



Karen Anderson

## You can't wear a bathrobe when working from home anymore. Or roll your eyes.

*Club Columnist Karen Anderson is often asked what it's like to work from home full-time. To be your own boss. To do whatever you want, whenever you want. If you ask nicely, she'll tell you the truth.*

My friend Darla was sharing a computer in the basement family room with her 16 year-old son. She used the computer during the day for freelance assignments; he used it at night for homework. Or so she thought.

Darla sat down at the keyboard one morning and was taken back when an odd message popped onto the screen:

"dude. u ready 2 raid?"

When she clicked to answer it, portentous symphonic music boomed from the speakers. Her son had failed to log out of an online role-playing game.

As much as Darla had always wondered if she had it in her to be a Death Knight in league with a Paladin, she demurred.

"Thank you for the invitation," she typed. "Perhaps some other time."

When we met for coffee later that morning, Darla groaned after telling me the story, "I need a real home office. Tell me about yours."

I opened my mouth, and quickly closed it again. I really don't like to talk about my office setup. It's not nearly as glamorous as most people imagine. But she persisted, and in the end, I revealed all.

You know how employees at high-tech companies decorate their cubicles to look like kids' bedrooms? I decorated a kid's bedroom to look like a professional office space.

I painted the room in stern and neutral colors, brought in a computer system and ergonomic furniture, installed task lighting, and hung tastefully framed posters on the walls. (The massive tangle of wires under my desk somehow installed itself.)

The whole setup says "professional" – as long as you ignore the cat bed on the desk and the neighbor mowing his lawn 10 feet from my window.

I set up my home office a decade ago, in the Good

Old Days before video-conferencing. Today, thanks to online meetings and impromptu video chats, it's a whole new world – one without any privacy. I can no longer roll my eyes at someone's idiocy while talking on the phone. There's no more going to work in my bathrobe. Worse, it's not just me that has to be ready for the camera – it's my whole office. I'm careful to angle my computer so its camera captures a tasteful backdrop of framed posters – not the sight of my tabby, one leg in the air, industriously grooming herself.

While working from home avoids time-wasting water cooler gossip and lunches that turn into shopping trips, it turns out to have its own distractions: Who's at the door? What did FedEx deliver? Why has the water in the laundry room been running for 45 minutes? And the perennial favorite, What's burning?

When I worked downtown, I could chatter from the next cubicle, but at home I can't risk tuning out the one-sided phone conversations that drift in from the kitchen.

"Your kennel was booked? Sure, we can take care of Attila and Vlad for two weeks while you're gone. They like to eat cat food? Oh, they like to eat cats..."

By the time I've wrested the phone from the Scholarly Gentleman and explained that our zoo license has lapsed, I'm in need of two pain-relievers and a strong cup of coffee. And a bagel with cream cheese. And I might as well look at the mail while I'm out here. And I've completely lost my train of thought about whatever it was I was working on in my home office.

The best part of working from home is that I can go out for coffee whenever I feel like it. Last week I met up with Shari at a trendy espresso bar.

"Got your new office set up?" I asked.

She nodded. We paused to admire the latte the barista set in front of her, topped with a swirl of foam in which he'd drawn a vintage typewriter.

"Wow," I said. "They must know you here."

"They ought to." She pointed to the end of the table, where her briefcase sat, a new laptop open beside it. "After what you told me about your home office, I've decided I'm going to work here."

