

Tips for Working Remotely

Working from home has its attractions, but it also requires many adjustments. If your employer gives you the option of working from home, keep in mind that it means big changes in the way you work.

Working remotely is becoming more practical all the time. Employers are recognizing the potential benefits in productivity and job satisfaction. But if your idea of working remotely involves sleeping late and taking long lunches, you're in for a surprise. Working from home doesn't mean a vacation from the rigors of the office.

While it does offer many advantages—no traffic jams, for one—working remotely requires that you exercise self-discipline, pace yourself, and manage your time well. Even if you're already well-organized, disciplined, and flexible, the transition to working remotely still calls for some adjustment.

On the plus side of working from home, you can

- Work with fewer interruptions from unscheduled meetings or distracting coworkers.
- Enjoy greater flexibility in tailoring your work space and your schedule.
- Reallocate time and money spent on commuting to other needs.

And on the minus side, chances are you'll be

- Isolated from coworkers for instant feedback, brainstorming, or socializing
- Without a supervisor nearby when you need answers or guidance
- Called upon by family and friends or asked to attend to household duties during working hours
- Within a few steps of your office and your work—24 hours a day
- Subject to procrastination

You may discover that working from home creates opportunities for you to do more of what you want—both professionally and personally. Still, succeeding as a remote worker won't happen without thought and effort on your part.

Making the Transition

You're not the only one who will need to adjust when you begin working from home. Your manager, coworkers, family, and friends will all be affected by the change. Expect the transition to take from one to three months.

Here are some ways you can ease the change:

Sit down with your manager and coworkers to discuss how your working remotely will affect each of them, and what you expect from each other. Take this critical step before you start, so you can identify any potential conflicts.

Be sure to discuss logistic details such as methods of contact, work schedules, timetables for completing tasks, opportunities for feedback, and the days or hours you plan to spend in the office.

Discuss with your family or roommates the benefits and problems that may arise with you working at home. Encourage the people you live with to share their concerns, questions, and expectations. The sooner you address possible problems, the less likely they'll cause conflict later.

For instance, explain that although you're home, you may not always be available to resolve conflicts, prepare meals, or do more housework. You may need to redefine some household rules to prevent such things as blaring TVs or radios, excessive telephone use, or other activities from interfering with your productivity during the days you're working from home.

Explain to your friends that just because you work at home, it doesn't mean that you're available for long chats on the phone, two-hour lunches, or knocking off work in the early afternoon.

Gently request that they call or visit during the times of the day that you've scheduled for your breaks, or after your workday ends. This reminder applies particularly to friends who drop in unannounced, make frequent social phone calls, or send you frivolous e-mails with the latest jokes or gossip.

A Matter of Habit

Offices provide people and protocols to tell you what to do and help you stay focused. But at home you might find it more challenging to stay on track and use your time wisely.

One thing's for certain: The better your work habits—particularly your organization and time management skills—the easier it will be for you to be a productive remote employee. It's up to you to structure your time on a daily basis. Since no one's looking over your shoulder, you're the one responsible for developing, regulating, and enforcing routines and deadlines.

Just as if you worked in the company office, your manager will need to see measurable results. You and your manager will have to set your performance goals. But because your manager's supervising from a distance, you'll need to break down those goals and outcomes into several smaller steps. As a remote employee, it's your responsibility to complete them without the close supervision or guidance you may have had at the office.

Here are some habits that will help you succeed:

Prioritize your tasks. Establish a plan of action, based on importance and due dates, how long tasks will take to complete, and what skills are required. By completing tasks that require less time and effort first or during certain parts of your daily schedule, you'll have more time to devote to the more difficult jobs.

Estimate the time required to properly complete each task. Author Jeffrey Mayer had it right when he wrote, "If you haven't got the time to do it right, when will you have the time to do it over?" Correctly estimating how long tasks will take to properly complete is one of the most time-efficient work habits you can learn. It takes trial and error to hone this skill, but the sooner you can attach the approximate amount of time it takes to complete a given task, the more productive you'll be.

Stay in your seat, concentrate, and complete a segment of your work. Procrastinating remote employees tap their computer keys for bit and then bounce into the kitchen for a soda. After quick calls to friends, they return to their computers—only to be interrupted by the dog pleading to go for a walk or the mailman with a delivery. Heck, it's almost lunchtime, why not fix a sandwich? And so another half-day slips away without accomplishing half of what needs to get done.

The trick to meeting deadlines and managing time effectively is to stay seated and hack away until you've completed a predetermined amount of work. For example, if your goal in an hour is two written pages, 10 telephone calls to vendors, or whatever it may be, then don't get up until it's completed.

If you finish the task in less time than you've estimated, that's great—but don't take a break just yet. Instead, get started on your next assignment and work on it until you use up the time you'd allocated for the previous task. That way, you'll improve your estimation skills—and at the same time get a jump on your next order of business.

Create a reward system of breaks and activities. After you've achieved your goal for a particular time slot, give yourself a break commensurate with what you've accomplished.

You might need a 5-minute stretch break every hour, or you may prefer to skip the short breaks and spend a longer break relaxing at lunch. Rewarding yourself can include activities—such as having a snack or meal, exercise or walking, phoning a friend or spouse, or reading the newspaper.

Remember that rewards help motivate you to stay focused and complete part or all of a task. However, sometimes your estimates of how much you'll accomplish over a given period of time won't be correct. In those cases, you'll still need to take breaks to refresh yourself—but keep them brief until you reach your goals.

Pace yourself for the long haul. Overwork can be just as big a pitfall to remote workers as procrastination. While you might think that putting in lots of extra hours will help you get more done, studies have shown that overworking actually reduces productivity. In addition, without proper rest and relaxation, your mental and physical health will suffer.

One way to avoid overwork is to set firm starting and stopping times for work. Although you may work before or after the typical nine-to-five schedule, it's usually necessary to have some overlap with traditional office hours so you can contact your manager and coworkers. No matter how you schedule your day, you'll succeed as a telecommuter only by working at a steady, comfortable pace and spreading your workload over a reasonable period of time.

Finally, here are some answers to frequently asked questions:

I'm afraid that when I'm at home, I might lack the motivation to get the work day started. What are some ways to get going in the morning?

Set regular business hours for your work-at-home days and stick to them. You probably wouldn't dream of waltzing into the office an hour late or taking a two-hour lunch, so apply the same rules when you're working at home.

When you first start working remotely, you might kick off your day with a brief "good morning" call to check in with your manager at the office. That way you have an opportunity to discuss any needed adjustments to your workload—and to reinforce that it's "time to get to work."

I have young children who I want to care for while I'm working at home. How can I balance their needs and my work responsibilities?

Working from home isn't a substitute for child care. You'll still need someone to care for your children while you perform your work-related tasks at home.

Think of it this way: How well can you take care of your youngsters if half your attention is on your work? If you try to be a full-time employee and a full-time parent at the same time, you'll do neither job very well. So make your child care arrangements before you begin working from home.

I love the idea of working remotely because it gives me the freedom to work the way I want to. But what do I do when I come up against a problem that I don't know how to solve?

If you're like most independent workers, you wouldn't think of pestering your boss for help whenever you encounter an obstacle that demands extra effort to overcome. However, to be successful as a remote employee, you need to recognize when you've spent enough time on a problem and you're not getting results. That's the time to call and ask your manager or a coworker for more input.

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