

Going to the office without actually going to the office

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CEO of financial planning firm has created a virtual office where staff have own avatar, desks and hangout areas



Imagine going to the office without actually going to the office. Not but a Zoom or a Skype call but by actually “walking” to your desk after catching up with your colleagues in the lounge area.

One day after invoking its work-from-home protocol, Scott Plaskett, CEO of IRONSHIELD Financial Planning, took it one step further and activated CANiWorld, which he’d been “renovating” since December. “The next day, people were having group meetings and not skipping a beat,” he said.

The virtual office space has been built inside the VirBELA Open Campus, which was designed by Stanford University and acts like a campus with everybody walking around chatting.

WP met Plaskett, see main picture above, and entered his virtual reception area. We walked past his office manager having a meeting and headed to his office, which features live web presentation boards with access to the internet.

There is also a main boardroom and various resource rooms, including one where financial planners meet once a week for an update. This meeting is recorded and can be replayed at any time.



While you can walk around and talk to whoever you like, there are areas where you can activate a “private conversation space” so that people in the general office can’t hear you. If you need a really urgent answer, simply hit the Shift button and run to a colleague.

Plaskett told WP: “One of the amazing things is how people can poke their head into somebody’s office and ask a question. Everybody is saying how valuable that is because that’s what they do at the real office. I come in first thing in the morning and there’s often a group sitting around one of the lounges having a chat about their weekend. Then they break into team meetings and get their day planned.”

Plaskett had intended to activate his virtual CANiWorld office later in the year, only for the coronavirus crisis to accelerate plans. Two rooms still need “renovating” but the transition has been seamless and offers an intriguing insight into future possibilities.

He said: “First I thought this is a pretty gimmicky game but then I started using it and walking around campus meeting people. Then my staff started using it, and they were raving about how great it felt. I thought, ‘wow, we’ve really got something here.’”



Staff have embraced the collaborative experience of the virtual office space and online meetings. It works best with the Google suite of products and so the options are extensive. One bonus has been how social graces kick when a staff member's avatar mingles with others. Stopping for a chat, giving each other space and making sure you are looking at someone when you’re talking to them has added to the experience.

"A nice by-product is that a lot of the financial planners who work from home are not in a big team environment. Having done that for many years myself, it can get kind of lonely. But now I'll be 'sitting' in the office and suddenly planners from Quebec, Burlington, Montreal or Oakville show up in the suite on their lunch break and come and say, 'hi!'"

Productivity has not been affected. In fact, Plaskett said that by cutting out the commute, people naturally have more time to work and help other colleagues. "The unwritten rule here is when you're in the office and you're working, sit at your desk and make yourself available to people, so if someone has a question you are there."