Introduction

The Origin of "Work Naked"

To fully appreciate the value of the concepts presented in this book, you should understand the history behind the phrase "Work Naked."

On August 20, 1997, Sue Shellenbarger's "Work & Family" column in the Wall Street Journal took on the advertisers: "Madison Avenue May Need to Alter Image of '90s Telecommuter." The television ads depicting telecommuters as bunny-slipper-clad, pajama-wearing women who decline to shower on work-at-home days are inaccurate and unfair, according to Shellenbarger. Yes, as she pointed out, the majority of telecommuters are male and as her small sample indicated, most shower and dress for work (even though no one may see them). Her column ended with the following note, "Full disclosure: I'm a telecommuter. I shower every morning. I only work in my jammies before dawn." While I am a regular reader of Sue's column and typically agree with her point of view, this time I disagreed. In fact, her column touched a nerve; I couldn't stop thinking about it all day. I felt the issue was a much larger one and quickly dashed off the following response:

Dear Sue:

I thoroughly enjoyed your column "Madison Avenue May Need to Alter Image of '90s Telecommuter" in today's WSJ. I would broaden the notion to say that U.S. organizations, and possibly society in general, must alter their image of the WORKER and WORK (I'm not sure we can blame Madison Avenue for this one). Only then, will remote work or telework truly flourish. Let me explain.

Regardless of what you are wearing (pajamas, bunny slippers, or nothing), are you working if no one can SEE you?

We've never fully made the transition from manual labor to knowledge-based working. It is very easy to see when a farmer or factory-worker, construction worker, etc. is working because they are expending physical energy on visible tasks. In fact, it could be argued that the harder one is working, the more they sweat (so there is a visible hierarchy of effort). This doesn't translate well to white-collar work. So we have created a complex system of visual cues to signify that (or give the impression that) someone is working. "The office" is a stage where people "perform their work" for others to SEE. Wearing a business suit, sitting behind a desk, talking on the phone, being in a meeting, operating a computer, bumping into the CEO in the parking lot at 9:00 pm, among other activities send a message that the performer is hard at work. Technology has bumped it up a notch-sending e-mail, faxes, voicemails (especially at odd hours)-gives the impression of productivity. And, frankly, all these activities might result in very high quality work. But then again, the movement toward casual dress codes is proof that our brains operate just
as well when we are wearing jeans as when we are wearing a Tahari suit.

Pajama-wearing need not convey a negative image.

Scott Adams, as a ten-year-old, identified his desire for a life-long career that would allow him to work in his pajamas. As he explained in a recent presentation at the alt.office conference, cartoonist seemed to be the only achievable option, having rejected the three other choices he felt permitted pajama-work: pope, Supreme Court justice, and Hugh Hefner's job as head of the Playboy empire. We all know that after a detour into corporate life, he successfully realized his goal. Imagine a world devoid of Dilbert had that ten-year-old set the lofty goal "to wear a suit and tie and sit in a big office" for his working years.

I understand your concern about the TV ads depicting an inaccurate image of telecommuters, but on the positive side, the ads do at least challenge the myth that you can only be productive in the "appropriate business trappings." In all the ads I've seen, the teleworker is shown to be a high performer. We struggle so much with measuring performance quality that we often resort to relying on the LOOK of work-"face-time"-rather than the results.

Knowledge work is not something to be observed with the eye.

I confess, I was one of those annoying students in college and grad school who didn't appear to colleagues to be working very hard. I sat in the back of the class, rarely went to professors' office hours, did not put in much face-time at the library, read the assignments the night before the exam, sat down to type a major paper 6 hours before it was due, and was rewarded with A's and B's. Fortunately, I was graded on the basis of quality of result, not some outdated notion of how hard work should LOOK. The fact is, I was "working" when people thought I was playing or at least not paying attention. I could hear as much from the back of the class as those in the front. I was THINKING about the term paper when I was walking, cycling, showering, etc. But others couldn't SEE me thinking. They could see someone typing, reading, talking to a professor after class, or sitting in the library, but these activities don't necessarily translate into a quality product reflecting innovative thinking.

We grapple with similar issues in the workplace. Remote work of any kind challenges the practice of visual monitoring of work, raising anxieties in managers and nonmanagers alike. It is comforting to think that getting up, showering, dressing, going to the office, and chatting with colleagues over coffee will be interpreted as "strong commitment to work" before you've even turned the computer on. Abandoning the old "face-time" measurement is difficult, but successful teleworkers are leading the way.

I think the advertisers should be congratulated for getting people talking about telecommuting and depicting it as a productive, flexible, fun way to work.

As for my personal telecommuting style, I dispense with the pajamas and bunny slippers, opting instead to work naked for the first hour of phone calling and e-mailing, then shower. Do I miss nylon stockings and the rush-rush of the office? NO. Do I feel better about my performance? Absolutely! Do I think having the freedom to work where, when, and how you choose might work for others? Definitely. Change is always an opportunity for learning.

Sue Shellenbarger printed the italicized excerpts of my fax in a September 24, 1997,
letters column titled "These Telecommuters Just Barely Maintain Their Office Decorum." Two other readers, it seems, wrote to Sue with stories about nakedness in the home office. The column was very funny and somewhat out of character for the conservative Wall Street Journal.

On the morning it appeared in the Wall Street Journal, I sent an e-mail message to everyone in my on-line address book. The subject line read "work naked," and the message encouraged recipients to look for my "insightful and REVEALING commentary on telework" in that day's paper. The response was overwhelming!

The majority of respondents applauded my honesty, agreed that being liberated from the trappings (and politics) of most corporate environments improved creativity, and then shared their own quirky workstyle secrets. There were some negative or less-than-enthusiastic replies, though. The ones that angered me the most involved some sort of "sex sells" remark. "No, honesty sells," I replied defensively. Then I explained more about my living and working situation and why I started this practice of working without clothing early in the morning. I live alone and work from a small Manhattan apartment. I'm very productive late in the evening (from 10 p.m. to midnight), need seven to eight hours of sleep a night, and take pride in being available to clients when they need me. (These three factors are sometimes at odds with each other.) One client was a morning person who arrived at the office before 7 a.m. and liked to start his day by coordinating with me on the progress of a particular project. Knowing that "morning people" think of late-risers as lazy, I would sleep with a notebook and the cordless phone next to my bed so I could take his call on the first ring! It didn't matter that I wasn't dressed in business clothes and sitting at a desk in an office. After finishing the call, I'd check e-mail and return some voicemail before going for a bike ride in Central Park or taking a shower. And, on many days, I just wouldn't get around to dressing for a while. So, it wasn't a conscious choice to work naked, but it turned out to be very convenient.

Of course, I enjoyed reading the comments from the people who said, "Yes! I do the same thing." They sent rather long, detailed descriptions of their work habits and the benefits they derive from working in a nontraditional way. One e-mail message painted a very clear picture of a bathing-suit-clad worker lounging on a boat with laptop, cell phone, and pet dog within easy reach. Another colleague explained that she takes difficult client calls from home, dressed only in her underwear, so she's more relaxed for a tough negotiation. It was reassuring to me that most of these people who shared their "secret work contexts" were not entrepreneurs running their own businesses from home, they were corporate workers who were trusted and equipped to make smart choices about the most effective work environment for the situation.

Some wrote to tell me why I shouldn't work naked ("you could catch a cold") or why they wouldn't work naked ("the neighbors might talk"). To the latter I replied, "Hey, you know, whatever works for you! Saying everyone should work naked would be as crazy as, for instance, saying everyone should work in a business suit (ooops, we've done that, haven't we?)." I was most disheartened by e-mail from people who saw the value of having more freedom to make workstyle choices, but felt trapped in companies where it wouldn't be allowed. Worse yet, they were timid about finding a different employer that would allow that kind of freedom.

At first, I wanted to dismiss the less-than-enthusiastic responses-just delete them from my inbox. Then I realized that there was a lot to be learned by pursuing the personal feelings and corporate policies behind the negative reactions. If the positive experiences of individuals and corporations that I had collected could be transferred to the more negative or resistant types, some significant obstacles to performance could be removed.
The obstacles are usually mind-sets and traditional corporate norms that we need to challenge ourselves to reexamine. Consider the following questions to start the rethinking process. Strip away the suit and tie, corner office, and reserved parking space; would your employees be more productive or less productive? Now, let go of face-time with the boss, office gossip, constant interruptions from coworkers, and 9-to-5 working hours; would your employees be more creative or less creative? If your employees had the freedom to choose where and when to work, would they be more effective or less effective? Envision your organization naked (in the figurative sense), unencumbered by all the traditional corporate rules and trappings; would your employees feel liberated or exposed? Please join me in pursuing the “work naked” metaphor to learn how your organization can get the most out of remote and mobile work strategies.