



REMOTE POSSIBILITIES

The new
way we work

Words and photos
by Simon Shattky

Life Simon Shattky



I meet Annette at an open home. She's looking to make a permanent move to the Bay, keen to leave the famous Wellington wind well behind her. 'But on a good day...', the often-heard refrain that Wellingtonians trot out to justify living in a wind tunnel just isn't cutting it anymore.

None of this is unusual, there are many who have visited the Bay, fallen in love, and never left. Figuratively and literally. What gives Annette's story a twist is that while she works in New Zealand, the office is in London.

Annette Wullems, who has a rather fancy job title - Executive Producer Visual Effects, works for Framestore, a global company that makes the magic that we see on films and television. Or rather magic that we often don't see - their visual effects work being so real and seamless when complete, you won't know what's real and what's not.

Her work, and that of the 700 or so artists and visual effects crew on *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 3* was just nominated for a visual effects Oscar, and her CV includes a long stint at Wētā, working on *Lord of the Rings*, *Avatar* and *King Kong*. So yeah, arguably her business card isn't fancy enough.

As it was for many, Covid paved the way in making remote office work not just possible out of necessity, but legitimate. Annette was working out of Framestore's London office when the pandemic hit. "They had us all out of the building in about three weeks," she recalls, the producer in her still in awe of all the logistics required. Staff were well armed with multiple computer monitors, and a nifty device called a teradici, which the teams use to move the petabytes of visual data between locations at high speed.

"For every pro there's a con," Annette offers, by way of describing her own

Left: Annette Wullems, Executive Producer Visual Effects, Framestore

remote work experience. Obviously there's the time zones, as Annette juggles crew in London, Montreal and studio clients most often in Los Angeles. This cuts both ways though.

There's the 4am video calls, often held in appropriate work attire over a nightie. Surprisingly though, and early mornings aside, Annette believes these calls enhance the creative and production process. "When we all were on-site, we'd screen work in a darkened theatre, and you never got to see how everyone was reacting," explains Annette, who fiercely protects the well-being of her crew as much as the client's budget and vision. "A video call allows me to read the room better," she adds. Nuance is everything.

I wonder though, if something might be lost in translation, when trying to do a sales call via Zoom, for example, where it's crucial to establish a quick and easy rapport. It's a thought that gets quickly shot down when I talk with Jessica Knapp. As the CEO of SaferMe, a predictive psycho-social risk management tool, used largely in the construction and mining industries - Jessica has been doing remote sales calls since 2016 with enviable success.

"It's the best of both worlds," says Jessica, whose clients are largely American, and laughing as she recounts for me a sales call with Walmart's Head of Marketing, pitching up a storm while walking amongst the Braeburn trees and the odd sheep. Jessica grew up on the family organic pip-fruit orchard in Longlands, and while she lives not far from there, Jess leads a remote team of eight all over New Zealand, and as far afield as London. But Heretaunga is home. "It's my tūrangawaewae, it's where my feet are" says Jess.

Remote working requires high trust as a leader, a quality that Jess embraces

"A video call allows me to read the room better," she adds. Nuance is everything." Annette Wullems

naturally. "They could work from the moon," Jess explains. "I don't need eyeballs on my people to know how productive they are." Adding that her brain is no less valuable because of where she works.

Jessica's own situation illustrates how just how hybrid and varied office work has become. Rather than working totally from home, Jess spends a few days a week in the Hastings co-working space Bad Company. This gives her the community that working from home can't, adding a dimensionality that head office falls short on too. "You get to collide with different people and ideas. Curiosity increases," explains Jessica. So there's a win right there.

Other winners are work from home mums, who according to Jessica are one of the biggest segments of remote office workers. "Being in a specific location doesn't increase productivity, nor does it make for a better employee," she says, being equally sure on what does - citing autonomy, trust and flexibility. It's the work life balance that Jessica treasures, you'd have to drag her kicking and screaming to get her back into a full-time office role, that's for certain. As a leader she wants her people to enjoy the same benefits of the hybrid lifestyle. "If you give back, people rise to the occasion."

Giving back is an intrinsic part of the Bad Company DNA too, according to local operator Belinda Williams. The co-working outfit is growing, with spaces in the Bay, the Mount and Wanaka. There's a couple of



Above: Jessica Knapp, CEO of SaferMe. Right: Belinda Williams, Bad Company.

pre-requisites for hiring a hot desk at the Bad Company space in Karamu Rd, “Be kind and be able to spare five minutes,” says Belinda. The kind bit is obvious and sparing five minutes is simply a reflection of that. “Someone might ask you to proof-read an email, or ask for a quick point of view,” Belinda explains.

“Many of the people that work here get business referrals and work, often from someone that’s sitting right beside them,” she adds. Helping others is all part of creating a shared office culture, and what goes round comes round.

Case in point, the morning I’m there coincides with a Bad Company birthday. They’re having a bad hat day to celebrate, and as I search for a suitable backdrop to take Belinda’s photo, Fran

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Jessica Knapp

Arlidge, who works for the Chamber of Commerce but has popped in to deliver birthday wishes, instantly offers up an idea much better than my first choice. “Shoot her in the orange room. It’ll really pop,” Fran says, rushing out the door. She’s not wrong either. Pop it does.

Belinda wears a couple of hats, three

if you count the mad one she’s donned for the party. She used to work as an ICU nurse, and also helps run clinical trials for Pharma companies, again remotely. Maybe there’s a wee bit of self-interest, or maybe it’s just her bedside manner, but Belinda doesn’t believe it’s healthy working on your own at home the whole time. “We all need connection,” says Belinda. “There’s no toxicity in a shared space, because there’s no office politics. No reliance on those around you to do your own job.”

Over at Populous People, a local recruitment firm, founder Rachel Cornwall agrees with the hybrid model, having no problem with her own people working from home when they feel the need. But it’s not a trend

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Claudia Chandler

that seems to be growing. Rachel sees a significant shift in the opposite direction from her clients, who are increasingly demanding a return to the office.

I’m keen to understand what’s driving the ‘return to office’ policy.

To be fair, Hawke’s Bay has never been a big work from home region, Rachel explains, but this is due to the type of work that gets done here, with fewer roles being what we might traditionally call ‘professional’ and many more being in the primary sector.

But beyond this, clearly some businesses – especially when they’re under the pump – simply believe their employees are more productive in the office. “There’s enormous pressure on businesses in challenging times,” says Rachel. She’s right about the pressure of course, but the remote workers I’ve met all claim to be better at their jobs by being out of the office rather than in it, and if that’s true, surely more empowered and productive employees would help relieve the pressure businesses are under. Rachel is sceptical. “Are they really more productive though?” she challenges.

Not according to Nike CEO, John Donahoe, who in a recent television interview blamed remote work for the company’s failure to innovate, claiming it’s hard to build disruptive products over Zoom. It may well be, but it’s slightly disingenuous all the same. University of Pittsburgh research professor Mark Ma suggests cutting office leases and reinvesting that money back in R&D might help Nike more than getting people back to the office.

Seems a perfectly sensible idea, given Nike mandated a 3-day return to office in 2022, increasing this to 4-days a week last year, yet still managed to lose 25% of its stock market value

since November. “Does the CEO really believe one more day in the office will lead to disruptive innovation,” asks Ma, observing that Nvidia Corporation, a two trillion dollar company, nearly 20 times the market cap of Nike, and makers of the chips that are powering the AI revolution, was just named the world’s most innovative business by *Fast Company*, despite not having any ‘return-to-office’ policy at all.

No one seems to have any issue with Claudia Chandler’s productivity. She works for Sky Television in Auckland, from her lounge office overlooking Te Awanga beach. I imagine you’ve got to have incredible discipline to get anything done given the outlook, but it’s a quality Claudia seems to have in spades. She reckons she’s twice as productive as when she worked in the company’s head office. Yes, it’s anecdotal and probably hard to quantify, but as she points out, she’d soon hear about it if she wasn’t.

Claudia has a degree in journalism from Massey and now works in the Partnership team for Sky dealing with complex licensing and contract work on the many shows the broadcaster screens across multiple channels and platforms.

A recent arrival to Hawke’s Bay, love brought Claudia to town in between lockdowns. With her fiancé, she’s been able to buy a house, something she doubts would have been possible in Auckland. There’s a diligence required, a prerequisite of remote working, and she’s extra careful ‘not to take the piss’. Her words not mine. “If I’m going to go out during the day, I’ll always tell someone in my team what I’m up to,” Claudia says. That in itself is interesting. Would she have done the same if her boss was in the next office? “Probably not,” she admits. It’s her lack of visibility that

drives the extra transparency.

There’s a reason for this apart from her obvious integrity: the Sky role initially came with a requirement to be based in the Auckland office. “They were really understanding,” says Claudia of her employer and the hiring process that brought a turnaround in their thinking. “I guess something just clicked,” she adds rather humbly, completely underselling her own ability and skills that would have seen her offered the role in the first place.

The obvious plus about remote working in the Bay is not having to spend two hours each day traipsing from home to Sky’s Mt Wellington headquarters. “It was just getting too hard to live in Auckland,” says Claudia. Time shifting is a bonus too. “I’ll get up and check emails before anything else,” she says. Then coffee, a bit more work, then a shower. It’s a way of doing things that office work doesn’t allow.

Yes, she misses the social aspects of working together, but workmates are never far away thanks to the technology that enabled remote work to begin with. And she doesn’t miss it that much that she’d be willing to go back. Out here on the Cape Coast Claudia’s life has changed dramatically. She’s spending more time in the kitchen and bakes a mean sourdough. She’s learning to surf. What’s not to like?

There’s wax on her board, a spring in her step, and a shiny new ring on her finger. She loves the leap she took, the new friends that surround her, and grateful for an empathetic employer that allowed her to make the move. Like Annette and Jessica, you’d be hard pushed to get Claudia back in the office full-time. Or any time for that matter.

Because here, the way she sees it, the possibilities are endless. ●

This page: Claudia Chandler, Sky Television

