

On the Home Front

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As working at home becomes increasingly common, with redundancies generating new freelancers, and the growth of teleworking, one would expect it to be by now a recognized business norm, its peculiar circumstances duly allowed for. Alas, far from it.

The classic problems attendant on working alone at home have long been well known, well documented: lack of sick pay, holiday pay, between-commissions pay; scheduling difficulties; occasionally having to turn our living quarters into professionally presentable premises for business visitors. The solitude of home-work leads to a lack, not only of company, but also of quick consultation or second opinion, a spare pair of hands, and someone to take deliveries and phone calls when we must go out. Under the sitting-duck syndrome, those known to be at home all day are seen as those to whom it should fall to run local errands and act as lookout for neighbourhood watch schemes. I am greatly enraged when summonsed to the door to be confronted by would-be sellers or opinion canvassers proudly flourishing their licences to call. No official body can confer the right to interrupt me at my work, I tell them. Clothes-pegs and brushes are not hawked round the desks of office blocks.

The late Norma Whitcombe fought gamely to have the freelance status sanctioned and defined by the Inland Revenue - and reported constant failure. We suffer a lack of official recognition, as Orwellian unworkers, and terrible tax troubles.

Now, alongside the established difficulties of home-work, new developments are bringing yet more. The postal system is trusted less and less, failing to deliver on time. Many publishers now resort to using delivery services to the door instead. But the packages must be signed for, and if they call when you, the single daytime occupier of the premises, are out - and the exact time of delivery is not ascertainable in advance, to plan the day round - they take the parcel away, leaving a note. You ring headquarters to be told your proofs are now on the van en route to the next delivery point, and cannot be returned to your district till next day. You do not have the option of calling at the post office the same day to collect your parcel, as with conventional postal non-delivery.

If publishers feel they cannot rely on the post, then freelancers living near their premises, who can call in to collect proofs or have messengers despatched to them, have a further advantage. Calling in oneself has side-bonuses for good contacts and personal relationships. I have a mental list of all the commuters living on my

estate, and know exactly to which part of 20-mile-distant London each goes. They are usually willing to take my packages, delivering them, or letting the publishers collect them from their offices. Remote country-dwelling freelancers, again, are disadvantaged.

The expense of technological equipment militates further against the solitary worker. I recall an adolescent sense of being a victim of social discrimination as my family had no telephone. It was so much easier to ring round to make up a party of friends for the evening; those who needed visiting to get the message got left out. Now, the fax machine makes communication and reply so fast and simple (no need for envelopes, stamps, photocopies, a walk to the letter box, to worry about when the missive will arrive, or the time of day in the country you might have had to telephone) that fax-owners become preferred addressees. Publishers, trimming their schedules tighter yet, may send work to an indexer they know can fax the work through on a Monday morning after a full weekend's work. Concomitantly, the non-fax-owner is disadvantaged. But the expense of these machines makes it likely that organizations in business premises have them, individuals working at home (probably having already had to spend out on their own computer), not.

Photocopiers, too, may well be beyond the means of individuals working alone on their own premises. I feel the lack keenly, and must drive two miles to the public library (choosing a day when it is open) with a handful of 10p pieces, to obtain photocopies. I have heard many newly retired people say that what they find themselves missing most, unexpectedly, is the office photocopier. We no longer refer to cottage workers, but freelancers generally do not have the means to equip our homes with full office technology, now becoming more essential for professional credibility, not less.

And now the telephone directories are restructured into separate sections for business and residential! Into which half should the home-worker go? After meeting a possible new client, 'I'm in the book - the residential section' - seems to lack a certain professional commitment (even without having to add, 'under my hubby's name - it's Alf').

The army of freelancers is growing, but, increasingly, consigned to peasant rank.