

# Working from home

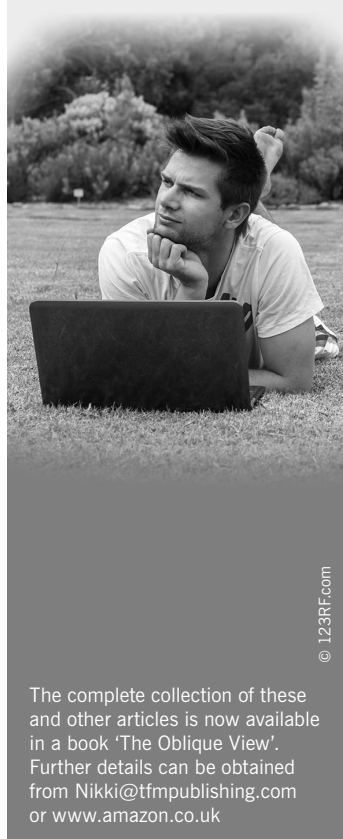


## THE OBLIQUE VIEW

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We continue our series in which Consultant Interventionist Dr Michael Norell takes a sideways look at life in the cath lab...and beyond. In this column, he muses on taking work home.

A recent news item concerned the time that senior managers spend outside normal office hours dealing with emails and the like. Apparently trawling through and answering correspondence, together with the odd phone call to colleagues similarly embroiled in evening or weekend work and therefore presumably available for discussion, can amount to a day or so per week.

There is a distinction to be drawn between working *from* home – addressing office-related issues but in the comfort of one's own familiar domestic surroundings – and working *at* home. The latter could comprise anything from painting the ceiling, mowing the lawn or producing creative writing such as that absorbing your undivided attention right now.

Acknowledging that ploughing through patient-related administration is unlikely to be an option, it is reasonable to ask whether working on other matters from home might actually be *more* productive than being in one's office with immediate access to a secretary and colleagues. So, what are the ways in which working off-site for one's employers can be made as efficient as possible?

## Welcome distractions

Firstly, there is the avoidance of distractions. Whilst, under normal circumstances, undertaking tasks such as weeding the drive or de-scaling showerheads is all too easy to put off until another day, they suddenly become bizarrely attractive when placed alongside alternatives such as writing a job description, checking the minutes of governance meetings or producing yet another business case.

This is just human nature. I remember when I was at home revising for A-Levels in the summer of... whenever, there were textbooks on Maths, Zoology and Chemistry piled high on the dining room table, and reams of A4 paper together with a clutch of pencils at the ready.

Unfortunately, so were my brother (whose unbridled enthusiasm for schoolwork matched my own) and a mate of his who was staying with us and studying art. His exam preparations consisted of sketching various types of 'real life' – at least, I think that is

the appropriate term. Not being particularly adept at drawing myself, I was mesmerised with the ease and speed with which he could reproduce all manner of natural curves and shapes.

It was not long before the table was strewn with pages of attempted pencil drawings – probably more akin to Dalí or Banksy than Degas or Botticelli. Added to this was a tendency for ITV to run episodes of Danger Man (the forerunner of the iconic Prisoner series, with the late Patrick McGeehan as Number Six) as well as an afternoon film. This was invariably a classic and equally riveting, especially when compared to differentiation and integration, or describing the digestive tract of a dogfish and the nature of the hydrogen bond.

This was my first foray into working from home. The result? Not good. Let's fast forward...

There are certain practicalities to be observed if domestic working is to succeed. Clearly the house should be empty (wife/partner out or in gainful employment; kids at school; dog walked; cat sorted) and any remaining household chores deferred.

Internet/computer function should be unfettered and telephone access also unhindered in order to allow seamless liaising with your secretary and, if necessary, feeding in to any important conference calls.

## The garden office

I can't deny having a preference for working *al fresco* if the weather is decent. Whilst phone and Wi-Fi connections can usually be maintained in the garden, maintaining power to my antiquated laptop – itself with a battery life of at most 15 minutes – can be tricky and involves running an extension cable through the kitchen window.

The other problem is the effect that sunlight has on my ability to actually see what is on the computer screen. It does not use the technology found within a Kindle for instance, and even if I maximise the brightness I still struggle to find the cursor. I have to wiggle my mouse finger all over the place in the hope that, just by chance, I will catch the cursor as it whizzes by and transiently highlights some icon or other on the toolbar.

Having taken advice from my ever-trusty secretary, I recently discovered an option within the mouse/pointer menu that just requires me to hit "control". A circle of rapidly decreasing diameter then immediately appears at the cursor's last known location and thereby

identifies where I am on the page. There! Oooo... I did it just then.

Not everyone functions well in the open air; perhaps there are still distractions around. A colleague of mine, with whom I co-produced a textbook some years ago, used to reassure me that the chapters he was tasked to check would soon be ready as he was planning a weekend on his 'editing patio'. The publishers are still waiting for them.

In the computer age I have no doubt that there are applications and software tweaks that assist the process of distance working. So, you could programme your laptop with the required time you intend to spend toiling with paperwork during your day at home. At selected, and increasingly shorter intervals, the screen would display a reminder, together with an audible signal such

as "Oi! You're not being paid to loaf around; get back here and finish this stuff".

Another modification, which I suspect actually exists, might be the ability to programme the time when emails are actually sent. Hence, when the Chief Executive, Finance Manager and Clinical Director receive your email and then notice that it was sent at 05:30, they will be really impressed.

### Keeping up with the OOFs

I am quite taken with the various types of message that senders can receive automatically when you are away from work (OOF). The basic version is something like "I am out of the office until October 15th. Urgent enquires can be referred to..." etc.

However they range from the slightly too detailed, such as: "Having discovered what I thought initially was an innocuous rash on my trunk, I am currently an inpatient in an infectious diseases unit located on an isolated and undisclosed island off the Hebrides. Incoming emails will be screened by Government officials"...

... to the much more enviable: "I am on the backpacking trip of a lifetime up the Amazon and coming home via Sydney, Hawaii, Mauritius and Tuscany. I will notify all parties when – and if – I decide to return".

Next time you send me correspondence and I'm not around, don't be surprised if you receive the following: "I have been selected as crew on the first manned mission to Mars. I will be out of the office for the next two and a half years and will have limited access to emails" ●

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