

Businesses are looking for space in the metaverse to facilitate hybrid working

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In the context of work, the digital divide has become less about access to devices and connectivity and more about skills and mindset. Many experienced professionals have never learned more than the fundamental basics of email, web search, and Microsoft Office. Instead, they lean hard on nearby colleagues or the IT help desk when things go wrong.



By contrast, young people have already demonstrated a competitive edge in the virtual workplace. They come equipped with a more intuitive grasp of digital technology and the initiative to troubleshoot problems via YouTube tutorials or Google.

Meetings in the metaverse could become a reality for millions in the near future after a new study found that hundreds of businesses are looking for building office space in virtual technology. With the shift to hybrid working, it is tweaking interest amongst the business leader and employees alike.

Recent studies by Regus show that enabling workers in different locations to interact via 3D avatars will significantly impact how we work. "It will increase the demand for flexible working, as well as reduce the need for staff to work from the same office location," says Joanne Bushell, MD, IWG, South Africa.

"The flexibility offered by the metaverse will bring many other benefits, including more diverse workplaces, improved mental health, reduced presenteeism and better relations between removed and office-based staff. Seven in 10 leaders believe it will present new business opportunities and welcome news amidst fears of a recession on the horizon," Bushell adds.



Despite the enthusiasm for the metaverse, there are fears among office workers that businesses will not be brave enough to take the plunge on the new tech. Employees think their employer will wait to see how other businesses fare before investing. However, research undertaken by [Regus](#), part of the world's largest flexible workspace group IWG, found that two-thirds (66%) of business leaders view the metaverse as the natural progression for hybrid working and that half (48%) are exploring office space within the online world for their employees.

Mark Dixon, IWG founder and CEO, said: *"Change in the world of work is almost always driven by technology. In the 90s, email transformed the way we did business. At the same time, the onset of the pandemic led to millions around the world permanently adopting web-based tools and platforms like Zoom and Teams to enable more effective working."*

"This latest research shows that business leaders expect the metaverse to have a transformative effect on hybrid working. It will enable better collaboration for people working worldwide, reducing the need to commute and allowing greater flexibility in people's daily working schedules."

VR has long been used in training for specific physical jobs, from astronauts and pilots to law enforcement, surgery, and manufacturing. In the workplace, however, much of the metaverse is still to be built. When it comes to specialist machinery or complex locations, the relative safety and cost advantages of training virtually are apparent. But it is in knowledge work, from software engineering to law to design, where the changes will be most profound.

The reality is that this metaverse, like each significant previous wave of innovation before it, is less a substitute for location and more a complement to it. Even as the metaverse enables a far more realistic experience of the digital world and enables us to do many more things online — expanding access to rich content and broader pools of talent, lowering switching costs between locations and transaction costs in general, and vastly augmenting data-based decision-making and personalisation, it will still be unable to replicate the emotional cues, body language, serendipity, and diversity that happen when human beings cluster and collaborate in real places.

Academic studies have found that collaborative work among colleagues suffers when they work remotely. Exchanges over email or Slack increasingly replace real-time in-person conversations, hampering communication.

Google itself has claimed that informal chats at coffee machines and lunch tables on its campus were responsible for innovations such as Street View and Gmail. But with remote working, this kind of opportune encounter all but disappears.

And of course, there are costs to remote working in terms of individual well-being. Stanford University researchers have found that so-called Zoom fatigue is driven by a combination of intense eye contact, lack of mobility, self-consciousness about one's video feed, and the cognitive demands of needing to give exaggerated feedback to signal understanding,

agreement, or concern.

The metaverse 1.0 will undoubtedly see organisations creating persistent VR workplace environments in which employees can interact in real-time as embodied avatars. VR versions of office spaces can be designed to encourage chance encounters and corridor chats.

Imagine, for example, if going from one remote meeting to another involved leaving the conference room and crossing a bustling virtual atrium. That might sound far-fetched but remember that Korean proptech company Zibang has already opened a 30-floor VR office called Metapolis. Employees choose an avatar and navigate to their desks via elevators and corridors. When they meet a colleague's avatar, their webcam and mic are activated so that they can have a conversation. The webcam and mic then turn off automatically as their avatar walks away.

According to the Harvard Business Review, The metaverse will make the physical location a more - not less - important consideration for business. This is already playing out to some extent: cities like Dubai and Shanghai are launching strategies to attract metaverse-focused businesses and people. This could mean ideal locations for brands to experiment with enthusiastic early adopters. Companies will have to think more strategically than ever before about where to place offices and innovation hubs to attract and connect talent, where to locate retail shops to attract customers and heighten brand awareness, and, more generally, how to balance their physical and virtual footprints.

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