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## Telework, Silver Bullets, Black Holes and a Dog Named "Cheeto"

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It's time to clear the air. Last week was [Telework Week](#) and while more than 70,000 people pledged to work from somewhere other than their office, I have been accused of being a blind advocate for telework... a cheerleader, if you will. And trust me, that is the only time my name and cheerleader were ever used in the same sentence. Let's see where I really stand on this issue. It may surprise some of you.

No, I won't declare that all previous posts are wrong and that everyone should punch a clock and sit in his or her cubicle from nine-to-five each weekday. But I want to be honest that I am not convinced that working from home every day with zero interaction with collaborators is the best solution for most people. And there is a very simple reason for why it's not ideal: we are all human. At least all of us except for Cheeto, the steel dog sculpture in my

front yard. And being human, we require a few basic metabolic things: water, air, food (but apparently

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not so much, according to my doctor) and sleep. We also need what renowned psychologist Abraham Maslow called a sense of belonging. We can't get that sense of belonging very easily through email, online tools, or even, in my case, talking to a metal dog. We need to interact physically with other humans. Just like we need air, food and water.

I read a book recently on particle physics and why the Large Hadron Collider near Geneva, Switzerland is *not* going to create a black hole and annihilate us all in a nanosecond (but just in case, maybe they should take the day off on Dec. 21 or whenever those Mayans said was the end of the world). The author is a Harvard physics professor named [Lisa Randall](#). Now, Dr. Randall is what my buddies in Boston would call "wicked smart." And guess what, she agreed to talk to me about working remotely.

Why did a guy who thinks about management issues need to consult a world famous theoretical physicist? Well, because in her recent book, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, Dr. Randall makes a statement that while that particle accelerator near Geneva is going to test her most important theories, she can do her work from her office back in Massachusetts just fine and they can send her data as they finish their experiments. OK, here is someone who can help me finally deal with the argument I all the time that telework is "OK for the masses, but what I do is just too darn complicated to collaborate remotely." I mean really, if Dr. Randall, who deals with extra dimensions, warped space-time and something called a "charmed squark," can work with people 4000 miles away, tell me your acquisition policy memo is too complex. Really, lay it on me, Larry.

I read her book because I was interested in the science, but part of what I got out of it was a surprise to me. She talks about the nature of study and inquiry in a very interesting way. Her discussions of science and art, creativity and collaboration and even the value of competition in driving innovation are applicable to any human pursuit, not just particle physics (which is good because I got a little lost in the multi-dimensional space, super-symmetry discussion).

So I have a heavy hitter in my corner and we are cooking with gluons here (sorry, bad attempt at a physics joke). Screech -- not so fast, buster. As they say in the army, no plan survives first contact with the enemy. "Well, I might have been a little hasty in that statement," said Dr. Randall when we spoke last month. She went on to explain that she believes that we lose something when we are not physically in the same place with collaborators. She said what's lost is often focus and concentration. Dr. Randall said her initial thinking was that she would write a paper, the experimental folks would read it and design their experiments to test her theories, and then send her the data when they were done. However, she explained that going to Geneva and sitting in a room or a café with them allowed her and the experimenters to better understand what the other was thinking and is leading to better science. Does she need to be there every day? No. But not to go at all would have been a mistake, she said.

Finally, I asked her if she thought that her students, who presumably are more comfortable with the breadth of communication tools and social media, would find it easier to collaborate remotely. "The students are definitely better at using computers than we are, but they may actually be more social," she replied. Not sure I am there with her on that one as I have seen two kids text each other from across the table. I went into the conversation thinking I was going to write about complex issues and remote collaboration, but what came out of the discussion was a realization that I need to be clearer about my theories on remote work and collaboration.

Complex or simple, the issue is the same for any problem. We often need quiet time to work out something in our head. That might be in our office (if we have a quiet space) or sitting at home (if there are no other distractions), or maybe it's on a park bench or in Starbucks with our headphones on. Each of us is different and so are our problems. But we have one important thing in common and that's that we are all human (except poor Cheeto). And as humans, we need to be physically near other humans at least some of the time to build trust and understanding. So no, telework is not a silver bullet. It is just one of many tools that we as workers and leaders need to evaluate on a case-by-case basis to see how we can be most effective and productive. Cheerleader, advocate, or pundit, the one message I want to get across is that there is no one-size-fits-all in telework or in life.

*I look forward to your thoughts and comments. You can email me at [jsawislak@teleworkexchange.com](mailto:jsawislak@teleworkexchange.com) at check out my blog at [TeleworkExchange.com/Work](http://TeleworkExchange.com/Work).*

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