

# Working (and Staying Sane) at Home During the Pandemic



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When preparing to write this article, I plugged my laptop into my external monitor and, interestingly, the background wallpaper showed a remote island. I thought, how appropriate! All of us probably feel a little like islands floating uncertainly around in this weird pandemic ocean. Navigating this COVID nightmare is, well, a nightmare. If you're fortunate enough to still have your job (and I hope that you are!) and are working from home, whether you have always done so or are newly setting up your remote office, there are challenges to overcome.

But, to start, a few interesting statistics. With the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) social distancing guidelines,<sup>1</sup> many companies began instituting work-from-home policies for non-essential personnel. Willis Towers Watson, a global brokerage, released results from a survey conducted in mid-February 2020 that polled 158 national and multinational companies that employ nearly 1.5 million workers.<sup>2</sup> At that time, 46% of the organizations who responded were implementing remote work policies, and it's probable that that percentage has gone up significantly in the last several weeks. On the upside, working from home even just half the time can save you between \$2,500 and \$4,000 per year, primarily in travel, parking, and food savings. And, in regard to time saved, you can save about 11 days of work per year, depending on the length of your commute.<sup>3</sup> I think we can all agree that there are definite benefits to working remotely, even when you're forced to due to the world's circumstances.

## Tools

For those of you who worked from home prior to the pandemic, you can probably skip this part; however, in recent weeks, more and more companies are beginning to try out new tools to connect their employees. There are a variety of

video conferencing applications as well as other business platforms that have multiple connection functions such as video calling, chat, and file sharing, all in one tidy tool. In our current situation, where we're all cut off from friends and loved ones, even connecting with work colleagues can be a blessing. (Another fun statistic: Zoom increased their daily users from a measly 10 million to 200 million. Daily!)<sup>4</sup>

Think about the basics of what you need to do your job remotely. If all you need is a computer, plug in and get started! If there are other electronics or supplies you need, such as a printer or scanner, talk to your employer about either procuring one for your new digs or how to change procedures so you don't need to utilize tools you don't have. If your work involves files or other paper-based processes that can't be digitized, you may consider agreeing on a schedule with your colleagues in which only one of you visits the office at a time. Perhaps each of you can have one or two days a week in the office, or you go in the mornings while your colleague goes in the afternoons. If you do have to go into the office, please be sure to 1) maintain proper social distancing, 2) abide by all mandates and laws in your area, 3) clean up after yourself with disinfectant.

Now that the basics are handled, move on to what would make working from home easier and more comfortable. If you're working on a laptop now, invest in a Bluetooth mouse instead of using the built-in touchpad. It will help both in ergonomics and efficiency. Also consider an external monitor, which will broaden your digital workspace and give you room to spread out. You may also consider a new comfortable desk chair, an external hard drive to back up your precious output, a headset with a microphone to take calls, and noise-cancelling headphones because...well, you know.

## Actually Getting Work Done

Again, for those of you who already worked remotely before, the same rules apply, but it bears saying again: Designate a separate space used only during working hours. This might be simply one side of the kitchen table if you don't have a room for an office. I highly recommend avoiding the couch. While comfortable, you're likely to end up with back pain or an onset of unplanned napping. Regardless of what's going on in the world, it's imperative for all remote workers to

maintain separation between their working lives and their personal lives. This makes it easier for your family (or whomever you're sharing your isolation with) to know when you're "at the office." Additionally, it bears to reason that if you have a physical working space, this will assist in boosting your mindset and, presumably, your productivity.

When telecommuting, getting into the working frame of mind is much harder than when you're physically going into an office. It's very easy to let the sun wake you, roll out of bed, and start to work in your pajamas. Sounds comfy, right? But, and this isn't going to make me many friends, this isn't typically good for productivity. If you take a shower, brush your teeth, and get dressed (please don't get me wrong; I have absolutely no problem with dressing comfortably, but wear something you wouldn't be embarrassed to be seen in, even if you're not going anywhere), you're more likely to be productive. If you look like it's Saturday, you're going to act like it's Saturday.

Find a schedule that works. Whether you're all alone in your office space or you've got five kids running around in the background, a schedule is what will help you (and everyone else in your house) get things done without getting burned out. Closely evaluate your job responsibilities. Make a list (yay!) to determine priority and deadlines. Once you have your own needs ironed out, you can look outward to the schedules of your quarantine-mates, if applicable. If Suzy has a Zoom meeting with her first-grade teacher at 10:00am, build in a break for yourself to get her set up. Or, if your kids are older, plan to sit down with them either on Sunday, before the week begins, or each evening to discuss what they have going on each day and make a schedule together. Fun tip: Color-coding can be pretty and useful!

Stay connected with your colleagues. It's easy to feel rather adrift when working remotely, and even more so during this time of isolation. Be sure you're checking in with your colleagues. If you usually had a weekly in-person meeting at the office, schedule that as a phone or video conference. Talk to your supervisor and workmates to determine the best mode of communication. Whether you have a quick question or need to have a longer discussion, find out how to contact people. Would a phone call, an email, or, as I mentioned above, the use of a tool like Teams, WhatsApp, or Skype be most effective?

### Balance

I know you've heard it before, especially if you're a mother, but don't forget about taking care of yourself. While it sounds easy, it can be next to impossible to actually implement. Like

they'll tell you on any flight (remember those?), put your own oxygen mask on before helping others with theirs. Make sure you're getting enough sleep, healthy food, and physical activity. If you're used to going to the gym, find a way to exercise at home. There are an insane amount of tips and full-on workouts online, many for available for free. One thing that may be increasingly difficult in our current circumstances is finding simple quiet. Go outside for a few minutes, or hole yourself up in a room to allow your brain to recharge and focus.

Remember that you shouldn't fight against what you can't control. It's uselessly utilizing energy that could be put toward much more productive tasks. Break down your needs to what you *can* control. Start focusing on yourself, your family, your job. There's not much else pulling at you right now; the weekend parties have stopped, the stores are closed so your errands can wait. Take advantage of this slow-down to enjoy what's directly, physically around you. Doing this can both decrease your stress by 23% and increase your productivity by 31%.<sup>4</sup>

Keep in mind that we are all in this together. In an unprecedented (is anyone tired of that word yet?) turn of events, the literal *entire world* is dealing with this exact same thing, fighting for the same cause. This has *never* happened before in documented history. Regardless of where you and the people you're working with and for are located, we're all feeling the heat of this pandemic. Be kind and patient, both to yourself and to everyone else. Things may need to change, at least temporarily, to adjust. Deadlines may need extending, or explanations that there may be delays can be given. But remember that we're all in this together. Separately and six feet apart (at least).

### And, Failing All That

If you're still struggling, there's actually a free online class to learn "How to Win at Working from Home" taught by the CEO of [TellMeYourDreams.com](https://www.tellyourdreams.com).<sup>5</sup> It's an eight-week course, so be ready to settle in for the long haul, but it could help you improve productivity if you're having a hard time.

### Disclosure Statement

The author has no relationships or conflicts to disclose.

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