WORKING IN THE METAVERSE: WHAT VIRTUAL OFFICE LIFE COULD LOOK LIKE

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Let's face it, few of us will be back in the office full time – but does that have to mean endless video calls and alt-tabbing between Slack and Zoom?

I'm in a virtual pavilion attending a design lesson on creating the future of the workplace. My avatar is small, with popping eyes and yellow skin, much like Marge Simpson, but I could have chosen from hundreds of options or built my own.

I move by using the arrow keys on my keyboard, changing my gaze so I can look around the room, where a virtual fish tank takes up one wall. There's no video here – we speak via our avatars and human-like ways when we talk. I can enter and leave conversations.

Does it all sound odd? Well, there is much room for improvement when it comes to the future of VR workplace environments.

Video calls aren't helping us work or stay connected effectively.

Studies have found that the shift to remote work has caused people to become less interconnected. A Stanford University research provides evidence that many of us feel Zoom fatigue is real. The study showed that the cognitive load of video conferencing is far higher than phone calls or in-person conversations.

VIRTUAL REALITY ISN'T JUST FOR GAMERS

There are solutions to these very 2021/22 problems. Some sites, platforms, and apps offer remote workers more than just a gallery of faces on a screen. Meta's Horizon Workrooms and Microsoft Mesh allow colleagues to meet as avatars in VR or participate in real-world meetings as photorealistic holograms.

But many were mystified by the recent Horizon Worlds showing of less-than-impressive graphics, a reaction driven by the high bar set by imaginative sci-fi like Snowcrash and The Matrix.

Fair. This is one of the main problems with the metaverse. There's a mismatch of expectations between what we are able to imagine and what is, relatively speaking, a technology that's still very much in its infancy. The vision for a better, metaverse-powered way of working that tech giants are promising is still experiencing growing pains.

Regardless, the metaverse's Big Bang—the point where everyone will jump in as they did with smartphones—could be just around the corner.

A VR headset, which a few years ago made splashy cover stories as the technology that's "about to change the world," could be upended by "the world's first true metaverse", according to Joseph Bradley, CEO of NEOM Tech & Digital Company.

"The plan is to set virtual and augmented reality free from the headset, screen and glasses with a frictionless, avatar-enabled user experience," he said.

With the metaverse taking shape like a jigsaw puzzle, NEOM Tech & Digital Company's instance of the metaverse will enable a seamless, immersive union of the digital and physical in the world's first cognitive region, NEOM.

"We believe the future will not be defined by megacities but by cognitive meta cities. NEOM's metaverse offers users genuine agency over a dynamic virtual environment with real-world features," adds Bradley.

Even more remarkably, with solutions such as NEOM's metaverse, the metaverse would function for a regular company as it will for Apple, with enough value and control for employees to interact in real time as avatars. A combination of 3D, extended reality and AI will make it possible to have human-like digital companions in our work lives.

As per Ryan Cairns, Vice President, Home and Work, Meta Reality Labs, adapting physical spaces to provide virtual connection creates new requirements for office technology. It means investing in versatile, immersive tools. "The metaverse will be one of the 'tools' that will change businesses for the better with technology that helps us work smarter and offers synchronous collaboration in both physical and virtual spaces."

Augmented reality presents a new way to work by supporting collaboration across distances. Helen Papagiannis, founder of XR Goes Pop and a technology evangelist, says, “AR enables you to ‘see’ what another person sees, and annotate directly on top of that view in real-time, whether you’re a novice or an expert. We’ve witnessed how AR can help reduce the physical distance between people and space—and error—between concepts and ideas.”

In NEOM’s immersive, mixed-reality cognitive metaverse, people can have a simultaneous presence in the physical city and virtually as an avatar or hologram. For example, employees can collaborate seamlessly with realistic projections of themselves in one virtual workspace, while presentations are polished by allowing one person to appear in multiple locations. Think of a CEO addressing his team, who will physically be at NEOM while simultaneously appearing virtually at offices across the globe.

For its developer, NEOM’s metaverse is part of a broader vision, one that both supports and transcends new ways of working in a cognitive, mixed-reality city. “It will revolutionize innovation, convenience, creativity and wellbeing. As a 3D digital twin platform, it will enable users to influence the construction of NEOM before an asset is even built by interacting with in-progress designs. Posting digital assets, such as NFTs for your virtual apartment, would appear on the duplicate physical version,” says Bradley.

“It’s truly a technology with human needs at its core, combining features like gamification, real-time translation, a social platform, and a digital marketplace for crypto and NFTs”.

GIVING EVERYONE A SEAT AT THE TABLE

In a virtual office, your desk can become a special metaverse zone, pulling up a virtual computer for you, a teleworking colleague can hop into your presentation, and your coworkers could join your desk via VR headsets.

“Innovations in cameras, digital whiteboards, and virtual meeting rooms help give everyone a voice and seat at the table so they can be seen, heard, and contribute in a meaningful way,” says Jared Spataro, Corporate Vice President of Modern Work, Microsoft.

To build a future that democratizes the work experience, Meta is developing virtual name tags that are applied to employees sharing a physical space to help remote employees know who is speaking. “And we are thinking about how AR/VR can power better experiences for the future of work, including virtual campus tools that enable employees to experience our offices in VR, supporting virtual productivity applications from training to health and wellness, and tools that bridge the gap across hybrid events,” says Atish Banerjea, CIO, Meta.

Virtual offices will be a space with lifelike digital interactions. People will drop in and out of these spaces during their work. You can attend a VR meeting, discuss how revenue and per-share earnings topped forecasts, and step out of the immersive environment. Korean PropTech company Zigbang has opened a 30-floor VR office called Metapolis, where employees choose an avatar, and their webcam and mic are activated when they meet a colleague's avatar.

MIXED MEDIA TOOLS WILL BE A NECESSITY

Mixed media tools and 3D-rendered, life-size photorealistic holograms will allow for meetings where you can feel like you're sitting across from your colleagues, except they're 10,000 miles apart.

"Because of the VR and open-world experience, one employee can visualize something in 3D and simultaneously show it to another employee halfway around the world. Employees would be empowered to show their ideas unprecedentedly in this virtual world," says Khaled Al Huraimel, CEO of Bee'ah Group.

According to a report by Citi, by 2030, about five billion people will interact in the metaverse. For companies, this is an opportunity to rethink how and where people work in virtual offices with new products and services.

"We must be mindful that people are hesitant to enter this space, and it's very new to them. So having some semblance of reality, or something that's a bit more grounded in everyday textures or materials or look and feel is important," says Pallavi Dean, founder of interior design studio Roar.

Multinational conglomerate 3M is using Engage Oasis to build its own virtual "metaworld" to keep employees connected via VR. The virtual space contains hubs for different business divisions and larger environments for 3M-wide gatherings, eliminating geographical limitations on communication and productivity.

"Future-focused businesses have already been exploring metaverse-like solutions for the workplace," adds Al Huraimel.

Last year, describing the metaverse as the closest thing to teleportation, Mark Zuckerberg said, "The defining quality of the metaverse will be a feeling of presence – like you are right there with another person in another place."

Echoing the same sentiment, Bradley says a true metaverse has to tie the digital and the physical together, "otherwise, you're just in a virtual world, or on a webpage."

"The metaverse should truly merge the two realities – that's why, at NEOM Tech & Digital Company, we like to think of our work as virtualizing the real and realizing the virtual," adds Bradley.

In recent years, numerous tech companies have invested heavily in the metaverse. Amazon, Microsoft, and Nvidia are putting their weight (and financial might) behind building the metaverse. Adobe is investing in immersive tools, such as Adobe Substance 3D and Adobe Aero, making metaverse content creation accessible.

Even Cisco wants a piece of the pie — its WebEx platform provides hyperrealistic video conferencing, allowing people to enter workspaces as 3D holograms.

“We believe that new virtual worlds, such as the metaverse, are about transforming experiences: bringing together people, things, and spaces. All of these represent digital transformation on an unprecedented scale,” says Osama Al-Zoubi, CTO at Cisco Middle East and Africa, adding that the company is building a foundation to make a “metaverse real.”

The metaverse allows employees the freedom to engage with their surroundings, their colleagues, and their work — all from the comfort of their living room or wherever they are. “You can meet with clients from across the country or abroad without driving or flying there. You can replace the manufacture and assembly of physical assets with virtual alternatives, which could significantly reduce emissions,” adds Al Huraimel.

In the workplace, the metaverse magnifies the scope of what professionals and businesses can do with technology, making them well equipped to navigate this brave new virtual world.

“The NEOM metaverse will shed the constraints of the physical world and a conventional economy on decision-making, innovation, and the future of work. The incredible thing about the metaverse is that it extends beyond physical borders and obstacles for human movement. Anyone can come in and create a building, an asset, a technology—it doesn’t matter where they happen to physically live,” says Bradley.

“That’s true inclusivity. It’s a fundamentally different view of the world.”

Things are changing, but one thing is certain is that the virtual workplace must be equitable and more inclusive – from avatars to attitudes and experiences.

In the real world, purpose connects with people; it will matter more in the metaverse. An ecosystem of cognitive solutions, like NEOM and its metaverse, that helps us work smarter and offers synchronous collaboration in both physical and virtual spaces, is a roadmap for how virtual offices will function in the future.

And maybe, soon, team games will be virtual bowling nights and tennis tournaments, supplanting Zoom party as the default remote-working social event.