

The Mouse Goes Into Business [2]

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Okay, let me be straight with you here: This one is going to be *really boring* and probably shouldn't be a blog post at all. But the guys over at MouseCorp—slave drivers!—were really unhappy about the drop-off in blog productivity over the summer, and are absolutely hounding my butt to make quota before the end of the year, so like I gotta do something, right? Boring, not really worth reading, jokes even lamer than usual, nothing to see here, move along.

Well, got that off my chest. So...attitude adjustment...



and back to blogging.

Some of the challenges in setting up an independent business were discussed a couple of months ago, [here](#) and [here](#). But for the most part, the process was a series of fascinating little victories. A process interesting in an inevitable geeky way *to me* but I realized unless you are planning to do pretty much exactly what I've done, probably not all that interesting, nor all that original. But one or more elements of my experience might someday be useful somewhere to someone—more than can be said for most of things I've published in refereed journals—so here we go:

Office

Out of inclination—and the advice of many others—part of the original feral plan had been to get an office outside my residence. As it happened, I inadvertently did an experiment in this regard, as the first option I thought I had lined up—a sublet at the end of a long dimly-lit hallway in a grim office complex—fell through (the occupant failed to check whether it was okay to sublet), and I worked out of my home office for about a month. It was okay, but the temptations everyone talks about—grab something from the kitchen, weed the garden, don't take a shower until noon—were definitely there. I then lucked into—well, not luck, but my wife's extensive social networks—an absolutely lovely office in an elegant house now occupied by several small

businesses. It was an easy walk from home, the rent was \$450 per month, and “on a handshake”, a distinct contrast to one place I had checked into where the receptionist glared at me and said “We prefer only to provide space for people willing to sign a five year lease.” [1]

None of the other businesses had anything to do with mine—and I suppose in an *ideal* situation I’d be sharing space with some tech firms—but they provided enough random human activity that I didn’t feel isolated. Also—yes, I’ve spent my entire life in large organizations—the fact that people could simply drive into our parking lot, which I could see from my window, was a pleasant and unexpected bonus. The arrangement included a small kitchen, a shared coffee maker, a copy machine and a very large shared candy dish.

My office situation in CVille is not quite as good—in particular there is no common space—but in a [quirky historical building](#) [3], much the same distance from home, with parking, and at an even lower price. And two blocks from the CVille pedestrian mall and its seemingly endless array of coffee shops and restaurants: the one downside to the State College location was the sole food establishments in the immediate vicinity were a massive beer distributor—hey, it’s State College—and a friendly if rather downscale Quik-Trip and a walk of several blocks got you only to a Starbucks, Subway and Dunkin Donuts. Access to the CVille mall: priceless. Downside of the current venue is the absence of a chatty little community, no shared coffee maker, and no candy bowl. So as my lease runs out next summer—one year lease, that’s okay—I’ll probably be looking for an alternative.

Furniture

My landlord in State College had accumulated a very eclectic collection of furniture in the garage of the building—sort of *Antiques Roadshow* meets *Hoarders*—and told me just to take my pick. I found a beautiful old solid wood desk with a couple missing drawers and a utilitarian table; some guys with no necks hauled these upstairs for me and I assembled them with power tools. In CVille, the office was partially furnished and I completed that shopping at the [local SPCA rummage store](#), finding an office chair for \$7 and a nice little table for \$10. In both offices I built custom tables from plywood and 2x4s—every time I make one of these I get better at it—to put the larger tables into the “L” configuration I prefer. No one is going to mistake this for the executive offices of a Fortune 100 company, though the furniture in State College was actually a lot nicer than what I’d had in Kansas.[4]

Internet

Lots of office spaces now include internet, but neither of mine did. Getting a hardwired connection was quite expensive, particularly given that I didn't know how long I'd be staying, and the solution I've used is a Verizon wireless "JetPack": basically a phone pretending to be a wireless hotspot. The data plan I've got is limited to 5 Gb a month, but this is sufficient for my day-to-day work, and for the occasional high-bandwidth demands—notably teleconferences and [updating software](#)—I use our hardwired connection at home.[5] And the JetPack, about the size of a hockey puck, comes along when I travel and provides reliable internet access in the likes of airports, interstate highways and, Thor-forbid, conference hotels.

Computer

I already had a high-capacity MacBook Pro I'd used in Norway, and subsequently purchased a couple more machines from Penn State surplus for a few hundred dollars each which I used until about a month ago, when I was finally sufficiently settled that I got a large-screen iMac pimped out with a lot of RAM and a 3Tb hard drive. And with all of that equipment, no brain-addled bureaucrat telling me what I can and can't install on it, in particular...

Software

Everything I use [6] either came with the machine, is free-as-in-beer, and/or is free-as-in-open-source. And increasingly, everything I use for analytics is Python.

Color printer/scanner/copier:[11]

There are numerous machines in the \$80 range that combine these functions, connect via your wireless network, and work right out of the box. Sure, the manufacturers expect to make up for that low cost selling ink cartridges, but I've got an older black-and-white laser printer I use for the very occasional high-volume print job—mostly I'm just reading things as PDF files [8]—or put the files on a USB drive and go to Kinkos or Staples.

Library

There this fantastic thing called the World Wide Web, ya know? It's absolutely *full* of information.

Establishing a legal entity as a small business:

[Discussed in greater detail here](#), and while aggravating, and leading to the unexpected side effect of longing for Richard Nixon, not particularly onerous. Discovering that mortgage lenders find new small business owners as attractive as an Ebola carrier in a mosh pit was somewhat more problematic, though had a happy ending, [as discussed here](#).

Business cards:

\$10 or less from VistaPrint. Which can also provide every other imaginable business swag you may or may not need. Had some really cool [EL:DIABLO-logoed](#) coffee mugs made for my collaborators.

Health insurance

This is costing maybe 20% more than I was paying earlier, but minimal issues finding it in either Pennsylvania or Virginia. Thankfully I was able to get this under the Affordable Care Act, and not that dreaded Obamacare![7] But sorry, if you are using access to health insurance as an excuse not to get your Boomer butt out of the way, that one no longer works.

Footnotes

1. And State College wonders why it is not a popular venue for start-ups?
2. This isn't really a footnote. Though I will use it to note that I'm not "monetizing" the various links to commercial enterprises you see here—nor has that been done in any of my entries. This blog is provided as a public service [yeah, right...] and maybe even the grist for an eventual book [yeah, right...]
3. Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe allegedly used to hang out at the site when doing business in the colonial-era courthouse across the street. Before the place burned down sometime in the second half of the nineteenth century, then was rebuilt in brick. The floors squeak.
4. At Penn State, in contrast, I'd inherited the [custom wood furniture](#) from the previous department head, which I then supplemented with some additional matching wood furniture from my own start-up budget. This was inherited by an assistant professor, who probably has the nicest office furniture of any assistant professor in the country. He also now has what is

probably the longest job title of any assistant professor in the country.

5. Except during the times it is not working because squirrels have eaten through the coaxial cable.

6. Okay, in fact I use a single purchased program, [BBEdit](#), though mostly because I've been supporting the company for some twenty years now and they long ago registered the trademark "It doesn't suck": how can you not like that? And the software does not, in fact, suck. But there are now open source alternatives even here.

7. Joke...

8. Please, please do not send docx!—yes, I can read those files through GoogleDocs [9] or LibreOffice but that is sooo 1990s.

A positive externality of paying for printing is that you don't fall into the habit that I've seen so often in large organizations where one prints, say, a 10-page memo, or 75 page conference paper (or 400-page dissertation) because, well, because that is how they did things in the days of Gutenberg. PDFs on screen are, I would suggest, a little easier on the environment. And if you avoid printing on paper that was purchased from a [Koch Industry subsidiary](#)—and a lot of office paper is—then you are benefiting the environment twice over!

9. At which point if your document mentions, say, Boko Haram suicide bombers, and documents sent to me tend to, by posting these on Google means I'm effectively posting them to all sorts other places [10] but what would *really* get me into trouble is if your docx which I post to the Google Panopticon contains the phrase "Bargains on tropical timeshare resorts!"

10. Which were intercepting my email anyway...okay...whatever...tin hat and masking tape over the laptop camera...

11. It does fax as well, though I believe the fax is used with about the same frequency as carrier pigeons, and far outpaced by bicycle couriers.

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