

Working on tomorrow

The class of 2015 will find themselves entering a very different world of work than their predecessors of even a decade ago.

Val McFarlane meets the men examining how we work now - and what the future might bring.

Writing on the walls is positively encouraged at the Centre for Workplace Leadership. Much of the wall space in the Centre, on the sixth floor of the Business and Economics building in Berkeley Street, is covered in scribbles. There are lists, Venn diagrams, graphs ... all ideas downloaded from the brains of the academics who work there.

It's just one of the signs that the Centre doesn't just research the modern workplace; it is one. Here, academic and professional staff share the space. There's a formal meeting room, but more informal places to gather - booths with comfy couches and a bar with high stools, like in the hipster cafes round the corner in Carlton.

Director Professor Peter Gahan (PhD 1997) hasn't bought a pool table for the team yet, but one wouldn't look out of place.

It's exactly the kind of environment you would expect from Gahan, who has spent his life researching ways of making the Australian workforce happier and more productive. A former Director of Workplace Innovation at the Victorian Department of Industry, Innovation and Regional Development, he has studied the impact of workplace changes over many years.

"We forget the enormity of technological change that has taken place over a relatively short period of time," he says. "Just think about how long things like smart mobile phones have been around. The first smartphone came out in the mid-1990s, the first iPhone in 2007, but where would we be without them now? The first thing I do when I get out of bed - in fact I don't even get out of bed - is check my emails."

Reports of the death of the traditional office may be an exaggeration, but there is no doubt the nine-to-five is changing, with flexibility the current buzzword.

Flexibility takes many forms. "Activity-based working", where employees no longer have their own assigned workstation, instead using a range of areas to carry out specific tasks, is just one. Teams don't necessarily sit together, instead using videocasting to communicate, or meeting in shared spaces. In at least one Melbourne bank - and increasingly around the world - the definition of office space is being stretched even further, to include areas where customers can work alongside bank staff.

Teleworking, or virtual working, with employees scattered across the city, country or even globe, is also increasingly common. At technology firm Cisco, 40 per cent of managers manage people who don't work in the same location.

Research fellow Dr Jesse Olsen says there will always be jobs where such methods won't work, but for those where they are appropriate, they can save money and present new opportunities. "Technology allows us to get lots of people to work together who might otherwise not be able to because of their personal circumstances, whether it is family commitments or because they live in different places," he says. "If you get a lot of different types of people together they share different perspectives and you come up with different outcomes."

It's the "getting together" that makes the difference, regardless of whether it's in person or over Skype. Olsen cites the 2013 decision by the CEO of Yahoo, Marissa

Mayer, to put an end to staff working from home. "It's not that she is against working from home, she is against working by yourself. To get the benefits of diversity you have got to get the people together. Collaboration is the key."

This is where technology can help. It's expected that the next generation of office telephones will allow videoconferencing at your desk, and the research has proved that if people can see each other while they talk,



Professor Peter Gahan, left, and Dr Jesse Olsen. PICTURE: DARREN HOWE



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even on a screen, it's almost as effective as meeting face-to-face. "There is still something in us that wants to be with other people. It's what makes us human," Olsen says.

But even with the latest technology, creating serendipitous "watercooler moments" when staff are not in the same building is hard, Gahan admits. "If we are working from home or virtually we miss out on the chance interactions with others in the workplace which often lead to problems being solved and new insights and ideas."

Flexibility brings risks for employees, too, in the form of work-related stress. "We know that when we have less structured forms of working that people find it much harder to balance work and life. Work takes over," Gahan says.

"Organisations have to think about what that means for their workplace health and safety liabilities and the impact on

employee productivity in the long run. How sustainable is it to have staff working in this way?"

There's evidence that when employees feel they have insufficient control over how they work, their risk of depression doubles. And everyone pays - research by Professor Tony LaMontagne (see right) has put the cost of work-related mental health problems at more than \$700 million a year.

Stress-related WorkCover claims are the only ones on the rise. That's something bosses need to be mindful of when introducing new working practices, Olsen says. "Ultimately what we should be doing is creating real flexibility, not forcing a new way of working. You might be lauded for putting flexible working in place in when in reality you are just creating a different rigidity."

Perks, pay and the real meaning of life

We've all seen them on TV - the big tech firms where perks of the job include gourmet meals, games rooms, massages and gyms. Sounds great? Not to Professor Tony LaMontagne, who leads the Workplace Health research stream in the McCaughey VicHealth Centre for Community Wellbeing in the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health.

"That stuff gives me the shivers," he says. "People think it's the company looking after them but it's not really. It's the company working you to the bone."

"It might be fine for the person who does nothing but work, then goes home and comes back to work. But for most people there is danger in having all of your social connections at work, because if you lose that job or you move on, you lose your social networks at the time you most need them."

Regardless of what their workplace is like, LaMontagne cautions workers against getting

too wrapped up in their jobs, a risk increased by the technology that allows - and encourages - employees to be on call 24/7.

"In Western society we over-invest in work for our identities, and we [in Australia] have some of the longest working hours in the OECD," he says. "Yet there's much more to life than work."

He urges job-seekers to protect their mental health by researching a company's culture carefully before signing up for a new position.

"You need to do more than read the annual reports or know what the salary range is," he says. "Salary drives a lot of people but over time it's not going to make or break whether you stay in a particular role. If you are somebody who really, really values your weekends, you need to know that in certain lines of work you're not going to have them."

"A lot of workplaces might profess to have the flexibility to accommodate you but in the end, it may not be so true. Know what your limits are in terms of how hard you want to work, and how important your life out of work is to you."