

IS ANYBODY OUT THERE?

BY ROBERT M. GIGNAC

I believe it was Thursday, January 22nd when the thought struck me—I was alone again. The holidays had been a whirlwind of activity, people descending upon our house, us descending on others, a social calendar that made us wonder why we hadn't hired someone to help us keep track of it. For some reason, it didn't strike me until that day that I was alone again, at my desk, overlooking the town of Blonay.

When I made the decision to give up corporate life, being alone was perhaps one of the hardest things to get used to. I was prepared for the rigors of running my own business (not really, some days I'm still not), but I wasn't aware of how much time I would have to spend by myself. Alone.

During my corporate days, socialization was as easy as sticking my head above the cubicle wall and asking, "Who needs a coffee?" Just for fun, I tried that yesterday; the sound of my own voice echoing down the hallway scared me. Don't get me wrong; there are many advantages to the solo home office.

Advantages: it's really quiet, no outside distractions allow one to stay focused on complex tasks, no sharing a bathroom with co-workers, the refrigerator is only 24 steps away, and nobody stops by to ask if you watched last night's gripping episode of: <insert reality show title here>.

Disadvantages: it's really quiet, it can be hard to break inertia to focus on complex tasks, you are the janitorial staff, the refrigerator is only 24 steps away, and nobody stops by to ask you if you watched last night's gripping episode of: <insert reality show title here>.

It sounds like I'm playing games, but I'm not. Some of the advantages are also disadvantages. One of the first things you need to do before you can work from home successfully is to understand what type of social interaction allows you to function better. As a writer, I like the quiet of my home office (or laptop well balanced while I recline on the couch), but there are many days when I long to hear the voices of people in conversation. One of the advantages of living in Switzerland is that the main spoken language is not English, so even if I go to the local coffee shop and fire up the wireless laptop, their conversations don't distract me because I can tune out a language I don't speak. There is an ex-pat coffee shop I can go to if I want English-language stimulation (after all, snippets of stories and characters are everywhere)—it depends on what I'm working on that day. But aside from the social interaction issues, there

are two characteristics that you must have to be a successful home office worker:

Self-Motivation—Without this, working at home will never work for you. When you are alone you are completely reliant on yourself to get started each day. If you need someone looking over your shoulder (and some do), you'll find yourself easily distracted. Nobody will be there to remind you that you have deadlines to meet. If your printer isn't working or you can't seem to send/receive email (your lifeline to the outside world for the home worker), there is no yelling over the cubicle wall, "Hey, can somebody help me?" You'll have to learn to troubleshoot some things all by yourself.

Obsession—No, I'm not talking about becoming the neighbourhood stalker. To be successful in the home office not only requires you to "get started" but also to "keep going". The refrigerator, daytime television, and unlimited web surfing will conspire against you completing any given task if you let them. Being obsessively focused on the task at hand, diligent about your schedule and to-do list will help you tremendously in blocking out these distractions.

You know your social style: you're self-motivated and willing to be obsessive enough that you stay focused—you're done right? Wrong. One last little piece of advice will make a big difference to the success of your home office enterprise: You have to know when to quit. No, I don't mean quit your job; but you have to know when to stop working.

Parkinson's Law states: "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." In your home office you'll find a tendency to start when you fire the computer up in the morning, and work until something (or someone) pulls you away from it. When you work in an office and an idea arrives on Saturday afternoon you write it down. It's rare that you jump in your car, drive there, and do something about it. With a home office it is too easy to walk from the kitchen and down the hall thinking to yourself "this will just take a minute..." and four hours later your spouse pokes their head in the office and says something potentially unpleasant. It will be really unpleasant if this is the fifth day in a row that inspiration has struck at a bad time.

So these are the simple basics of successful work in your home office: know your social interaction style, be able to kick-start yourself, stay focused without people pushing you, and just as important, don't let your work consume all the time you have at home. I can tell you from experience that it can be very rewarding (if occasionally lonely). Now if you'll excuse me, I'm 24 steps away from a ham sandwich. **E**

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