

From the Desk of ... Renee Hopkins

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From the spring 2013 issue of OPEN, the McCombs School of Business magazine.

My whole work life beamed at me through two big monitors. When I shut them off at night, I was instantly home, but also still technically at work. That transition was increasingly jarring for me.

FROM THE DESK OF...

Renee Hopkins



Renee Hopkins

Yahoo! banned it. Others love it. Where does telecommuting fit in today's office? McCombs media relations staffer and ex-telecommuter Renee Hopkins reflects on working away from work.

"Where do you work?" isn't supposed to be a trick question, but it was a trick for me to answer during the year I telecommuted for my job at McCombs from 1,977 miles away in Nashua, New Hampshire, a small city 45 minutes northwest of Boston.

I had been living and working in Boston when I accepted my job at McCombs. But after one year on campus, the move to Austin felt like a mistake. When I told my manager I was returning to New England, he offered me an opportunity to work remotely.

I had a lot of reasons for going back north. I thought I'd re-assimilate, eventually find another job there, and that would be that.

But I never re-assimilated. I never looked for another job, because I continued to enjoy the challenge of finding and writing McCombs stories and connecting McCombs news, ideas, and experts with reporters and editors.

By the time I'd been in New Hampshire six months, I began to feel isolated professionally. Sure, I could connect with peers who were my friends in Boston. But it was much harder to connect with McCombs. I've been a reporter and editor when my physical location didn't matter much, but working at and writing about McCombs demands attention to the place as just that: a place, and a dynamic one at that, with a recognizable ebb and flow of activity.

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Each semester, students appear in a trickle, then en masse; the hallway bulletin boards sprout notices of guest speakers, and conferences convene at the AT&T Center. Student organizations erect card tables on the plaza, lavishing cupcakes on their peers in the hopes of recruiting new members.

And then each semester unwinds: the event calendar empties, students form hives buzzing about finals and job offers, professors eschew requests for media interviews in order to grade exams and papers. Commencement commences, the Tower beams burnt orange congratulations to the graduates, and campus enters hibernation.

Working at home, I missed being part of the warp and weft of the McCombs fabric. I missed hallway encounters and what one friend calls “random collisions with unusual suspects”—running into someone only to have a conversation in which you learn something new. And—even better—a conversation in which you learn something you would never have gone in search of.

Networks need weak ties as well as strong ties, but in New Hampshire almost all my McCombs ties became weak ones. I kept up with local news online, and my campus phone forwarded to my home office. But then I’d call or email a new UT colleague, and that person would be flabbergasted when I declined the chance to meet for coffee by explaining that I was off campus. Really, really off-campus.

And despite the good intentions (and mediocre technology) of conference phones and video chat software, I felt like an incomplete contributor, relying on the kindness of others to see and hear things I couldn’t. I was ever grateful to my colleagues for taking on extra tasks—remembering to email documents that were handed out in person, sharing notes, passing along observations I wasn’t there to make—while I sat plugged into my headset trying to decipher the disparate voices of meeting participants.

Telecommuting is brutally efficient. We stay on task because we aren’t distracted by campus happenings and hallway conversations (chats with the dog don’t count). I found myself working odd hours, sometimes late into the New Hampshire night, matching the hours of co-workers in another time zone.

This was no anomaly: [A recent study](#) by UT sociology professor **Jennifer Glass** shows that most of the 30 percent of respondents who work from home add five to seven hours to their workweek compared with those who work exclusively at the office. Telecommuters are also significantly less likely to work a standard 40-hour schedule and more likely to work overtime.

I realized that New England wasn’t really my home place, and to begin to determine where that might be, I returned to McCombs, my work place. Even the weather favored my mid-August arrival with a weeklong cool spell. And this time, when the wave of faculty and students began to swell with the new academic year, I was in its midst instead of peering at it dimly through computer monitors 2,000 miles away.

This morning I walked from where I live on 45th Street to McCombs’ Graduate School of Business building. I wanted to feel the physical transition from home to neighborhood to edge of campus, and finally to the corner of Speedway and 21st Street. Then I climbed the steps from the sidewalk, swung open the heavy glass door, and entered my work place.

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