Out of this world

Second Life gives employers access to a virtual world which can help with recruitment and learning. Hashi Syedain finds out why the likes of IBM and Manpower are logging on.

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This is a story about a subject that most of us may find baffling, but a minority will probably take in their stride. It's about Second Life (SL), a "virtual world" that anyone can visit who has a PC, a decent internet connection and time to navigate the basics of creating and controlling an avatar, or character (see "Getting started").

Second Life – for the benefit of the baffled category – looks like a giant, live computer game, but with real people behind the characters. Avatars can do all kinds of things: hang out, shop for new virtual outfits with their virtual money or teleport to new virtual places and, crucially, meet new people, join groups and talk to others via instant messaging, or voice chat.

The point? Well, a lot of activity on SL is simply an extension of web social networking, made more absorbing by the 3D imagery of the world in which you are moving around. There is, however, a more serious side that has intriguing implications for work generally and HR in particular.

A growing number of real firms – IBM, Cisco, PA Consulting, Kelly Services, and Manpower to name a few – have built virtual offices, showrooms, meeting rooms, conference facilities, training or leisure spaces on SL that enable them to do certain things more easily and cheaply than in the real world – for example, bringing people from several continents into one room, or creating a forum where the chief executive can talk to someone on the shopfloor on a (virtually) equal basis.

Indeed Holly Stewart, UK lead in 3Dinternet at IBM Research (see panel, page 24), says virtual worlds such as SL and others will play a big role in the way we work in the future. "IBM thinks it's going to have a massive impact on the workplace," she says. She points out that technology research company Gartner estimates that 80 per cent of internet users will be taking part in virtual worlds by 2011, and certainly coming generations, who have grown up with computer games, will be much more at home in virtual worlds than staff today. With educational establishments also experimenting with SL for seminars, networking and other events, future graduates will arrive in the workplace having already experienced virtual world networking and learning.

David Wortley, director of the Coventry-based Serious Games Institute (a partnership between Coventry University's private-sector arm and the West Midlands regional development agency), which promotes the use of virtual worlds, says SL is helpful for meetings and seminars. He has found that when people are looking at avatars sitting round a table, they are more committed than if taking part in a web seminar, where participants may wander off because they can't be seen. He adds that SL meetings are more business-like than in real life because there is less chitchat. They can also be empowering for some people with disabilities.

"We have one member with cerebral palsy who has a speech impediment. It's good for him because we conduct our meetings in text," he explains.

That said, it is still early days – and there are plenty of people warning against over-hyping Second Life. Clive Shepherd, e-learning director at The Training Foundation, says that while there is value to online communication,

he's not convinced that virtual worlds offer a lot more than older technologies such as web conferencing. "The advantage of 2D versus 3D is debatable," he argues. "Sometimes anonymity can help to break down barriers of age and gender etc, so people might communicate more freely. There's also the feeling of immersion so that it feels more real emotionally – but whether that creates a learning benefit is up for discussion," he says.

Martyn Sloman, CIPD adviser, learning, training and development, also believes virtual worlds are more hype than substance. "There are some good examples of the use of SL, but generally we are dubious," he says.

Certainly, the overriding impression you get if you create an avatar and tour round the so-called islands of various firms on SL is of empty spaces – fabulous virtual facilities in cleverly landscaped settings with interactive displays or features, but devoid of people – or manned perhaps by a "greeter" or two (see panel, right). This is because even the early adopters are still hosting only relatively few events on SL.

Publishing company Informa is a rare example outside the technology and consulting arena where HR has taken a leap into SL. It has built a career development centre on SL, Transformed Careers, focusing on the different types of roles in the company. For each job type, examples are highlighted of the skills needed to progress to the next level. There is also the name of a "champion" for that role, whom visitors are invited to contact.

In future, says Alison Chisnel, HR director in charge of Transformed Careers, champions will be available to answer questions on SL at fixed times. She says it's too early to evaluate, but part of the impetus was to make career development more engaging, since staff were not using the intranet resources as well as they might. Margaret Regan, chief executive of the FutureWork Institute, a diversity training company based in New York, says that HR should be getting its feet wet with SL. FutureWork has an island on SL with extensive interactive training and networking spaces. It has built Connected Women, an island for Cisco's female employees to meet and network from all over the world.

It also offers training exercises, including the chance to inhabit a ready-made avatar of a different age, sex or race to see how your experience changes, and a game designed to help people understand the glass ceiling. For this, avatars physically move up and down on their seats according to the answers they give about their experience of the (real-life) workplace.

"The physical representation of the men moving up and up and the women moving up and then down again that we have on SL elicits strong emotional reactions," Regan says. Recruitment, training and onboarding via SL are the areas that HR is most interested in at the moment, she says. IBM, for example, has about 40 islands on SL and is using one to experiment with onboarding new recruits. It offers a space where people starting in the company in different locations around the world can meet and share experiences. Central services such as payroll are signposted to make it easier for new recruits to reach them and times can be fixed for HR to do an in-world induction and Q&A. IBM is also experimenting with virtual worlds that are more secure than SL or more sophisticated, allowing companies to build simulations of detailed scenarios for training. Holly Stewart says it is looking at ways of increasing compatibility between these worlds, so avatars and information can be portable.

That is still a way off. But even sceptics such as Sloman acknowledge practitioners needs to watch the virtual space carefully. "This stuff is here to stay so they have to get it right. But they must never forget that learning is about learning, not technology," he says.

TIPS

Getting started on Second Life

Download the SL software from www.secondlife.com and follow the instructions to create an avatar. This is your

persona, and you can pick how it looks and change it at will.

When you start you are directed to an orientation island where you can learn to move and communicate. This is not as easy as it might be, but many firms with SL islands have their own orientation exercises for staff, clients and visitors that are more user friendly.

There is a search button that allows you to find places to visit. Manpower, Kelly Services, PA Consulting and IBM have open access islands, as do many other firms – but most also have closed islands for private communications or create their own SL-style worlds behind firewalls. To access closed islands you will need an electronic invitation.

LAW

What about the legal issues?

Do you have to pay taxes on income earned in SL's currency, Linden Dollars (L$), if you exchange them for real dollars? And do the minimum wage and other employment laws apply? It's an area of law that is largely untested, but David Naylor, partner at law firm Field Fisher Waterhouse, says the law "does not stop at the edge of a computer screen".

"Companies who are recruiting people as greeters on SL are not usually going through HR and that creates legal risks," he warns. Many greeters are paid in Lindens at a rate below the minimum wage. The Australian tax authorities have recently ruled that Linden income is taxable, says Naylor, but UK authorities have not yet got to grips with the implications of SL.

Then there's discrimination. SL's advantage is you can't tell a person's age, gender or race. But what if someone felt they were discriminated against at an SL recruitment fair because their avatar was black?

u See page 48 for more on social networking and the law.

RECRUITMENT

Attracting staff in the virtual world

Recruitment is one of the areas that has seen the most SL experiments so far. Kelly Services, Manpower and TMP, for example, all have SL islands. On Kelly's island, apart from some fun elements, such as interactive workstations where avatars can earn new outfits, there is a selection of live vacancies on noticeboards that allows visitors to click though to a website for more information. The island is manned by a small number of marketing people and recruiters – all real-life staff, mostly from Kelly's headquarters in Troy, Michigan.

Avatar Hooligan Dollinger, a Kelly recruiter in real life, says that he has recruited several people via SL, but that, for now, Kelly's presence is more about exploring the possibilities of Second Life and helping clients understand the environment. "If people want to find a job, they can do that via regular websites," he points out.

David Coombs, UK regional head of digital at recruitment company TMP Worldwide, hosted an SL recruitment fair last year for KPMG, Yell and Royal Bank of Scotland. He too says the event was more about understanding the environment than hiring people – and won't say how many people were recruited as a result. Some 300 avatars attended the event over three days and 100 first interviews took place. Before securing an interview slot, candidates had to pre-register and upload their CVs.

What did participants learn from the process?

One thing that proved helpful, says Coombs, was creating "pre-built" suits of clothes, so that people who had not mastered dressing their avatars well could still look smart. He adds that it was as easy to tell on Second Life whether a candidate was serious or not as it is in real life and that timewasters were not a problem.

IBM is experimenting with Second Life, particularly for graduate recruitment. Technical internship manager Matthew Whitbourne has set up several campus events and expects this to become an increasingly important channel. "It's a

way of engaging with Generation Y on its own terms," he says. Whitbourne is currently planning an event with Manchester University students, where an IBM "master inventor" will talk to them on SL about mainframe computers. "This way it takes him an hour instead of a day of travelling." Whitbourne says students are more willing to ask direct questions on SL than in real life. "I've been asked what my salary is!" he says. He also suggests that since so much workplace communication these days is electronic, seeing how people communicate electronically is in itself quite useful.

CASE STUDY

How my Second Life alter ego helped me to write this article, by Hashi Syedain

My avatar Fanfare Snook (pictured above) was born in September 2007, but I found learning to operate on the SL orientation island so complex that I got bored and gave up. I was also put off by an early encounter with an avatar whose first question was "asl?" ("Age? Sex? Location?"). That seemed quite seedy.

This time it has been absorbing. The difference was that I had a purpose and was able to approach people in a business context.

Fanfare's main guide was Chester Orbit, Peter Dunkley in real life, marketing director for Depo, a consultancy that helps real-life companies set up in SL.

Depo created an SL business park in 2006 where it has built islands for itself and its clients. In fact Depo gave up its real offices last year. "We have about 20 staff in different locations, such as the US and UK, and a real office wouldn't cut it," said Dunkley.

Chester taught me many things that it would have taken a long time to work out myself – how to understand maps, for example.

He also showed me how networking can work on SL. Once, he sent a message to a lawyer contact who was online and immediately teleported in to join us. No delays, just instant results: a short introduction on SL followed up with a real-life phone call. Fantastic!

SL enthusiasts talk about how it brings down barriers. I certainly found that it was easier to build a rapport with the people I interviewed on SL than with those I spoke to only by phone.

It probably took me about eight hours to start to feel reasonably confident about the basics – and I'm a very non-technical person.

Fanfare had fun researching this article. She danced on a roof with Futura Cosmos, in real life Margaret Regan, head of the FutureWork Institute, drank whiskey with Chester and shopped for gestures with IBM's Ada Alfa (Holly Stewart, UK lead in 3Dinternet in real life).

Did Fanfare help me to do my job better? She was invaluable in researching this feature. But I'm not convinced she would help on a more traditional subject.

Links

Second Life
www.secondlife.com

FROM THE CIPD
Second Life case study
"Virtual Worlds and Learning: Using Second Life at Duke Corporate Education"
www.cipd.co.uk/helpingpeoplelearn

Helping people learn
The CIPD is commissioning a new research project on social networking. For details, visit its website or email Martyn Sloman.
www.cipd.co.uk/helpingpeoplelearn
m.sloman@cipd.co.uk

HRD conference and exhibition
Clive Shepherd is speaking at HRD in London this week.
www.cipd.co.uk/hrd