

# /dev/random

## WFH

ROBERT G. FERRELL



Robert G. Ferrell, author of *The Tol Chronicles*, spends most of his time writing humor, fantasy, and science fiction.

[rgferrell@gmail.com](mailto:rgferrell@gmail.com)

I spent some time in medical school in the late 1980s. (They eventually caught me skulking around in the hall and threw me out.) I don't remember coronaviruses—*orthocoronavirinae*, to virologists—being therein addressed as anything serious in terms of human pathology, other than maybe as one of the causes of the common cold. They were mostly associated with birds and bats. That abruptly changed in 2002 with the emergence of the SARS outbreak. Since then, it's just been one bout of coronaviolence after another, culminating in the present day with the imaginatively named Covid-19. (Imagine if they'd named measles "Morbillivid-54.") One consequence of this has been a dramatic increase in non-traditional work environments, especially working from home.

My own first foray into working remotely came in 1998. I did UNIX systems administration and information security, such as it existed then in the federal government, which was in name only. Early on I drove to a local office of another agency in the same department each day, but gradually slid into working from home full-time, doing mostly external penetration testing and incident response statistics for headquarters.

I'd like to emphasize that there is a considerable difference between working remotely and working from home (WFH). While WFH can be truly rewarding, working remotely is a fool's paradise. It has all the drawbacks of going into the office with none of the advantages. You still have to dress appropriately, sit in a sterile office environment, and stock an additional refrigerator and coffee machine. You have to fight traffic while discovering just why it's called a "remote site," worry about other occupants who can't be bothered to stay home when contagiously ill, and put up with bosses who, because they can't observe you physically, drag you into endless teleconferences. They do this when you WFH too, admittedly, but being able to attend while your lower half is wearing only underwear or comfortable track suit pants attenuates the sting.

In case you were trying to sneak in a little actual remote work during your day between inconvenience and onerous oversight, the intrusive, arbitrary policies of the agency or company that manages the building will dash that hope against the rocks of reality. Remodeling, fire drills, inspections, noisy tenants, parking lot repaving, and the nearby cacophony of highway traffic (remote work facilities are almost always in some low-rent industrial park next to the freeway) will guarantee only limited concentration is possible. Ear buds can be a welcome panacea if you're one of the happy few who can work with music going on, but alas I do not count myself among your number. My own brain demands silence in exchange for creativity.

In the late '90s and early aughts, the Office of Personnel Management, that all-purpose HR department for the civilian aspects of the US federal government, began to encourage/cajole federal agencies to allow their employees to work remotely. Toward that end, they either established, or issued guidelines for establishing, remote federal work sites. These were supposed to reduce fuel consumption, consolidate power/office supply costs, and ease the burden

of being a faceless bureaucratic cog in a ponderous gargantuan machine, if only by a smidgeon. Mostly, I think, remote work was intended to make it appear as though the federal government was moving toward being a bit more environmentally friendly. Green baby steps, as it were.

I appreciated this initiative at the time because without it, I would not have been able to perform my Reston, VA, duties from all the way down in San Antonio. Having said that, I still feel that the remote work concept was, among other things, an attempt to give employees the illusion of more flexibility while maintaining management's feeling of control. As with the majority of compromises, neither side was really satisfied.

I made the transition to WFH rather seamlessly in the chaotic days following 9/11, because I spent a couple of weeks hanging around in various forums looking for suspicious chatter on behalf of a three-letter agency, and they did not want me coming in over a government network. When that temporary assignment was over, I just never went back to the "remote office," saving myself a 90-mile daily round trip. By that point, my duties had been transferred from Reston to Denver. I'm not certain how long it took before my boss figured out I wasn't reporting to the remote work facility any longer, but I suspect it was quite a while. By that time, I'd settled into my rather productive routines, and she probably figured as long as I was doing the job, the "where" didn't much matter.

The thesis here, in case my long and winding rhetorical road has left you confused, is that working remotely is just another version of going into the office, unlike WFH. Although I can see that certain jobs do not lend themselves well to the WFH paradigm—volcanologist, airline pilot, firefighter, thoracic surgeon, construction crane operator, and so on—WFH is a natural fit for those employed in the purely digital realm. I offer my sympathy and gratitude to people whose commitment to the hands-on life allows the rest of us to sit comfortably in our recliners with a spreadsheet open on one screen and cat videos on the other.

These days I'm a freelance author, admittedly, so for me WFH is more or less a given. I suppose I should call it "WFW," or Working from Wherever (I happen to be). One problem with WFW is that it affords a great many options for entertaining myself in a manner not conducive to, you know, actual *writing*. Sure, back when I worked in an office I could create paperclip sculptures or take-out menu origami, but those pursuits require at least minimal physical participation on my part. Procrastination these days is just a mouse/PS4 controller click away. Write a paragraph, watch an episode or two. Rinse and repeat. I used to write at least 2,000 words a day. Now I'm lucky if I write that much in a week. I can, however, rattle off the filmographies of a couple dozen actors on command. That's got to count for something, right?