

Best Practices for Successfully Working from Home

The number of at-home workers has skyrocketed this year as the novel coronavirus caused companies across the country to temporarily lock their doors.

As a result, some business experts are suggesting that remote working—already a well-established trend—will become an increasingly common way for many companies and their employees to get the job done. If so, you may find yourself increasingly working remotely—either by choice or by necessity. And if you manage employees, you might need to oversee and motivate your teams from great distances.

With that in mind, here are some best practices for working and managing from your home.

Your gear

Part of successfully telecommuting is getting set up to conduct business smoothly while maintaining an officelike atmosphere.

At the bare minimum, you'll likely need a good computer, monitor and headset—along with cybersecurity software and a storage backup solution. Pay up for the strongest possible Internet connection, too, so your e-meetings don't freeze up during peak usage times.

Depending on how professional you need to appear on camera, consider investing in a high-quality microphone and good lighting—little details that can help you be perceived as more credible.

In addition, there are video and collaboration tools most people have become quite familiar with recently, including Webex, Google Hangouts, Microsoft 365, Slack and Zoom. There also are messaging and “walkie talkie” apps, such as Voxer, that let you quickly send live voice messages to others—which helps you convey your tone better than you might be able to via an email message.

Your space

Next, you need to get set up in the right environment—which means a dedicated work space. That could mean a separate room with a door (ideally), part of your living room or even your kitchen counter. The key is to define one space that sends the message to you (and your family, if they're around during nine to five) that “this is where the work happens.” A clearly delineated space will help you focus when you need to—and step away from work at the end of the day.

Pro tip: Don't set up shop in your bedroom or on your couch if you can help it. Leave those spaces as designated nonwork/relaxation areas—you'll need them to unwind!

Regardless of the space you select, set up shop ergonomically to avoid muscle strains that could lead to chronic health problems. An adjustable chair, an ergonomic keyboard and a headset are basic must-haves

for most at-home workers. Adjustable desks that allow you to work while both standing and sitting throughout the day also potentially can keep muscles happy and joints flexible.

ALL-IMPORTANT WORK HABITS

That said, a fancy chair in a nice room won't matter much unless you also establish and follow smart work-at-home habits.

1. Set firm boundaries. Make it clear that when the door to your home office is closed, you are closed for family and personal business. If you find yourself working in an exposed space or if you have children at home while you're working, wear noise-canceling headphones to communicate that you're not to be disturbed.

Set boundaries for yourself, too. Some at-home workers find chore breaks to be relaxing, while others too easily get taken off target if they don't stay laser-focused on work. Your temperament should drive your decisions here.

2. Establish a routine, and stick to it. This will likely require trial and error as you figure out what types of schedule and work routine are best for you, your boss or clients, and your co-workers. To the extent you can, tackle the toughest tasks of your job when you are at your most productive. And try to start and end your workdays at the same time to mentally separate your professional and personal times. (You might want to take a morning walk or run as your new "commute" to help shift your brain into work mode.)

Pro tip: Schedule formal breaks for movement and mental health. Eat lunch away from the desk, walk the dog or just simply go stretch in a different room for five minutes.

3. Be able to "show your work." Bosses often fret that at-home workers won't stay focused or driven. So consider easing any doubts by creating a viewable online task list or tracker that shows the current status of your projects. (Note that this decision might be made for you if your company uses tracking software.)

4. Revisit your remote communication skills. Ideally, your boss or team leader has spelled out communication protocols. But if that's not happening, take the reins:

- Develop clear expectations for daily communication with the team—whether it's a short kickoff call in the morning or a wrap-up call later on. Do this in partnership with your co-workers.
- Conduct video meetings that make conversations richer. Seeing co-workers' faces can bring some of the office's personal "watercooler conversation" dynamic to at-home working.
- Check your tone and style, too. Body language doesn't come through with emails and instant messages. Take a minute to reread written communications before you send them to ensure you are not inadvertently sending an unintended message.

5. Stay connected beyond business. The in-person bonding that occurs in an office isn't just a nicety—it also helps build strong teams and spark creative problem-solving that doesn't always happen in formal meetings. Video-based happy hours, pizza parties or birthday celebrations where everyone can dial in can keep everyone feeling connected and that they're "all in it together"—even if everyone is miles apart.

Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether the pandemic will permanently shift our working patterns. But it's certainly possible that remote working will become part of the "new normal" in the years ahead. If so, you can take steps now that will set you and your team up for success no matter where the work gets done.

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