

Best practices for successfully working from home

In the wake of COVID-19, working from home may become part of our “new normal.” Discover how to be a successful at-home worker, and the habits and strategies for maximizing your work-from-home effectiveness.



This report was selected especially for you by Falkenberg-Poetz & Pidhirniak Wealth

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Key takeaways

- Arm yourself with video and other collaboration technology.
- Set up a dedicated work-space that is as ergonomic as possible.
- Establish good work routines and watch your communication style.

In general, more than 40 percent of workers work from home, at least some of the time.

Of course, these aren't "general" times. The number of at-home workers has skyrocketed this year as the novel coronavirus has caused companies 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. While the transition to working at home has been challenging for many, others who are getting their first taste of the benefits and freedom that can accompany working from home may resist giving up those perks.

What's more, their bosses might not want them to rush back to the office. Various studies from the likes of Gallup and Harvard Business Review show that workers who transition to working from home often boost their productivity significantly.

The upshot. 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 and efficiently while maintaining an office-like atmosphere. And that means arming yourself with the right gear for success.

First, the technology. At the bare minimum, you'll 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 are also 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 from 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 non-work/relaxation areas — you’ll need them in order to unwind!

Regardless of the space you select, take steps to set up shop as ergonomically as possible. Muscle strains that lead to chronic health problems can occur faster than you might expect.

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.

And don’t forget your posture, which can make as big an impact as any product you buy. Ergonomics experts stress the importance of sitting so that your knees are roughly level with your hips (with your feet flat on the floor or on a footrest), your wrists are straight (with your hands at or below your elbow level) and your monitor is about an arm’s length away from your face.



Your habits

All that said, a high-end microphone and a fancy chair in a room with a pleasant view won't matter much unless you also establish and follow smart work-at-home habits. Some major dos and don'ts that we find effective include the following.

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. You might even hang blinds or another covering if your family can see into your office. If you find yourself working in an exposed space or if you have children at home while you're working, boundaries get trickier. One solution: wear noise-canceling headphones to communicate that you're not to be disturbed. Regardless, your boundaries should be informed by how you work best. Some people need to be closed off from personal life and distractions to get work done, while others thrive in busier settings.

Set boundaries for yourself, too. Should you be trying to do loads of laundry in between e-meetings? Some at-home workers find chore breaks relaxing — they can tackle tasks in chunks instead of all at once on weekends — while others too easily get taken off target if they don't stay laser-focused on work, or they find adding chores to their daily list increases stress. There's no one right answer — your temperament should drive your decisions here.

2. Establish a routine and stick to it.

This likely will require trial and error as you figure out what types of schedule and work routines 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. If you work best in the morning, hit the hard stuff in the morning. If your brain fully turns on after sunset, go with it as much as possible.

At any rate, 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.

Of course, much of your schedule may be dictated by others — morning meetings, end-of-day check-ins and so on. Try to work collaboratively with your bosses and peers to arrange schedules that work for everyone.

Pro tip. Your routine must include scheduled breaks for movement, stretching and the like. Give yourself physical distance from your work zone by eating away from the desk, walking the dog or simply just being in a different room for five minutes. The break can help you refocus and relax, and it might even help you perform better when it counts. Consider that Danish students who were given a short break before taking a test got significantly higher scores than their peers who didn't get any time to relax. There are, of course, loads of apps and devices that will alert you when it's time to move.

3. Be able to “show your work.”

Despite evidence showing that at-home workers are highly productive — one 2019 study shows that telecommuters work 1.4 more days every month, or 16.8 more days every year, than people who work in an office — 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.) Go for bonus points by using some of the time that once was needed for a long morning commute to engage in online classes or tutorials for your professional development — and be sure to let the higher-ups know what you're doing.

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 and consider the following.

- 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.
- Remove distance-related barriers by doing video calls and meetings that make conversations richer. Seeing co-workers' faces also 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, and sarcasm can be extra tough to recognize. Take a minute to reread written communications before you send them to ensure you are being clear and not inadvertently sending a message that will provoke a negative or anxious response. If you're not sure, go the old-fashioned route and pick up the phone.

5. Stay connected beyond business.

One of the perks of office life that can get lost with remote working is the camaraderie among peers. The in-person bonding that occurs in the office isn't just a nicety — it also helps build strong teams and gets everyone pulling toward the same goals. The ability to have casual moments also can spark creative ideas and problem-solving that don'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 from each other.

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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