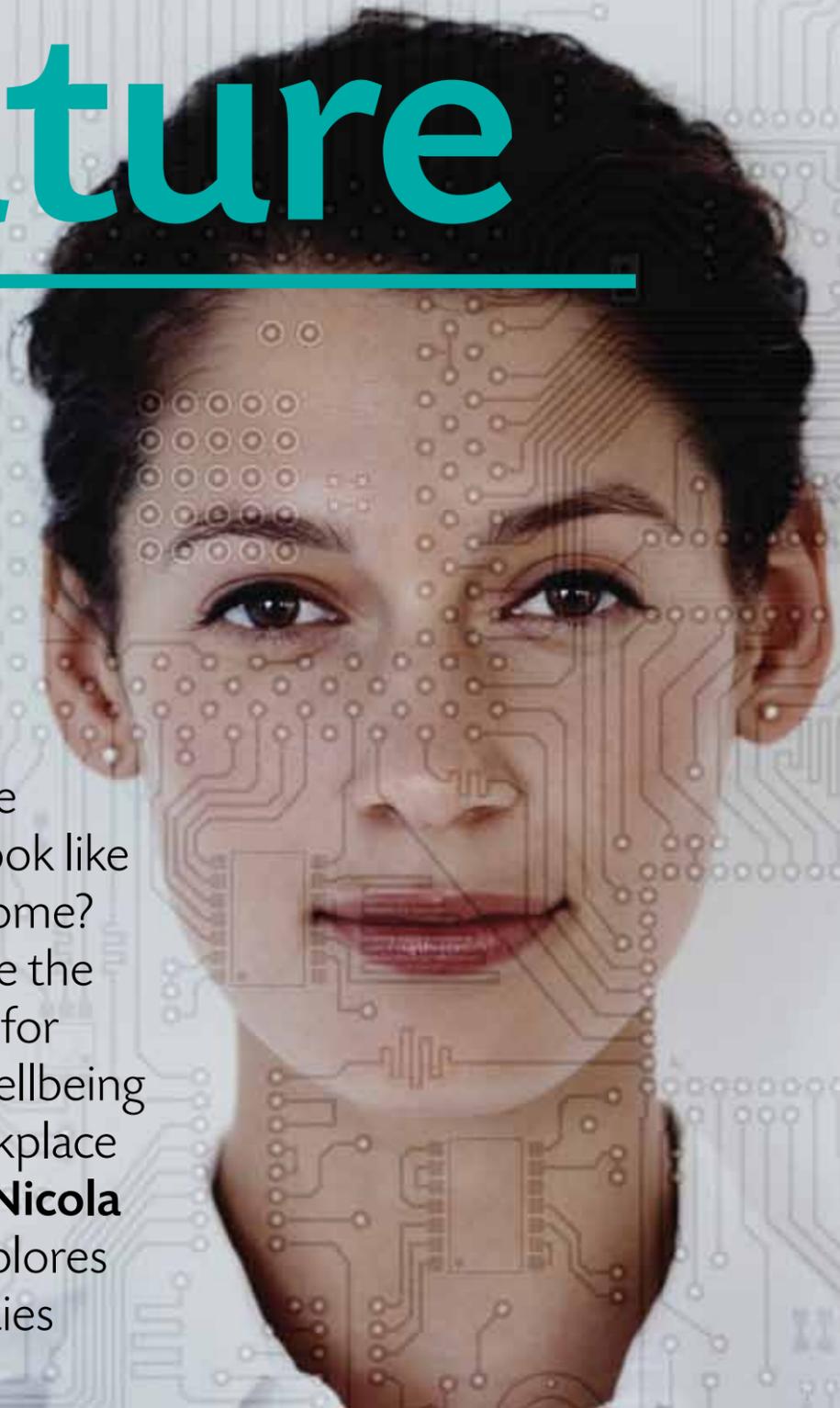# Into the future

What will the workplace look like in years to come? And what are the implications for employee wellbeing and the workplace counsellor? **Nicola Banning** explores the possibilities

The world of work is changing faster than it did during the time of the industrial revolution and this has profound consequences for how we think about our working lives[1]. A key force that is impacting is the access to instant communication. If you or your clients find yourselves feeling under siege from your technology, it may not be much comfort to learn that it's estimated that we are currently interrupted (at least) every three minutes by technology, and by 2025, we will be working 24/7 and five billion of us will be connected to one another[1].

Cast your minds back and consider how quickly social networking and the internet have became a part of the fabric of our lives. Job security and a notion of one career for life already belong to a bygone age. Nine-to-five working patterns, traditional hierarchies in organisations and the daily commute to and from work will potentially also become history. Flexible working has been described as 'an unstoppable tidal wave'[2] and it is thought that we will increasingly seek more and more autonomy about how we live and work[3].

In a round table debate in *Management Today*[4], cost, carbon, technology, sustainability and culture were cited as the big issues impacting on the future workplace. For those of us involved in the very human side of working face to face in the counselling relationship, at first glance this may seem to be removed from our work. Except that, if you think about it, you may recognise how some of these issues are already impacting on the ways that we, our clients or our organisations are working.

Being self-employed, seeking autonomy to create a work/life balance, reducing overheads and travel costs, using technology to stay connected whilst working anywhere, are all very present realities for me and many therapists I know. Increasingly, too, clients speak of their own home-working patterns as technology allows for it and it becomes normal practice within organisations.

Perhaps a little depressingly, if you are over 30 (and the majority of counsellors are) the chances are that you will already have been left behind technologically[5]. Succeeding in the future will depend on learning to be more 'virtual' because our work will depend on it. Where we live will become less important, as our work becomes both more global and more virtual.

We have already seen significant changes in the ways in which therapy is offered to clients and organisations, including the widespread use of telephone counselling and online counselling, and clearly many counsellors and organisations are already working remotely and embracing these ways of working.

Technology in therapy – the advantages
Kate Anthony is a leading authority on the use of technology in therapy and co-founder of the Online Therapy Institute (www.onlinetherapyinstitute.com). From her experience in the virtual therapy world, Kate sees the advantages that technology can bring to clients entering into the therapeutic relationship: 'Face-to-face counselling is often preferred, but that doesn't make it necessary,' she explains. 'Working virtually allows overheads, such as travel, to be cut, meaning that more clients can be served and budgets can be stretched.

'Using text-based, video or voice recognition technology also tends to get to the crux of issues much faster, due to the "disinhibition effect",' she says. 'Clients get through embarrassment or shame about the problems as they perceive the counsellor to be distant, and therefore safer to talk to, and less potentially judgmental. It also reduces stigma that may be felt by visiting a face-to-face counsellor since, in working from a computer, one can be "invisible". One of the earliest lessons for me in my career was understanding that, sometimes, clients just don't want to sit with us, and I believe there are a lot of counsellors who struggle with that concept.'

Virtual therapy rooms in organisations
Organisations already embrace the virtual world and current patterns predict this will only increase, Kate explains: 'Many large organisations already have a presence in a virtual environment such as Second Life (SL), and I see this growing in the future. Carefully managed, and with awareness of all the issues around confidentiality and encrypted communication, it can be a dynamic way of working.'

Virtual reality is already used by HR departments for interviewing and training in many organisations' own virtual

Nicola Banning is an MBACP accredited counsellor specialising in working with individuals and organisations. She is a member of the BACP Workplace executive and has a specialist interest in promoting wellbeing in the workplace.

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Kate Anthony

offices, and adapting this to the therapeutic environment is not difficult, says Kate: 'Creating a counselling suite within an organisation's virtual office is simple. It's a small step to the creation of a safe secure space for two avatars to meet to talk. At the Institute, we have our own model therapy room to train students, and it looks much like a face-to-face consulting room – warm and comforting, with virtual paintings and boxes of tissues. We even have our own virtual cat, who wanders around purring and demanding to be virtually fed!'

EAPs are adapting their services to organisations and their employees, Kate observes: 'The main shift is now being able to offer the client counselling however he or she wishes, and what works best for them in terms of fitting the counselling in to their work/life.'

How will we work?
In a landmark BBC series for the millennium, *Back to the Future*[6], futurologist Jeremy Rifkin predicted that, increasingly, we are going to create all sorts of new knowledge-based jobs that require new skills, and that we cannot yet begin to imagine what they might be. Just as the industrial revolution made many jobs redundant, so will the information revolution, he suggests: 'If you're a secretary, a file clerk, a middle manager, a factory worker, if you work in the agricultural fields, if you're a telephone operator, a librarian, a bank teller, [the] chances are your job won't be here in 20 years from now[6].'

Lynda Gratton is Professor of Management Practice at the London Business School, where she teaches MBA students on the future of work. In her book, *The Shift: The Future of Work is Already Here*[1], she paints a future scenario which powerfully illustrates the potential offered by technology to change our working practices, in ways that might seem impossible. She describes a globally renowned brain surgeon, based in Mumbai, who works from home but leads teams of medics conducting brain surgery in China, Chile and London – all in one day. Technology has made this possible[1].

Implications for wellbeing
So if, as the research suggests, we will increasingly work virtually from home, and outside of a workplace (as we have known it), what are the implications for our wellbeing? There is much talk about the virtual world offering spaces for people to connect, and undoubtedly that happens, socially and professionally. But, in a recent article in *Therapy Today*[7], Madeleine Böcker wrote of the epidemic of loneliness which will increasingly have profound consequences for individuals and our health and social care

systems. Böcker points out that social networking has not led to a reduced experience of loneliness, but rather suggests that 'the consequent reduction in direct human contact may exacerbate the problem for some people.'

Looking ahead, there is a sobering prediction from Lynda Gratton that, by 2025, much of our working lives will take place without face-to-face real world relationships and that the disease of loneliness could be the dark side to the future of work[1]. If loneliness is one possible consequence of technology, so too for Gratton is a concern about the impact it may have on our capacity to think and that this could become one of our biggest challenges: 'Fragmentation, overload and compression will decrease concentration, reduce our capacity to really observe and learn and could make the future working lives of our children more frenzied[1],' she says.

I am sure I am not alone in seeing, in the counselling room or when training, a trend towards a desperate need in organisations for reflective space, to think, feel, understand and make decisions, often about work. Author, Nancy Kline, has written extensively on the need to create thinking environments within all our systems: families, organisations, communities and beyond[8]. Connectedness, both at work and at home, and relationships with partners, friends and children, can all suffer if the quality of communication breaks down. This was well documented in Susan Maushart's *The Winter of Our Disconnect*[9] which described how a family pulled the plug on technology in an attempt to regain real relationships with themselves and one another.

Perhaps the speed of the change which we have had to adjust to by being available 24/7 has been so rapid for individuals and organisations, that we are only just beginning to understand what is needed to maintain good emotional and mental health in the face of it. While acknowledging the potential dark side of technological advances, Kate Anthony, has this advice: 'Understanding the culture of cyberspace, just as we understand our own cultures and societal norms offline, is paramount; embrace cyberculture and it can be rich and fulfilling. An awareness of the importance of balance is what organisations need to adopt.'

Opportunities for the workplace counsellor
In response to the demands that fast-moving technology makes, as therapists, we may increasingly be called upon to play an educative role, supporting clients with maintaining good emotional, mental, physical and spiritual health. Our awareness of boundaries and of what it takes to maintain personal wellbeing and develop resilience, both individually and organisationally, could be at a premium in the new and

changing world of work. Conceivably, our communication and facilitative skills within organisations could increasingly be needed to provide reflective spaces for individuals or groups, particularly if (and this might be the business case to prove) these spaces could be linked to improving employee productivity, innovation or creativity. It is suggested that coaching and caring will become ever more important over the next two decades and crucial to the wellbeing of workers by 2025[1]. Therefore, it is vital that we understand how work is changing for our clients, our organisations and ourselves, so that we are best placed to anticipate and respond to what will be needed.

Organisational cultures of the future
As workplace counsellors, we possess valuable knowledge and understanding of the organisations that we work in. But a new definition of work exists: 'Work is no longer a place you go; it's what you do[10].' And as organisations are thinned down and shed staff, and with more short-term contracts and home working, what might that mean for the culture of the organisation?

This seems to be one of the problems that organisations are grappling with: if staff work at home, how can the organisation create a shared culture? Added to this is the fact that, for many, going to work (apart from needing to earn an income) is also about a social activity. People make friends at work, and even meet partners. The workplace of the future might have hubs where people drop in, but the day-to-day rhythm of 'going to work' may well be very different.

Some experts, discussing the future of work, suggest that the word 'career' will become obsolete[11]. Instead, we will become more highly specialised and the short-term contracting pattern will continue whereby we have contractual relationships with a number of companies, rather than being an employee of just one. In a series of articles about the future of work, for Time.com[3], it was predicted that work will be more collaborative, less hierarchical, and success will no longer be defined by rank or seniority.

In research I undertook for an article for *Therapy Today* on why people choose to become a counsellor[12], I talked to many about their motivations and discovered that becoming a counsellor was not just about the pay cheque, but had a lot to do with a sense of vocation, personal values and the meaning of the work. If we are going to work until we are over 70, it will be increasingly vital that we find work that we enjoy; my experience of many therapists is that we love our work, which bodes well for our longevity at work.

Future-proofing the workplace counsellor
Kate Anthony recommends three things that the workplace counsellor might do to future-proof themselves or adapt to technological changes:
- Be open to technology and the cultural implications it has for both you and the client. If your client is using technology, you should, too, or empathy with their experiences online will be impossible.
- Undertake training – it's essential. No counsellor today has to wade in and make the mistakes we were making as a profession 10 or 12 years ago.
- Enjoy it! Working online with technology is certainly different to face-to-face work, but it is neither better nor worse. Being able to meet one's client in cyberspace is liberating for both parties.

Conclusion
The future of work is a vast and complex area of research. Challenging and thought provoking, it questions many of our deeply held beliefs and assumptions, and requires a change in how we think about work. I believe that the nature of our roles, as counsellors in the workplace, equips us well to do this. It seems to me that there are opportunities for those with our skills set, expertise and knowledge, and that, potentially, what we have to offer could be ever more required in the fragmented, connected, frenetic future world of work.

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