it's not only the over 50s that are responsible for the surge in self-employment numbers.

This [January 2016 article](#) from *ipse* cites figures reporting that: 'the number of self-employed has risen by 98,000 in the three months leading up to November 2015, compared to the same period in 2014.'

The article goes on to posit that freelancing is no longer restricted to particular professions or age-groups with the self-employed now forming an established section of the labour market. It goes on to say:

"The self-employed are now a key part of the UK economy. Their flexibility provides us with a unique characteristic that has powered the UK through the financial crisis and may be the one thing that shelters the country from the potential global economic storm appearing on the horizon."

So all hail the grey entrepreneur and the self-employed then.

## **Coworking**



We've already seen that the state of the economy is reshaping the workforce. And with that there's been a re-moulding of where and how we work. And it's called coworking.

If your image of business owners is that of someone holed up in their home office or renting space in a boring boxy business unit then think again.

Well there is that of course. And there's also the digital nomad or laptop entrepreneur operating their business on a laptop in their local coffee shop, or, if they're very fortunate, from a beach or poolside. Hmm – so where am I going wrong then?

More than simple hot-desking and a step on from teleworking for someone else, coworking is defined by Wikipedia as: 'a style of work that involves a shared working environment, often an office, and independent activity'. All of which sounds really rather dull. But clearly it's not given the steady growth in such spaces both here in the UK and across the world.

As [this article from Forbes.com](#) explains: ‘Coworking spaces are melting pots of creativity ... they generate a level of synergy that results from the proximity and collaboration of like-minded people.’ Which is a rather tortuous way of saying that such spaces give the self-employed somewhere to work in the company of others, do some unofficial networking, bounce ideas around and offer mutual support. And all in an environment far more inspiring than your local homogenized Starbucks.

As I touched on earlier, the freelancer can rent office space – both expensive and possibly unnecessary for most things or work from home. And it’s an environment that brings with it a whole heap of disadvantages and distractions. Alternatively there’s what [‘The Conversation.com’](#) refers to as ‘third places’ – your local coffee shop for example. Something also with its drawbacks – not withstanding the cost of coffee. Hence the notion of, and growth in, ‘coworking’. I’m told there’s something in the region of 15,000 coworking spaces across the globe and that figure is steadily rising.

This article from Crunch lists seven of the UK’s most beautiful coworking spaces spread from Brighton to Edinburgh: <https://www.crunch.co.uk/blog/startup-advice/2014/02/24/uks-most-beautiful-coworking-spaces/>

Another one that I’ve visited recently when attending an [Enterprise Nation](#) event is [Bristol’s Desklodge](#). I didn’t get to see all of it – gutted to have missed the TARDIS area - but what I saw is certainly very fun and funky. Albeit a little reminiscent of IKEA with all the different room settings.



### **Coworking at the core of Swindon**

And coming soon to Swindon (March 2016) we have [Desk Cowork](#).

The brainchild of business owner Matt Greenwood, Desk Cowork is set to be literally at the core of Swindon business life being located in the upstairs room of The Core juice bar in Swindon’s Old Town.

Matt knows from his own experience just how tricky it can be to work from home when setting up a new business

yet be without the budget for renting office space. When living and working in Milan he used a coworking space there and that experience has inspired him to bring the facility to Swindon. Read more about [Desk Cowork here](#).

So currently coworking, and its much-vaunted benefits, are riding the crest of a wave. But will it, as waves tend to do, eventually crash? Unsurprisingly it has its critics. Back to 'theconversation.com':

'Coinciding as it does with the rise in self-employment, critics have objected to the lack of security, sometimes lower wages and benefits that freelancers who cowork have compared to their employed counterparts.'

All of which is true enough but there are upsides to the freelance world too.

The article goes on to suggest, and I think I'd agree, is that we should be careful about forming a judgement just yet. I'll leave the last word with them. After all – it's only conversation:

'It's an emerging concept and we still don't fully understand people's motivations for joining coworking spaces – both positive and negative – and whether they really do improve creativity and collaboration, or are just a lot of buzz over nothing.'