

CULTURAL COMMENT

# WHAT IF REMOTE WORK DIDN'T MEAN WORKING FROM HOME?

*We need to separate our jobs and where we live.*

By Cal Newport

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*The retreat to eccentric near-home workplaces has been a common experience during the pandemic, and we've learned that performing useful cognitive work is a fragile endeavor, one in which environment matters.* Illustration by Radhiah Anis

In the late nineteen-sixties, the writer Peter Benchley and his wife, Wendy, were looking for a quiet place to live near New York City. They considered Princeton, New Jersey, but couldn't afford it, so they settled for Pennington, a small community eight miles to the west. It was here that Benchley got to work on his first novel, a sensationalist tale of a great white shark terrorizing a beach town. I've long been familiar with the connection between "[Jaws](#)" and Pennington because

I grew up down the street from the house that the Benchleys had bought. Their home was a classic converted carriage house on a sizable property, framed by conifers. As a kid, doing homework in my attic bedroom, I sometimes liked to imagine that Benchley had looked out over a similar lawn down the street, crafting his iconic scenes.

It was only recently that I learned, to my dismay, that Benchley didn't actually write "Jaws" in his bucolic Pennington home. As [John McPhee revealed](#), in an essay in the magazine last month, he remembers Benchley during these years working in a "rented space in the back of a furnace factory." A little digging, aided by the Hopewell Valley Historical Society, clarifies that it was Pennington Furnace Supply, Inc., situated on Brookside Avenue, off the north end of Pennington's Main Street. Years later, Wendy Benchley still remembered the noise: "He had a desk right in the middle of this place where they were making furnaces," she said. "Bang! Bang! Bang!—and it didn't bother him."

Benchley isn't the only author to abandon a charming home to work nearby in objectively worse conditions. Maya Angelou, for example, would rent hotel rooms to write, asking the staff to remove all artwork from the walls and enter each day only to empty the wastebaskets. She'd arrive at six-thirty in the morning, with a Bible, a yellow pad, and a bottle of sherry. No writing desk was necessary; she'd instead work lying across the bed, once explaining to George Plimpton, in an interview, how this habit led one of her elbows to become "absolutely encrusted" with calluses. David McCullough lived in a beautiful white-shingled house in West Tisbury, on Martha's Vineyard. The residence included a nicely appointed home office, but McCullough preferred to write in a glorified garden shed in his back yard. John Steinbeck went one step further. Late in his career, he spent his summers at a two-acre property in Sag Harbor (which was put on the market this past winter for \$17.9 million). Steinbeck told his editor, Elizabeth Otis, that he would escape this waterfront paradise to instead write on his fishing boat, balancing a notebook on a portable desk.

Professional authors are, in some sense, the original work-from-home knowledge workers. As we approach a post-pandemic world in which [telecommuting will be more common](#), we might observe with concern how far these writers are willing to go to escape having to work in their actual homes.

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Which environment matters. “I don’t want anything in there,” Angelou said, when elaborating on her spartan hotel habit. “I go into the room and I feel as if all my beliefs are suspended. Nothing holds me to anything.” The home is filled with the familiar, and the familiar snares our attention, destabilizing the subtle neuronal dance required to think clearly. When we pass the laundry basket outside our home office (a.k.a. our bedroom), our brain shifts toward a household-chores context, even when we would like to maintain focus on our e-mail, or an upcoming Zoom meeting, or whatever else that needs to get done. This phenomenon is a consequence of the associative nature of our brains. Because the laundry basket is embedded in a thick, stress-inducing matrix of under-attended household tasks, it creates what the neuroscientist Daniel Levitin describes as “a traffic jam of neural nodes trying to get through to consciousness.” Angelou, by shifting her work to a hotel room with bare walls, was cultivating an effective mental space to compose poetry by calming her relational-memory system.

Home is also rich in salient interruption. The human brain is adept at filtering out superfluous incoming information, but if this superfluous information is relevant to us it becomes difficult to ignore. The cognitive-science pioneer E. Colin Cherry famously dubbed this “the cocktail party problem”—in reference to the common experience of suddenly cueing your attention to the sound of your own name popping up in conversation across the room at a noisy party—and it helps explain why it’s possible to work productively for hours at a bustling coffee shop, only to have your attention hijacked when you hear a familiar topic arise in a neighboring conversation. Viewed through this perspective, your home, at times, can feel like a coffee shop in which all the patrons are talking about things that you care about. Benchley’s willingness to put up with the bangs and clangs of furnace assembly makes more sense once you learn that he had two young kids in the house during this period. The sound of hammers is not nearly so arresting as the sound of your own kids’ whining.

Historically, writing was one of only a small number of professions that required demanding cognitive work outside the context of an office or workshop. The coronavirus pandemic has radically increased the amount of knowledge work that will be conducted at home, with one recent survey of hiring managers predicting that more than twenty-five per cent of the United States workforce will remain remote next fall. The same motives that drove Angelou to a bare-walled hotel room and Benchley to a furnace-supply company will now suddenly apply at a large scale. This matters. Many workers won’t be returning to an office anytime soon, but having them relocate their efforts entirely to their homes for the long run might be unexpectedly misery-

inducing and unproductive. We need to consider a third option for our current moment, and if we look to authors for inspiration then one such alternative emerges: work from *near* home.

Here's my proposal: organizations that allow remote work should not only encourage these employees to find professional spaces near (but distinct from) their homes—they should also directly subsidize these cognitive escapes. The cost need not be prohibitive. If we turn back to our author examples, we see that a workspace doesn't need to be aesthetically pleasing, or well-equipped, or air-conditioned (or even have walls or a roof!) in order to support better work than what's possible at home. A co-working space, a small office above a Main Street store, a rented garage apartment, or even a spruced-up shed can enable a much more satisfying and effective experience tackling cognitive work than the laptop on the kitchen table, or the home-office desk in the bedroom. Not all work needs to be completed in these near-home locations—Steinbeck, for example, had a standard office that he used in addition to his fishing boat—but simply having the opportunity to reset your environment when needed can make a big difference for the type of efforts typical of this new class of remote workers.

The idea of subsidizing W.F.N.H. efforts is not novel. Last fall, a startup in the U.K. called Flown began developing what it describes as an Airbnb for undistracted knowledge work. The company's home page features enviable locations, such as a room in the Cotswolds with a desk facing a floor-to-ceiling picture window overlooking a meadow, available for short-term rent. As the founder of Flown, Alicia Navarro, explained to me, when we talked on the phone, the target for these rentals is not individuals but large organizations that can buy time in bulk to support their employees.

We should expect that such schemes will generate resistance. As offices reopen, there's an increasing pressure from management around incentivizing workers to return to their desks, including both perks for those who come back and cuts for those who do not. Facebook and Twitter, for example, made headlines last spring when they announced that they would reduce the paychecks of newly remote employees who decide to permanently relocate outside the San Francisco Bay Area. Given this corporate stance, the idea of offering an extra benefit to those remaining remote seems unlikely, but the science on this topic implies that leaving remote workers to fend for themselves at home is myopic. If an organization plans to allow remote work, the extra cost to subsidize the ability of workers to escape household distraction will be more than recouped in both the increased quality of work produced and the improved happiness of the employees, leading to less burnout and reduced churn. Strictly from the perspective of dollars and

cents, W.F.N.H. is likely a superior policy to W.F.H. It's an up-front investment that promises strong returns in the long run.

Admittedly, some of my enthusiasm for the W.F.N.H. concept comes from personal experience. After nearly a decade of commuting from my home in Takoma Park, Maryland, to the campus of Georgetown University, where I teach, the shift last March to full-time remote work felt abrupt. As a professor with a flexible schedule, I had always spent some time at home, but the sudden demand to do everything—from teaching and writing to faculty meetings and radio and podcast interviews—from my house strained my ability to concentrate (and also my three kids' ability to stay quiet while I was lecturing or live on the air). Last August, I finally relented and leased a modest office above a restaurant in Takoma Park's small downtown, which is a few blocks from where I live. The space is not luxurious; it features few windows, and each afternoon music from the restaurant patio below rattles the panes. Like Peter Benchley so many decades earlier, I now leave a perfectly lovely house, with its light-filled rooms and comfortable furniture, to instead go sit on a used office chair, staring at an undecorated wall, ignoring the clangs and clamor of the diners below. I no longer work from home—I work from *near* home. And I've never felt more productive.

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