

# Working Remotely: Is Anyone Out There?



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Buried in a drafty office in a 140-year-old building outside of Wentzville, Missouri, I stare at my computer screen and wonder whether anyone is really on the other end of the delicate digital thread that connects us. Or am I living in a *Twilight Zone* episode where I am the last human alive and the emails I'm receiving are really controlled by aliens or droids? Such are the thoughts of a remote managing editor.

Don't get me wrong—I wouldn't trade my situation for the medical society office life for anything. I love working remotely; in fact, I wrote an article about that several years ago for *EON*.<sup>1</sup> But nothing is perfect; it does have drawbacks. From interruptions to loneliness to invisibility, the problems are very real.

Some remote workers complain that their kids don't respect their boundaries and interrupt them constantly. I have an office away from my home, and my kids have all grown up and flown the coop, but being interrupted is a dilemma not only perpetrated by children. Adults who wouldn't dream of dropping in on me if I worked at the society office don't seem to understand that I am no less at work just because my colleagues are hundreds of miles away. They think nothing of stopping by for a chat and are mystified when I say I can't leave to attend non-work-related meetings of local organizations during the day. I'm sure many of them think I'm just anti-social.

Speaking of colleagues, another problem with working remotely is that I don't really get to know the other people who work at the society office. I can't have lunches with them, discover what they find annoying, talk about what they do for the company, or learn about their families or non-work lives. I'm not there for the introductions on a new employee's first day. I get the office-wide emails that say, "Join us in celebrating Jennifer's birthday with a slice of cake," but I can't

greet her in person and share her party. Some of the society employees probably think the "Managing Editor" is just a myth. An email message sent from me to the birthday girl isn't the same as a face-to-face greeting, hug, and conversation about how she will celebrate after work, and the unfulfilled offer of cake elicits my wistful sigh.

The inability to get to know my co-workers makes email a minefield. They don't know my sense of humor, so they can easily misunderstand my simplest messages. I find myself reading and re-reading every email before hitting "Send" to make sure it can't be misinterpreted. Of course, that's a good idea anyway, but it's especially true for the remote worker. Because I can't step over to someone's office to give a quick message, I spend a lot of time making sure my communications are clear, concise, complete, and polite. A corollary to that is it's harder to reach people to get answers. Email is much easier to ignore than a knock on someone's office door or a face hovering inches away. People also tend to not read emails thoroughly, so even if I get an answer, it's often incomplete. They may ignore that question in my last paragraph or misread something. Face-to-face I would immediately say, "No, I meant..." or "But what about..." But when I put that follow-up in an email, I might be waiting another day or two to get my answer. Not having someone looking over my shoulder can be listed in the pro column of working remotely—until I have a question and wish someone were there with the quick answer.

Sitting in on conference calls of office meetings can be challenging for remote workers. Not only is it often difficult to hear what they're saying, but sometimes they forget I'm even on the line. I can't see their PowerPoints and videos, and they don't ask my opinion or give me the chance to vote on the floating holiday. When I do get to speak, I wonder whether they are rolling their eyes at each other. Paranoia—yes, that's a drawback for the remote worker!

I work a lot of hours—10- to 12-hour days are not unusual for me—but no one knows that! I find myself looking for excuses to send an email to my bosses when I'm working late, just so they know I'm still in the office. I check my email around the clock, more frequently than if I were in the office under the watchful eye of supervisors, including during my lunchtime, to make sure they don't think I'm taking a lot of breaks. The society office lights are set to go off at six

o'clock; most nights I'm still going strong at that hour. If I were in the Chicago office, someone would notice. Not getting "credit" for the extra time I put in is frustrating—but more than that, it makes me feel invisible. Invisibility, by the way, is bad for a person's career. Out of sight, out of mind holds true for the remote worker, who has to try extra hard to make herself be seen. When it's time to move up in the company or just to get extra favors, I'm not the person they think of.

So *have* aliens taken over the world? Probably not, but I sometimes feel like I'm the subject of a knock-knock joke (Who's there? Hello? Anybody?). Envy the remote worker if you must, but also remember her when it's time for promotions—or birthday cake.

## Reference

1. Bowman D. Follow your yellow brick road. *EON*. 2008;1(10):2-3.

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