

Hey dude, where's my productivity gain?

How the PC has failed to revolutionise business in a way our parents might have hoped.

This is the computer age. With a PC on every desk and immense computing power available to all, we are more productive than ever before. We can accomplish in a few hours more than the last generation were able to in a month. Can't we?

Well, actually, no. Repeated research shows the uncomfortable fact that we are no more productive now than we were in the 1950s, when the average desk was graced not by a PC, but often by a blotter and inkwell. How can this be? We are so used to the boon of personal computing power, many of us would feel powerless without a PC; in a very real sense, many jobs are just not possible any more without use of a computer. This dependence is a price worth paying provided the payoff is more productivity, more profit, more leisure time or less stress, but it seems that none of these have typically arisen from computerisation over the last 50 years.

Why not? Here's my take on the issue: we're all spending more time and effort on presentation. Just think about how a 1950s manager would have written a report. He (because it would always have been a he) would have written it out longhand or dictated it, and his secretary would have quickly and efficiently typed it. She (because it would always have been a she) would have typed at an extremely fast rate, certainly 80 wpm or more, and would have had no choice over fonts, text size and the like. The options would have been confined almost solely to use of the shift key. Layout would be automatic, of course. Assuming there were no typing errors, the job would be finished once the last word was typed. There would be no repagination, no tweaking of styles, no endless changing of heading levels. Furthermore, the manager would have used all this typing time doing something else.

Compare that experience to today's manager's approach; equipped with Microsoft Word, but probably not with a secretary, he or she types himself or herself, probably at considerably less than 80 wpm and then spends the same time again, or possibly more, on tinkering with the formatting. A more enlightened outlook on sexual equality is widespread, but business efficiently certainly isn't.

And here's another example. There was a time when budgets and accounts were only handled by specialists with paper ledgers and poor social skills. But now that every manager has Microsoft Excel, he or she takes on these tasks him or herself. Not only could a specialist accountant do the work in a fraction of the time, but Excel also has extensive formatting and layout tools, the great 21st century thief of time!

And we haven't even touched on programming yet. If it were a crime to spend 8 hours writing a program which over the course of a decade might save 30 minutes or so, then I would inevitably be labelled a serial offender, as would most of my social circle.

What will define our progress this century – if we're lucky – is the definition of a new working relationship with the PC and a return to specialism in business. Maybe then we'll finally start enjoying the long-awaited computer productivity boom.