



## Going Officeless

### Vision

During a period of increasing community demand for service and declining external support, community colleges around the country are “doing more with less.” In times like these, it becomes tremendously important to be entrepreneurial, rather than retreat to compromised services at the expense of student success. Instead of expecting “more” resources, community college stakeholders are positioning themselves to use current resources “differently.” This re-engineering of resource allocation asks these leaders to be more efficient, more creative, and to do things they have never done before.

One option? Give up the comfort of four walls and an assigned desk—and move towards an officeless environment. In short, going officeless means that a faculty or staff volunteers to “give up” his or her assigned office on a temporary or semi-permanent basis, in the interest of seeing that space repurposed for another high-priority use. The officeless idea leverages emerging best practices from the private sector, including the “hoteling” concept, where employees check in and out of space as needed—rather than owning space permanently. With the right application of technology, there is little reason to anticipate any decrease in productivity—in some cases, quite the opposite. Picture this—a small group of officeless employees, each equipped with wireless laptop and VoIP phone, meeting in a coffee shop or library meeting room on campus. By leveraging technology and space already dedicated to public use, they have freed up several hundred square feet on campus—space with infinite possibilities, from classrooms, to labs, to entrepreneurial initiatives that have yet to be conceived.

### Why Officeless?

Fundamentally, officeless arrangements help colleges deliver on commitments that have been made to sustainable practice; going officeless helps organizations leverage existing space, rather than creating a need for new buildings. Space is a finite and often scarce commodity at most campuses around the country. Adding space through new construction, renovation/addition, or some other means may seem like a compelling way to respond. However, building practice is not particularly friendly to the environment; federal statistics routinely note how much waste is created through construction and how many environmentally harmful byproducts are created by building operations. For those colleges that have adopted sustainable practice as a core value, it seems appropriate to think

critically before breaking ground on new space—and, instead, focus on how existing space can be altered/enhanced for emerging needs.

Going officeless also has great potential in breaking down organizational silos. By definition, someone who operates in a silo is someone whose work experience does not lend itself to discovering what is going on beyond the four walls of the department. If those four walls were brought down, there would be fewer physical barriers between employees in different departments. Other sociocultural barriers may remain; but with the right application of expectation and invitation, officeless arrangements have the potential to expand a person's understanding of what is happening on campus and help strengthen the networked systems that make it all go. Consider this: communication likely sits near the top of challenges experienced by faculty and staff at colleges around the country. Even with all the available electronic tools (e.g., listservs, intranets, publications), word of mouth remains a fundamental piece of the puzzle. Hallway conversation is one of the most effective conduits for information exchange. Imagine if your entire workday was spent "in the hallway." What would you learn? What would you be able to share?

Finally, though perhaps most important, the officeless concept has the potential to create opportunities for students. If the entire Johnson County Community College (JCCC) workforce decided to go officeless overnight and the college found a magic pot of money to remodel banks of offices into classrooms, it would potentially double the number of classrooms on campus—if not more. Many colleges around the country have adopted variations on the "students come first" theme into their missions or statements of values. Allocation of space seems to be a fundamental way that colleges could put that mission into action. We might also assume that many state boards or major foundations might support a college that seeks to dedicate more space to teaching and learning on campus. Those of us who can "put our square feet where our mouth is" would be well received.

### **Opportunities**

The very idea of abandoning a desk for an officeless arrangement would be impossible without ample Internet bandwidth and emerging technology. Employee demand for mobility has strengthened the business case for implementing campus-wide wireless, VoIP, and a bring-your-own-device ("BYOD") approach. This trio of technologies creates the platform for a mobile workforce that facilitates increased productivity and accessibility beyond the boundaries of one's office.

While the initial response to implementing wireless at JCCC was student-driven, the initiative to enhance the experience and improve security aligns more closely with serving the mobile faculty and staff member. JCCC has completed its campus-wide implementation of a secure wireless network. Students, employees, and community members can now travel to any indoor or outdoor space and maintain a secure wireless network connection.

The college began its migration to VoIP in April 2011. In an effort to improve service to students, call centers and student-facing support staff were the first to transition to the new phone system. As a result, employees are now able to pick up a phone call from anywhere rather than enter into a game of voice mail tag. Even if the preference is to

receive a voice mail message, employees can now listen to their messages via their employee email.

For years, employees have been checking employee email via their smart phones. Employees are now starting to bring their own tablets and use them for personal productivity, both on and off campus. While the college is still working through internal processes and procedures regarding funding for tablets, the personal cloud is maturing at a rate that makes the personal computing experience on these devices more compelling and rewarding with every new release. As the use of virtual desktops grows, tablets become an even more viable workplace tool—making any applications or files stored on the campus network readily available.

There would seem to be dozens of different ways to outfit faculty and staff willing to engage in an officeless experiment. Theoretically, the officeless experiment does not require new technology for participants. Some candidates may do very well with shared email stations in hallways, coffee shops for meetings, and other available resources for other needs. More advanced engagement with the concept might include laptops, tablets, or other means for making employee productivity mobile. New VoIP “soft” phone solutions eliminate the need for a physical phone or campus location. And with a little creativity, colleges might turn a single office into a “home base” with file cabinets and secure storage for a dozen or more officeless employees.

Of special note—officeless workers are not people who do not need space. They are people who do not need to own a particular space on a permanent basis. Space would still need to be made available for officeless workers for meetings and other purposes. Officeless workers might benefit from the identification of a “host” who could connect them with meeting rooms or other private spaces as needed—which may serve as entrée to more formal “hoteling” systems on campus. Colleges could also consider creating “bump spaces”—informal workspaces with some, but perhaps not all, qualities of a regular office. These might look like regular offices that are filled with café tables, a communal phone, and other items. Bump spaces help officeless workers find a temporary landing pad for productivity, collaboration, or other work-related activities.

## **Results**

In fall 2011, Johnson County Community College outfitted one employee to pilot an officeless experiment on that campus. The college’s Executive Director of Academic Initiatives was given a laptop, a file cabinet in a storage room, and a voicemail box. For the entire semester, he used spaces like the cafeteria, coffee shop, and conference rooms for meetings and productivity time.

“My supervisor and I had a lot of discussion about how this would work before we got started. It was important for me to let her know that I planned on working a normal working day and that this wasn’t the same as telecommuting,” he reported. “It’s not that I’m away from campus; I’m just using our campus facilities in a different way.”

The executive director started a Twitter account to report his movements around campus. When he had downtime between meetings, he would tweet his location and welcome colleagues to stop by his landing pad. “My favorite spot ended up being right next to our cafeteria—a space with these huge windows. That’s one of the great things about being officeless—you have the potential to find a different office every day, each with its own benefits.”

Jason Kovac, Executive Director, Academic Initiatives

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He volunteered to pilot the experiment given the qualities of his typical schedule. “I usually spend more than 75% of my time on any given day in meetings. It was enough that I didn’t feel like I needed to own space, but I needed to be able to land somewhere when I had some down time.”

Reports from the Executive Director’s supervisor and direct reports indicate that there was no noticeable effect on being able to connect with an officeless colleague in a timely manner. That said, there are unique opportunities and challenges related to being an officeless employee. “I loved being among the students for so much of my day—I drew energy from that buzz in the air. But I missed my phone—I’m a ‘call first, email if needed’ kind of person, and that was harder to do last semester.” He reports that he looks forward to seeing what VoIP soft phones will do to address these types of challenges.

### **Parting Thoughts**

The officeless experiment at JCCC has moved on to phase two—the Executive Director has moved back into a semi-permanent office and is sharing results of the officeless experiment with colleagues. “It’s not enough for one person among a thousand to tackle this issue. But a group as small as five people? If you could move the right pieces around, that’s enough square footage to give a classroom back to the College,” he observed. While the long-term ramifications of alternative office arrangements remain to be seen, there seems to be merit in considering how creative solutions like these can realign more resources behind student success.

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