

February 2012

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Telecommute

Bob Nardini

Coutts Information Services, bnardini@couttsinfo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nardini, Bob (2012) "Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Telecommute," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 36.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6106>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.



**Dawson
Books**

Explore, Discover, Acquire...

Dawson Books is a world-class international supplier of academic and professional books, ebooks, shelf ready and information services to academic, professional and research institutions.

The breadth of our service includes shelf ready books, the latest technological data enhancements to MARC records, reclassification, RFID and dawsonera, our ebook platform, which fully integrates with our services for print.

Contact the central sales team
centralsales@dawsonbooks.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 1933 417500

Why Dawson Books?

- Over 200,000 ebooks, growing daily
- Over 450 ebook publishing partners
- eBook purchasing models ranging from Patron Driven Acquisition to Consortial Purchasing
- Free access to search over 18m title records
- Market leading supply times
- Central acquisition platform for print and ebook purchase
- Customized shelf ready processing available
- Dedicated sales and customer support

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Telecommute

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services)
<bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

Last November I made a long drive before Thanksgiving from Nashville, Tennessee to New Hampshire, about 1,200 miles worth of solitary time. Thirty years ago almost exactly I'd made a similar trip, south to north, Virginia to New York then, to take a job after grad school. This time, I was moving from one location to another in the job I already had. I'd always recalled that first drive with pleasure, hours alone with nothing to do but listen to the radio and enjoy the November sparseness of the passing roadside.

The November sparseness was the same this time, but thirty years later a radio wasn't the only electronic device in the car. In 2011, as against 1981, I also had a laptop to pick up emails each night and morning and a **Blackberry** to serve 24/7 — or really 24/3, the extent of this trip — for emails, phone calls, and clumsy efforts whenever the need or whim arose for a Web search. I can work from anywhere, I've sometimes said, and on this trip I'd be proving that.

While I'd wanted to start sooner, the afternoon of Thanksgiving Monday was when I left Nashville. If I'd left in the morning I could have aimed for Virginia, but that would mean driving tired in the dark after Knoxville, three

hours off, and so that's where I set my sights. The drive from Nashville is all highway on I-40 East, which follows the plateau of Middle Tennessee as it rises toward the mountains where Tennessee borders North Carolina and Virginia. It's mostly farmland east of Nashville, then wooded the rest of the way, and other than rolling hills always on the horizon, there's not much to see other than occasional houses and small settlements in the distance; a close look at the periodic truck-stop intersections off the highway; and billboards fairly regularly, which in Tennessee can range from Bible scripture to bourbon; also casinos and hotel chains, outlet stores, antique malls, and for-profit colleges. A pair of other sights are the exceptions, an enormous ceramic tile manufacturing plant at Crossville, about two hours east of Nashville, and another enormous structure, a power plant on the Cross River at Kingston, forty minutes after that. Once you see signs for the **Oak Ridge National Laboratory** (the signs are all you do see of that), you've reached the outskirts of Knoxville and soon there are shopping areas, chain hotels and restaurants, car dealerships and gas stations, and all the rest of the outer commercial layer of any city.

I chose a hotel I knew how to find near

Knoxville's 1982 World's Fair site, still landmarked by the "Sunsphere," what's always looked to me like a five-story lawn ornament globe, but that evening when I spotted it, my sign that the day's driving was done. I handed my credit card and frequent guest card to the woman behind the desk who, as she returned them to me said, "I feel sorry for you, you travel a lot." Probably not what she's supposed to say, and not usually the way I feel about travel either, but as I began dinner at the hotel bar, having too little energy to look for something in the city beyond, ordering their menu's "signature sandwich," a meal which upon arrival was a big disappointment — a French dip made with what must have been last week's roast beef — it occurred to me she knew more about that hotel than I did.

I hadn't stopped much between Nashville and Knoxville, and so hadn't paid a lot of attention to my Blackberry as it lay on the passenger seat, other than to be occasionally conscious of the little double-buzzing sound it makes every time an email comes in. So, with laptop at hand, I had more than a sorry sandwich to occupy me at dinner. Since it was Thanksgiving week, email had begun to slow

continued on page 56

down, and it took only an hour to get through the day's accumulation, which included news that a former colleague's wife had had their first baby; that there was a likely hacking incident with our eBooks at one library; that a group of libraries in Australia, new customers, were moving along in getting set up; and that colleagues were investigating if it was possible in our system, with downloaded eBooks, to enable early check-in.

By morning in Tennessee the UK workday was in full swing and early risers over here were online already too. So upon waking up with a fresh accumulation of email, replying to a string of them was a good way to avoid Knoxville's rush hour, first by thanking a customer for an error she'd noticed in our database, and then going on to the rest. Breakfast didn't take long, since I was the only guest in the hotel restaurant that Thanksgiving week morning, and I was back on I-40 shortly after nine.

Which was a good start, unlike the day before. It was still mid-morning when I turned north toward Virginia at Dandridge, Tennessee on I-81, the highway I'd be driving right into Wednesday. Most of Tuesday I'd be in the Shenandoah Valley, moving north between the Blue Ridge Mountains to the east and the Appalachian Plateau to the west, a more dramatic drive than the day before in Tennessee, with valley scenes and mountain vistas on view the whole day till dark. But since I had the whole day this time, and with only clear weather in sight, I was less concerned with making time and stopped more often to consult the **Blackberry**, which the whole way competed with Shenandoah glories for my attention. The most unforgettable sight in the valley, though, because so off-scale and out-of-context with everything else, was no postcard mountain pass, but a **Tyson** chicken processing plant at New Market, a building as startlingly enormous as the ceramic plant the day before in Tennessee.

Much of the day's mail had to do with eBooks, true most of the time for some years now, as the format that failed to take off for so long has now lifted well off the ground. Its ascent is occupying almost anyone with anything to do with the book business, all of us at mission control communicating with one another from our respective stations, trying to keep the enterprise on course, or more like it, on course as we each see things. The mission went on high alert, just about at the Tennessee-Virginia state line, for me, when one colleague and then another forwarded a news item originating on the publisher side.

Penguin USA, one of the "Big 6" trade publishers, had announced that they were pulling their new titles from library eBook vendors. That meant that they joined **Simon & Schuster**, **Hachette**, and **Macmillan** in this self-embargo of the library market, with **HarcourtCollins** famously allowing its 26 loans, and only **Random House** looking at libraries as if everything were business as usual. **Penguin**

cited security concerns over user downloads of its files. Among those who protested **Penguin's** move was the **American Library Association**, whose spokesperson expressed "disappointment" and said that there was no evidence that library patrons should be under suspicion as pirates.

Not long before I'd attended a meeting where I heard a top executive of a different publishing house express the same fear. "I can go online and find my books for sale in a dozen different places," he said, referring to rogue sites offering downloads of files with DRM wrappers helpfully removed. This is a publisher with a worldwide brand, thousands of books, and a publishing operation headquartered in a glass and steel skyscraper in the heart of midtown Manhattan, who's spooked by what are, in effect, the digital equivalents of the tabletop booksellers you used to see more often, many stories below, on New York's sidewalks.

It's not an argument librarians like to hear, and just one of the points that sometimes divide the people whose business is to publish books from the people whose business is to lend them. Publishers don't always buy the counter-arguments, which to them can bring to mind adjectives such as naive, angry, militant, out-of-touch. Librarians have their own set of words for the publishers who, in their view, don't get it: obtuse, greedy, stubborn, out-of-touch. While the recent eBook trajectory has been impressive, all systems, at this point, are not quite at go.

I slept that second night in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, where the main local thoroughfare crossing I-81 is the Lincoln Highway. Two hours back in New Market, it had been the Lee Highway. In fact **Robert E. Lee's** army passed through Chambersburg in 1863, as it moved north out of the Shenandoah Valley on the way to Gettysburg, not far to the east. In my hotel parking lot in the morning I had a brief conversation with a Virginian heading south, this day, to his home in Staunton, a construction worker whose pickup truck parked next to my Mazda looked as big as a tank. He told me he was glad I was leaving, that would make it a lot easier for him to back out. "I travel all the time," he told me, as we exchanged small talk about our respective trips. I asked him about getting past New York City later on, where, on the day before Thanksgiving, traffic might be a nightmare. "Don't go that way," he told me, "stay north on 81 to Binghamton, where you can cut up toward Albany, and then east."

It sounded like good advice, and I took it. Early on I had doubts, though, since on I-81 in Pennsylvania you don't just see the mountains, you're in them. The interior of Pennsylvania can be as remote a region as there is on the highways of the northeast. For long stretches past Harrisburg, the road cuts through rugged, thickly-wooded areas with no vistas at all for driving pleasure, especially when heavy fog comes in to ensure you can't see the car in

front of you, let alone anything else, on inclines up or down hugging the narrow, deep valley walls of the state's anthracite coal region. As the New York State line finally approached, the mountains taper off and the forest recedes. When the fog lifted too, yielding a clear day and a high blue sky, with light traffic on the ground, I was thanking my driving friend from Virginia.

Then just before Binghamton, from nowhere it seemed, a huge blocklike shape arose into view on a hillside. It was a building so white and windowless it was as if from science fiction, nearly glowing, and the equivalent in size of the tile and power plants in Tennessee, and the **Tyson** plant in Virginia. The little New Hampshire town I was traveling to, and all its surrounding towns, could probably hold their town meetings inside concurrently, and no one would notice. This building was a book warehouse, with no need for guesswork on that, thanks to a familiar orange penguin icon and "**Penguin Putnam, Inc.**" displayed in the top corner of the building, the only break in the vast whiteness of the building's face. This was the very same **Penguin** who had pulled its new eBooks from libraries earlier in the week.

Issues concerning eBooks can get awfully abstract, but there's nothing like a big book warehouse, or "distribution center," as they're called today, to ground things a bit. I'd been working across the street from **Ingram's** largest distribution center, outside of Nashville, for the past four years, and always marveled at the scale and scope of such an intricate operation whenever walking through it. Now I felt that same sense of wonder, maybe stronger, coming across this one so unexpectedly. A little Web research, later on, revealed that the building was where **Penguin** housed hardcovers and children's books, that the building was more than 500,000 square feet in dimension, and that some 100 million books moved through it in a year. That's an awful lot of **Tom Clancy**, **Patricia Cornwell**, and **Toni Morrison**, to name just three of the **Penguin** authors whose books must have passed in and out of this building in many pallet loads. Easy to see, if a print book operation like this belonged to you, along with all the books in it, how you might look at eBook issues a little differently than someone whose view is from some other angle.

Email had further died down with Thanksgiving only a day off, but even so I had to pull over a couple of times for phone meetings. While it's not unheard of for me to get the time zone wrong for a meeting, for one of these I had the wrong day altogether. I could sure use a desk to get myself organized again, I thought. Maybe I really can't work from anywhere. It wasn't, after all, for nothing that I was driving these 1,200 miles. Everything's moving online, I know, I know, but that warehouse and this whole trip reminded me that there's something about this old physical world of ours that's not going to be so easy to shake. 🐼

