Setting Work-Life Boundaries When You Work from Home

One thing that makes working from home so attractive for many people is the flexibility that it allows. However, without a clear difference between work and nonwork time, many home workers allow work to creep into the time that should be reserved for relaxation, family, and other personal needs. On the flip side, some home workers find that they have trouble keeping their personal lives from interfering with their work and affecting their work performance. Creating and maintaining effective boundaries between work and the rest of life is essential as you manage your schedule working from home.

Communication and work-life boundaries

One of the challenging aspects of working from home is establishing boundaries and then communicating them to your colleagues and manager in a positive way. Here are some ways to do that:

Know your manager's expectations. Talk to your manager regularly about work expectations and know what is needed in terms of goals and productivity. Set up a regular meeting with your manager to ensure that you stay up to date with team needs.

Use technology to your advantage. Technology can work wonders but sometimes it can seem like emails, voicemails, texts, and instant messages are controlling your life. But if you can make an effort to use these technologies wisely—such as Skype for virtual communication and SharePoint for file sharing—they will work *for* you.

Plan your workday. Just as you would in the office, make your to-do list to help keep you on track but make sure it's realistic. And as long as you're responding to colleagues and clients in a timely manner, you can decide to allow yourself blocks of uninterrupted time to focus on important work.

Staying focused

You may want to talk to colleagues and friends who work from home, as they

may have tips to share. Also, there are a number of good resources including the website Remote.co, an organisation that supports remote work. Here are other suggestions to help you stay focused in your home office.

Establish a workday routine. Many home workers find that setting and sticking to a regular routine is helpful for maintaining focus. You may want to establish a schedule that's similar to one you'd have if you worked in an office. Begin and end work at the same time each day and take regular, scheduled breaks.

Avoid multitasking. Don't try to get the laundry done or prepare dinner while also working on work tasks that require focus. But do take breaks from work. Many employees who work from home spend more concentrated time working on computers than they would in the office. Taking regular breaks, like getting up to stretch or taking a walk can actually increase your efficiency and reduce errors.

Assess your home office. Is there enough room for all of the things you need? Do you have the right equipment? Is it physically separated from the activity of your home? Is it quiet enough for you to concentrate? Is your office ergonomically correct? Any of these things can affect your ability to concentrate. Your company may have guidelines and even consultants to help you with this.

Get organised. Make lists of all the things you need in your home office, including files, equipment, and supplies, and think about what you'll need for specific projects—anything that you'd have available if you were at the office. When you have everything you need at hand, you'll find it easier to focus on your work.

Managing the temptation to overwork

Once new home workers master the basics and solve the problems of distractions and focus, the opposite problem—overwork—often sets in. There are many reasons why home workers overwork when they work outside of the office, including:

- fear of being seen as less productive or less accessible than in-office workers

- unclear communication that creates rework

- manager or colleague expectations

- access to work during "off hours"

- a lack of routine that designates the regular beginning and end of a workday

- losing track of time in the absence of office routines

If you're not sure whether you're maintaining a healthy balance between work and life, ask yourself:

- Do I worry that I'm not spending enough time with friends or family because of work?

- Do friends and family complain that I'm always working?

- Do I often find myself working late at night or early in the morning (or beyond my "normal" work hours) when there isn't a work emergency?

- Do I ever go into my home office to do "one last thing" and end up working for several more hours on tasks that could have been done the next day?

- Do I regularly work on weekends when I'm not scheduled?

- Do others (my manager, colleagues, customers) expect to be able to reach me outside regular business hours?

- Do I work when I'm on holiday at home because my office is so accessible?

It's easy to let things slide by working a little later than normal "just this once" or answering calls or emails during your off-duty time. If you are having trouble turning work off, it's important to come up with a plan to create and maintain a separation between your home and your work. You can do that by establishing schedules, rules, and routines.

Maintaining boundaries at home

The best way to maintain the boundaries you have set is to remain committed and firm. Here are some tips for maintaining boundaries between work and the rest of your life.

Talk to family members about minimising distractions. Make sure that all members of your family understand and respect that even though you're home, you're working. You may want to set some guidelines, like agreeing that you're only to be disturbed if there's an emergency or determining who will answer the door or phone when you're working.

Create signals that indicate to family members or others in your home when you are working and when you're not. Some people close their "office" door when they are working as a signal to family members that they aren't to be disturbed. Others may post a schedule in a common area or talk to family members about the coming workday.

Create as much separation between work and home as you can. Have a dedicated workspace in which you only do work. If possible, make it an area that's away from the common areas of your home. Install a separate phone line or VoIP software for work calls. If you have an office door, close it when you are working (and when you are not working so you can't easily hear the work phone).

Take scheduled breaks. Just because you're at home doesn't mean that you shouldn't stop for lunch or a break; leave your work area and eat in another part of your house or go for a walk.

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