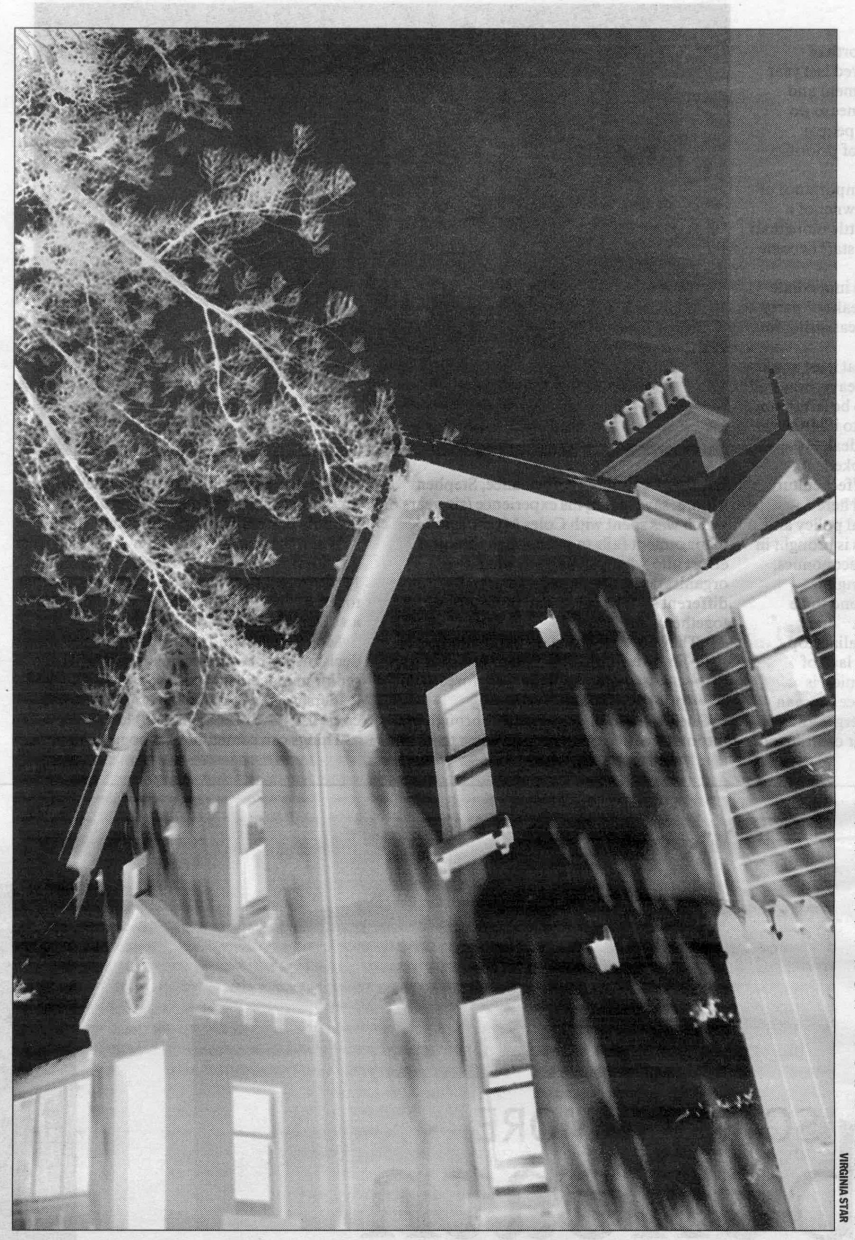
Home alone - and stuck in the office

Far from being fun, working from home may increase domestic pressures and social isolation, writes **Sohail Inayatullah.**



VIRGINIA STAR

John Worthington works from home. He saves on petrol and gets to spend more time with his children and his wife. He drives to his inner-city office once or twice a week for meetings with colleagues.

A win-win story? Perhaps, perhaps not.

The internet, while making it possible to telecommute, is still much slower at home than at most offices. However, in a decade or so, with information piped through cable (this is ATT's big gamble) it will become lightning quick.

Also, although individuals like John Worthington no longer spend long lunches with office friends, they do have their new virtual communities: friends from various email groups they are part of. And in the next 10 years, they will not only be able to read their emails, they will be able to see and hear them with v-net (visual net).

And yet all is not quite well. There is no one to help keep the house tidy. At work, any mess was cleaned up overnight. In the morning, the office was immaculate. At home, there is a constant battle between the children's toys, the partner's work and your own work.

Endless filing cabinets cannot solve the problem. While working from home offers a great deal of flexibility if the children become sick, work is always staring you in the face.

Moreover, life has become more anonymous. Working from the suburbs often means that the only community is the net. Office friendships, chance lunches with colleagues, and even the office will disappear.

It will be a lonely life. Yes, the screen no longer flickers, but virtual reality is still virtual.

Digital gurus such as Microsoft's Bill Gates and Professor Nicholas Negroponte have forgotten, in their rosy forecasts of digital nirvana, that technological change without real institutional change only makes life worse for most.

As author Marshall McLuhan warned two decades ago: "Excessive speed of change isolates already fragmented individuals." The technology is not the issue: community and relationship is.

For Sharon Jones, the "pros" outweigh the "cons". She too spends more time with her kids. But she wishes that they had an extended family. The net has allowed the return to the home, but the home is no longer what it used to be.

The neighborhood community does not exist. Mum and Dad are not there to help, they keep on getting sicker, and now are in an old folks home. She wishes she could get them to live with her, but she can barely manage her kids, and her husband does not make things easier — insisting on working from home, but doing nothing to help around the house, as that is still a woman's job.

Just as neighbourhood shops disappeared a few years back, malls have now started to go bankrupt. Internet shopping has reduced their traffic, and now there is nowhere to take the kids (in any case, they prefer their virtual friends). And the email grocer delivery person keeps on changing.

John and Sharon, two only slightly fictitious examples, are our present and future. Yes, we will work from home. Technological advances will let us do so. Globalism will ensure we do so, as it will save government, university and corporations on office space and other infrastructure costs.

Tenure and life-time jobs will disappear and we will be mostly contract workers. In the long term, few of us will actually work.

But the dream of telecommuting will not solve all our problems, largely because home has changed so much.

For men, home was the safe, secure space to retreat to after a hard day's work. The kids were already in bed, and all that was left to do was eat, wash a few dishes, watch television and try and have sex with one's wife.

But with working from home, responsibilities will begin to shift. Women will expect and demand that men help with the housework, with parenting. Not just their fair share but equal responsibility. Men will not be able to escape to the office.

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While men will only have to upgrade themselves, women will continue to face a difficult and uncertain future.

Michelle Wallace, head of the School of Workplace and Development at Southern Cross University, says: "Women who try and combine work with family are considered by management as not serious about their jobs.

"Studies show that women work the 'double shift' and that men with working wives often do not share half of the domestic/family responsibilities."

Does this mean that the more things change, the more they stay the same? Technology rearranges some of our work practices, but it does not change deeper-held beliefs of productivity, hard work and "blokism". Without fundamental change, it only amplifies oppressive practices.

Worse, says Wallace: "The whole move to family-friendly policies [by governments in Europe, for example, especially Sweden] and increasing interface between public and private can also be seen as increasing surveillance of workers' lives."

The power of management over the worker expands from the office to the home. While there is a definite shift from blue collar to white collar, and in the next 10 years to no-collar workers, management may soon desire to know what you are wearing underneath that no-collar.

But are there any bright futures in all this?

First, there is an age generation gap. Older managers will try to control workers who begin to telecommute. Productivity will not be enough for them; hours worked remains their measure.

The bonding or teamwork necessary through face-to-face meetings — the endless boring office meetings everyone loves to hate — will also be an issue for older managers.

But younger people raised on the net might see things differently. Networking relationships — less hierarchical, and more based on productivity, excellence and quadrupling the bottom line — might matter more.

Generation Xers — writes Rosemary Herceg, author of Seven Myths and Realities of Generation X (www.Futurists.net.au) — are far more sensitive to issues of gender, environment, social justice and future generations, and the impact of our current politics on the long term.

They are also more comfortable with multi-tasking. This is not just the ability to go from one Windows application to another, but to go from editing and writing to changing nappies; to go from web designing or net commerce, to a lovely afternoon spent with one's partner while the kids are at daycare (or busy on their own screens, since they will have become screenagers).

This new generation might also begin to rethink the home. This means homes designed not for a 19th century office, with the old teak desk, the single book case, and the quill or Parker pen, but high-tech smart homes and offices, with plenty of space for filing (electronic and paper).

This also means homes that bring the ageing and aged back in. With Australia and other OECD nations rapidly ageing — one out of every four will be over 65 in a few decades and the average age will move from the historical 20 to 40, or 50 — finding meaningful lives for the aged will be crucial.

Ending the world view that life ends at 40, 50 or 60 will be the first step. Ending the view that one works for 40 years and then mindlessly slips into death, or plays endless golf, will be the next step.

This means that the grand divisions we have had for centuries of the male public sphere and female private sphere will be challenged. The separation of inner city and suburbs will be next. The separation of work and play will follow soon.

An information-based post-industrial cyber era does not only mean that there will be tons more data, or that we will remove ourselves further from the farm; rather it could mean that the divisions of the industrial era are about to collapse.

A high-tech world, where work will intermingle with play, where kids and the aged will play together and communities will once again flourish — once tele-decentralisation goes into full swing — is quite possible.

Once men move back home, they will make sure that there is money for daycare, for creating community at home.

And what of the fancy offices of inner cities? They will become like the steel mills of the industrial era. Tourism relics. Just as the foreman has disappeared from our vocabulary, the office manager, or the university professor — or anyone else who needs a captive physical audience to exist — will slowly disappear.

Alternatively, the digital era could reinforce managerial power, surveillance and male domination. In response, we will return to a feudal digital era, where the house becomes the man's digital castle.

In either scenario, real changes are ahead. Welcome to the Wired World.

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