The Scholarly Publishing Scene – Working From Home

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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Working From Home

Column Editor: **Myer Kutz** (President, Myer Kutz Associates, Inc.) <myerkutz@aol.com>

Thirty years ago, when I was running scientific and technical publishing at **Wiley**, I noticed that my counterpart, who was responsible for business and trade books, had set up what was to me at that time an unusual working arrangement for the head of his production department. She was managing it (I'd guess that there were a dozen or so people in the department) from her home office in Phoenix, as I remember, nearly 2,500 miles from **Wiley's** New York headquarters. No big deal, I reckoned; after all, most of the business and trade books presented far fewer production issues than sci-tech books, with, for example, extensive chemical formulae, multi-level equations, or complex tables, etc.

So I was bemused, but hardly tempted to look for similar arrangements within my own staff of nearly 140 people. Besides, I'd always thought of reference book publishing as a collaborative effort, which benefitted from the ability of the people involved to work in close proximity with one another.

An important aside about how the world has moved on is in order here: given the harsh economic realities of sci-tech book publishing, the production people who work on the handbooks I now package for several publishers are likely to all be located in some reduced-cost place like India. As was the case back in the day when my colleague was content for his production chief to work 2,500 miles from the people she managed, the expectation is that nothing will be lost. (Whether anything was lost, I have no idea; I left **Wiley** long before such questions could be answered.) In my experience, the Internet enables quick and seamless transmission from anywhere on earth of copy-editors' queries, page proof, and chapter contributors' responses.

In hindsight, however, and despite my views on how complex sci-tech book publishing operations were, I probably should have looked more closely at possibilities for having any production or other staff work remotely. There was a good financial reason: **Wiley's** lease on multiple floors in a tower at Third Avenue and Thirty-Ninth Street — expensive real estate under most circumstances — was at punishingly onerous terms. (The company moved its headquarters to Hoboken, NJ, as soon as it could.) The division I managed needed a lot of space in those pre-cubicle days, when two levels of staff had their own private offices, with floor-to-ceiling walls and doors that could be closed. Should I have been looking for ways to reduce the size of my division's footprint? Might it have helped my bottom line in one way or another, lease or no lease? Let's just say that I can't go back to that future to find out, as amusing as that might be.

Publishers can't outsource all of the jobs their business operations require to countries where salaries are much lower than they are here. But they can find ways to economize while relatively high salaried American workers remain on the payroll. One way is to reduce rent expenditures by having fewer and fewer staffers work in expensive office space at all, or if they do have to show up, have them use shared space. At some publishers, a member of an executive search firm with publishing clients told me, even the head of sales might not have a permanent office. Just like junior employees, he has to keep his work materials in a locker and use whatever work space he can find at surfaces arranged in the open area that his firm makes available. You can reserve an enclosed space for a meeting; the local **Starbucks** would do just as well, it seems to me.

I don't suppose that a young person nowadays with a new publishing job would find a completely open office plan remarkable in the slightest. Instead, it might meet her expectations for the atmosphere in which she would do her work. I don't know at what age or level of experience a more seasoned employee would find an open plan annoying or even counterproductive. I do know that I myself would find it so.

There is another set of observations relevant to this discussion, namely, what do publishing employees working remotely, or operating small independent business that provide services to publishers, say about their experiences? Recently, I obtained responses to a brief questionnaire distributed to remote workers, and in one case a freelancer, located in

upstate New York and northeast Ohio. The three remote workers, all of them STM acquisitions editors, have been doing so for three-plus, five, and 17 years. The freelancer, who mainly provides editorial services to a textbook publisher, has been doing so for six years.

Two of these remote workers, who have no direct reports, are in touch with people in various offices several times every day via Skype, email, phone calls. The third remote worker wrote: "We have multiple 'home' offices and I work daily with people in at least four of them. For most of that communication, email and instant messaging are effective and efficient but calls are not problematic or unusual. I am in direct contact with my publisher multiple times a day via multiple means. Today was a conference call with a team, instant messaging, a 1:1 scheduled check-in meeting, email, and a quick spur-of-the-moment 'gut check' phone call." The freelancer primarily uses email to communicate with clients, with some phone calls as needed or very infrequent in-person meetings.

One remote worker visits the home office once to twice a year, usually for a social activity, such as a holiday party or a summer picnic. Another visits approximately four times per year. The third does so as required — typically for corporate internal meetings or training.

When I asked about the advantages of working remotely or freelance, I received these responses:

"Remote working allows for greater flexibility of schedule as well as more time to get work done. Being in an office can often be a great distraction for people who are outgoing. I can be present or not present at my discretion (turning Skype status on and off as needed) which allows me to prioritize my work. In an office, people see you and assume you have time to chat, discuss things, etc. It is much harder to tell them to come back later than it is to put your Skype status on busy."

"There were limited opportunities in my region for working with publishers so this provided me with the ability to continue in my chosen career. Also allows for greater flexibility in how I do my job by supporting an environment for non-traditional work days, especially when working in a global industry. Other advantages include flexibility in hours, less distractions from others, saving on commute time and other costs incurred by working in an office (lunches out, work clothes, etc)."

"Flexibility/balance with my family, flexibility in schedule, choosing my own work."

"I originally became a full-time remote due to a spousal employment-related required relocation. When I tried to tender my resignation due to the pending move, my publisher preferred to set me up as a remote. Because I started when working remotely was pretty much unheard-of, I have always recognized it not as a right, but a privilege. I've chosen to remain a remote employee because I appreciate the ability to focus in an environment that I control, to work independently with appropriate support, and because my job role is very well-suited to being remotely based. I have a quiet, structured environment that I control, that is designed to work for me. I'm able to leave my files out if I need/want to, there is no lack of privacy when I need to make an author or editor call that requires confidentiality. The commute time is unbeatable and transportation costs are eliminated. Coming in early or staying late has less of an impact on my personal life. Costs for meals, etc. are lower than when I worked in an office and ate out every day. My role is ideally suited for remote because our authors and editors as well as our internal corporate colleagues are located all around the globe and this job can be done from anywhere."

What are the disadvantages? Here are the comments:

"Remote workers are out of sight and sometimes out of mind. You need to be aggressive about being included in task forces

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and other special projects that initiate in the office. Some positions within the company are not attainable for remote workers (depends on company and management). It is sometimes hard to stop working because your desk is always with you. I find I work more hours now than I did when I worked in an office.”

“[Difficult to] stay connected to the group at large. Sometimes lag in getting up to speed on systems due to the fact that you don’t have people right there to speak with. [Lack of] growth opportunities.”

“Can be isolating; hard to stop working when the office is in your home.”

“There are times when not seeing my colleagues for extended periods of time is isolating because we are very business focused during work hours when we are interacting. Typically, I see them at least once a year but for colleagues who are not part of my

immediate team, it could be much longer between times when we’re together. That said, it’s the same for those working in our various offices as they don’t necessarily see colleagues from other offices regularly either. It is harder to remain ‘in the loop’ if a company does not have strong corporate communication policies. If the attitude is ‘share it in the hall’ then it’s definitely hard to stay up-to-date. It requires specific effort to ensure that you’re not ‘forgotten’ by management — you have to manage your professional visibility differently than an office-based person does.”

I asked, finally, do you recommend this professional life-style to others?

“Yes, if you have the right personality.”

“Yes, for the convenience and flexibility.”

“If you can work independently; you have to be more task-oriented and less people-oriented or be able to get your social fix somewhere else.”

“I recommend that you really know yourself before you make the choice. It is not for everyone by any means.” 🌿

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frown! It’s a shame that all of it must end but the memories are wonderful.

New and Special this year — ATG Trend-spotting! With all the changes going on around us, we are trying to position ourselves or our libraries or companies for the future. **ATG Me-**

dia is taking one small step. Lisa Hinchliffe is taking charge of this new initiative. We want to establish an ongoing process for identifying social, policy, economic, technology, and educational trends and forecasting the impacts on the information industry, with particular attention to scholarly communication and publishing as well as academic and research libraries. We are designing a community-engaged process for collaboratively exploring

these trends and forecasts and are planning to have an online **kickoff webinar on June 19**. We’re working on details and will be in touch soon! Save the date! Let me know if you have any questions!

Scott Plutchak’s article in this issue about the allure of **shiny new things** seems pertinent to a discussion of trends (p.63). When is a fad

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