

Flying Solo in the New Economy: Manning the Outpost Office

T O D D D , M A D D O C K S

It's 3 a.m. and the crisp mountain air outside my tent electrifies me with a snap. There is definitely something out there. There it is again—closer. The ranger warned me about the bear, but there had been no sign or recent sightings— whoa, he's right outside the tent. Heavy breathing ... stay calm ... no sudden movements. Did I really volunteer for this?

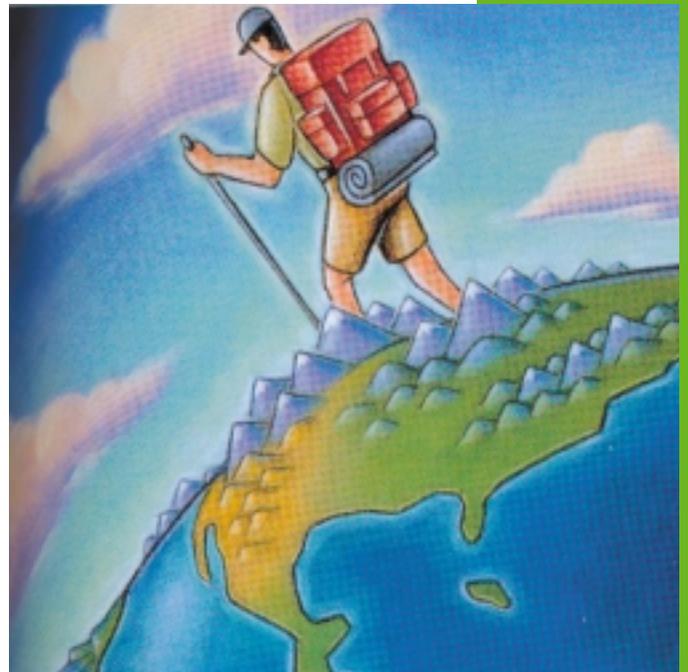
You must be careful what you wish for as your dreams may come true. In my case, the dream was to work from my home. When a hostile corporate takeover put my management team—and my corporate career—on the street in 1994, I took a shot at the home-office experience and have been working this way ever since.

Those of you who share this lifestyle know that wonderful peace of your own quiet space, working in your gym shorts, without a commute. But when the scenery never changes, those walls do start to close in. Even the best panorama, no matter how glorious, can be taken for granted. The home office can constrict you even as you try to relax—too often, the work calls softly through the office door. And when you are pressured, you can work around the clock, making your big event of the day a round trip to the refrigerator. I desperately needed a change of venue.

Road Trip

I put the American Dream on wheels for eight weeks during the summer of 1999. Leaving family and clients to carry on, I experimented with what I hope becomes the destiny for those who take the time to become quintessentially wired. It was not my desire to embark on a life-threatening adventure. The point was to prove that business can continue no matter where it is based, without an interruption of service or income, and that the entrepreneurs of the new millennium can work anywhere we please.

All you need is money. OK, admittedly that sounds like a significant barrier, but the outpost office experience is designed to make you money only if you can



Hungry for a change of scene, a solo lawyer takes a walk on the wild side to refresh, renew—and prove that business can be accomplished nearly anywhere.

take your business tools with you. This means, at a minimum, a laptop computer, printer, cell phone and a capacious set of wheels. Unlike the great adventurers who have the ability to secure sponsors, setting up your outpost office requires a plan like any other personal business endeavor. You may have a boat, a farm or somewhere to stay, but my plan was to sleep in a tent. After all, if you stay in a hotel, you end up working a few hours a day just for your bed. In fact, the costs associated with maintaining your outpost office lifestyle should be itemized before your departure to make sure that you can handle it. In my case, I needed a laptop, so I bought a used one on an Internet auction. I changed the terms of my cell phone contract so that I had one rate for all long distance calls and I increased the base amount of talk time (1,000 minutes a month served me pretty well). Thorough planning kept me in the black, but other intangibles can be garnered during the outpost office adventure.

July. 2 a.m. Base camp. Morning of the departure. The words “go west young man” resound in my thoughts. My eyes are blurry but the Suburban is almost packed. Recently, my time has not been my own, as my clients have been badgering me to do their work before I go. I have been unable to convince them that this journey is not a vacation. The preparation for departure has been going on for two months and now I hardly have time to sleep before I commence the first leg—15 hours to Durango, Colorado.

I had no idea how much preparation would be required. It's the little things that drive you wild. Just four days ago, I had to source a signature stamp so my partner could help with banking at the home office and I have spent days loading important data

onto the laptop. I've learned how to seize control of my home computer by telephone so that I can access any data I need. Despite the exhaustion my heart is pounding with anticipation. I feel very much alive.

Journeying. Five thousand miles of driving in eight weeks can open glorious new vistas. For me, freedom is traveling west on the loneliest highway in the country, Highway 55 across Nevada, or reviewing an otherwise lengthy and tedious lease in the shade of a pool umbrella. The everyday nature of my work forms a baseline, a comfort factor that generates cash flow while my senses luxuriate in the newness of my environment. I look forward to working now, so I can sit still.

Business as usual? One thing that is certain about taking the office on the road—you can't make any money grocery shopping, cutting firewood or traveling. It's funny how many conveniences we take for granted. This is tough. Time is losing all meaning and I'm really starting to wonder if this is truly possible. My cell phone can't keep a big enough charge to sustain long telephone negotiations, which is what business lawyers tend to do. If I can't communicate freely, I am out of business. You definitely need back-up cell phone batteries if the outpost office is in your plans.

Today I created a number of important documents I want to share with my clients but I cannot get the cellular modem to cooperate. The companies that sell computer and communication gadgetry are constantly capturing our imagination with futuristic portrayals of beautiful, wired individuals lounging on the beach while effortlessly enjoying digital telephony. Well, here I am guys, and I can't get this bloody gear to work. I have called customer service and the

dealer and I have clicked on “Help” in the software. Hours later, notwithstanding a dozen different attempts, I cannot fax or e-mail so I must go into town to find a phone line to tap into.

It's too late now. Time to scrounge for firewood while the patience of my clients is tested.

The dream comes alive. It is Sunday and I worked at moneymaking endeavors from sunrise until 2 p.m. The fast approaching twilight has cast a warm glow at my lakeside camp in the high country of Idaho. This is a good night. A warm shower, provided by the state, is only a few steps away. Melodic strains of Vivaldi play on the CD that mixes perfectly with my cocktail. Heaven on earth. My heart soars as all the trouble in getting here boils down to this moment. When your heart is pure and you take the opportunity to let time lick you in the face, creativity flows like honey. The fires in adjoining camps flicker through the Ponderosa pines.

Life is in perfect balance.

We have ignition. When you are performing e-commerce in the forest, electricity is your most precious commodity. I have finally been able to put together my own solar system for a little more than \$250. I am amazed at how bright a 75-watt bulb is in the night's black void. I have to remind myself constantly that I am not on vacation. This is particularly true in the mornings when I take the sunrise stroll with a steaming mug of hot French Roast down to the sandy shores of crystal clear Payette Lake. Of course my clients do a great job reminding me that I am still working. I never know when they will call and have learned that if you want to take a walk it's a good idea to have a pack full of active work files. A good sitting rock along a path can make a great office, if you are prepared.



Tips for the Trek

Here are a few tips to put to work when planning your own outpost office adventure.

- Schedule your first outpost office attempt to last no longer than a month.
- Don't change locations more than once a week.
- Plan strategically-timed hotel stays and treat yourself to a good shower and meal.
- Plan where you can send and receive mail and make sure to send this information to your pertinent business contacts.
- Make sure that someone at home will check your mail.
- Always be accessible during business hours—save those long drives in areas without cellular service for the evenings.
- Keep a daypack full of current projects so they can come with you on walks.

- Stay mentally prepared to work at any given moment.
- Take advantage of electrical connections whenever possible (“Hey stranger, do you mind if I plug in my cell phone for a while?”)

When it comes to packing and preparing for your trip:

- Install a remote control software package such as PC Anywhere on your main computer system.
- Learn how to access and forward faxes from your PC.
- Create a portable desk and kitchen in separate, sealable, water-tight cases.
- Create a portable post office with pre-addressed envelopes.
- Change your cell phone plan to provide for long distance calls and increase the base amount of talk time.
- Pack a spare battery for the computer and phone.
- Begin operating out of your outpost office set up before you leave the house, so that you can debug. Be sure to practice using all of your communications gear (including a cellular modem).
- Don't forget bug spray, and a folding table and chair with armrests.

August. Upgrades. I now office in a screen house designed to exclude all the critters that would choose me as a meal. However, I unwillingly kept a prisoner in my office today, which did little to help my productivity. I met this prisoner while conducting a conference call with four lawyers, all unaware of my current address. We were discussing some complex documents as I watched a squirrel work his way under my house wall, then refuse to return the same way. Being predisposed to look up for safety, my new friend decided to climb his way to freedom and began clinging to the mesh and running around the walls. The netting apparently horrified this crazy little gymnast as he then shot for the slick roof and fell into my file box. I grabbed the documents and tried to dodge his repeated high dives. Having a squirrel in my shirt was going to be hard to explain to the four negotiators on the line. Their

screaming and scolding was almost drowning out the noise from the squirrel, but I feared the distinguished gentlemen would soon know my predicament. Fortunately, the electricity generated by the situation did nothing for my cell phone battery, which ran out of juice. Dropped call. At least everyone could understand *that*.

September. Sawtooth Mountains. When you are backpacking, every ounce counts. As I stood next to my 56-pound pack with my cell phone in hand, a dilemma was born. Initially, my goal was to hike to a mountain summit at least once a day to prove that business can be accomplished nearly anywhere. I knew I had a maximum of two hours of talk time and then the phone might as well be a boat anchor. The concerns of my clients were covered so I made a weighty business decision and locked the phone in the car. Not more than four

paces away, it began to ring. Too late—my business is closed.

Thought on a rock. How many times have you dropped out of the monotony of your daily existence to gain an aerial view of your life? My outpost office experience provided a glorious bond with the things I love. Working and living in a fresh environment clarifies the mind and creates the perfect opportunity to wonder what could be. With technology to connect us, I believe society will morph into taking such things in stride.

I spent my last day perched on a big rock nestled on the shores of an alpine lake, dreaming and setting my sights on a future outpost adventure. Perhaps our paths will cross. ■

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