

Opinion: An economist predicted work from home in 1979. Here's what he expected.

Opinion by **Mitch Daniels**

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My beloved late pastor used to say that a Presbyterian was someone who fell down a flight of stairs and says, “Well, I’m glad I got that over with!” One needn’t be a Calvinist, or one of their theological descendants, a scientific determinist, to appreciate a good coincidence.

A delightful one happened to me just the other day. Seeking to double-check a dubious assertion in a book about World War II, I pulled down John Keegan’s authoritative history of the conflict, undisturbed on my library shelf for who knows how many years.

When I opened the book, a yellowed section of a newspaper — they used to come on paper, you may recall — fell out. It was the Outlook section of The Post from Sept. 2, 1979, as long ago now as the war was when it was published. Headed “The War That Changed the World,” the section marked the 40th anniversary of that ghastly conflict’s start.

Most of Outlook’s eight pages were devoted to the war, its origins and consequences. But my eye fell on an unrelated feature on the first page: “Working at Home Can Save Gasoline” by one Frank W. Schiff, then the chief economist of the Committee for Economic Development. He was reflecting on a completely different crisis than the current pandemic, namely the “energy crisis” of his day. But the prescience he displayed was stunning, and fun to read.

After listing societal problems such as “gasoline consumption, traffic congestion and air pollution” and “mental and physical stress,” Schiff marveled at “the contribution which could be made by working at home one or two days a week.” He noted that “the share of service industries has risen . . . to over 60 percent,” that a majority of jobs “are now centered in information-related activities.” He imagined “engineers, computer programmers . . . medical researchers, lawyers, accountants” among many others, moving their daily work back home.

Along with economic transformation, he saw even bigger changes in the “machinery” of work. Among new advances he cited were “today’s hand-held ‘programmable’ scientific calculators”; “computer terminals . . . in portable form”; the encoding of “large files and entire libraries” on microfiches, which could be “carried home” and displayed “on portable viewing machines.”

And Schiff thought that this was only the beginning, that in the next few years, “The sophistication of machines available at home is likely to increase tremendously . . . machines that combine the functions of television sets, videophones, computer terminals, electronic files and word and data processing systems and that can be directly connected with offices and other homes.”

About all he missed was the 3-D printer. Beyond the obvious savings in personal time and expense, Schiff went on to predict gains in productivity and quality of life, as “couples could spend more time together and with their

children.”

Student of business operations that he was, Schiff (who died in 2006 at age 85) anticipated the criticisms that working from home would draw: “How can one tell how well they are doing or whether they are working at all?” Employees would be “cut off . . . from needed contacts with their co-workers and others.” There would be “too many distractions and the lack of a quiet place in which to work.” His rebuttals of these concerns mirror almost exactly the answers that real-world, large-scale experience began providing in 2020.

What would it take to bring about this back-to-the-future transition? Only here did Schiff’s clairvoyance fail him. “No single dramatic step is likely to provide the solution,” he wrote, only a concerted campaign of persuasive public advocacy. Too bad such a campaign didn’t get here before covid-19 did.

As Yogi Berra never said, predictions about the future are especially tricky. But when so many in retrospect turn out to be bunk, it’s a treat to trip over one as wisely farsighted as Frank Schiff’s.

P.S. It wasn’t until I finished carving quotes from the Schiff essay that I spotted yet another coincidence. Right next to his piece was an article with the grabber headline “The Mad Gasser of Mattoon, Ill.” It recounted a “mass hysteria” from 35 years before, which the article said demonstrated the “stunning” potency of the American media.

In Mattoon, Ill., an elderly woman reported that she believed someone had pumped gas into her bedroom, sickening and paralyzing her. The “mad anesthetist” made for juicy headlines, and soon, newspapers around the country and even Time magazine were reporting breathlessly about dozens of Mattoon residents suffering similar symptoms.

The symptoms were real, even though the Mad Gasser did not exist; it was just someone’s diagnosable case of hysteria. Citing a University of Illinois psychologist who investigated the episode, the article said it was “testament to the power of a newspaper to influence not just public opinion, but even public health.” Good thing I’m out of space. That could have generated another column.

Mitch Daniels, a Post contributing columnist, is president of Purdue University and a former governor of Indiana.

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