Transcript of "COVID-19 Special Episode: Going Remote"

Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations about Careers in Meteorology and Beyond

April 7, 2020

Albert Betancourt:
There's been quite a bit of adjustment as you can imagine, and I'm sure a lot of other people are in a similar situation.

Jeff Yuhas:
It's been a challenge to say the least. Have not been able to be in school for a couple of weeks, haven't seen my students.

Max Vido:
I had to switch to home. That was put into place last week, so this is my second full week working from home and so far things have gone pretty smoothly. I had never worked from home in this position, so I was a little anxious last week when I made this transition.

Tony Praino:
From the standpoint of the work that I traditionally do, I typically would work remotely one or two days a week and I would be in the office and in the lab typically three days a week. So for me, the recent experience for probably about the last three to three and a half weeks has been exclusively from home.

Elizabeth Austin:
Interestingly here at WeatherExtreme, we have some people that are in other states that work for the company, so everyone is a little different, but everyone is working from home now.

Kelly Savoie:
In order to practice the social distancing necessary to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees, including all of us here at AMS, are working completely from home. We wanted to check in with some of our previous guests to see how this transition has been for them and what effects it's had on the nature of their work.

Albert:
Thankfully because of the amount of work that I do through the computer, American Families has a very good set up right now with their remote work capabilities. So the transition from in the office to at home was very smooth.

Elizabeth:

Well, I still am manning the office, just not with anyone else here other than my husband. So we just kind of man the phones and are here trying to keep a consistent presence at least for everyone and trying to keep everyone up to date on their work and what they're doing. And so, there is definite impact on everyone. The forensic work still goes on in terms of working on the case work. The slow part is depositions and trials. A lot of things are delayed that way, but then we have other work that's not forensic-related, contracts and things that we have to get done.

Albert:

The only difficulties right now for me has been my organization with my limited monitor space. At my desk, I have four monitors I can play with. Here I only have two. I don't have the components that I need to make it all work.

Jeff:

It's a case by case basis for different schools. Fortunately we have a system where we have a class portal, we have something in place where I've been able to post reading assignments or I'll be able to post worksheets throughout the school year and there's a calendar. And we have an online discussion board and I've already created a paperless classroom. So I have a mechanism in place that allows for electronically submitting work. And with the freshman physics we use video physics, which is a Vernier app. They're already able to take video of something happening and sort of analyze it in different ways. So we're trying to do a little bit of motion, shoot a video of a ball rolling along the ground. So it becomes kind of a physics experiments in the home kind of situation with them.

Elizabeth:

We had people take all of their computers home. We tried the remote login thing, but that really wasn't working so well. So everyone just took home what they needed.

Tony:

What's been encouraging to me so far with the amount of additional people going online exclusively, at least in my area, the internet and the bandwidth has been pretty good. There haven't been any outages. It demonstrates the technology really can support a substantial load on it above and beyond what's typical for a particular area.

Max:

The first thing I needed was a little bit more infrastructure to make things work out. I only had a 13 inch laptop screen and that wasn't going to suffice when trying to forecast the weather. So I got an HDMI cord and hooked that up to a spare 40 inch TV right now and I'm using that as an extra monitor. And I took my office chair and keyboard and mouse home as well. So my setup is finally nice and tidy in my spare bedroom. But in terms of everyday work processes, not a whole lot has changed, which has been nice. It's just been a tick slower trying to connect to the company VPN. So the time I gained from my shorter commute, from my bedroom to the spare bedroom, I lose it to everything just running a little bit slower on my remote desktop. So again, my schedule really hasn't changed too much. I get up at the same time, eat breakfast, then go to work, but things just move a little bit more slowly during those morning hours.

Jeff:

I think for students to try to get yourself in the mindset that you're in school. I think one thing that school does very well for teenagers, it gives their days a routine. And I think that it really is good for the students if Monday through Friday, they do try to get up at the same time and have breakfast at the same time and set up somewhere in their house where their workplace is so that they get in that mindset that they do go to school. And just to sort of add that structure to the day I think would be beneficial for everybody.

Tony:

Personally, one of the things I miss the most is I don't walk as much when I'm home. When I'm in the office, I make it a point to walk the loop of the building at least once or twice a day and the building's quite large, so I get about a half a mile to a mile of walking and I don't typically do that at home. I try to remind myself to get up and walk outside or walk around the house. But I will typically get far less steps because I do track those.

Max:

One thing I've definitely noticed is how the workplace has started to infiltrate the home life. Without that commute to kind of establish a place of work, everything just kind blends together and I found myself staying at my desk longer and having trouble logging off and getting out of work mode.

Elizabeth:

When people request meetings, everyone seems to accommodate. It's interesting to see them not in their normal environment but in their living rooms or on their kitchen table.

Albert:

The fact that I am working, doing my actual job here at my desk in my room, I feel like I'm actually doing nothing all day because I'm in my room, I haven't done anything around the home. It kind of stresses me out because I know there are things that need attention and since I'm not displaced from that environment, like in the office, I kind of have that... I don'' know if it's anxiety or what. I just can't focus. I don't know. But I was planning on doing a block type schedule where I would work, I don't know, a couple of hours, maybe three to whatever time I felt was acceptable based on my schedule. Once that block would end, I would set a timer on my phone for 30, 45 minutes and I would go do something else.

Albert:

The whole transition to remote work, there's just a lot of stuff we got to figure out again. Regardless, because of all this, I haven't really been able to dedicate that time to actually do my block schedule. I seem to be planted at my desk doing my work. I get up for lunch really quick and get back to work. So it's not the best or probably the healthiest routine in terms of physical activity and just mentally because it does get pretty overwhelming. My goal for next week is to really emphasize that block routine, because I think just for the type of person that I am, I just need to, I have to do that.

Jeff:

And really I think the biggest part of teaching is sort of that interaction you have with your students and not to be able to see them has been a big challenge. Not only is it a very different learning experience, the students are going through all kinds of emotional upheaval right now. Any way that we can maintain those connections with the students will hopefully help everybody get through however long this situation lasts. Trying to understand projectile motion is not really necessarily at the front of their minds and I understand that.

Max:

One thing we've noticed with our clients, they definitely seen noticeable impact to the energy grid with so many people working from home, large office buildings and some factories which require a lot of energy are no longer a part of the footprint. So a lot of the models used to predict energy load are over-predicting demand because these models were built on data, assuming these buildings and factories were consuming energy.

Tony:

Most of the work for the team has obviously gone online. We typically use Cisco WebEx as our primary means of audio and video conferencing. Our team is distributed, so our normal meetings would typically utilize a similar format. Even if I was sitting in my office in IBM Yorktown, which is where the research lab is located. So from a logistical standpoint it hasn't changed that much in the mechanics of how I do my work. It's more really the personal aspects of the experience. In order to conserve bandwidth, especially if there are multiples of us in the house using it, I don't typically don't use my camera, but it is nice to actually physically see someone occasionally.

Albert:

I am frequently involved in meetings with our different lines of business, working on different projects just trying to... you know, what you'd need to try and get stuff organized. We use Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

Elizabeth:

We all Skype quite a bit and stay in touch with each other. But it's been difficult.

Max:

Having more of that back and forth discussion that we usually have and that definitely improves our forecast and what we send out to our clients.

Elizabeth:

I've been communicating with various people around the world on LinkedIn who run weather services or are in charge of whether companies overseas. They have to be there obviously, at the weather service. They can't take their computers home.

Max:

One thing I've noticed, and I'm not sure if I'm speaking for everyone here, is that a lot of the listening audience are aspiring meteorologist and I think we do provide a pretty essential function in our society during these tough times.

Albert:

As far as my daily responsibilities, we have our weather report that we put out now that we're getting into the severe weather season, and on top of our catastrophe modeling that we do on a quarterly and annual basis, we have all these other side projects.

Tony:

IBM, which has been a sponsor and one of the initiators of a concept known as P-TECH, which is essentially a technology system to bridge the last two years of high school with first two years of college. They created or initiated what's known as Open P-TECH. That's essentially online content and things that I know will be relevant to certainly a lot of our AMS members as well as early career and students. Things like data science, things like machine learning and artificial intelligence. That website went live I believe last week.

Jeff:

To try to be understanding and compassionate is sort of what I think needs to happen in this time. I think more so than ever, each student is sort of a unique case. You don't know what kind of resources they're going to have available at home. You don't know what kind of support they're going to have available at home. And I think really student by student you need to be able to address individual needs and hopefully come up with something to meet those needs.

Elizabeth:

I think that's a good thing is that we're all kind of coming together more because we realize we all need each other, especially in times like this. I was listening to Dr. David Agus this morning, which a lot of people have been listening to different doctors. One thing he said that I liked is that, I guess going outside and getting UV light and everything is helpful against the virus. And I thought, "Whoa. At least in the Northern Hemisphere here where we're going into spring time, the weather is going to start to get better. We're going to start to at least... If people can go out on their patios or porches or if you have a yard, it'd be nice to go outside and then there's a bonus of that it does help against the virus apparently."

Tony:

I'm happy to share my experiences so far in the transition for working exclusively from home.

Elizabeth:

Thank you so much for having me and I wish everyone all the best and stay healthy.

Jeff:

Thanks for having me on and everybody be well.

Max:

Thanks for having me. Everyone stay safe!

Albert:

You guys take care.

Rex Horner:

You've heard the voices of Albert Betancourt, Jeff Yuhas, Max Vido, Elizabeth Austin, and Tony Praino, recorded on March 26th and 27th, 2020. How has COVID-19 impacted your work? How does your experience compare to the experiences of our guests? Share your story. Reach out to us at skypodcast@ametsoc.org. Most importantly, we'd like to express our sincere wishes for your safety and your health.