

Your Remote Working Day

In some ways, remote working is no different from working in a central office. You have work expectations to meet and you coordinate with colleagues and customers to meet them. But remote working also brings with it a set of unique challenges that can take some practice to master.

Creating a beginning and an ending to your day

Without a commute and the signals that come with travelling to a place that's dedicated to work, some remote workers find it hard to get started at the beginning of the workday, or to get back to work after breaks and interruptions. Other homeworkers have trouble ending their day because it's so easy to just keep on working.

The flexibility that is part of remote working's attraction—the ability to start work very early in the morning, take breaks for personal or family needs, or put in hours of work in the evening—can also make it hard for some people to turn work on and off in productive and healthy ways.

One solution is to develop a "false commute" or some ritual that signals the beginning and the end of each workday. Some people may take a walk each morning before heading into their home office or spend twenty minutes reading a newspaper at the end of the day. It doesn't really matter what you do. What's important is that you create some kind of routine that helps you ease into work at the beginning of the day and ease back into your personal life at the end of each day.

Your remote working day should also include some breaks. Schedule regular breaks throughout the day and take a walk, read a newspaper, or do something else that will help you relieve stress and feel more energised.

The importance of organisation

One of the keys to successful remote working is organisation. When you work in an office setting, everything is right at your fingertips. When you need a document, it's right there in the filing cabinet or on the protected drive. If you

need to make some copies, the machine is all the way down the hall. If you need to send a package, you can drop it off at the post room. When you have to talk to your manager, you can walk straight into their office.

But when you work away from the office and especially if you work in different places on different days, all of these simple tasks can be more challenging. They require better coordination with colleagues and customers, careful planning of what you'll be working on and what you'll need, setting up an efficient home office and finding ways to work when you're traveling.

Here are some things to think about as you take on the special challenges of remote working:

Do you have all of the files and resources you need to do your job? This includes everything from telephone lists, research documents and progress reports to access to computer systems that may be protected behind firewalls. The items and electronic systems that you need access to may change from day to day or week to week, so it's important to know what you'll need on both a short- and long-term basis so that you can plan ahead and make sure that they're available wherever you are going to be working.

Can you save files electronically in ways that allow you to access them no matter where you're working? At the same time, can you properly protect and backup your files in case of systems failures? You need to make sure when you are working in different places that you can both access your files and save your work so that it won't disappear if something happens to your physical computer. You also need to make sure that the work you are doing is properly protected from access by unauthorised people.

Is your home office set up in a way that allows you to be organised? Do you have enough files and filing cabinets? Do you have other paper supplies you need? What about a printer, scanner, camera for video conferencing and colour printer? Is your wireless network protected from unauthorised access? Do you have enough bandwidth to easily access large documents and to have video conferences?

Do you know how to get technical support? Technical breakdowns can be especially frustrating when you work at home because there's no technical expert right there who can stop by and take a look at your computer. Find out who you

need to contact in your organisation when you need computer help and post their name and number where you can find it quickly. It is also a good idea to have an alternate non company email address that you can use to communicate with technical support if your corporate email account is inaccessible. Also find out who to call for telephone, network connection, or email problems as well as for problems with other equipment in your home office, such as mobile devices and scanners.

Figure out what you can't do at home and schedule time to be in the office.

In addition to meetings, there may be tasks or projects that just can't be handled from your home office or are dealt with more efficiently at the office. Try to anticipate these and make a plan to be in the office to take care of them.

Establish accounts with organisations that can help you with administrative tasks. This could include pickup and delivery, office supplies, printing, or copying services.

Try not to rely on or overuse office staff or other workers for help. If you are able to ask staff members for help with tasks like making appointments, posting, photocopying, scanning, or other things you need to do, try to work with them in an efficient manner rather than calling them up frequently to do small tasks. The same goes for colleagues. It's OK to occasionally ask a colleague to email you a file you forgot if you for some reason don't have access to it, but if it gets to be a habit, your colleagues may start to feel like your remote working arrangement means extra work for them and that you're disorganised and can't keep track of the information you need to do your job.

Using communication tools effectively

There are many ways of communicating these days: teleconference, video conference, email, mobile phone, texting, instant messaging and voice mail. But it's important to learn how to best use these communication tools for your different communication needs. For example, if you need to give a colleague some detailed information, it is probably better to send an email rather than leave a voice mail - unless you know the person doesn't read email promptly and the voice mail is simply a request for the person to call you back. If the information is complicated and may cause confusion or questions, set up a time to talk rather than simply sending the information and then send information electronically as a backup and reiteration of the discussion. And if you have an urgent need, work

out the best way to get in touch with people quickly. For some people that will be a text message, for others it will be email and for others it will be the phone or some other method.

Communication is vital, but as you go about your remote working day, try not to overdo it. Sometimes homeworkers send lots of emails or call many people throughout the day to remind them that they are at home, working diligently. This strategy can be helpful, but if you begin to communicate too much, your colleagues, clients, or manager may start to feel annoyed because you are interrupting their work flow and may wonder when you get your work done. A single "just checking in" call or message each day is enough and try not to "cc" anyone on an email message who doesn't really need the information.

The importance of casual conversation

Communication is another key to making remote working work. People who work in offices communicate all day long. They talk to clients and colleagues on the telephone, they email, they participate in webinars. All of this you can do from home, but there's another important type of office communication that's harder to do from home: casual conversation.

People who work in offices see their colleagues every day and they talk to them in hallways, chill out rooms and wherever else they see each other. These passing conversations may be about family, hobbies, weekend activities, or office gossip, or they may have to do with projects or news about the organisation. Whatever the subject, this kind of casual conversation helps colleagues make connections and usually leads to better working relationships.

When you don't work in an office, you have to work a little harder to create opportunities for casual conversation. Successful homeworkers do the following:

Make an effort to call people to just say hello and find out what's going on.

Schedule a few extra minutes before or after telephone meetings to catch up with each other.

Stay informed about what's happening in their organisation and their field and make time for conversations about developments that colleagues may

be interested in.

Setting and meeting expectations

Every homeworker should have a set of guidelines or expectations about access and availability. You and your manager, colleagues and any clients you work with should have a clear understanding about things like:

- when you will be available
- the best way to reach you
- how long it will take you to respond to voice mail or email
- how you will update people about schedule changes

If you establish expectations up front, you may be able to avoid some of the problems that many homeworkers face, especially issues about when and how to reach employees who don't have a physical presence in an office.

Coping with isolation

Many homeworkers say the best thing about not working in the office is that they don't have to deal with as many distractions and can really concentrate on the work at hand. But this plus has a negative side - it's easy to feel disconnected, isolated, or lonely when you work at home, away from colleagues and the office atmosphere.

It's important to learn how to recognise when you're missing social interaction and try to build it into your remote working day. Try the following:

Schedule lunch or coffee dates. Some people set up a weekly or monthly lunch date with colleagues or friends to break up their workday and provide an opportunity for interacting with other people.

Take a few minutes to chat with colleagues when you connect by telephone. Instead of immediately jumping into work, spend a minute or two talking about what's going on in each other's lives, a new movie you've seen, or anything else. This can help build connections between office employees and homeworkers and may help the homeworker feel less isolated.

Attend office social events. Make an effort to go to birthday or other celebrations or parties. When you work remotely, it's easy to feel disconnected from the larger organisation, but if you try to attend social events, you may feel more like you're part of a team.

Volunteer for projects that involve other departments or workplace committees or groups. This is a great way to get to know people beyond your immediate team members, which can be very hard when you don't work in the office.

Call a colleague or your manager just to say "hello" or to chat. Because email is such an easy way to communicate, it's possible to let days or even weeks go by without actually talking to the people you work with. If you find this happening, pick up the phone and say, "Hi, I'm just calling to see how you're doing". You may be surprised at how happy people are to know that you're interested and were thinking of them.

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