

## A home is not an office ? or is it?

by BROCK WEIR

If you know your way around holiday movies, we don't need to spell out which Manhattan landmark was once ? and mercifully briefly ? billed as New York's most exciting hotel experience.

But, even before its starring role in Home Alone 2, Manhattan's Plaza Hotel had a reputation that preceded it. Young readers might have had their first introduction to the landmark through Kay Thompson's Eloise books, which charts the adventures of a young girl living in the top floor of the palatial space with her nanny and pets for company.

Some kids might think she has it all ? room service a quick dial away (hey, the stories were published before the advent of the touch-tone), staff on hand to make the bed every day, and, being in one of the most bustling cities on the planet, the world at her feet. It sounds good, but having had an Eloise-style living situation for a couple of months when I was in kindergarten, albeit in a much more budget-friendly abode, the novelty does wear off after a while!

Even still, there's always a certain feeling of adventure whenever a hotel stay is on the horizon, and there have been a surprising amount for me this year as 2025 has unfurled. Perhaps the sense of adventure can be chalked up to never really knowing what you're going to get in a new place.

Earlier this year, work took me to a beautiful hotel in Niagara-on-the-Lake that somehow combined a very homey atmosphere with a keen awareness of its status as a community showplace. On the flipside, a month-or-so later, my brother and I made a spur-of-the-moment overnight trip to Ottawa and, being just a single night, booked on a budget. Prior to this stay, I've never had the experience of walking uphill and downhill in a shower, but you do get what you pay for!

There was a different type of experience just this month where a well-known international hotel chain decided the rates they quoted me were negotiable and tried to haggle things in their favour right there at the front desk.

That, I thought, was that, until accommodation plans for a family wedding this weekend shifted and the hunt was on for another booking. Unless this is shaping up to be the Wedding of the Century without our knowledge, I can't figure out just why every single hotel room in the City of Orillia ? bar one ? was booked for Saturday night, but it was no easy task to secure it.

We are, of course, used to booking things online these days, but, with the room shortage, a human was required to make the booking. Once upon a time, this would have been no big deal, but, in hindsight, buying a Ouija board to scare up Kay Thompson probably would have been an easier task. Several ?virtual persons,? each of which was programmed with questions more mundane than the last, had to be cleared before reaching a living, breathing human to sort things out. And, thankfully, they were able to sort things out in no less than 40 seconds.

As much as companies think they can get away with virtual and AI services to help their own bottom lines, there are some jobs where one-on-one communication simply can't be replicated.

The Global Pandemic caused a re-think on so many things in our society, not the least of which is our work situation, who needs to be where, what tasks can be carried out remotely, and how workspaces left behind by workers who choose to work remotely can be best used.

Necessity forced most of us to translate our jobs to the virtual realm wherever possible, with varying degrees of success. A hotel might need someone on the front desk to greet customers and field questions, but does it really matter whether the person handling your booking over the phone is seated right there beside the clerk, or taking the call from a home office?

Some seem to think so, but I'm not so sure.

Five years on from our collective COVID trauma, businesses are still finding their feet, and there has been a renewed effort at the Provincial level to get workers back to the office full time, encouraging municipalities to follow suit and issue similar mandates along the way.

As the government delivers on our plan to protect Ontario, we will continue to drive public service excellence for the people of Ontario, said MPP Caroline Mulroney, President of the Treasury Board, in a statement last week a message which was echoed by Premier Ford at the AMO conference this week.

This plan includes a mandate for all members of the Ontario Public Service to return to the office full time by January 5.

The return to a five days per week in-workplace standard represents the current workforce landscape in the province and it reinforces our commitment to reflecting the people and the businesses we serve across Ontario. This transition is an important step that supports the government's ongoing efforts to build a more competitive, resilient, and self-reliant Ontario.

I am curious to see the full business case of how such a mandate will result in a more competitive, resilient and self-reliant Province, however. Sure, a full return-to-office mandate might be an economic boon to the areas in which these offices are situated as employees are more likely to frequent area businesses and services on their way in and out, but what then?

Obviously there are jobs that can only be done in person, and, as a customer, there is much rejoicing when you find yourself before an actual human being, there are plenty of instances of jobs where location matters less than the quality of the job done.

For some businesses I am acquainted with, allowing some employees to work from home by their own choice has seen the employees in question increase in both their productivity and job satisfaction. In other areas where client visits are part and parcel of the gig, employees have been able to increase how often they can make the rounds rather than sitting at their desk simply to keep their seat warm.

But, as we know, these situations aren't for everyone.

In our first bout with a COVID lockdown, I initially felt my productivity increase having to only go as far as my home office, but, like an extended hotel stay, the situation eventually lost its lustre. After a year and a half of looking out the same window, I could almost feel the walls closing in around me, which cancelled out any previous productivity, and a return to the office on my own terms and for my own mental health was needed.

Having the option was and remains a luxury and, on the days where there's nothing requiring me to be in the office, those two hours spent on the collective daily commute, are used much more productively at home.

Unless those two hours are spent navigating a field of robots to reach a real person. That's an entirely different story!