LIVING A DISTRIBUTED LIFE:  
MULTI-LOCALITY AND WORKING AT A DISTANCE  

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Abstract: In the last few years, new collaboration and communication technologies have led to a de-territorialization of work, allowing for the rise of new work- and lifestyles. In this chapter, I use my own transition from the life of a corporate researcher to that of a multi-local mobile consultant for tracking some of the patterns I see in a changing cultural and economic environment where work and workers are no longer tied to a specific place of work. My main interest lies in identifying some of the behavioral shifts that are happening as people are caught up in and attempt to deal with this changing cultural landscape. Writing as a knowledge worker who now moves regularly from a work/home place in the Silicon Valley of California to another in the tropical lowlands of Costa Rica, I use my personal transition as a lens through which to trace new, emergent patterns of behavior, of values, and of social conventions. I assess the stresses and joys, the upsides and downsides, the challenges and rewards of this work- and lifestyle and identify strategies for making such a life successful and rewarding. I assess the stresses and joys, the upsides and downsides, the challenges and rewards of this work- and lifestyle and identify strategies for making such a life successful and rewarding. Throughout, there emerges an awareness of the ways in which the personal patterns described reflect wider trends and cumulatively illustrate global transformation of workscapes and lifescapes. These types of local patterns in fact constitute the on-the-ground material reality of global processes that initiate and sustain widespread culture change and emergent social transformations. 

Key words: Multi-locality, lifestyle, culture change, work and technology, lifescapes  

Introduction  

As the world is globalizing, many of us are leading lives that are to a greater or lesser degree mobile and distributed. As the papers in this volume show, many people are now doing professional work away from what might be considered their official workspace. Some of them do this sporadically, some semi-permanently, while others have gone to live in a foreign country on assignment for lengthy periods of time. While maintaining professional ties to their original or official workspace, these mobile knowledge workers retain varying degrees of emotional attachment to their “workplace of origin”. They may work in far-flung places but they regularly and expectedly come back to their home base where most of their personal and family life is located. For others, the mobile life means a permanent condition of existing in
two or more places at once. Some of them experience this as chronic homelessness, others as the integrated life, raising questions about how much integration between work and home is freeing because it provides options and alternatives, and how much becomes an intolerable invasion.

For a growing number of people the very idea of a home in the traditional sense has become nebulous. I am one of those. In the pages that follow I track my transition from a more or less conventional job as a corporate researcher into a complex, multi-local, distributed life which now has me moving regularly between two integrated home-work spaces that are separated by thousands of miles. In the lifescapes I have constructed, what is local and what is remote flips regularly. Every three months to be exact.

And so I find myself exemplifying both sides of the “new mobility”: one side being the global mobility of work, the fact that tasks and work processes that were tied to specific locations have moved to wherever they can be done the cheapest and most efficient way (Palm 2006; Skipper 2006, Sonntag 2005); the second being the mobility of those doing the work (Hislop and Axtell 2007). Actually, mobility has been common and widespread prehistorically, historically and crossculturally, much in contrast to popular opinion that sees it as a recent phenomenon (Cobb 2005; O'Leary et al. 2002; Trager 2005). There have always been nomads, people who have been leading distributed lives, though maybe not in quite the way we do now. I am thinking of the homeless in our inner cities, the thousands of migratory workers that cross our borders every year from Central America, the “shuttle traders” that Ken Anderson studies as they ply the border region between China and Russia (Fiske 2007; Galembo 2008), or herders like the Masai whose seasonal migration paths anthropologists have studied for a long time. What has changed is that with the rise of modern communication media the patterning of mobility has been altered.

In this chapter I will be exploring some of the major trends within which the experiences of my own mobile life have played themselves out. I begin by highlighting what may be the most significant factor of the many that have led to making this kind of life possible for me and other knowledge workers: the blurring of the boundaries between work and home life that has occurred with the introduction of new collaboration and communication technologies, especially the internet and mobile telephony. I continue with a somewhat personal account of my transition to a

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1 The idea of “lifescapes” came out of early work at IRL (the Institute for Research on Learning) and WPT (the Workpractice and Technology group at the Palo Alto Research Center), where by the early 1990s our focus on workpractice studies had evolved into the more holistic notion of “workscape”. In a project with on-the-move, high-performance executives I coined the term “lifescapes” because it became clear that work was no longer confined to work-in-the-workplace but had spread into people’s “other” lives. The idea of “scapes” as indicating horizontal cultural conceptual domains has been publicized by Appadurai with “ethnoscapes”, Cefkin with “rhythmscapes”, and many others (Appadurai 1996; Cefkin 2007). For an in-depth treatment of the idea of lifescapes see Jordan (2005).

2 Less familiar than undocumented Mexican labor migration are any number of emerging mobility patterns that have arisen as a direct result of globalization. For example, in the families of professional Taiwanese immigrants, it is not infrequent that the husband returns to Taiwan where he can get a better paying job because of a booming economy, while the wife and children stay in Southern California because there are better educational opportunities there for their children. The commuting husbands in these transnational, upper middle class “split households” are often referred to as “parachute husbands” because of their periodic dropping in on the family (Avenarius 2003).
multi-local existence and distributed work, exploring the ways in which new architectures and technologies make this kind of lifestyle possible. I discuss the patterns of adaptation I see emerging as global economies, organizations, and individuals adjust. Throughout I focus on emerging patterns, tracing the connecting lines between global trends, my own life, the lives of my mobile colleagues, and the participants in the consulting projects with which I am involved. I look at some of the ways in which the emergent technologies of today affect the way we work, we live, and relate to each other and, in the course of doing so, again change our ideas of what is possible.

**Work and Home: Blurring Boundaries**

The boundaries between homelife and worklife, whose blurring we observe at the current time, were created by the Industrial Revolution. Removing production for example from a shoe makers’ hut and the shop that was part of his family’s living quarters to a factory, the Industrial Revolution erected barriers that are only now beginning to be breached. By cutting up the day into (then) twelve-hour shifts, it established regular working hours and with whistle and factory bell managed to split home from work and work from home, as temporally and locationally separate spheres.

It has been an unquestioned fact of life ever since the Industrial Revolution that work is at work and home is where the family is. Now much of what knowledge workers used to do at work has spilled over into their private lives. And this is not only true for routine activities such as reading professional journals, keeping up with disciplinary trends, and answering email and voice mail but also increasingly includes strategic, heads-down activities such as planning and writing. As a matter of fact, many knowledge workers say that they can’t get any “real” work done at the office. Work that formerly was tethered to a defined workplace is now routinely done at home, in the car or in the kinds of public third spaces described by Churchill and Nelson (in press), As a matter of fact, for many people work activities and related obligations have proliferated into almost all aspects of daily life.

Work has invaded the home in many ways, some of which are not obvious. For example, Darrah, Freeman and English-Lueck (2007), in their ten-year study of family life in Silicon Valley, document that many families have begun to conduct their home life with the management techniques they learned at work (see also English-Lueck 2003; Ruhleder et al. 1996).

As is the case at work, time has become the critical resource for the families of knowledge workers. There is a premium on non-committed time that they can spend as “quality time” with each other and especially with their children (Darrah et al. 2007). They feel the need for devices that help with efficient time management and eagerly adopt any technology that might help them monitor the activities of family and friends.

But what may be more surprising is that a parallel change is proceeding at the same time as a visit to any Google campus will confirm. Digital technologies have allowed home- and leisure-related activities to make inroads in the workplace, so that for many people worklife has become very much like homelife (Hochschild 1997, 2007). It is not only that work has invaded our home and leisure life, the converse is also
true. Our “other life” in all of its myriad realizations, has crept into the times and spaces that used to be reserved for work (Hochschild 1997). The home has domes\textsuperscript{3}ticated the workplace almost as much as work has settled itself in the home.\textsuperscript{3} Knowledge workers’ private lives are increasingly colonized by a work mentality that has moved in on the back of the technologies that have worked well for coordinating connections with the workplace. Cell phones and PDAs were quickly seen to provide similar services for organizing one’s family (Darrah et al. 2007; Hochschild 2007). This constitutes a structural shift in family life and a major cultural transformation that is widely visible at least in the Euro-American sphere.

These two worlds, the world of work and our personal, private world of children and friends, of community life and hobbies, of sports and quiet meditation places in the garden, used to be cleanly separated from each other. They were protected by generally accepted rhythms and schedules and by institutions like “the end of the workday” which dumped untold numbers of commuters onto the freeways at 5 o’clock. For many knowledge workers like me, the two worlds are now interdigitating or even fusing. The barriers between our work- and personal lives have become porous in lots of places and “stuff” is leaking through. Invited or not, stealthily or welcomed, work has snuck into our home lives and has staked claims to a variety of other places and spaces as well. We grapple with the consequences, as the papers in this volume show.

**Boundary Management: Mending the Fences**

There is no doubt that well-established boundaries are being breached.\textsuperscript{4} Since there are as yet few societally sanctioned rules for handling this new situation, individuals, families and work communities are beginning to develop strategies for managing it, including resisting the constant monitoring that digital devices permit. With ever-increasing availability and visibility, many people feel the need to fence off certain areas of their lives so that they are not open for inspection and colonization by just anyone, at any time.

Families work out explicit rules about technology use and the conditions under which technology-generated interruptions may intrude into family life by manipulating their

\textsuperscript{3} This trend is reinforced and often initiated by a new type of corporate retreat seminar in which employees are encouraged to re-evaluate their “work/life balance” Covey 1989). These seminars specifically target family life as amenable to effective management techniques. Having participated in several of these in the course of my consulting work, I now think it is quite likely that the exhortations to identify and prioritize tasks and responsibilities in one’s professional and personal life lead for many employees to a heightened sensitivity about the rift. As a consequence, many of them reprioritize their time allocations in favor of family and personal growth activities. In my observation these “life changes” quickly wash out under the pressures of unchanged corporate demands and policies. If I look at the way I have organized my own life, I realize that I, too, have been influenced by these trends (a point that will become abundantly clear later in these pages).

\textsuperscript{4} In this section I draw extensively on the Silicon Valley Cultures Project of my colleagues at San Jose State University who have carried out inspiring ethnographic research on high-tech, two-earner families in Silicon Valley for more than a decade. Many of their papers and presentations can be found at http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/anthropology/svcp/, accessed July 29, 2008. See also Darrah et al. 2007; English-Lueck 1997.
techno-gadgets and inventing new rituals and boundary markers (English-Lueck 2002; Darrah et al. 2007; Lange 2008). Some make new rules that renegotiate the interface between family and work -- balancing the demands of children and homelife on one side with those of work on the other. So mealtime may be off limits for answering phonecalls, both for adults and teenagers. Uninterruptable work times may be agreed upon within the family, though, as Lange (2008) suggests, the verdict is still out about if and under what conditions that works. When is it alright to interrupt a parent working at home, and what to do when Mommy is at home but not available for homework? These parents often find it very difficult to make clear to their children and each other what their status is. As they connect to their virtual office from their kitchen, living room or home office, symbols of transition from work to parental status are gone. The working men and women who used to leave home in business clothes, with briefcase in hand, now, in t-shirts and running shorts, appear totally available and interruptible, to their children as well as to household help.

Boundary work is particularly urgent for two-earner families with children where crisis times seem to be pickup and delivery for school or childcare, bedtime routines, and meal preparation. Often we see elaborate divisions of labor developing around these critical junctures where the requirements of home tend to conflict with those of work. For me, given that my children are grown, these issues don’t apply anymore. My home- and worklife is no longer quite as complicated, though I am constantly mindful (and often being reminded) of the restrictions under that many of my collaborators who telework from home have to manage. While we are on IM (Instant Messaging) or a pc (phonecall), there is always the possibility that on the other side a child walks in with a bloody knee or the gardener sticks in his head asking for instructions.

Domestically, my partner and I have worked out a mutual agreement to minimize interruptions and thereby avoid the associated penalties (primarily the cost of recovering). Since I do much work at home, often in a recliner in the garden or in a hammock chair by the fire, my partner has developed the habit of approaching without saying anything until I give an indication that I can talk. This allows me to do the multitasking that is part of my lifestyle and to give proper attention to these other parts of my life without incurring the negative consequences of multitasking to a large degree. I do the same for him. We also use IM extensively for communicating between our physically separated home offices (one upstairs, the other downstairs), which eliminates many of the interruptions generated by the “maintenance requirements” of a shared operational household (“You hungry yet?”) as well as the myriad “urgent” items that would otherwise generate an interruption. (“Did you see the message from the airline?”)

In this new work ecology, fresh behavioral clusters, values, and conventions appear. For example, distributed workers tend to differentiate between “work time” and “my time”, though these are no longer linearly arranged but rather intermingled in variably sized chunks. Others organize their activities spatially by explicitly distributing tasks and time allocations between work space and domestic space in their homes (Halford 2005; Woodruff et al. 2007).

For many, the blurring of the boundaries between work and home is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it gives (some) people the freedom to arrange their lives in ways that are more satisfying to them and fit their needs better; but on the other, people fight again and again to maintain some semblance of order and predictability.
as the pressures in the office combine with those of a hectic family life. Individually and collectively they create new boundaries by manipulating the techno-gadgets and inventing new rituals and props, creating new institutions like meeting-free days at the office, and agreeing on new no-trespassing signs for family members working at home (Lange 2008).

While many of us chafe under these arrangements, we might consider that this interpenetration of work and home is neither good nor bad in itself. We might want to remember that traditional jobs are a fairly recent invention, kicked off by the rise of factories in the 1800s. During earlier times, when human beings simply followed the rhythms of nature, they worked hard during periods when wild or domesticated crops could be harvested but during slack times devoted lots of time to social, ritual and artistic activities. Before the Industrial Revolution people didn't have jobs in the modern sense at all, but did whatever work was required to bring in the harvest or make goods for home consumption or trade or to sell their wares in periodically occurring regional markets (Bridges 1994a, 1994b). Might the new technologies provide the possibility to return to a more “natural” rhythm? Some of us think so. As worklife and private endeavors again become intermingled (at least for knowledge workers), many of us believe that this offers an opportunity for a better integration that intersperses paid “work-work” with other kinds of worthwhile activities.

Yet, for many, it is not freedom and options they are acquiring but coercion and outside control. As Halford (2005) points out, there exists a major dividing line, a “significant fault line”, between low-paid, semiskilled or unskilled workers who are given no choice but to work from home, and managerial or professional workers for whom the opportunity may appear to offer greater autonomy and flexibility. As a society, we have not yet worked out our priorities and what makes sense for whom.

Technology adoption is one of the forces that make all kinds of borders increasingly permeable (Jordan in press). Techno-gadgets are colonizing our homes and workplaces, our entertainment spaces and learning environments. Observing ourselves and the world around us, we might ask, “What other borders are being breached?” Or the other way around, “What kinds of boundary lines are still intact? How much of our world still remains off-limits to techno-gadget intrusion?” Or again looking at it from the other side, “What activity domains are barred from technological ‘enrichment’? What are the spaces that we, as a society, will agree to keep protected from colonization by techno-gadgets?” I used to think that fear of surveillance would motivate people to guard certain physical places, private activities and conceptual domains against technology intrusion. In particular, I thought that the intimate and spiritual parts of our lives would remain technology-free sanctuaries for a long time. But as I visit my mother’s grave in a cemetery in a small town in Germany, there is, on a grave nearby, an “eternal light” powered by a solar cell.\(^5\) This took me by surprise, but the use of communication technologies in spiritual life, ritual and religious practice is extremely common and widespread (Bell 2006; Miller and Slater 2000) and has been incorporated even in indigenous communities without a hitch (Jordan 2007). Now that people are using cell phones and laptops in bed it appears that neither the spiritual nor the intimate is safe. Should it be?

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\(^5\) What does that mean? Does it change the cycle of maintenance visits to this grave? Does it mean fewer visits to the cemetery? A change in the family’s Sunday walk route? Or is it a sign of besting the Joneses?
How I Got Here: A Confessional

Earlier in my career, I and everybody else I knew, used to “go to work”, and that was a particular physical place. For me it was at first a faculty office at a university and then a corporate research lab, where I had all the resources I needed, from libraries to administrative support. Most significantly, I could meet up with my colleagues face-to-face, real live people with whom I had developed significant and satisfying working relationships.

My life changed in 1998 when I switched from being an employee to becoming an independent consultant. A period of downsizing at work coincided with a periodic desire to try something new. So I took a “golden handshake” and “retired.”

I wish there were a better word for “retirement.” To some people it still implies shutting down. Retreating to the knitting and the fishing, depending on your gender. But for me it was to a large extent life as before. Outwardly, not much changed. I was still doing R&D (Research and Development) projects, though now with accountability to my own partners rather than to clients contracted by my employer. I still traveled a lot, lived in hotels a lot, came “home” to Springhill, my house in the Santa Cruz Mountains above Palo Alto, to catch up, take a look at my garden and take off again. I still had an office at the Palo Alto Research Center, and continued to interact with my colleagues there pretty much the same as before. As a matter of fact, many of them didn’t realize for a long time that my status had changed. I still spent several days a week at my office at PARC, working from my home office the rest of the time, not too different from what I had done before.

I had a minor “identity crisis” at the transition. I wasn’t sure at first about how I should refer to myself now, but my past boss suggested I simply put “consultant” in front of my former title. I printed up new business cards that made me a “Consulting Principal Scientist”. For a while I contemplated the possibility of starting my own company. It would be called “OnSite Insight”, but looking at the difficulties my formerly employed friends encountered (the office rent, the assistants they had to hire, the communication systems they had to install) I decided to stay lean and simple.

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A few years earlier my partner and I had taken a vacation in Costa Rica. We immediately felt an affinity for the land and the people. Both Bob and I had lived in the tropics before (he in Africa, I in Mexico) and had found that lifestyle appealing. We bought a piece of property high up on the side of a mountain, looking down on miles and miles of beach. There were some old trees on our land but much of the property was cattle pasture, recently abandoned, and now overgrown with weeds and the first generation of forest regrowth. Amongst fantasies of regrowing the original jungle we dreamed of building a house there where we would live whenever we could manage some time off, a place that we could use as a base for exploring other areas in Central and South America. This seemed increasingly a possibility as our consulting engagements settled into a predictable pattern of high-intensity work interspersed with occasional slow times.

Whenever we could squeeze in a few days, maybe because a project required time for analysis, for preparing a workshop, or for writing a client report, we began to work on building Besos del Viento (Kisses of the Wind), our house on the mountain. Bob designed it and built it little by little with the help of a motley group of local workers. I had only two requirements: this house had to be round (I hate square boxes) and without walls (I also hate to be caged in). We both wanted it to be open to the wind, the butterflies, the birds, the snakes, and whatever other animals might want to share our lives there. It took years before Besos became livable. We finally inaugurated it on the last day of the 20th century with a smashing New Year’s Party. By now, eight years later, we have settled into a fairly regular pattern of three months chunks of time in California twice a year, with the rest of the time in Costa Rica. My work patterns in California and Costa Rica are quite similar, the main difference being the lack of face-to-face interaction with my partners outside of Costa Rica. At the same time, it is remarkable how similar my life is in both places. The majority of the consulting work I do now is done remotely, by email and telephone, with only occasional face-to-face meetings. And those are as easy or difficult to accomplish from Costa Rica as they are from California. As a matter of fact, it takes me less time
to get to the U.S. East Coast from San Jose, Costa Rica, than from San Jose, California.

Before Besos del Viento became a part of our lives I had always traveled a lot. But I had always had a “home”. Now I am living with the necessities, the routines, the pleasures and the excitement of constantly negotiating my two lives – the one that is physically located in Costa Rica, and the other that plays itself out in Silicon Valley. Why do I run my business half of the year from a mountainside in that little country, looking down on 30 miles of surf and watching a toucan or a family of coati mundis steal my bananas while I do my email? Why am I not sitting in California’s Silicon Valley for twelve months of the year when that is where most of my business connections are? Good questions.

Architectures for the Mobile Life

One of the most obvious changes that the shift to remote work and a mobile lifestyle has generated is visible in the changing architectures of our physical environment, in private, domestic domains as much as in the public sphere. Both of them are interesting spaces in which to track emergent cultural shifts.

As information technologies have decoupled work from physical spaces and face-to-face interaction (Gluesing 2008), the shift to distributed work and a mobile lifestyle has shaped the relationship between home and office. The layout of both Besos and Springhill accommodates the co-location of domestic, personal and work activities and that has modified our expectations of what behaviors can occur in our home-work spaces. Archeologists keep coming up with fascinating insights about the influence of subsistence technologies on home, hut, or cave shelter design. I am old enough to remember the disappearance if not of the “parlor”, then definitely of the “rumpus room”, the “den”, and then the “family room”, all of which vanished as people reordered the priorities in their lives. The most recent changes came with the reconfiguration of our physical spaces due to the rise of the home office. These changes are indicative of the negotiations over redefining when and where work happens and when home life rules.

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6 A coati mundi or pizote is a small mammal, similar to a raccoon.

7 For an interesting example of how kitchen architecture reflects such shifts, see Bell and Kaye (2002).
I do have a home office at Springhill (in California) but that may be mostly for historical reasons, mainly because it’s always been there and serves as the place that collects the papers, books and tapes I need for my work. At Besos del Viento (in Costa Rica) I don’t really have an “office”, and in both places I appropriate different locations as the place where I do work for a while. It is worth noting that for most of the people who have “real” home offices, that home office is stationary, a specific place to which they may even be able to shut the door. For others, the home office has become mobile and multi-locational. For me it happens to be wherever my laptop makes an appearance. Sometimes it shows up on a nine foot slab of wood (our dining table at Besos) or in the palapa, my retreat on the hill above the house. This is particularly important for me because at Besos, due to the open construction, it becomes difficult to generate something approaching a space (not to speak of a room) of one’s own. My partner, too, has his favorite spaces and one might easily find him, laptop on lap, in a shady spot on the steps going up to the pool. Our laptops allow us to colonize a space of our own, when we need it and where we need it, by appropriating different parts of both houses and their environment.

Reflecting on the ways in which we have constructed, reconstructed, modified and adapted the structures and functionalities of our two abodes, I see myself participating in the wholesale global re-purposing and multi-purposing of dwellings. When I think about it, I see myself doing a version of what everybody else is doing and has been doing for eons -- that is redesigning our environments so that they become esthetically beautiful and functionally efficient, according to whatever current conditions and cultural preferences require. When I look at the Great Rooms in contemporary upscale home construction, so insightfully described by Allison Woodruff and her colleagues (2007),

8 Great Rooms are typically of generous dimensions, centered on a large multifunctional family room, often with a high ceiling, that combines the functions of kitchen, family room and living room, plus providing space for public reception and display. It is not usually a place for permanent laptop installation, though such rooms are valued as a site of working in the presence of others, a kind of multi-tasking in “being alone together” (Mainwaring and Woodruff 2005; Woodruff et al. 2007).
in a different environment, would I have yearned for the protectiveness of cozy little rooms that made one feel safe and cherished? It is in these subtle ways that “culture has us by the throat” as Harvey Sacks used to say, and that is precisely why examining one’s own actions can generate a deeper understanding of these “invisible-in-plain-sight” cultural shifts that we experience, even as we contribute to them.

But it is not only in our own private environments that we can observe the evolution of new spatial architectures. The same is true in the public sphere. Work has scattered beyond our bedrooms and living rooms into a variety of spaces that are becoming hospitable to working remotely by providing resources and a place of refuge for the mobile worker. In the competitive public sphere, this has created considerable pressure to offer services for workers on the go, a pressure that is visible in the changing layout of a variety of structures, from banks to retail stores. For me, two favorite observation points have been airport lounges and hotel lobbies.

One of the things that always fascinate me on my trips is to see how the global transportation economies are adjusting to the pressure exerted by the ever-increasing demands of frequent travelers. These pressures affect changes in architecture to changes in services. Now there are spas and massage stations as well as novel and innovative shopping opportunities in practically every large airport, train station or mega-hotel that caters to a crowd of “transumers” (consumers in transition), global travelers who increasingly live a transient lifestyle. In most airport cafes and bistros your latte now comes with internet access and a convenient outlet for your laptop, for travelers as well as pilots.

I am also fascinated when I watch the ways in which airport lounges are beginning to adapt to the needs of working travelers. Old style lounges are almost institutional in the layout of their uncomfortable parlor-like seating arrangements, old-fashioned

9 The reader may notice that earlier I gave a personal, psychological reason for this preference.
phone cubby holes, and few outlets for your laptop. Newly constructed or remodeled lounges, on the other hand, have tables with ergonomic chairs where one can prop a laptop, free wireless broadband access, plentiful connections, and may even let you do your email in a luxurious massage loung er. Patently visible here is the slow diffusion of these kinds of innovation. Travelers who don’t have access to airport lounges are still crowding around scarce outlets in the gate areas, sprawling around floor level outlets with their laptops, backpacks (and sometimes babies). One might expect that the next remodeling of those facilities will catch up with mobile workers’ needs and provide convenient access of the kind that is already common in airports in Hong Kong and Singapore.

I also continue to track what is happening in hotels, where lobbies are changing from drab, somber walk-through places to brightly lit, cheerful seating areas where you can easily have a private business conversation or hole up with your laptop, never far from an outlet. And many public restaurants and hotels are now providing free wifi and internet access, a terrific boon to the traveler.

Again, recently remodeled or new facilities show the contrast most starkly. Many more properties, originally considered to be for the tourist/vacation trade, have recently installed free wireless broadband connections from every guest room, a sign that they are responding to the increasing mix of business and pleasure travel in global tourism. I also find it interesting that many small and boutique hotels, in the US as well as internationally, are offering these services for free while major large hotel chains continue to charge for such services. Another example of smaller, more flexible organizations responding quicker to competitive pressure than larger ones?

A Longitudinal View: Critical Enablers

We have come a long way since we started to experiment with locating half of our work/life in Costa Rica and I do not underestimate the role of regional economic development and technological development that made this possible. The dozen years since we began building Besos saw wrenching changes in the local economy, including a comparatively rapid progress in upgrading infrastructures such as phone and broadband connectivity, visible in most of the Central and South American countries. Doing distributed work, of course, wouldn’t be possible without the increasing functionalities of the technologies that connect us remote workers with our clients and partners.

What we see clearly outlined here is the co-evolution of technology with work- and lifestyle, with the technology playing a critical role as an enabler, as Julia Gluesing (2008) has so cogently demonstrated. Today’s emergent technologies are affecting the way we work, we live, and relate to each other and, in the course of doing so, make different kinds of lifescapes possible.

When I am not in face-to-face contact with clients or colleagues, my main work activities (and I believe this is true for most knowledge workers) are computer work (much of it email), writing, (most of which involves editing computer printouts),

10 for openness: “I hate to be cooped in.”
10 Yes, I am of the generation whose brain doesn’t engage and whose body doesn’t comply with a computer screen for writing. Much as I love (and hate) my laptop, it has a long ways to
and telephone calls (Brown et al. 2002; Julsrud 2005). With the laptop, all of these have become divorced from a fixed location.

But in the early days in Costa Rica, phone calls used to be a major headache. When we happened into Matapalo on that first trip in 1993, it was a sleepy little beach community. There was one public phone at a local “soda” (roadside eating place) where villagers stood in line to call family and friends for news, or a potential employer for upcoming jobs – not exactly a place where you could conduct business. In those days the only way we could get email was to stand in line with the rest of the villagers, connect our laptop to the phone line when our turn came, and hope that nobody was sending us longwinded messages or attachments.

When we acquired a cell phone, it had reception originally only in very restricted locations. One of those was in the pit of Manuelito, the village mechanic. (Remember the days before hydraulic lifts?) The other one was available at low tide. If one waded far enough out into the ocean, one could sometimes get a phonecall through, but it was a hazardous enterprise. Now this little community has land phone lines and villagers can call anywhere in the world, send faxes and email, and, incidentally, so can I when I need to communicate back to my partners from this still remote place. What we are beginning to see is a communication network that spans the globe, linking individuals, institutions, and communities.

We still don’t have a landline at Besos up on the mountain. But Bob, always the inventor-tinkerer, somehow cobbled together a two-kilometer wifi connection down to the village to the house of a tico family who were kind enough to share the use of their landline with us. So now we check email several times a day – a luxury we appreciate immensely since together with the cell phone email is our most important link to professional counterparts and family.

Economic development may be most visible with cars. In the early days, there was one car in Matapalo, then (and still) owned by Micki, who might be pressed into taxi services at times. Now you see almost as many cars in the village as there are television antennas on the roofs. In the beginning, we used the rickety buses that ply the dirt road between Matapalo and the communities to the North and South, like everybody else. We also hitchhiked a lot, a practice we continued when we bought Mulita, a rather decrepit Toyota Land Cruiser (by now 35 years old) that for a long time had the endearing habit of breaking down rather regularly. But as time went on, Bob, who had driven such a thing across Africa earlier in his life, repaired her bit by bit, and now it is we who give locals and stranded tourists a ride. During the dry season we take the top of and she becomes our safari vehicle.

**Upsides, Downsides, Rewards and Penalties of the Distributed Life**

I believe that the upsides of leading this kind of life are obvious, at least for the privileged professionals who lead a life similar to mine, and indeed, people often go before it can even approach the functionalities of plain paper. At the same time, I have to ask: Is this a generational issue?

11 Costa Ricans refer to themselves as "ticsos". The term, unlike "gringo" for North Americans and Europeans, has no negative implications.
envy this lifestyle. But there are also considerable difficulties one encounters and penalties one pays. I fully appreciate that where there is still a single fixed home to which the nomad returns, especially one where family members await her or him, there is likely to be a lot more conflict and negotiation than is the case for me since my partner is with me, no matter where we are for the moment. The consulting trips I take, whether from California or Costa Rica, have the same flavor of absence and return as they used to when I had a single work/home location. My work is still sprinkled through my “other” day in kaleidoscopic fashion, alternating cycles of serious head-down work with breaks of “other”. So in many ways, my home life and my work life have not changed.

The Upsides

Probably the biggest upside for me in living a distributed, semi-nomadic life is the excitement of constant change, mixed with the security of the familiar. I love the tropical life at Besos where I continually discover new sources of delight, of joy, and of adventure. I love the early morning hours before the sun rises, doing my exercises on a tile floor downstairs that is still warm from the sun of the previous day; a pale moon floats in a star-filled firmament; a kinkajou makes its way across the branches of a tree, silhouetted against the moon-lit sky. At Besos, I experience an expansion of my senses, an increased peripheral awareness that notes a gecko on the wall munching on a grasshopper, a toucan in our bananas, a beautiful parrot snake that turns and takes off in a green flash as soon as she sees me raise my head from my laptop. I find a new kind of joy in watching a jeweled beetle make its way across my laptop, or a butterfly landing on it while I take a sip of my coffee. On a mountain where traffic is rare, I’ve learned to tell who is coming up the steep gravel road (and may stop for a chat) by the sounds of their car. I know that a car or truck horn sounding three times repeatedly somewhere on the mountain means “I’m in trouble, need help”. It is those recognitions of familiarity, of insider knowledge, of awareness of local routines and events that give me the feeling that I actually live here, that I am not “just” a tourist.

I continue to take breaks between my work cycles, but they now may consist of a walk down to the star fruit tree to check what is ripe, or a chat with Ricardo, our worker, who wants to know if he should cut the coconut trees that are beginning to
obliterate the skyline. My tropical
garden is a new delight now and I spend
lots of my breaks there. Our
reforestation efforts have brought
monkeys and other animals that need
forested travel paths back into our area.
And then there is always the beach. I
know California quite well, but in Costa
Rica, whenever we drive into the jungle
or cross a river with our “safari vehicle”,
there is still a sense of newness, of
discovery, of adventure that keeps me
from falling into all too rigid routines in
the rest of my life, too.

But after living three months in the rainforest I find myself ready to return to
Springhill and to the familiar haunts and faces that continue to define, to a large
extent, my work persona. I reconnect with colleagues and friends, reinforce
professional bonds, and enjoy having an extensive research library once again at my
fingertips. I even enjoy trading the incessant call of toucans for the raucous
screeches of blue jays, and looking up once again at redwoods rather than teak and
palm trees.

The Downsides

Although the upsides of this kind of life are obvious, the downsides are maybe less
so, but it is the downsides that require conscious effort and extra energy because
they have to be actively managed. (The upsides are only to be enjoyed or possibly to
be prioritized.) Compared to a stable workplace where much information gets
exchanged in the hallway, at lunch, the gym or other in-between places, most of the
troubles that descend on the nomadic worker have to do with the disruption of social
relations and the loss of context. This is the bane of the consultant anyway, and one
that I certainly experienced when I did external projects while still tied to a fixed
workplace. Not having access to the corridor conversations, those of us working
remotely often have no clue about what is happening until a decision has been made
"back at the office". But even after return, having missed a major chunk of informal
knowledge transfer, having missed subtle changes in company and client goals, not
having met new employees or even the new boss when one returns, it is crucial to
manage surprises by quick assessment and soliciting updates. For this, ongoing
relationships are crucial. One of the hidden costs in working remotely is the
tremendous amount of energy that successful distance workers invest in maintaining
these kinds of relationships. Potentially serious problems flow from neglecting their
maintenance, including unanticipated decisions that may significantly affect the
remote worker’s or consultant’s project.

All knowledge workers who lead distributed lives face changes in their social
relationships. Most painful is the unavoidable shrinkage of prior collegial and
personal relationships, but on the other hand there is also a significant increase in
new relationships. In my case, while I definitely experience a certain impoverishment
in the connection to my colleagues at PARC and to the lab culture, I now have a
second set of permanent relationships, namely those I am developing in Costa Rica
with colleagues, expats, and ticos from the village and surrounding areas. To
overgeneralize, I would say that the number and variety of relationships is up, but
the intensity is down. The reality is that I am away for six months out of the year as
seen from either side. As Meerwarth (2008) points out, having face-to-face
connections in one place automatically means remote relationship maintenance for
the other. And that is a serious issue if one doesn’t want to run the risk of letting
those relationships shrink into oblivion.

I do have some consulting projects where there is no face-time whatsoever. I’ve
never seen these people and they’ve never seen me. We do wonder how much of a
problem that is and have tried to patch it up by sending photos like the one below.
In the course of time I have learned interesting bits about them (like that one of
them is six feet two inches tall and has trouble in airplane seats, or that the sister of
another team member just had a baby) but these are isolated bits that don’t hang
together. Nevertheless, at least in this case, the relationship works perfectly. And
I don’t know why. Maybe it is because it is
the kind of project that I have done a lot,
where I can predict what the tasks are
that have to be done in sequence, where I
can be a watchdog helping them avoid
making the most common mistakes and
missing those obvious but invisible
opportunities. Nevertheless, for me and
many of my mobile colleagues the
question remains: When is face-time really
necessary? How much is enough? And
enough for what?

What is definitely certain, however, is that I pay special attention to maintaining
these relationships of familiarity, availability, and mutual commitment to the best of
my ability. I know that requires special work. I keep lists that tell me both who I
need to meet with when I get back and who “at the other end” I want to continue a
conversation with while I am gone. In some ways my life has become richer but also
more complicated.

There are many, rather mundane reasons why, in our lives, the problems could
easily have outweighed the advantages. I do not underestimate the fortuitous
idiosyncratic circumstances that enable our particular version of a mobile life.
Without my partner’s ability to build a dream house from scratch, his technological
expertise that keeps our communication networks intact, and his constant attention
to the myriad maintenance requirements of our multilocal lifestyle, little of this would
be possible. Nevertheless, I believe that there are enough parallels to what other
mobile workers experience to make it worthwhile to look at the kinds of strategies
we have developed to make this a challenging but deeply satisfying and often
exhilarating existence.

**Strategies for Living and Working in Two Places**

As other contributors to this volume have shown, knowledge workers have adopted a
variety of different strategies for adjusting to a life where boundaries are blurred and
relationships are tenuous and in constant need of maintenance. These adjustments range from choosing socially acceptable patterns of activity management to an assemblage of heuristics, “tricks of the trade,” and experiential wisdom that accumulates based on individual and collective experience.

**Boundary Keepers and Integrators**

As I observe people trying to figure out what strategies to adopt for living this new distributed life where the barriers between work and non-work are disappearing, I see them struggling to adjust. There seem to be two kinds of strategic solutions for dealing with the pervasive interdigitation of work and off-work spheres. Some people fight the disappearance of time-honored boundaries. They struggle to establish new borders and rules so that both family-related and work-related tasks get done. These "Boundary Keepers" fit well into a regulated workplace. They like a clear division between work and non-work. They thrive on set hours for each and do best with a formal, structured workday. They are the ones who maintain separate email accounts for personal and work email. As a matter of fact, they may open their "work mail" only during the work part of their day and they definitely are not going to take their laptop on vacation.

Those of us who interleave activities of different kinds, such as intensive head-down work while writing a report with a spell of pulling weeds in the garden, we might call the "Integrators". I confess that I am an unabashed, unmitigated, dyed-in-the-wool, Integrator. For me, there is no strict division between work time and “other” time. I prefer to look at the list of what I need to do and what I want to do at the beginning of my day and then spread my energy around to give cycles of maybe 30 minutes to tasks according to their priority. What this means is that many things are in progress. Many things do not get done. Yet items move up in the ranking as they become more urgent. I might end up with spending several cycles on a project proposal with a close deadline. Still, even if that happens, I prefer to get up between cycles, check the laundry, look up a reference, pick some flowers and come back to the task. The advantage of balancing non-work activities with work-related tasks is that I can juggle many different projects and interests at the same time, including allocating time to myself. With this system, nothing gets consistently ignored: clients, family, friends and colleagues all remain in my peripheral awareness. It is rare that something actually falls between the cracks. On the other hand, it’s a wonderful way of supporting procrastination, an ever-present temptation for the solitary knowledge worker. If there is something I really don’t feel like doing, I can always push it down on the list.

Integrators don’t object to interruptions (though they do manage their negative consequences). The door to their office (if they have one) is always open. They are the ones who keep their email program on all of their non-sleeping hours, and they rarely resist the temptation to look at a mail if it pops up on their screen. If you send

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12 The rapid succession of bouts of activity looks like a form of multitasking, but is more akin to what Lange (in press) calls “intertasking”. I used to think that my predilection for this kind of piece-work came from my early experiences raising three children as a single mother, when I juggled at first the demands of graduate school and then the demands of academic employment with my need to be present at home and there for my children. I became rather good at making lists (I live with lists!) and prioritizing, looking ahead to what needed to be done today, this month, during the year, squeezing the last bit of usable time out of my day.
them a message, you can expect an answer within minutes. (On the other hand, if you are working with a Boundary Keeper, don’t expect an answer before the next working day.) The Integrators are avid users of Instant Messaging (IM). They mix personal and business items in the same email and on their to-do lists. They think nothing of doing a grocery run in the middle of a workday and their workplace shows it. I knew I was talking to an Integrator when I met with a manager recently whose cubicle was decorated with a lively collection of pictures of colleagues and kids (her customers’), several magnet photo frames of her cats, a candy dish for drop-ins and even a copy of the New Testament Psalms and Proverbs lying there on her desk. This was an Integrator whose home had happily colonized her workspace. She actually said: “My cube is home for me,” and I would bet that she runs errands during the day, talks to friends and family during work times, and stays late in her cube-home whenever required.  

Clearly, both Boundary Keepers and Integrators are struggling to establish and maintain some semblance of order and predictability, the Boundary Keepers by establishing new barriers and rules that allow them to preserve some form of separation between their work life and their private life, the Integrators by obliterating them. Both are in the business of making new rules that renegotiate the interface between family and work.

**Managing the Transitions: Lists and Routines**

Actually, the most hazardous aspect of being continuously on the move is the transition stage, the period of time when you are neither here nor there, when here and away flip. Meerwarth (2008) calls this a liminal time, the experience of moving through space and time without solid grounding. For me, especially in the early days, there always loomed the fear (and often the experience) of impending double disaster, chaos on leaving one place and chaos on arriving at the other. At the same time, these transitional days are full of energy, tinged with the excitement of change, of new adventures, of making plans, of hoping for the repetition of what attracted us to Springhill and Besos del Viento in the first place. There is a sense of pulling loose, of leaving behind, of uncertainty but also of anticipation of the changes that are in store. This is the time when memories have to be re-furbished for the new place.  

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13 This raises the question of whether the work styles of Boundary Keepers and Integrators can mix. I think not easily. I know that it is important for me, a hard-core Integrator, to figure out what style my remote partners prefer. Boundary Keepers can easily become annoyed if I bombard them with short updates, questions or requests, while a fellow Integrator would welcome that. It may well be that there is a fairly hard-wired (or early-wired) preference for one style or another. Nevertheless, observation also suggests that hierarchical (boundary-favoring) environments seem to favor (or attract?) Boundary Keepers, while flat, distributed work environments tend to favor Integrators.

14 I am thoroughly convinced that memory is location-specific, at least for me. It has happened to me more than once that I can’t remember my own phone number or the names of people in the place where I have just arrived, even though recalling them is no problem otherwise. Why do I find myself turning into the bathroom at Springhill looking for chicken bouillon? Because at Besos I would find it also to the right, in the bodega (store room). And why am I looking for my car in the wrong parking space at PARC? After a frustrating search, I realize that’s where I parked it the last time. But that was three months earlier!
A major way to conquer chaos for me has always been making lists. I live by lists. They allow me to get some idea of what’s out there, and thereby an idea of what I can handle and what will remain a problem. So lists are not really a way to get things done (the tasks and problems are still there after I’ve written the list) but they provide a feeling of control. At least I know now what the feeling of doom is about, what the chaos consists of and I can make a worst-case scenario in the knowledge -- based on experience -- that the outcome is never as bad as I think.

Active workload management by making lists is a joint enterprise. Both Bob and I draw up various lists and post them in public places (like the kitchen table). And we make lots of lists. Many of them are tri-partite: of here (wherever that may be at the time), of there, and of in-between. Of things to do before leaving (disconnect the car battery), things to do on the way (last phonecalls from the airport lounge), and things to do when there (check which bridges are down). Of items to purchase here, in between, and there. Of things to remember when we are here, in-between, and there. These lists bind the here with the there, they smooth the disjuncture, and make the non-ordinary again familiar, ordinary, and tractable.

A specialized list that I have on my desktop no matter where I am is our exit list. It, too, has a flip-flop nature, depending on where we are exiting from. It is a boundary object for that wholesale reconfiguration that needs to happen whenever we move from “CR” to “CA” or “CA” to “CR”. “Things to take back” in the exit list means things to take back to CA when we are in CR, but take back to CR when we are in CA. The “talk to when we get back” list will have the names of clients, colleagues and family in California while I am in Costa Rica, and the other way around when I am in California.

**Double the Effort, Double the Fun: Duplicating the Necessities**

So what does it take to make a structure of massive beams, tile floors, and cement columns home? A functioning work/home? For us, the operant questions were: How much do you really have to duplicate? And how much stuff can you carry on a plane? It turns out a lot. Especially in the early days, little could be acquired locally. For ten years we brought down tools, building supplies, computers, phones, books, office supplies, small appliances, car parts, dehumidifiers, exercise equipment and more, not to speak of the favorite foods we couldn’t get in Costa Rica. If you are addicted to Reese’s candy bars or brie cheese, you will have a hard time finding those in our tiny village grocery store. We still travel with our full baggage allowance but now much of that is taken up with clothes, tools and household goods for our Costa Rican friends, and coffee and Costa Rican rum for our U.S. friends. (I am, however, still dreaming of walking off the plane with only a handbag, and a book under my arm – my idealized version of what a mobile life should look like.)

**Finding Way Stations**

What has become very important to us in our journeys back and forth are our way stations, places of refuge in the transition that are, in many ways, akin to the “third places” described by Oldenburg (1991) and the “in-between” and “transition spaces” discussed by other authors in this volume. These are familiar islands of comfort and convenience that make a stressful, day-long journey tolerable. All mobile workers who travel particular routes routinely find them sooner or later. For us, the way
stations that have become particularly important are airport lounges and our arrival and departure hotel in Costa Rica.

Airport lounges are prime candidates for "third places". They facilitate all kinds of business, as well as recreational and personal maintenance activities (like showers) for the out-of-home, out-of-office nomads that frequent them. At this point in time, they show some measure of stress to adapt to the changing routines of travelers. In the past the design trended towards a pseudo living-room atmosphere where one could watch a movie, read a book, and meet friends and colleagues. Business-related pursuits were relegated to a windowless conference room and a corridor of narrow cubicles where travelers could make a phone call or hook up their laptop. Though less innovative than home office design which has become very much attuned to work-at-home activities, one can see small steps towards making lounges more responsive to the emergent needs of working travelers. My observations suggest that cubicle occupancy is declining, while laptop work in the open areas of lounges seems to be more common, leading again and again to the spectacle of travelers searching for scarce outlets.

Our favorite arrival and departure hotel in Costa Rica has also taken on special significance. Arriving there, no matter what time of the day or night, I breathe a sigh of relief. Things here are familiar. We are greeted like family. I ask the maid how it is going with her long-dying father and the gardener inquires after "Mateo", our grandson, who at the age of seven stole his heart. Routine interaction and the expectation of continuing visits generate a kind of pseudo family atmosphere. In the course of the years there has been a progressive exploration of what kinds of favors and special treatment we can ask of each other that may be quite typical for these kinds of ongoing relationships. We bring tools and consumer items that are difficult to get or of inferior quality in Costa Rica for friends among the hotel staff. We keep our car in the hotel parking lot while we are gone. The kitchen staff keeps the cheeses we bring in a cold pack from the US in the hotel refrigerator for us while we are there. What contributes a lot to this sense of "almost home" is that we know things that non-regular travelers don’t know, like to ask for a favorite room such as the Orchid Suite (which is adjacent to the pool) or the fact that we can get coffee at 6am though breakfast isn’t served officially until eight. What is important in this kind of relationship are the personal connections, the small favors exchanged, and the help offered and given whenever the need arises, even if inherently modulated by the basically commercial nature of our stay.

**Managing Social Relationships**

As Meerwarth notes (2008), as a remote worker, no matter where you are physically, you are always managing two sets of relationships simultaneously, those at a distance and those that exist locally. This adds substantially to the workload of the remote worker, taking not only time and effort but also requiring a fair amount of emotional energy. Not paying sufficient attention to this issue crops up as a significant cause of dissatisfaction on both sides, the worker’s and the employer’s, and may even lead to the abandonment of what often is begun as an experiment.

Youngblood (2008) explicitly names two strategies for building and maintaining effective collaboration over distance. One revolves around self-presentation and identity; the other around making the work (the "value add" in corporate language) visible to a distant partner or client. There is a set of rarely vocalized questions that
always lurk in the background, needing to be answered unexpectedly in interaction with clients and colleagues, such as: Who am I to them? How do they see me? How can I make myself and my value visible? What do they need to know about my past, my competencies, my limitations? My work style and my lifestyle? Obviously, I would want to communicate what they need to know to carry out the work we are doing together, but that itself, in my type of consulting, is often ill-defined to start with.

Again, as in the Boundary Keeper/Integrator question, personal preferences and well-established habits loom large. I know of people who keep any indication of their personal life out of such exchanges, and others who, like me, believe that work is more productive and more satisfying when our outsider status is in some ways mitigated. Research shows that judgment about the performance and competence of remote team members is often negatively affected by the absence of personal contextual information, resulting in what is known as the "fundamental attribution error" (Cramton 2002). If a project fails or a task is not carried out properly, it is possible to attribute the cause to the actor's lack of leadership, motivation or skill, or, alternatively, it could be seen as due to situational factors such as lack of support, not enough time, task too difficult. Negative behavior by an inside member of a group is likely to be attributed to situational factors ("child sick at home") but similar behavior by an outsider is often judged as due to personal deficiencies ("incompetent", "unreliable"). This affects how credit and blame are allocated, performance is evaluated and, as a consequence how resources are distributed. It would appear then that even apart from personal preference, there are good reasons for not withholding all personal information. In any case, maintaining a strict division between what is private and what is business related is not likely to come naturally to Integrators who tend to mimic the progressive disclosure of personal information in face-to-face encounters in their remote relationships.

This speaks to the larger issue of self-presentation in the absence of co-location. Without the immediate feedback available in face-to-face relationships, I often experience a nagging uncertainty about how my work is being evaluated and how I am seen. There are band-aid solutions to this problem, such as quick phonecalls for "checking in," prompt responses to email and voicemail, frequent updates on progress, though, as Youngblood (2008) has pointed out, that has its own dangers as well. The underlying issue remains. In the last analysis, for social creatures like us, the pervasive ill-feeling that comes from lack of frequent responsive feedback is something that, at least at the current state of technology, remote workers will have to live with. It is one of the many stresses they have to manage.

I am fortunate in that my enduring home base at PARC provides a solid anchor for continuing relationships with my professional colleagues there that allows me to retain many of the benefits of co-location. PARC continues as my primary intellectual community but I have also found it important to compensate for the unavoidable shrinking of established relationships by strengthening my participation in other professional communities. Here the anthrodesign community, the SFAA (Society for Applied Anthropology), NAPA (the National Association of Practicing Anthropologists), and most recently the EPIC (Ethnographic Praxis in Industry) community have become major resources for building, maintaining, refreshing, and adapting my professional self-image to the changed conditions in my life. Their websites and support groups make up for the lack of face-to-face communication to some extent, apparently a common way for remote worker to build virtual communities as Gossett (2008) describes as well.
My lifestyle is often seen as enviable and I know that I am likely to overemphasize its positive aspects. For example, I often find myself launching into an enthusiastic, overly positive account of life in Costa Rica. But this, after all, is also a country where theft and robbery are endemic, where torrential downpours can sweep you off your mountain, where it takes forever to get something done, and where unbridled development is rampant. I know that living in a tropical country in the midst of natural beauty is intrinsically subject to suspicion of vacationing, retiring, or other kinds of unavailability. So I have learned, as has Strawn (2008), that actively managing one’s remote status rather than being defensive or overly advocatory about it is part of managing remote social relationships.

**Conclusions**

The rise of new information storage and communication technologies, coupled with a transition to a service society, has made possible a different ecology of work. We are clearly in a time of cultural shifts and major societal change.

In times of cultural shift new rules and standards have to be built. With the expectation of a 24x7 work style in many jobs, the relationship between worklife and homelife is visibly stressed. There are no fixed rules yet for how to deal with this issue, either in the sphere of work or at home, neither from the individual side, the corporate sphere, or society. We are living in a time of experiments being conducted and new social contracts and agreements being worked out and what will finally emerge is by no means self-evident.

Let me end this chapter by returning to the phenomenon I began with: blurring boundaries. For many of us who have adopted a mobile lifestyle the blurrings are most compellingly, most powerfully experienced in two aspects of our oscillating existence: The first revolves around the vanishing distinction between work and non-work; the second around the fact that home and away flip every time we move; that here slips into there and there becomes another here.

For me, “home” and “work” have become nebulous concepts. If home is where family is, then both Besos and Springhill are my home. I see my children and grandchildren about as often in Costa Rica as in California. And as far as work is concerned, am I working when I read the American Anthropologist? Wired Magazine? Coastal Living? I used to have a pretty good understanding, shared with colleagues at the office, of what was work and what wasn’t. The American Anthropologist, yes; Wired, maybe; Coastal Living, definitely not. But now the question arises: Am I working when I have dinner with a daughter who works at a high-tech company? We discuss the logistics of an impending family get-together, but she also explains to me the nuances of how Indian technologists relate to their superiors.

I do a lot of mentoring in my current life. Is this work? It is not very different from the “co-thinking” I do with senior managers in my corporate practice. The main difference is that I get paid for one and not for the other. I do it because it gives me intense pleasure to be helpful to others. I build personal relationships. I learn a lot. So should I think of those activities as personal? Especially for an anthropologist, the

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15 For an unusual attempt to design corporate policies that are responsive to changing career realities see Benko and Weisberg (2007).
differentiation has never made much sense anyway since we tend to operate in a participant-observer mode no matter where we are or what we are doing. But in the past, the distinctly separate physical location of what I call “work-work” encouraged and actually enforced this separation even in the minds of ethnographers for whom the social/physical world is always the field in which they operate.

The all-important questions of what effects the new technologies will have, how much distance or co-location we shall have, if we shall enjoy solitude or battle loneliness, enjoy connectedness or suffer from overcrowding, what shall be normal and expected and what will be seen as strange, what shall be privilege and what shall be considered substandard, these kinds of issues have not yet been negotiated at the beginning of the 21st century. We have the new technologies, but the societal rules which allow them to be domesticated and adapted to human life have not yet appeared (Arthur 2003).¹

As a society, we are in a period of intense experimentation about how we might conduct ourselves with the new communication and information devices, in families as well as in workplaces. We look for ways of using these new gadgets and the functionalities they represent to help us lead richer lives, be more connected to our fellow human beings, maybe even generate a rhythm in our lives that abandons the nine-to-five regime generated by the Industrial Revolution -- in favor of a lifestyle that is more suited to what our bodies and souls need to function optimally.

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