



## Meet the moofers: the office is so last century

A new generation of young entrepreneurs are using technology to break free from desks and work on the move, says James Knight

It may boast all the recognisable trappings of a swanky London gentlemen's club, but One Alfred Place is not your average private members' hangout. Among the period features, bespoke furniture and contemporary art, the club provides the mod cons of a 21st century office.

When they join in February, new members will be given their own club telephone number, with an 0207 London prefix, a personal e-mail address and access to the club's free wi-fi network. There are meeting rooms, and the waitresses double as PAs, delivering reports, printing documents and offering IT support in between mixing margaritas. Even the sofas have been designed to be comfy while you are using a laptop.

Welcome to the brave new world of the moofer — or mobile out-of-office worker. Look around: you'll see them conducting deals, holding meetings or finding inspiration at a coffee shop, hotel lobby, airport lounge or park bench near you. This new generation of young, tech-savvy workers live their business lives in nomadic fashion, wherever they can find a wi-fi connection — and they don't believe in the traditional nine to five. Many are entrepreneurs running their own internet-based companies, but they could be management types working for big firms and often away from the office, media consultants out and about meeting clients or freelance writers.

"The reason we started the club now is that there is a huge new trend of people who are working in this way," says Rob Shreeve, the chief executive at One Alfred Place. "They are using new technology to take their office with them. But while it's all well and good working out of a hotel, you can't really hold meetings there. And the same applies to traditional gentlemen's clubs, where it's impossible to use a phone, let alone recharge your laptop."

Of course the trend for more flexible working practices has been around for years. But in 2007 the trickle has become a flood as new technology makes it more practical than ever. One key

development has been the rapid growth in the availability of public wi-fi. In the past year this has gone from being a patchwork quilt of isolated hotspots to covering entire swathes of cities and town centres. Many of these wi-fi networks are also free.

As important has been the hugely increased speeds of the 3G phone networks thanks to a technology known as HSDPA. This means that even outside a wi-fi network you are still connected to the internet. Savvy moofers of 2007 can use its fast, multi-megabit broadband speeds on their mobile phone or laptop to do anything from sending or receiving a presentation to quickly sharing photos and video while on the move. Then there are the ever more sophisticated smartphones that double as calendars, notebooks, voice recorders and cameras, giving the modern entrepreneur all the tools of executive life in a device smaller than a Filofax.

Today's ultra-competitive mobile tariffs and free minutes increasingly marginalise landlines, weakening further the ties to a fixed physical space, while virtual office suites such as Google Docs and other cloud technologies enable workers to access private documents from any computer in the world via the internet.

"I've worked from the back of a camel, from a tent in the middle of the desert and out of a tiger sanctuary," says Sachin Duggal, a 24-year-old technology entrepreneur.

"I've watched and commented on a presentation on my BlackBerry in the middle of an Indian wedding, and I was taking calls at three this morning. I've stopped thinking of work as something you start at nine and finish at six. To me there's just life."

Duggal founded his first company at 15, building and repairing computers from his bedroom. Now he's overseeing his latest venture (see panel below), valued at £16m, living and working almost exclusively off piste, not tied to a



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desk, a timetable or even a continent, rotating between the UK and India every five to six days.

He's not alone. Andy Wood, 30, founded his digital production company Tough Cookie (now a part of Whizz Kid Entertainment, after a buyout

last year) with a friend in 2003. Without an office, the partners started off Skyping each other from home about the shape the new business should take. "We would set up client meetings and

spend the time between them working from a Starbucks, or anywhere on the Cloud network," he says. "Our staff meetings used to be in Virgin Megastore on Oxford Street."

Filming music gigs for broadcast over the web on digital equipment, the company could work off laptops from virtually anywhere, and fast. "We once edited gig footage of the Rumble Strips on a tour bus on the way back from Manchester, and dropped it off with the client as soon as we were back in London," says Wood.

As well as the new technology, a cultural shift means the idea of a job for life is a thing of the past for today's graduates. A recent survey commissioned by the Work Foundation and Microsoft found that 78% of people believed working away from the office was the future, with more than half saying they would be happier if there were a greater element of mobile working in their job. Meanwhile, the Future Laboratory, a trend forecaster, predicts that 5.5m people will be using technology to work away from the office by 2012.

"We need to redefine the term 'office work'," says James McCarthy of Microsoft, who set up the site www.moof.mobi to kickstart a discussion among employees of the benefits of mobile working. "Far too many of

us endure a daily commute, only to sit at our desks and work on jobs that we could do from anywhere with an internet connection."

Moofing requires a readjustment, because, like the technology, you are in effect always on. For workaholics this is a boon because it improves productivity. However, the flipside of the "always on" lifestyle is the nightmare vision of constant accessibility — as with the commuters who cannot put down their BlackBerry. Business contacts know that you are always at the end of a phone,

or checking e-mails remotely, and start to expect an almost immediate response.

Most moofers running their own businesses accept they have to be available all the time. Steven Malpass, 36, of www.blitzworld.co.uk, designs and builds off-road buggies for a living, and he has cut his response times to e-mail orders by 75% with his technology set-up. Relying on a mobile phone and his own web-coding skills, he has put through deals worth thousands of pounds and updated the stock on his website from the tops of mountains on ski trips to Whistler and Banff in Canada. "It's difficult not to sneak a look sometimes," he admits. "But at the end of the day, it's your business, and you want to make sure it succeeds."

The biggest drawback of the mobile working life (and the reason the office will never disappear) is the lack of interaction with colleagues. That, after all, is why offices were invented, before e-mail and intranets became a way of ensuring everyone was strapped to their chairs.

For the moofer who doesn't even have a communal office as a base, this is the kind of gap that One Alfred Place is trying to fill. Just don't join expecting a wild night of champagne-fuelled excess.



## The high-flyers always connected

**Name** Sherry Madera

**Age** 33

**Occupation** Chief executive of AwayPhone ([www.awayphone.com](http://www.awayphone.com)), a phone system for globetrotting executives who want to establish a local presence. The system enables customers to travel with a local number in more than 100 countries.

**Name** Steven Malpass

**Age** 36

**Occupation** Designs, manufactures and sells off-road buggies from his website [www.blitzworld.com](http://www.blitzworld.com). Having constant access to his e-mails using his mobile phone has increased company productivity, while sophisticated web applications allow him to process larger orders than bigger rival companies.

**Name** Andy Wood

**Age** 30

**Occupation** Founded a digital production company that films live music gigs for broadcast over the web. Laptops with high-speed broadband connection mean they

can work from anywhere. "When we go to clients we have a five-minute showreel to show them on our mobiles. It gets across that this is the product, in the way it's supposed to be seen," says Wood.

**Name** Sachin Duggal

**Age** 24

**Occupation** An internet entrepreneur, he spends his time in the UK and India. He is launching a web service called [www.nivio.com](http://www.nivio.com) that allows you to access your personal Windows desktop on any terminal in the world.

**Name** Vanita Kara

**Age** 33

**Occupation** Security consultant for DNV, a Norwegian risk management firm. Using a laptop and a phone, she can work from home rather than go to the office. "It's so simple it doesn't feel like a big deal," she says. "I'm not using anything particularly advanced or special. All I need is a laptop and a phone although my dad is always a bit shocked."

## Moofing tools

### DO-IT-ALL PHONE

**Nokia E61i**

**£280** [www.nokia.co.uk](http://www.nokia.co.uk)

Featuring a qwerty keyboard and large screen, this powerful 3G smartphone makes for easy e-mailing and web surfing on the move. It can also run other applications, such as advanced diary features, or view pictures and even edit presentations.



### LIGHTWEIGHT LAPTOP

**Dell Latitude D630**

**£699**

[www.dell.co.uk](http://www.dell.co.uk)

The D630 is lightweight yet powerful and offers nine hours of battery life. Decent processing power will handle spreadsheets and presentations, and there is an optional internal 3G card giving fast internet access if out of wi-fi range.



### SKYPE AWAY

**Sennheiser PC146**

**USB headset**

**£80**

[www.sennheiser.co.uk](http://www.sennheiser.co.uk)

A Skype account (sign up at [www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)) allows free calls over the web. However, you'll need a decent headset such as this with a built-in microphone. Its noise-cancelling technology helps you make clearer calls.



### CORDLESS MOUSE

**MoGo Mouse**

**X54 Pro**

**£65** [www.newtonperipherals.com](http://www.newtonperipherals.com)

This flat laptop mouse works wirelessly by Bluetooth and, when you're done, it folds up and stores away inside the 54 express-card expansion slot of newer laptops. It also acts as a multimedia remote that can control a PowerPoint presentation.



### ESSENTIAL SOFTWARE

It's not only hardware that you'll need if you want to become a successful moofer. Instead of storing documents locally on your hard drive, why not store them online at [www.diino.com](http://www.diino.com), which enables you to upload up to 2GB of data a month, for nothing. Citrix Online's GoToMeeting ([www.gotomeeting.com](http://www.gotomeeting.com)) allows up to 10 people to share documents and chat simultaneously for an annual subscription of £250.



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Mark Bourdoin. Photomontage by Martin Banks

From left, Madera, Malpass, Wood, Duggal and Kara use new technology to free themselves from the tyranny of the office