

Surviving on the Savannahs of the New Economy
By Karen Stephenson

“The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: We are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersections with its own skein.”

Michael Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” p.22.
Diacritics, Vol. 16, 1 (Spring 1986:22-27)

Virtual: Meet Real

Surviving the savannahs of the New Economy may be just as treacherous as leaping from tree to tree in the jungles of old economy corporate takeovers. But it was on the savannahs that our ancestors evolved, so perhaps we can learn a few lessons. First lesson: look up – think strategically. Second lesson: look past – learn fast. Third lesson: it’s the economy *and* technology, stupid! With the new tools of a changed economy, place is usurped by work space on the Internet.

Fifteen years ago the intellectual, Michel Foucault saw it coming. His philosophical body of work traces this transformation from the concept of simple *location* in seventeenth-century physics to a *fixed location* of a disciplined individual in the eighteenth century and finally to the *regulated workplace* of the 19th century. As any good archaeologist does, he went to the field and pieced together a “site analysis” that included an architectural examination of prisons, factories, asylums, hospitals, and schools.

Each of the institutions he investigated possessed a built reality whereby people were placed in a line of cells or cubicles, side by side, a suburb. The result was that each individual became fixed in his place, constantly located. We can observe this phenomenon today by simply walking into any corporation or university. Then as now, hidden away from view behind the walled partitioned offices of universal planning are the docile Stepford drones disciplined to serve.

Unwittingly, we have caged and enraged ourselves with artefacts from this Industrial Era. Hierarchical planning, those Dilbertian cubicles in which we make our nests result from reducing space to its barest economical essentials just as the production factory eliminated extraneous human movement to ensure robotic efficiency, accuracy and an IQ equivalent to the ambient temperature. The errors are obvious with hindsight: we know now that we needed another head, not necessarily another pair of hands. And we found out that the deprivation of space can and does sink a human to an existence that is nasty and bureaucratic.

Is it any wonder that the vast savannahs of the New Economy gave us a sense of newfound freedom? Instead of becoming a vanishing point in a warehouse of cubicles, we become targets of human capital in a new economy. Pundits theorized that the vast distance between people was compensated by the simultaneity of an Internet response. Intimacy achieved through immediacy. But that theory was undermined when research indicated that even those who sat side by side in physical proximity continued to communicate through email. Virtual was becoming the preferred mode. Have we substantively moved away from geography to recapture a sense of the communal, albeit electronic, flow- something we lost somewhere along the way in the fight for the right to be alone in the corner office?

I suggest that the New Economy has not replaced our primordial need to be between. Rather, the Information Superhighway cut a swath through our parochial perceptions and permitted a new view from afar. It punctuated the evolutionary path we have travelled and let us see how we fit in space and time. Indeed we have met a felt need over the Internet precisely because of the way we live in gated corporate suburbs. But as bland as those corporate suburbs are, we are not likely to abandon physical propinquity nor our old institutions because they still meet that primordial need for physical intimacy – that fluid sense of community that comes and goes with belonging and is inexorably linked to the raw territorialism of our hominid forbearers. Virtuality simply added another dimension to the space-time continuum. It cast a spotlight on the sterile corporate office where a bureaucrat trumps brain and brawn any day of the week.

If this is so, then virtual work becomes *very* important.