What Everyone Should Know About Working Remotely

We're all having to make changes to our daily lives during this national crisis. For many of us, that means transitioning from going to the office every day to exclusively working from home. It may seem like a dream come true for some, but the reality of a home office is far more challenging than it appears at first glance. So, whether you're working from home for the first time or you're struggling with the unique difficulties and unexpected stressors that come with holding a remote position, we've got some practical advice to get you through the rough spots.

Avoid Distractions

All the things that seem like a tick in the "pro" column for working at home can quickly become a "con." A recent study showed 76 percent of people who work from home admit to having the TV on, 64 percent find themselves online shopping, paying bills, or perusing social media, and another 27 percent run errands, take a shower, and exercise during their workday. Soon, you're not working regular hours – you're simply working a string of uninterrupted chunks of time.
The first step to avoiding distractions is to designate one workspace, preferably with a door. Let everyone know this is your office, and they and you should treat it as an off-site office. We suggest taping a "Do Not Disturb" sign to the door during calls and video conferences.
Make a list of your biggest distractions and actionable remedies. Unplug the TV, put a sticky note on your computer warning you not to shop, check social media, etc., and put your personal phone on airplane mode. Play background music or a white noise machine so you're not jumping up at every sound. This blocks out street noise, the television in the living room, and even your wandering thoughts.

Set Boundaries

Just like in the off-site workspace, you will experience home office frustrations that stem from not setting the appropriate boundaries, especially with your friends and family. Have a conversation with everyone important to you that you want to treat your home office the same as an off-site office. Post your work hours on the outside of your door or make a calendar invite for your family and friends letting them know when your time is spoken for.
It's okay to say things like "I'm working right now, can we talk about this after six?" or "I need to call you back when I'm done working." Continuously setting these boundaries will get everyone in the habit of respecting your workspace and hours – including you.

Structure Your Day

It's easy to let a loose structure turn into no structure and a ton of lost productivity. The best way to not only work from home but also to thrive and succeed from a home office is to commit to structure each and every day. The first step is to set work hours, including short breaks and a lunch hour. This not only ensures you're working when you should, but it also protects your personal time so you can actually "leave" work each day.

Create a task list at the end of each day for the next day. Prioritize it the next day after your mind has gotten time to rest. Starting each day with the most difficult task is the best way to alleviate stress and begin the day with a big win. Place your task list in plain sight and check things off as you go. This keeps you on track when your attention shifts from your daily priorities.

Communicate with Co-workers

It's easy to get very comfortable in your own little bubble and forget to share the details with your boss and co-workers. This becomes even more challenging if you're a manager with employees that need to hear from you often. This sets you up to either slip people's minds or for them to question your output. Setting up a communication schedule is key.

- Send a daily email to those who need to know your progress and priorities. This usually includes your boss and others working on the same initiatives. An email will allow recipients to address where they see gaps or to praise your efforts.
- Let everyone, including your employees, know the best way to get in touch with you and when.
- Always send out-of-office replies when you're taking a day or afternoon off, letting people know when you'll be back.
- Set up weekly conference calls with employees laying out priorities. Leave time for an open forum so they can express what's on their minds.
- If you're in a virtual meeting, take notes. This will keep your mind focused on the information being gathered. Ask questions where appropriate. Speaking up will keep you at the forefront of everyone's mind.
- Reach out. Spend 15 minutes each day calling someone just to touch base. It can be to see how they're doing, get clarification about something, or discuss an initiative.
- Set up a work-at-home buddy system. Have a weekly conference call to keep each other on task and share information.
- Set aside the first and last 30 minutes of each workday for checking and replying to emails. If you need more urgency, set aside 10 minutes every hour.
- When in doubt, over-communicate. If you're not sure whether someone wants to hear from you, err on the side of "yes." Communicating with people you work with keeps you and them accustomed to being a tight workgroup even if you're not in the same space.

Fight Isolation

This is a big deal, and a lot of people don't talk about it. You will feel lonely and alone at some point, and it's okay. You can overcome those feelings by talking to others – often.

- Video chat with your closest work friends weekly.
- Create a work-from-home group and virtually meet at least every other week to talk about challenges.
- Watch all corporate-generated videos to keep you connected to the work culture.
- During the current stay-at-home orders, video chat with one friend or family member each night for at least 10 minutes.
- Make the most of necessary trips outside the house by making eye contact, smiling, and waving to people you see even if you can't approach them.
- Anytime you feel like you're becoming a hermit, go outside and get some sun or call someone you have a strong connection with. Your four walls won't seem so confining.

Best Practices

- Many people have gone before you and successfully navigated working at home. We've compiled their best practices to help you thrive in this new environment.
- Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.
- Make your bed each day.
- Take a shower and get dressed for work each morning the same way you would for the office.
- Stop working at a designated time and close your office.
- Make your workspace comfortable and a place you want to be for eight hours.
- Set a timer for breaks. This makes sure you take them and return on time.

Cut Yourself Some Slack

It's okay to struggle, as long as you keep moving forward. Give yourself high fives for little and big wins. If you need to step away and take an unscheduled walk, remember that people do the same thing every day in the physical office when things get overwhelming. You will not only get through this, but with the right mindset and activities, you can also be more successful and productive than ever before.

Using Your Employee or Student Assistance Program

You may be working alone at home, but you are not in a vacuum. Your Employee or Student Assistance Program (EAP/SAP) can still support you with any personal problem or struggle you experience whether or not it work related.