

VIRTUAL OFFICES

LAPTOP CONCENTRATION REPLACING LAID-BACK CONVERSATION IN LOCAL COFFEEHOUSES

By **Samara Kalk Derby**, *The Capital Times*

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graduate student and professional photographer Erick Danzer is a coffee shop junkie.

One recent day he was at Electric Earth Cafe off Regent Street from 10 a.m. until it closed at 11 p.m. The next day he was at Michelangelo's on State Street most of the day. Free wireless is the No. 1 reason he's there.

"I need a high-speed Internet connection, which is critical in both the work I do as a graduate student and as a photographer. I won't go to a coffee shop that doesn't have it," Danzer said, adding that he and his wife, Kate, also a grad student, refer to "the coffee shop" as their office.

In Madison, those searching for an office away from home or what Starbucks calls a "third place" - after work and home - have plenty of choices, most of them offering free wireless Internet service (although Starbucks does not).

There are many factors driving the new wireless trend. Downsizing and outsourcing at larger companies are increasing the pool of consultants and free-lancers. Some workers would rather not commute to offices across town or outside of Madison. And the speed, cost and ease of WiFi and cell phones makes telecommuting easier and more acceptable.

It's like Dorothy remarks at the end of "The Wizard of Oz": "There's no place like home," said Lori Silverman, owner of the management consulting business Partners for Progress, who has worked out of her home for almost 20 years.

"From food to beverages, comfy chairs, fireplaces, wireless Internet connections, background music and restrooms, coffeehouses offer all the amenities of a comfortable home - and more - the ability to easily connect with others without having to clean up the place before they arrive. Where would you rather work?"

As she travels, Silverman said she can count on a warm welcome when she enters a coffeehouse.

"A pleasant smile. A bit of chitchat. Not something I'd get in a hotel room," she said. "At the end of a long day of speaking or consulting, coffeehouses offer me the best of two worlds: a refuge to continue my writing and a place to people-watch, one of my favorite pastimes."

Nina McGuffin, 39, a coach and trainer in leadership and team development, was behind her laptop last week at EVP Coffee on East Washington Avenue preparing for a training session she's delivering next week.

"I am an extrovert. I like the stimulation," she said sitting across from her husband, Jim Bower, also self-employed and perched behind his own laptop, taking a cell phone call. "I could work by myself but I work better when I have other people around me who aren't working with me but are just here."

McGuffin has a home office, where she conducts coaching sessions over the phone. Coffee shops, she said, provide great uninterrupted time for project work. She prefers when a coffee shop has WiFi so she can access her e-mail and respond to clients. She sometimes meets with clients in coffeehouses as well.

Workplace expert Patricia Mullins, a UW-Madison lecturer and co-author of "The Best Work of Your Life," said conducting work at a coffee shop has been a trend for the past few years.

"As more people work independently and from home, particularly women, a coffee shop is a convenient place to meet with clients. It is more business-like than meeting at one's home and less formal than renting an office just to meet with clients," she said.

With WiFi, coffee shops offer those who normally work from home a respite from the temptation to take care of other chores, Mullins said, and a feeling of some connectedness with the outside world.

"A coffee shop offers a neutral meeting ground that is less than the business lunch but more than talking on the phone. A coffee shop also offers a reason for work-at-home people to get out of their jammies, into the shower, and out into the world," she said.

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TAKING UP SPACE: A lot of coffee shops encourage people to camp out for hours, even if they only buy a \$1.50 cup of coffee. But customers hogging tables can be a bigger problem if the business is more of a restaurant.

People taking up table space with their laptops became such a problem at Panera Bread on University Avenue during the lunch rush that the restaurant began implementing a 30-minute maximum per table to get turnover.

"Otherwise, there are a lot of customers who complain that there are people taking up tables and not eating," said store manager Rachel Ogden, who reports that the new rule is working well. Laptop users are notified before they log on. "Nobody's complained about it," she said.

In the afternoon, when the restaurant isn't busy, people are welcome to stay online for hours, Ogden said.

By design, Starbucks, Borders, Barriques and a couple of dozen independent coffeehouses around Madison have become virtual offices. In some coffee shops a table without a laptop is the exception.

"We call them laptop zombies," said Matt Weygandt, a partner in the five Barriques locations in and around Madison. "We're trying to figure out a good T-shirt, like 'Where the laptops roam' or something along those lines. It's pretty crazy."

A lot of the laptop denizens are students, particularly in the downtown and Middleton locations, Weygandt said. "Back when I went to school, nobody had a laptop so you had to sit in a dorm room somewhere and do your homework with pencil and paper."

People don't want to sit in a library and they don't want to sit in a bar, Weygandt said. "They want that quasi-place between home and work, and a coffee store kind of fits that. It's public, and they can feel like they are around other people and at the same time they feel they can get their work done."

Free Internet access doesn't hurt either, he noted. Plus, many of the Barriques stores sell food in addition to coffee and "that can kind of keep you going for a long period of time."

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CONVERSATION FORGOTTEN: Those who frequent the city's independent coffeehouses often take free WiFi for granted. But both Starbucks and Borders cafes are T-Mobile HotSpots, which charge for their Internet access. Customers who sign up with T-Mobile can pay a \$6 hourly rate, or get a \$10 day pass. It's \$29.99 monthly for an annual plan.

Susie Schulz, 24, a shift supervisor at Starbucks, 2825 University Ave., personally thinks it's something the company should change, adding that it would help increase business if they offered free wireless.

During their training, employees are told that Starbucks is like a third home, Schulz said.

"The concept is that people have their home and they also have their workplace but Starbucks is another place. It's not home, it's not work, it's another place where they can come and sit and be, and either relax over a cup of coffee or meet with friends or read a book. It's a 'third place' that is a comfortable environment," she said.

Schulz has one customer who sits in the coffeehouse eight hours each day working. She knows him by name and says that he is often there before she starts her shift and after she's done. "We definitely want to have people here. We don't kick anybody out."

Most of her customers are using their computers but not going online because of the price, Schulz said. Some people comment that they like to come to Starbucks because they can't get the Internet. That way they don't waste their time on social networking Web sites like Facebook, she said.

Greg Harris, 34, who has been a barista at EVP for two years, is used to seeing the same faces day after day - particularly graduate students - just like in an office setting.

Most people who set up shop in the coffeehouse buy one drink and that's it, Harris said, but customers who sit there all day are more than generous.

"Tips are a way for them to pay table rent," he said.

With everybody working, absorbed in their computer screens, coffee shops can seem more like libraries, and those in front of their computers will get testy about others making noise, Harris said.

"People have forgotten conversation," he said. "Conversation used to be the centerpiece of any coffee shop and it doesn't happen anymore. It's kind of pathetic."

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