THE LAB
N°33

ten {10} tips for working effectively from home

Working Remotely | Teleworking | Telecommuting | Home Office Work

A paper by Tab Edwards

Approximately 43 percent of U.S. workers work remotely to some degree, according to *Gallup's* 2017 report, "The State of the American Workplace." That percentage is an increase from 39 percent in 2012, which suggests that the number of workers working remotely (i.e., teleworking or telecommuting) is steadily increasing.

1

Establish home working hours

Think of the days when you work(ed) from an office. For most workers, that involves a commute from your home to your organization's office building or facility, and then to your workplace within that facility. When you arrived at your desk, it was just in time to begin your official workday—usually 9 AM. And when the clock struck 5 PM, you packed up your stuff for the commute home. In this scenario, your office hours were 9 to 5. When working from home, you should establish the same work hours and adhere to them, just as if you were working in your work office. Just because you are working from home or Starbucks or the public library, clients and co-workers still expect that you will be working and available during your standard "office hours."

2

Set expectations with your boss and co-workers

Have you discussed with your boss, direct reports, team members, and co-workers their expectations for communicating via different vehicles? For example, have you discussed how quickly your boss expects you to respond to email messages s/he sends you? (Admit it: you probably believe that you need to respond "immediately" to your boss's email messages. In reality, you probably don't have to)? Have you discussed the best way to reach you if your boss needs to contact you immediately? Remote workers must have such conversations to set expectations. When you do, you will feel less anxiety stepping away from your laptop fearing that you might miss your boss's email messages, for instance, and you will have a less stressful, more responsive work-at-home experience.

3

Make yourself equally accessible

When working from home, you should be equally as available to your clients and co-workers as you are when you work from your organization's office. Everyone should have your appropriate phone number, email address, emergency contact information (how to reach you if you are needed "immediately"), and contact information for your backup person if you are unavailable for immediate assistance. Establish "office hours" where your clients and co-workers know that you will be available for a call or video conference if needed. This requires that you have the technological capability to meet in person (virtually), using some form of video conferencing tool. Or, you could meet face-to-face at a coffee shop if that is an appropriate option.

4

Establish a virtual face-to-face presence

Face-to-face interactions can be valuable—and even necessary by remote workers for a sense of connectedness—just as they are when you meet with someone in person. When working remotely, in-person meetings may not be possible, so the next best thing is to meet virtually using some form of videoconferencing technology where people can see each other and work collaboratively remotely. Examples include FaceTime, Skype, Google Hangouts/Meet, Slack, WebEx, Zoom, BlueJeans, Teams, GoToMeeting, and others.

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5

People-Managers: manage by results

As someone who has managed a $2 billion organization containing many people, I appreciate the effectiveness of managing by results (and in some cases, initiatives) and not by individual tasks. When, as people-managers, you are comfortable **trusting** your remote workers to do what needs to be done—and not being concerned about “what they are doing right now at 2:18 PM?” but rather “are they on track to achieving that desired outcome?”—both you and your remote team members will be more productive with less micromanaging. It will help form stronger working relationships between the parties as well.

6

Work productively, not busily

To work “productively” is to focus your time and efforts on completing those tasks, to-dos, and action items that—when completed—contribute/lead to the achievement of desired outcomes: goals and objectives. If you spend time completing tasks that do not directly allow you to make progress toward the achievement of outcomes, goals, and objectives, one can make the argument that you are wasting your time. Sure, some tasks must be completed even if their completion does not contribute to a desired outcome. For example, some tasks hold consequences if not completed. In these cases, though they may not be productive activities, it is nonetheless essential to complete the tasks.

7

Execute “The 5 Musts”

My research has shown—as presented in the book **The 50-Hour Workweek in 20 Hours**—that, in the course of the average office-based worker’s workday, there are between 2 and 5 critical things that absolutely must be completed that day. I refer to these as *The 5 Musts*. Starting from your list of priority and essential tasks, identify The 5 Musts (or, however many there are) and move them to the top of your list. Then, allocate time on your calendar to complete them. The rationale: if your day gets hectic and your work time is cut short, by prioritizing the completion of The 5 Musts, you will at least get the most important tasks completed that day—tasks that contribute most significantly to the achievement of desired outcomes.

8

Be mindful of security

Home-based workers sometimes relax our security diligence because it is not drilled into us as it is in our organization’s office. Yet, it can be equally important. Be sure to use smart passwords that adhere to recommended secure standards (read: not easy to figure out). Beware of phishing scams, and if you are not sure about an email message, contact your organization’s IT staff. I also recommend using your personal computer for personal (non-work-related) activity and your work computer (if you have a separate one) for only work-related activities.

9

Step away

Just as it is beneficial to take downtime breaks when working from an office, it is also important to take downtime breaks when working from home. Some leaders suggest taking a 20-minute break for every 2 hours worked, while others contend that one 15-minute break (plus the lunch break) is enough. You decide. And whatever your decision, the point is that it is valuable and necessary to bake downtime into your workday. So go out and take a walk, ride a bike, get coffee (even if you can make your own at home), throw snowballs, anything to reenergize. When it comes to television, taking news update breaks (where you watch the news on your TV) has been shown to lessen the urge to watch it during your working hours.

10

Relax

Roll out of bed in your pajamas and go to work. I know that some people swear by the idea of following your regular office commute routine by showering, shaving, putting on makeup, putting on work clothes, and then going into the next room to start working. Uh, whatever. Take advantage of the time-saving benefit of working from home. Some people save up to 5 hours each day by not having to “get ready for work” (as I just described) and commuting to an office. Take breaks, don’t chain yourself to your laptop/PC or your desk, kitchen table, ottoman, floor, chair, or whatever you use for a desk. Working from home can be a much less stressful and equally- (if not more) productive experience if done following the disciplines outlined here.

A few quick tips on working productively at home

- Document a list of all of your tasks, to-dos, and action items (they are synonymous).
- Divide the list into two (2) parts: (A) those tasks that can be done working remotely and (B) those that absolutely cannot be done remotely.
- From list (A), identify those tasks that, if completed, will move you closer to achieving a desired outcome, goal, or objective; these are your *priority* items. Add these priority tasks to your calendar and allocate time to complete them. From the tasks on list (B), determine if they are necessary/essential. If not, punt or renegotiate with the requestor; and if so, figure out a way they can be completed—even if by someone else.
- Spend less time in (virtual) meetings and conference calls. If the agenda suggests that there is little value to your attendance, renegotiate with the requestor to see if you can be excused, have someone attend on your behalf, or get the meeting minutes afterward as an option to attending.

Tab Edwards is a performance and productivity expert who works with organizations and individuals globally on achieving maximum effectiveness and job success

info@TheLab33.com
Info@TabEdwards.com