

# Working Online

by Les Wiseman

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## riding the wave of the future

### Computers have given us more

than just eyestrain and nervous breakdowns. Yes, the digital age has seen us move from delivering messages by hand to mail, air mail to the miracle of the fax, then e-mail, video conferencing, instant messaging, editable PDF documents, streaming video and audio, plus Skype. Now you can accomplish tasks for certain companies virtually from any place with a high-speed Internet connection and a laptop. And all you miss of personal interaction is your coworkers' coffee breath.

Sounds like a pretty good gig. Is it the wave of the future, cutting down on the carbon emissions of commuting, allowing head offices to be small nerve centres with no need for expensive office space? Will the

lack of office romance potential see the wheels of industry grind to a drudge pace?

Fears of increasing electronic isolation of a large portion of society have not manifested — yet. While lack of “face time” (the buzzphrase for personal interaction) might cause the uninhibited development of eccentricities, what is certain is that along with business, a new set of social skills for the electronic age must develop in due course.

### East Coast from the West Coast

Kevin Aschenbrenner, vice-president of public relations for Jaffe Associates, a PR and marketing agency for law firms around the world, works an east coast day from his home in Langford. He is at the

computer at 6:30 a.m. and working for clients in Washington, D.C., New York, Chicago, and Birmingham, Alabama. Jaffe Associates, which has been around nearly 30 years, has always been a virtual company with its staff working from their homes around the continent. Aschenbrenner, who has been with Jaffe for 10 years, laughs when he remembers the days when phone lines were all jammed in the days of dial-up connections. Jaffe makes significant investments in technology so that its outlying staff are always up to date. When they need a video staff meeting, the Mac-oriented firm uses iChat. “Your screen has all these people in their individual boxes. We sort of look like the intro to the *Brady Bunch* TV show,” says Aschenbrenner.

An expert on e-commuting since he worked for a New York company from his bedroom in his parents' Penticton home, Aschenbrenner, 38, is keenly aware of the social protocols of the digital wheeler-dealer. “People often think that people who work at home are sort of antisocial shut-ins. But even more than in an office, you have to know how to relate to people. If you don't know how to reach out and keep relationships with clients and media and colleagues, the lack of face-to-face contact can be detrimental to your work life. You have to be more present for people than you would working in an office. It's learning how to manage the communications avenues we do have.”

### Off Road from Mount Doug


It's another morning in no man's land and Ann Lockley is looking at the morning sky in Colorado — a waypoint on her twice-yearly 2,700-mile drive from Victoria to Dallas, Texas. She is in her tent, which is pitched on the roof of her Land Rover. The tent was developed for use on African Safari to keep lions and persons on different levels. “A friend felt sorry for me camping on the ground with grizzly bears around,” she says. “Texans freak out about grizzlies.” She does not carry a gun, only a really big tire iron.

She answers calls on her BlackBerry and then finishes a story on her Mac laptop, which she then hooks to her BlackBerry and files to her editor at *Land Rover World* or *4x4 International* or *Canine Review*. She folds down the tent and drives on, stopping to take photos of whatever catches her fancy. The 38-year-old photographer and writer has cut out a niche for herself as an eminent writer on off-road motoring and dogs. On her travels, she attends rallies and canine events as she meanders her way from her home near Mount Doug to Dallas to see her boyfriend, who works as a process engineer for Texas Instruments.

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Lockley was disposed to independence partially by nature and nurture. Her father operated an extremely successful hairdressing business from the family home for 43 years and when not braiding and perming, he took his daughter out sailing the coast. "I grew up knowing the advantages and disadvantages of being self-employed," says Lockley. "And the sailing bit me with the travel bug."

While travelling in Costa Rica in 2003, she noticed a preponderance of Land Rovers and sourced out the tale of Land Rover production as the single industry that kept the Costa Rican economy afloat. She contracted Land Rover to see if they would like photos and a story on this and, six years later, she is the North American correspondent for *Land Rover World*.

Though currently dogless, she is a profiler for *Canine Review* and writes the popular Good Dog Blog — which garners 1,000 hits a day — for Dogster, the Facebook of the furry.

Still, it's not all snuffling puppies and roaring engines. She recalls a situation from last summer. "I hadn't realized when I left Canada that I had two cracked teeth, so I'm sitting on top of a mountain in Colorado with two abscessed teeth and my left eye swollen shut and on heavy pain killers. Luckily, at that point, I was with a group and could get help."

There are the other times though. "My parents and friends gave up on me settling down many years ago. They worry about me, but they also think I have the best life ever. When I'm on top of a mountain with a glass of wine and I say, 'I'm working now. I'm being paid to be here.' That's pretty great. I wouldn't change anything about my life except to have my boyfriend live some place a little more convenient than Dallas."

### E-writing from Salt Spring

Another writer who loves the outdoors but didn't see much of it during his working life is Michael Butler. A pioneer in the e-commuting business, Butler, along with writing partner Dennis Shryack, is best known for his association with Clint Eastwood's Malpaso Productions/The Malpaso Company and his two movie masterpieces *Pale Rider* and *The Gauntlet*, though his résumé is replete with hits including *Flashpoint*, *Code of Silence*, the camp horror classic, *The Car*, as well as numerous episodes of the TV series *Ironsides* and *Houston Knights*.

At 68, Butler and wife Robin Ferry have lived on Salt Spring Island since 1999. "We were getting tired of southern California and, it may be said, of the U.S.," he says. "We wanted to live some place where it was sane."

Both he and his wife had parents who were Canadian. For Butler, it came down to Salt Spring or Nova Scotia. A couple of connections between L.A. and Toronto producers and lawyers and it was arranged that what was being considered a vacation home could become a permanent one with Canadian citizenship. And that his location would not impede his flow of assignments. "We said, 'Let it be so.'"

After living a virtual life for decades, Butler decided to hang up his word processor three years ago. Screenwriting, he says, "basically kept me in a chair more than 35 years with my focus on a blank page or a computer screen, living in my head, creating imaginary drama. But the price you pay for 40 years of that is that you miss the real world. You have very little in the way of real-world experience. If you have deadlines, that's the way it works. More often than not, my deadlines have obliged me to work seven days a week, 12 to 14 hours a day. I remember one stint when I didn't take a day off for 95 days." A gauntlet, indeed. "And you know what? The real world is very interesting. There are woods, boats, animals, places to go, and people to talk to." So maybe there is a bit of cyber backlash, when you can work where you want but don't have the free time to enjoy it.

### Rollbots from Fairfield

Call him MCM, though he's Michael to Mrs. Milligan. He's a blaze of creativity, electronically hooked up to the world. From his home in Victoria's Fairfield district, he produces the animated series *RollBots*, which airs Saturday mornings on YTV and will be integrated into The CW4Kids block of cartoons that airs on the CWTV network throughout the U.S. and also in Australia and South Africa. The *Rollbots* title is, of course, derived from rolling robots and is about good robots who can pull in their limbs and roll really fast after bad robots who can do likewise. Big-time toy producer Mattel Inc. has purchased the rights to producing *RollBots* figures.

The tri-initialled one also writes self-admittedly "strange" books for children, tweens, teens, and adults for his own 1889 Labs Ltd. imprint. Currently, he has an online sci-fi noir novel-in-progress called *Fission Chips*, in which he allows online readers to vote on its plot twists.

In sum, at 32, he's a wearer of many hats, including a husband and father to two daughters. His days start with picking a room to use as an office. "When it's hot, I look for the coolest room, and when it's cool, I look for the warmest one," he says. Then he fires

up his laptop and uses instant messaging to check in with Ottawa-based Amberwood Productions, where he is creative producer. Through private network hookups and servers, he reviews scripts, proofs and edits scripts that come in, and watches the animation through servers. "The show is produced in Ottawa and in Toronto where they model and render and do effects," says MCM. "The real nitty-gritty of the animation — the keyframing — is done in the Philippines. So telecommunication is part of the nature of the beast, no matter where I'm located."

"When there's a meeting to be had, we either crack open Skype or I plug in my corded phone and listen to them eat snacks I can never touch. I get flown out to Ottawa every six months or so. We talk shop, but it's strange when it's not done by IM. I've grown to depend on emoticons to articulate my feelings," he laughs.

"The other benefit is that I can be working on projects when they've all gone home and started watching 24, meaning we have a much more productive workday than if I'd actually stayed in Ottawa."

MCM claims that he cannot stand wasting time and that by working from home, he can be more efficient. "If I were waiting for something, I'm not stuck in an office, and I

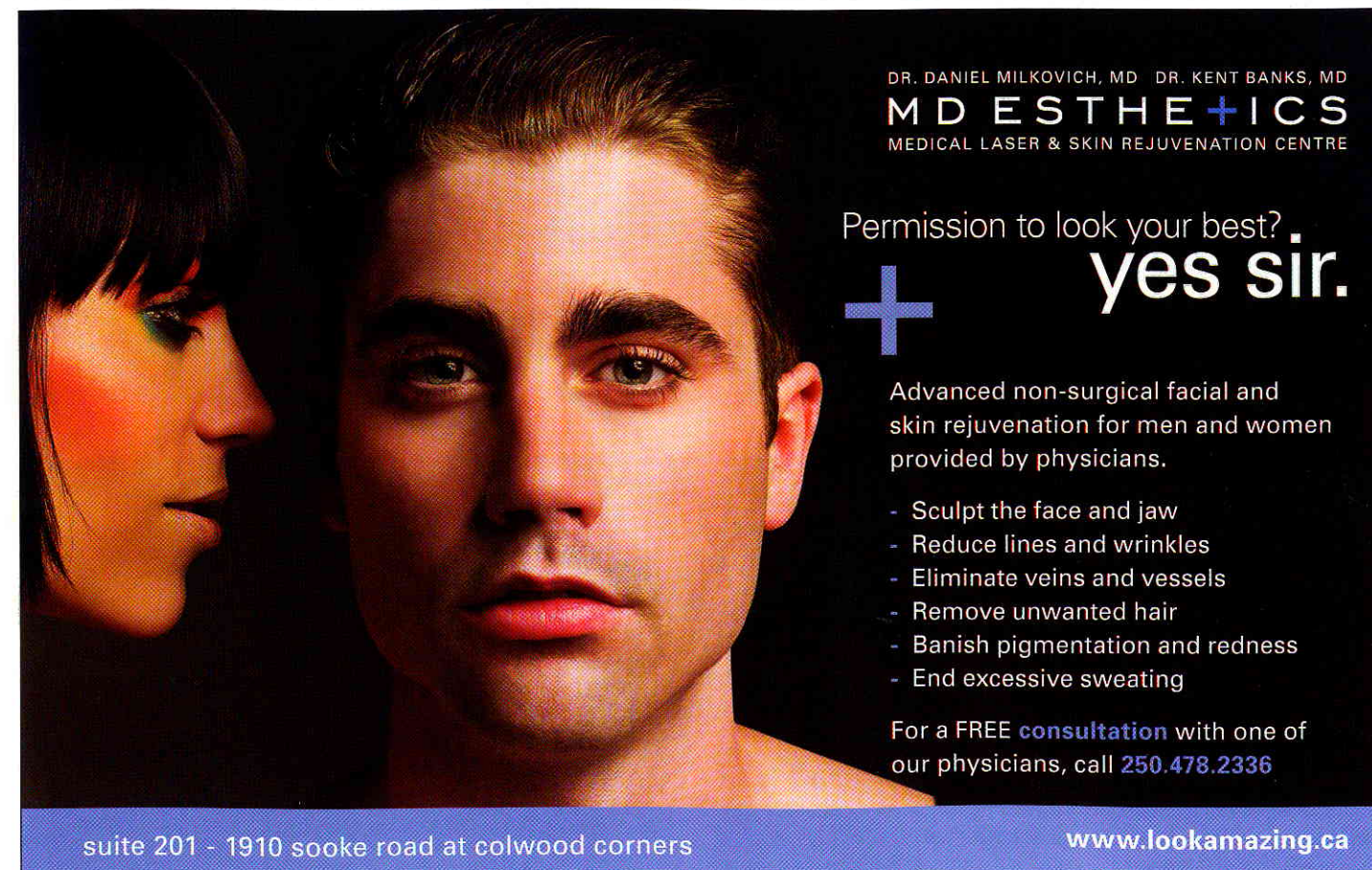
can make something happen with one of my other projects."

While he does not feel he necessarily gets to spend more time with his family, he notes that he can time-shift if a kid gets sick and has to go to a doctor. "I take my laptop into the waiting room," he says.

Other advantages of e-commuting include less reliance on transportation. "From a financial perspective," says Kevin Aschenbrenner, "I save money on gas and eat my lunches at home. Not commuting is a greener way to work."

What about from a tax perspective? "The perception from people who don't work from home or who don't have their own business is that you can write off everything. And you can't. You could try, but you'll probably go to jail."

Then there is the issue of being a self-starter. It is readily seen that these people profiled put in more than a 40-hour work week, despite saving time on the commute. "People say, 'If I worked at home, I'd never get anything done,'" says Aschenbrenner. "And I say, 'Then you'd no longer have a job.' I like a roof over my head and food on my table and my cat to have food in his bowl. So getting started on the workday is not really a problem." ■



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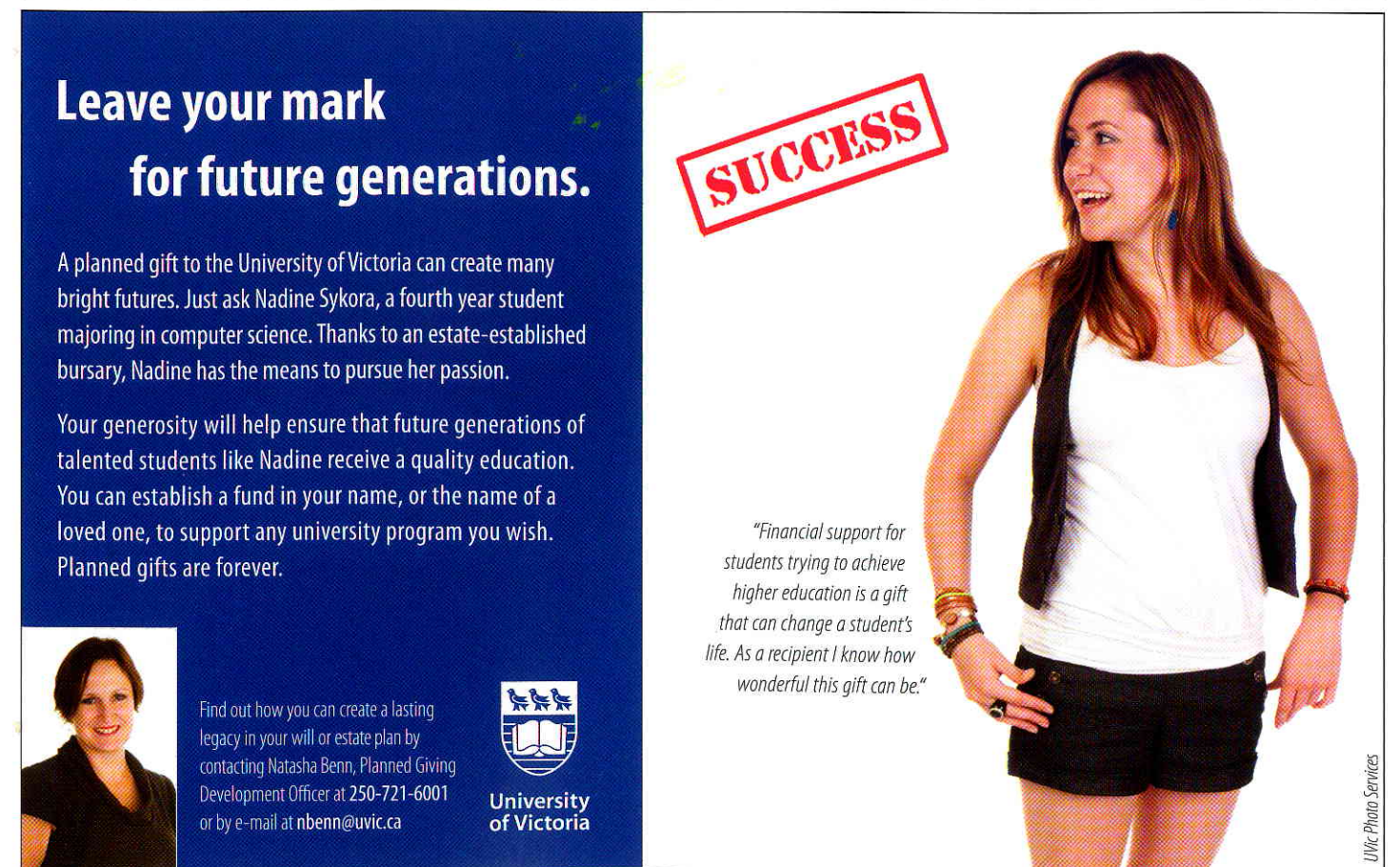
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