

# The future of work... office not required

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Working from home can be great. Photo / Thinkstock

**As the nation heads back to work after the summer break, it's time to consider how many of us really need to be in the office at all. Greg Dixon talks to an American tech entrepreneur and author about his vision of a future where spending your days in a poky cubicle will be a thing of the past.**

In the beginning there was the office. Immediately after that there was a dreary meeting, followed by an irritating interruption, followed by another damn meeting, followed by a whole bunch of emails (which of course need answering immediately), followed by ... It really is a wonder anything gets done at the office. Anyone who has worked in one, or has just trudged back into one after the brief blessing of a summer break, will know that so much of each working day is not spent doing the thing that you actually need to do.

Instead you spend your day fighting a losing battle against a blizzard of distractions.

Instead of centres of productivity, what modern offices actually are, says an American software entrepreneur Jason Fried, are "interruption factories", places that are the enemy of the creative, thoughtful work you'd actually prefer to be doing.

"A busy office is like a food processor - it chops your day into tiny bits," Fried says in his new book *Remote*, "Fifteen minutes here, 10 minutes there, 20 here, five there. Each segment is filled with a conference call, a meeting, another meeting, or some other institutionalised unnecessary interruption.

"It's incredibly hard to get meaningful work done when your workday has been shredded into work moments."

It's probably always been like this. The office has been around since antiquity - the word office comes from the Latin "officium" - and it's a sure bet that from Imperial Rome to the chanceries of the Middle Ages to the bureaucracies of the British Empire to the first proper office blocks built in the States in the late 19th century, the office has always been a place where interruption frustrates productivity.

As most office workers know, the quick fixes for the monumentally aggravating flow of distractions one faces between 9 and 5 are the less than ideal solutions of coming in early, working late or slipping in at weekends when the chances of constantly ringing phones, floods of emails, not to mention Phil from accounts needing you to "action" something, are much reduced.

However there is another solution. As Fried and his business partner David Heinemeier Hansson preach in *Remote*, there's "a brave new world beyond the industrial-age belief in *The Office*". It's called remote working.

Defining this not-so-new idea for a new age - the concept goes back to the 70s - can be slightly problematic; some take it to mean out-sourcing, like those call centres based in other countries. This, according to Fried, is what modern remote working is not. His definition: being in "the office" isn't required and "remote" can be almost anywhere.

"I think remote is working anywhere where there is not a requirement [to be in the office]," Fried says on the line from Chicago. "If you can live in the same city as your company and

work from home, that's remote. But if you're working anywhere outside the office, then I consider it to be remote working too."



Jason Fried, author of 'Remote: Office Not Required'.

It's been 40 years since a former American rocket scientist called Jack Nilles coined the term telecommuting. In the decades since - particularly when there's been some technological leap forward like fax machines, cellphones and the internet - telecommuting has had periodic flashes of popularity and generated excited stories just like this one suggesting it was the future. Which is to say that the brave new world Fried is talking about is more a brave old world that's never quite become the brave new world it promised to be.

Remote working is still the exception rather than the rule. In the US, for example, less than 3 per cent of the working population works remotely. Of the roughly 135 million people in full and part-time work in the US, just 3 million or so telecommute (mind you the number of US telecommuters did increase dramatically - by 73 per cent - between 2005 and 2011). In New Zealand, a business monitor financed by accounting software company MYOB revealed last year that almost half of all small and medium New Zealand businesses now have employees who work from home or away from the office some of the time. Interestingly New Zealand "professionals" - that is "business leaders" - are leading the way with 40 per cent of them working away from the office for half the

week or more, according to another report, the 2013 Regus Global Economic Indicator.

But the reality is that the vast majority of businesses don't have any remote workers at all, even though it's suitable for many industries, from accounting to finance to legal to technology. In a 2008 paper "Why isn't teleworking working?", AUT University professor of work and employment Erling Rasmussen revealed that, on 2007 figures, 81 per cent New Zealand businesses had not one remote worker - and of the 19 per cent that did, three-quarters had less than 5 per cent of staff telecommuting.

So for all remote working's promise - and ease thanks to the cheapness and ubiquity of technology to do it - it's a wonder telecommuting hasn't been embraced the way its evangelists have always said it should be.

Fried says this failure has a lot to do with momentum, tradition and an older generation of managers who think that not being able to see the whites of their staff's eyes equals a loss of control. "At a lot of companies, in order to make remote working possible, managers there would have to give up a certain amount of control - and a lot of managers aren't used to giving up control. Their job is a controlling job. They don't believe that people can work unless they're being watched or they don't believe they can work out what someone is doing unless they're constantly monitoring them. Or they think people have to be in the office because they have to have meetings all the time."

"I do think a lot of people in their early 20s now are just flat out used to [remote working]. And, when more and more people become so used to it and feel like it's just the way things are done, it will be really hard to push back against [remote working]. The revolution will happen. I think it's very early still, ultimately, for the revolution to happen, but it is happening as the older generation moves on and a newer one comes in with new ideas and new possibilities."

The arguments for remote working do make it sound like the best kind of revolution, for both businesses and workers. For businesses, the reason for having remote workers has traditionally revolved around financial savings, estimated at about US\$10,000 per remote employee by one US study. However Kim Campbell, chief executive of New Zealand's Employers and Manufacturers

Association, doesn't buy this. He believes the savings are probably minimal because a company with people telecommuting may well be supplying the software and computers to do so. "So the capital cost you're saving is a desk or two, a bit of rent. When you add it all up and subtract it, there's probably not a lot in it."

For Fried, whose software company 37signals (the company started as a web design business but now makes software to aid remote working; Amazon's Jeff Bezos is its sole investor) has 36 staff spread all around the world, talking savings is missing the point.

It's actually about hiring the best people you can find.

"We just kept hiring the best people we could find no matter where they were. If you limit your search to 20-30 miles from where you live you're not going to get the best people in the world. The best people are everywhere, so that's why we did it and that's why we continue to do it."

For employees it is not only about escaping a world of interruptions but also the tyranny of the commute. But it goes deeper than that Fried believes.

First, there is the matter of trust. "A big part of remote working is trusting that people are going to deliver great work, that they're going to be spending their time wisely. It starts with the company trusting the employees.

"If you go in doubting that people can do the work without being observed or watched all the time, or you're thinking that they are going to goof off all day watching TV, of course it's not going to work. But if you feel that way about your employees anyway ... So you've got to get around that and trust people and treat them like adults, not like children. I think a lot of companies, unfortunately, treat their employees like children by forcing them to be at a certain place at a certain time. It's just like school, it's weird."

Another problem, Fried says, is that, beyond salary, work isn't typically talked about as something that really improves a worker's quality of life. "But I think work can improve your quality of life in so many different ways if people are given the freedom to pursue things outside of work and not be penalised for it. We've had employees who started working for us here in Chicago, for example Kristin, she just moved to Portland, Oregon, which is 2000 miles

away or so and she got to keep her job and she loved her job. And now she lives in a place that she likes more [than Chicago]. That's such a huge win, that's an enormous win for her."

The big upside of that happiness should be productivity. A survey in New Zealand by the Kelly Global Workforce Index revealed that though only a quarter of those surveyed spent at least one day a week working from home, those who did believed they were more productive - 51 per cent said fewer interruptions meant greater focus which meant greater productivity.

On top of that 59 per cent said it minimised the time and expense of commuting while 46 per cent said it gave them greater flexibility to deal with unexpected personal requirements.

Barb Harris, a journalist for more than 30 years, has been remote working for four years as a subeditor for Pagemasters (a company which provides subediting services to companies like APN, which owns the Herald) after moving back to her hometown Christchurch from Auckland.

Putting aside early issues with her internet connection and of course Christchurch's tragic earthquakes, Harris says she's definitely more productive than when she was working in Pagemasters' Auckland offices, largely because there are fewer distractions. It is also cheaper for her, she believes, even though she had to buy her own equipment and pay to power it.

"I think I work harder working from home. There's no doubt. You don't take the breaks that you used to. If you were in an office, you'd go have a coffee. If you do that at home, the work is still arriving."

Harris, however, has faced two of the three major disadvantages of remote working: loss of opportunities for collaboration with colleagues (something experienced by 50 per cent of those in the survey done by Kelly Global Workforce Index) and a feeling of isolation (43 per cent). However, thanks to email she doesn't feel outside the loop on company information (though 34 per cent in the KGWI survey did).

"For the first year or so I found the isolation quite hard. But I've been down here four and a half years so I've adjusted to that. On a Friday night my friends are really glad to get home and they'd rather

have drinks at home. I insist we go out because I spend all my time at home."

One of the biggest risks for remote working - for employers as well as workers - is the blurring of personal and work time. "It's a bit contradictory," Fried says. "A lot of managers will think that letting someone work from home means they're going to slack off and work less but it really often is the opposite, and you have to be careful about that.

"It's a big part of a manager's job to set expectations and let people know that 40 hours is all we really want, it's all we need. If you're working more than that on consistent basis it is not healthy for you or for us. We've forced sabbaticals on people for 30 days. We've paid them to go away and get some perspective."

Employers and Manufacturers Association's Kim Campbell isn't as convinced by the uber-productivity argument. "I'm not saying it's a fiction. But it isn't as obvious a one as you think. And the vast majority of businesses do require people to interact in some way.

There are not many jobs in any business which are one person sitting at desk doing one thing."

Fried disagrees. He believes new technology means most meetings can happen at a distance. Besides, he says, many meetings aren't necessary. "Know anyone who wishes they had more meetings?"

It may surprise you to know Fried talked to me not from his home, or a coffee shop, or the side of a mountain but from his company's flash Chicago office. The future might be working out of the office, but having a home base may still be important for many businesses.

"I'm kind of a hybrid guy, do mornings at home and come in around noon," he says. "Or I work at home all day. If I come in, it's for half a day.

"I like to mix it up a bit. Sometimes I do need to see someone face to face and so I'll come into the office for that. But I really think the hybrid model, which is really what our company is, both remote and local, it's a really good healthy model."

Few companies can go or have gone completely remote. One of the most high-profile successes is a tech company called Automattic.

It's completely remote and has 120 employees working all around the world. But even Fried concedes that this would be unobtainable for most companies. And tech companies, while apparently a natural fit for telecommuting, are not necessarily successful at it. One of the first things internet giant Yahoo's newish CEO, Marissa Mayer, did when she took over was ban her employees from remote working.

Still despite this high-profile rejection of telecommuting, Fried believes remote working is nearing a tipping point.

"The majority of people are still going to work in offices for quite a long time. The tipping point on a hybrid combination is much closer, so that even if you work at home one day a week that's a huge achievement. But in the future the possibility of remote working will be built into the decision about what companies you go work for. So if companies want to hire great people they're going to have to make remote working an option."

***Remote: Office Not Required (\$29.99, Vermilion) is out now.***