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SANITY CHECK

The hazards of working from home

Tracey I. Batt / Special to NLJ.com
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Kilroy the squirrel

In this high-tech day and age, there are many careers, including numerous legal positions, that can be performed in part or in whole from the comfort of one's home. For example, I am the Executive Director of a small, statewide legal services non-profit organization. I telecommute from my spare bedroom.

This sounded like an ideal situation when I first took the job a little less than three years ago. To be sure, there are many positive aspects to this kind of position. Unless I have a meeting or a speaking engagement outside of my home office, I can dress comfortably without worrying about what does and does not constitute appropriate "business casual" attire. (My inability to tell the difference is a topic for a future column.) I can roll out of bed 30 seconds before I need to be at work. I can avoid purchasing all my meals from fast food chains, delivery services, and vending machines. I can be home when the washing machine repair company or Federal Express says that they will be sending someone to the house between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. (That's not a time window, people. That's a time doorway.)

But there are many things that the proverbial "they" do not tell you about telecommuting from home. They don't warn you about the days when you say to yourself, "I'll just let the computer warm up while I brush my teeth. Oh hey! The message light is on. I wonder

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who called." The next thing you know, it's 4:55 PM, the Post Office closes in five minutes, you haven't eaten anything, you forgot to feed the fish and put dinner in the crockpot, and you're still dressed in your fuzzy bunny slippers and "Dark Side of the Moon" boxer shorts.

They don't warn you that, when you don't need to worry about rush hour traffic or public transportation schedules, you always think you can fit in just one more task before you call it a day. Then you wonder what that light is and realize it's the sun rising.

I understand that many people work from home so that they can spend more time with their families. However, that is not my situation. There isn't anyone here but me. My job entails communicating with clients, pro bono attorneys, student interns, board members, grantors, speaking engagement hosts, and people working on events, usually by telephone, e-mail, and fax. I have been known to go a whole work week without having a single face-to-face conversation with someone who is not employed by the United States Postal Service. I have caught myself having animated discussions with my pet betta Carmen Miranda Warning, who lives in a Lava Lamp-shaped fish bowl, and Kilroy the squirrel who, unlike his compatriots, does not flee the yard when I open the back door to fill the bird feeder, opting instead to peer at me from over the fence to ensure that he is the first back to the feeder when I reenter the house. Clearly, they do not warn you about this. Nobody ever says at your firm going-away party, "And when you start talking to a chipmunk, we'll be here waiting for you." (Do I talk to a chipmunk? Yes. His name is Comma.)

They don't warn you that this lack of direct human contact will bleed over into your social life. When I worked in New York City, I had plenty of friends and workmates with whom I could go out for a drink, dinner, a movie or a show on the spur of the moment. Although I now live less than 45 minutes from my parents in one direction and my sister and my brother and his family in another direction, I can no longer get together with anyone on the spur of the moment. These days, gathering the family for something as simple as a barbecue in my suburban backyard is roughly akin to orchestrating troop movements or herding cats. Possibly orchestrating cat troop movements.

Also, because I don't interact directly with people on a day-to-day basis, I am socially unprepared. They don't warn you that your wardrobe will consist entirely of sweatpants, T-shirts, and business suits, with nothing in between the two extremes. They don't warn you that you will wear makeup so rarely that your mascara will be a solid lump of carbon that will give you pink eye when you actually need it.

Most importantly, they absolutely do not warn you that, if the only human interaction you have is distance-based business



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communication and stamp purchasing, you will quickly lose any social skills you ever had, assuming you ever had any in the first place. So I am going to warn you, since no one else will: If you don't make an effort to get out and meet people, they will not come to you. As someone once said to me, "I never met anyone in my house." If you're single and working from home, venture out occasionally and be a part of the world. Otherwise, you may find yourself on a first-name basis with no one but your neighborhood wildlife. And the folks at the Post Office.

I asked a friend, a writer who also works at home, how she copes with the lack of stimulation, at least while her children are in school. She responded that she deliberately draws a distinction between her "work" life and her "home" life, even though they occupy the same physical space, by dressing for work, even when she is working from home. She noted that doing so puts her in the proper "head space" for work. As she suggests, I need to find a way to do something similar, to draw that line: Now I am at work, now I am not at work.

My friend also mentioned that the work-at-home revolution accounts for all those people huddled over laptops at chain coffee stores with wireless access during the day, trying to shield their computer screens from prying eyes. Oh, is that what they are doing? It all makes sense to me now. People who crave the company of other people but still need to work leave the home office and sit in a room with other people doing exactly the same thing. That is a brilliant notion. Unfortunately, there aren't many aspects of my job that can be performed in a public setting over a steaming cup of coffee. But I'll bet writing columns for the *National Law Journal* is one that can.

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