Working From Home: What You Need To Know

The number of organizations are asking their employees to work from home, with 46% of American businesses having implemented remote-work policies as of mid-February 2020. While telecommuting has become more mainstream in recent years—the remote workforce grew 159% between 2005 and 2017—when just 3.4% of Americans work from home at least half of the time, it's not unreasonable to think that many of the employees who have been asked to work from home due to the coronavirus or other circumstances may have little to no experience doing so, or at least not for an extended period of time.

Whether you're a first-time telecommuter struggling to be as productive from your couch as you are from your cube, or a manager looking for ways to keep your remote team engaged, here's everything you need to know about working from home during the coronavirus pandemic.

How To Work From Home

1. Get your technology in order

Technology is what enables remote work in the first place. Make sure to take your laptop home, and don't forget your charger. Also, take home your mouse and keyboard — anything that might make working on your laptop from home a little easier.

If you don't have a work laptop and you'll be spending a long time remote, ask if your supervisor wants you to take your desktop computer home. If you don't drive and it's too much to carry on public transport, ask your supervisor if you can expense a taxi or rideshare.

Then there's the software. Make sure you have the right applications. Lots of remote workers are leaning heavily on Slack, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Zoom or GoToMeeting. Iron out what your team is planning to use ASAP.

Of course, you'll want to make sure all your technology actually works from home. Do you need a secure line? Are those applications accessible from your home Wi-Fi? Do you need a security key to log in? These are all questions to ask your supervisor or IT department.

2. Make sure you have bandwidth

Another thing? Internet access — is yours robust enough at home to allow you to video conference? Many conferences and almost all nonessential work travel are being canceled right now, so people want to use online video conferencing, which requires a good Internet connection.

If your bandwidth is low and you're on a video call, try shutting down other programs to lighten the load on your connection. If your connection is really choppy, you can often shut off the video portion of a call

and participate with audio only, which defeats the purpose of seeing your team but will still allow you to participate in the conversation.

Another Internet hog? Kids.

If your connection is not robust, set some ground rules about when kids can't be online because mom or dad is on a conference call, or stagger your video meetings with your partner or other family members if possible.

3. The kids are alright — but they're home too

With school closures and concerns about putting kids in day care, as well as staffing those places up, parents are faced with a challenge, especially parents who have to physically go to work because they have no remote work option.

You'll need to make a plan for education and entertainment. Stock up on books and puzzles. Also, it's OK to use streaming services (Common Sense Media has good recommendations for kid-appropriate content).

Be flexible about how much work you might realistically be able to get done if you're balancing child care. #WorkLifeBalance. Just not the kind you were hoping for.

4. Manage expectations

It's wise to have a discussion with your manager about what can actually be accomplished from home.

Ask your manager what the priorities are, and discuss how tasks will get done.

How are teams going to track projects they're working on? How will they meet to discuss this? Will you all be connecting on Microsoft Teams or email? Will there be standing meetings at a certain time to get everyone coordinated?

This should be an ongoing conversation. Remember, going fully remote is a new experience for many companies and their workers. Be honest about what isn't working or can't get done in these circumstances. More overall communication is going to be necessary.

5. Know thyself (and thy WFH weaknesses)

If you're distractible, get ready for work every morning like you are going to physically go into work. Dress up, do your hair — whatever you'd normally do. This puts you in a professional mindset.

It's hard to draw a sharp distinction between home and office when you're *at* home. But to the extent possible, create a space at home that looks and feels like your office to you.

If you're the type of person who never takes a break at home, set a timer to take time for lunch, and turn off your work. Or go for a walk. If you don't change your venue at some point during the day and

take a breather, it can make the claustrophobia worse. Try to maintain normal work hours, and shut things down when you would normally leave the office.

Try to appreciate the benefits that do come with remote work. You're not commuting. You're able to make your own lunch and save money doing so. You have more control over your schedule and more time with family. Focus on whatever positives you can find.

6. Embrace the webcam

Conference calls are tough — there are time delays, not knowing who's talking because you can't see the person, people getting interrupted on accident.

Webcams can solve a number of these issues: the sense of isolation and that confusion.

"To be able to see the person you're talking to I think is important," says Matthew Hollingsworth, who heads operations at Tiny Boards, a company that has several job boards for remote work.

And also, he says, because we miss cues when we aren't working together in person, make doubly sure all colleagues understand their marching orders.

"I tend to over communicate, and I think that's a good default setting," he says. Don't be afraid to ask, "Is this clear?"

You can even try repeating back what you heard the other person say, to make sure you interpreted the person's meaning correctly.

7. Stay connected

One undeniable loss is the social, casual "water cooler" conversation that connects us to people — if you're not used to that loss, full-time remote work can feel isolating.

To fill the gap, some co-workers are scheduling online social time to have conversations with no agenda. Use Slack chats and things like that if you miss real-time interaction.

Again, embrace video calling and webcams so you can see your colleagues. Try an icebreaker over your team chat: What's everyone's favorite TV show right now? What's one good thing that someone read that day?

Reference: NPR, 2020

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