

Working from Home: Tips for Employees and Business Owners

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Working from home, a necessity during the pandemic, is here to stay despite some companies calling for a return to the office. This 2020 article explored how to make it work.

The coronavirus pandemic is forcing employees around the world to work from home. Although remote work has existed for decades, it's not ideal for everybody. Many employees who are accustomed to working from an office location and who prefer it will need to make a huge transition. While studies have shown that remote work can bring many benefits, including reduced commuting time and fewer workplace distractions, these benefits are often associated with people who work from home a few days a week instead of all the time (Golden & Eddleston, 2020). So transitioning to working solely from home will be challenging for many.

This article lays out the challenges and proposes some strategies for overcoming them. It is primarily based on several of my studies on remote workers (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017; Marshall, Michaels & Mulki, 2007; Mulki, Bardhi, Lassk & Nanavaty-Dahl, 2009; Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011). This research was developed from two survey-based data collections on remote workers. One looked at employees of a large US-based organization with remote workers all over the world. The second used data from a large international pharmaceutical company with a subsidiary located on the US East Coast.

By being aware of the challenges of remote work, employees and their managers can better prepare for the transition and hopefully manage the inevitable obstacles. Following the advice below can also help employees to adapt to the situation more quickly and develop practices that will contribute to their work

performance and work-family balance.

Difficulty Transitioning Between Roles

One of the major challenges that remote work presents is how the distinction between one's work life and family life deteriorates. Although early research tended to suggest that remote workers would not complete their work due to family distractions, in fact it is more likely that remote workers will remain focused on their work at the expense of their family. Specifically, employees find it difficult to exit the work role and shut work "off" in order to transition to their family role. With their workplace in their home, many remote worker feel that "work is always there" and "ever present," thus leading their work to infringe on their family and personal time. For many remote workers, their home comes to be associated with the work role; work physically and psychologically intrudes upon their family; and habits and norms form that keep remote workers preoccupied with work when they're home.

However, remote workers who are able to create spatial, temporal and social boundaries that separate work and family roles are better able to create and manage role transitions.

Spatial boundaries include having a designated space to work (i.e. a home office) and not working in a space designated for the family (i.e. living room) or personal use (i.e. bedroom). Remote workers who work only in a home office are much better able to transition between their work and family roles than those who work in the dining room or bedroom. This also makes it easier to stop working once one decides to transition to the family role, thus helping to reduce stress.

Temporal boundaries refer to establishing designated times for work and family. For example, it is commonly advised that remote workers follow the hours of their



typical workday (i.e. 9:00 – 5:00) and stop working and transition to family and personal time at the end of their workday. Those that repeatedly transition between work and family time have the most difficulty shutting work “off.” If an employee needs to “borrow” time from one role to accommodate the other, s/he should make sure to schedule time to pay it back. But, as much as possible, employees should aim to set specific times for work and family and keep to that schedule.

Finally, **social boundaries** refer to the ability to devote specific time, energy and resources to individuals in one’s work and family roles with minimal overlap. Remote workers are best able to transition between work and family when they create social boundaries between the two roles. In other words, a remote worker should not try to play with a child while performing work, or try to teleconference with a colleague while playing a game with a child. Remote workers who do not create social boundaries are often interrupted during their work and family time, which not only creates stress but can also make them feel ineffective as an employee and family member. To create social boundaries in one’s home, it is often necessary to communicate expectations with one’s spouse and children and to also ensure that one is following these expectations when it is time to transition to the family role. For example, just as families typically don’t visit loved ones at their work place away from home, they should not expect to enter one’s home office when the door is closed.

Feeling Isolated – Professionally and Socially

Individuals greatly differ in their preference for working at home versus the office. While some employees are more easily distracted by coworkers, others are more easily distracted by family members, which thereby influences how well individuals transition to working from home. For those who prefer working from an office location, working remotely tends to bring a sense of isolation, both professionally and socially. These individuals miss their interactions, both formal and informal, with colleagues and supervisors. Indeed, many studies have shown that feeling isolated from coworkers and informal office networks is one of the most frequently cited concerns of remote workers. Many also worry that being “out-of-sight and out-of-mind” will make them lose career support, promotional opportunities and access to desirable projects. In turn, when remote workers feel isolated, they experience lower job

satisfaction, reduced organizational commitment, and higher turnover intentions. (Mulki, Lask and Jaramillo 2008; Mulki, Locander, Marshall, Harris and Hensel 2008).

To combat feelings of isolation from remote work, particularly given the current “social distancing” recommendations, organizations and their managers will need to offer many ways for employees to stay connected. Both managers and employees should also recognize that some individuals prefer more social interaction than others, but by supporting one another’s need for both formal and informal interaction, employees should feel that they are helping their colleagues through this difficult time. Managers should therefore set up regular conference calls to check-in and to allow co-workers to share concerns and best practices. Given the increased stress that many are feeling, it is also important to refrain from adding more work pressure during these conference calls, but instead to demonstrate care, concern and, when possible, optimism. Employees should be encouraged to reach out to one another and to continue their informal relationships as much as possible -- for example, by sending friendly texts and emails and replying quickly. Millennials often view their workplace as a source of professional contacts and friends, so maintaining interaction with coworkers will likely be particularly important for them in minimizing feelings of isolation.

Work-Family Balance – a Myth?

Although it was once believed that remote workers experience greater work-family balance, unfortunately the opposite is often true. Because it’s easier to switch between work and family, it becomes harder to set priorities, deal with unexpected interruptions, schedule work and family time, and shut off work pressures. While some remote workers appear to appreciate the ability to integrate work and family, my research shows that those who attempt to separate their work and family roles report the lowest levels of conflict. Thus, because work and family are inherently integrated through remote work, people are most effective in both realms if they lessen that integration and set clear times for work and family.

Therefore, remote workers and their managers must be aware of the potential for work-family conflicts that can result from the blending work and family domains. Organizations should educate remote workers on the need to establish boundaries between work and family,

and train these workers to resist temptations to do work during family time. In turn, managers and fellow employees must be trained to respect the work–family boundaries of remote workers and to not expect them to be “on call 24/7.” Additionally, since schools have closed and children are now participating in online learning, managers and co-workers need to be patient as employees who are parents develop schedules and routines that work for their entire household. This means some flexibility with due dates when possible and clearly communicating which work should be prioritized.

In addition, keeping work and family separate appears to be particularly important for male remote workers. Research has shown that men achieve greater work–family balance when they create clear boundaries between their work and family roles. While both men and women benefit from segmenting work and family roles, it is particularly important for men because blurring the lines can increase conflict and stress and lead to an over-commitment to work. For example, any time men take to attend to family needs during work leads them to feel the need to overcompensate at work for that “lost time.” Therefore, men may need to be commit to creating boundaries between their work and family roles as they transition to working remotely. Some advice offered by remote workers in my study included: having a separate office space, not working in pajamas in bed, dressing for work, starting and ending the work day by entering and exiting the home office at specific times, and maintaining strong discipline with work–family transitions.

Finally, as surrogates for their company or organization, managers play a vital role in the success of their remote workers. When necessary, it is important for managers to offer their employees the appropriate training and tools to transition to remote work. Additionally, managers can best contribute to the success of their employees by addressing feelings of isolation, setting clear goals and performance expectations, actively encouraging the segmentation of work and family, and offering frequent feedback and compliments. Given fears that remote work may stall one’s career, it is also important for managers to share employees’ accomplishments throughout the organization. To minimize stress and feelings of isolation during these times, it may also be worth considering how colleagues can continue to communicate informally. For example, some work groups are scheduling virtual lunches and coffee breaks to create a sense of camaraderie and

maintain informal communication. When employees feel that they can rely on their organizations, managers and colleagues despite being away from the office, a psychological anchor is provided that offers them a sense of belonging and optimism in these troubling times.