Working Remotely: A Perk or a Punishment?

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Editors’ Note: This article was written prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe our readers will find this article of interest as they transition to a remote working environment during this crisis; however, please disregard any suggestions that violate stay-at-home mandates in your area.

Close your eyes and imagine yourself sitting on the beach, toes dug in the sand and the sun warming you, or, if you prefer, imagine sitting by a roaring fire up in a mountain cabin. Are you comfortable? Now add a computer on your lap. Telecommuting can offer you the chance to work wherever you are or where you want to be. To some, this may sound like a dream come true, to others, a nightmare of drastic proportions. And the problem is, many people don’t know to which category they would truly belong, given the chance to work remotely.

Working remotely—that is, telecommuting, flexible working, working from home—is becoming more and more prevalent both in the United States and globally. According to the Gallup State of the American Workplace report, 43% of employees work away from their team members at least some of the time.1 Internationally, 70% of professionals telecommute at least one day a week, 53% for at least half the week.2 This trend is continuing in many different industries, from finance to education, and is increasingly prevalent in publishing. In fact, some would argue that it’s a part of our sociological history. Early humans didn’t stray far from their homes to work. Homo ergaster, literally the “working man,” used advanced tools, which were found fossilized close to their dwelling places.3 And now, with technology at our fingertips, we can follow in the footsteps of our ancestors.

The pros and cons have been discussed at length by all manner of people, but the how hasn’t really been explored in depth. Specifically, how to work remotely without going off the rails. For some, it’s easy to stay focused and motivated, to not leave the house for days. Whatever you have going on in your personal life, working from home affords the tendency to stay there. And as good as it can feel to all those introverts out there, it’s not healthy, emotionally or physically, to stay home for days on end. On the opposite side of the spectrum, it can also be tough for some people to stay focused long enough to get a full day’s work in, especially when there’s not the potentiality of your boss checking in to see if you’re at your desk. There are so many “to-dos” calling; it wouldn’t take too long to run out and get some of them done...and then, three hours later you’re still not back in front of your computer.

Regardless of which category you might fall into, I think the best way to proceed is with a happy medium. Think Goldilocks! Obviously, in order to be productive and get your jobs done, we can’t take advantage of the situation and be off gallivanting (or running errands) all day. But, for the sake of our sanity, we can’t be stuck in front of the computer all the live-long day either. The best way to “Goldilocks it” is to first understand your work priorities. If you need to, make a list and/or a schedule. What are the expectations of your job? Do you have daily tasks that have to be completed by a certain time? What are the deadlines you have to keep in mind? Once you have a clear idea of these expectations and priorities, you can then move forward with a schedule that works for you. And your employer.

Personally, I am what I call a “Continuous Worker.” I would prefer to just keep working. If I take too long a break, I lose my momentum, and it’s amazingly difficult to get back into the swing of things. I found that short two- to five-minute breaks every hour or two are best for the Continuous Worker. A specific tip I can share is to use a timer. My smart watch has a function that will buzz at me each hour to tell me to take 250 steps. When I feel that buzz, I’ll hop up and run up and down the stairs to hit my 250 steps. You could also walk around your house, or go outside if you’re lucky enough to be in a warm climate, or even jog in place. I think the break from work and staring at a screen in addition to the physical...
activity jump starts your brain and all those synapses fire, waking you up. Then, when you sit back down at the computer, the good ol’ juices are flowing and you can get back down to business.

If you are instead a Sporadic Worker, someone who does their best work in short bursts and can’t hold their attention on a task for too long, it might be more beneficial to you to work in shorter intervals. Maybe every 30 minutes take a brief break to stand up, stretch, take a walk around the house. Switching tasks more often may work for you as well. Don’t work on a project for longer than 20 or 30 minutes. If you’re using this method, you’ll have to keep a closer eye on deadlines, though. Make sure you give yourself enough time to break up those tasks to ensure they’re done by the deadline.

It is incredibly essential to set timing boundaries. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, full-time workers work an average of 8.5 hours each workday and 5.39 hours each weekend day.\(^4\) That’s 53.28 hours a week, or 32% of your entire week. Considering Americans get an average of 6.8 hours of sleep each night,\(^5\) that means we’re spending 44% of our waking hours working. Regardless of whether your job is a 9-to-5 schedule or something else, no job is 24 hours, 7 days a week. On your off time, leave the computer off, and don’t touch it! It’s so easy to sneak work in when you’re supposed to be off, especially when you work from home. I know I don’t have to tell you that this isn’t healthy. Your brain and your well-being depend on off time. Be sure you’re giving yourself that extended break to do what you need to and want to do.

Now that the more abstract idea of time management is out of the way, it’s time to talk about the concrete idea of your working environment. Probably one of the most important things when you work remotely is to carve out a space to work. A physical space to call your very own. When you are in said space, you are working. Any accompanying materials you need to do your job are in this space, and your computer stays in this space (unless you’re traveling, of course). That means no bringing work to the couch in front of the television on your off time. Just like we need breaks during the day, it’s imperative that we take time in the evenings and weekends (or whenever the longer breaks of your work schedule are) to recharge. Take time for yourself and your family and friends. If you don’t have a designated space, it’s just too easy to fall into the bad habit of pulling your computer onto your lap during what’s supposed to be your off time.

Having specific work space will also be an important deterrnet to one of the most difficult barriers to working remotely. I’m referring to that irritating tendency for others to think that because you’re home, you’re not really working. It’s difficult for your family or friends, especially those who have office jobs, to realize you also have a job and responsibilities; and they try to entice you out of your house during your working hours, distracting you from getting your job done. Those people who think, “oh you’re at home, so you can...” run this or that errand or go out to a long lunch, or, even worse, you can watch the kids while you work. This perception is incredibly hard to overcome in some cases. Especially that last situation. The best way to handle this is to be direct and clear that no, you are working, and it’s just like going to an office without the hazards and irritations of a commute. Explain this to the offender, and, simply, don’t give in. And that separate, designated work space can really help. Your family should know that whenever you are in that space, you are working and unavailable.

Another difficulty is the potential for feeling isolated. Especially for those extroverts who like being around people. One solution can be the use of the increasingly popular shared offices. You can rent space in an office building where others who telecommute share working space. Depending on the arrangement, there can be shared equipment, utilities, receptionists, and even refreshments. The downside to this is that there is an added cost. On a slightly smaller (and cheaper) scale, working a few hours at the local coffee house can make you feel a little less isolated. Just make sure they have free, secure wifi, and that you take advantage of being present.

Those who work remotely part of the time, or whose colleagues usually go into the office, can experience feelings of being left out or missing out. To answer this challenge, try to be as “present” as you can be; attend meetings by phone, interact with colleagues via email, and make sure your supervisor is aware of any concerns you may have along these lines. Those in the office should ensure their remote workers are included in meetings and other office activities. Using an internal chat app or having video conferences can help remote employees stay connected. And, especially if you are far removed geographically from the office, you can request once- or twice-a-year trips to come into the office to have face-to-face interactions with your colleagues.

Despite all of these challenges, working remotely can be quite a boon. You can dress comfortably, save wear and tear on your car, and save time in general by shortening your commute to a simple walk down the hall or a flight of stairs. You can have that scenario of working on the beach or in a mountain cabin or wherever your happy place is. If you can
learn to manage your time and space appropriately, working from home can definitely be a reality!

References

Ira Salkin Service Award

This year, reflective of the passionate commitment of our ISMTE membership, the Ira Salkin Award transitions from a Scholarship Award to a Service Award.

The goal of this transition is to capture the dynamic nature of ISMTE and to recognize its members for outstanding service to the Society. The ISMTE Board selects members who have exhibited enthusiasm for and commitment to the Society and its mission to connect, educate, and provide resources for professionals who are passionate about the operations of peer-reviewed publications. Ira Salkin Awardees should have a history of dedicated service to ISMTE demonstrated by active participation such as involvement at the committee level, serving as a committee chair, writing for EON, or presenting at conferences, workshops, or webinars. Criteria for the award are found here.

This award is named in honor of Ira Salkin, who was one of the founding members of ISMTE and sadly passed away in 2016. His goal was to ensure editorial office professionals are educated and vigilant in matters of publishing ethics.

Awards Open for Nomination

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We are now accepting nominations for the 2020 International Society of Managing and Technical Editors Awards. Celebrating success and editorial achievements, these annual awards provide an opportunity for businesses, organizations, and individuals to be recognized. This year, nominations are invited for three categories and may be submitted by members or nonmembers of ISMTE. The range of awards is designed to be accessible to all members.

Nominations are easy. Learn more about each award and nominate a current member here. The deadline for Awards Nominations is June 1, 2020.