Working from Home

Human Resources

Michigan Tech

A MESSAGE FROM HUMAN RESOURCES

Now that many of our faculty and staff are working from home, I'd like to make sure that all employees feel safe and productive in their new spaces. We have gathered some helpful hints and tips for you to consider while working at home. Stay Safe!

Renee Hiller

Director of Human Resources, SPHR

TIPS FOR WORK-FROM-HOME

Trips to the coffee maker, the water cooler, or in-person meetings typically break up your day at the office, and it's important to keep up similar routines at home. Our main recommendation is to keep up your routine just as you would if going into an office. Doing all the things you do in the morning — brushing your teeth, showering, eating breakfast, etc. — will help you embrace the change and stay focused.

Here are a few other work-from-home tips from some of our Zoomies:

Get dressed: Get dressed from head to toe. You should put on a shirt or outfit you'd normally wear to the office work and not the ratty old shirt you'd wear to clean your garage.

Take 5 regularly: Just like the office, proactively take breaks every hour to avoid burnout. Take the dog for an extra walk (your dog will love it!), put in that load of laundry, or spend 15 minutes outside with the kids (they'll love it, too!).

Stretch! Stop your video and stretch yourself a little bit every hour. Take a lap around the kitchen in between calls or use a lacrosse ball or massager on your back to stave off the kinks. Or make it more fun and use a virtual video workout background and get your reps in during a meeting!

Communicate your availability: Publish your calendar so others can see it and quickly understand your commitment. You can block off time for work on projects, set reminders for important tasks, and even reserve a time to get dinner started. You can also toggle your Zoom Chat status to busy when you need to be heads-down on a project.

Eliminate distractions: Shut the door to give yourself some privacy and separation, especially at home. Even hanging a curtain to separate your space can help. You'll also want to close tabs and pause notifications so you're not tempted to constantly check social media. Even setting a 10-minute meeting or two throughout your day to specifically check your feeds can give you a break and something to look forward to.

But avoid isolation & loneliness: Many people need that personal contact with their team, so it's helpful to have daily team stand-ups and check-ins. You can even set up a "group lunch" with your colleagues over Zoom. Talk live or disable the audio and chat with the group or 1-on-1 privately, whatever helps you get the conversation and connection you need.

WORKING FROM HOME

For Faculty

1. Be real. Humanize yourself. We may be a STEM school, but **we're not robots**. Show them you're a real person experiencing a vast range of emotions about adjusting to this new lifestyle. A minute or two sharing your work-from-home experience, perhaps with a little humor sprinkled in, can go a long way.
2. **Check in**. Recent NIA-supported research has shown that long-term social isolation and loneliness have an impact on cognitive abilities and other health issues. Send individual emails opening a line of conversation, and conduct extra office hours via Zoom.
3. Encourage students to spend time **reflecting on their needs** for a few minutes each day. Offer extra credit or praise for students who post or share a to-do list or schedule. Share examples of how your own routine has changed since the shift to online.
4. **Use hopeful and optimistic language**. Instead of commiserating over how much it sucks to revamp your class mid-semester, frame the change in words like "we have the opportunity to learn together/try online learning/undergo new challenges." Use forward-thinking language like, "In the fall, when we're back on campus…" or "In your job/internship/co-op, these adaptive skills will be valuable."
5. Create ways for **students to connect with each other**. Remember, they may have left behind their roommates, friends, study spaces, church groups and student orgs. That's a lot to give up all at once. Encourage students in your class to connect using Slack or WhatsApp. It can be nerve-wracking to ask someone for their phone number, help students make the jump by leading the way for these kinds of connections.
6. Don't forget that students learn in many different ways. Ask for regular student feedback on how well they're learning and what resources they need. Don't forget, we have a vast range of learners, from those who have excelled at online learning in the past, to students with a learning disability who might struggle reading a webpage that's not user-friendly. Check in with the CTL to get ideas on how to **make your content accessible** to students of all learning abilities. #UniversalDesign
7. Tell students **mental health is key.** Connect students with resources to help support them. Counseling Services is now offering telecounseling for in-state students, and case management (help finding a new provider) for out-of-state students. Wellness is offering daily tips and suggestions on how to maintain a balanced life through the rest of this semester (@mtu.wellness). Report a Concern to the Dean of Students Office if you notice students struggling academically or emotionally.
8. Don't ignore why we're all in this boat. Take a few moments to **acknowledge** the mental health landscape we're in; there's a lot of fear and anxiety about COVID-19. Remind your students to check mtu.edu/covid-19 to connect to reliable resources.

9. **Continue to challenge and support** your students. Let's face it, even the most motivated students are likely to struggle with online learning. Keep lessons simple, refer back to lessons that you shared together in class earlier this semester.

10. Most importantly, **ASK THEM what they need**. Now's the time to open those lines of communication. Students are often afraid to ask, or don't even realize that they should ask for help in times of need. After years of establishing independence as a teenager, they need help with the transition to adulthood and building a support network. When you can, offer choices to your students: flexible deadlines, multiple options for demonstrating mastery of material (test, slideshow, video, etc.).

As much as this has become a wrinkle in our plans for this semester, inevitably, we'll remember how we persevered through a difficult time, systems will become more efficient and new technologies and ways of life will be invented. Let's be the people who pull together and support each other, remembering our core values of **#tenacity** and **#community**, during this unprecedented time.

Instructor Check-List

_ Email students to connect "I'm here for you"

_ Set up ways for students to connect with each other using Canvas, WhatsApp, Slack or other

_ Ask students what they need for success (do this now and again in 2 weeks)

_ Share resources for help (Counseling Services, Wellness social media, Learning Centers, Dean of Students)

_ Be human. Share stories about your transition to online.

_ Use positive language (avoid lamenting about the current situation)

_ Point out student/class successes - i.e. all assignments turned in on time, successful first Zoom lecture, etc.

_ Give students flexibility and choice when you're able - due dates, type of assignment, etc.

_ Acknowledge increase stressed and anxiety (and redirect to resources)

_ Assume students won't always have access to reliable internet for streaming video, provide text options and   slide notes whenever possible

5 Tips for Staying Productive and Mentally Healthy While You're Working From Home

By: Patrick Lucas Austin, Time Magazine

With the [spread of the novel coronavirus](#) affecting everything from international travel to the availability of hand sanitizer, mitigating COVID-19 in the United States has become a growing concern. That's why many companies are mandating or recommending that as many employees as possible work remotely until the virus can be slowed.

Plenty of people fantasize about working from the comfort of their own home, foregoing their commute in favor of more sleep, family or exercise time. But working remotely is a double-edge sword — sure, you get to stay home, but it can be harder to focus on actually working. Whether it's a pile of laundry that suddenly looks more appealing than your bosses' to-do list, or a quick three-hour binge of that one Netflix show you've been dying to watch, staying productive at home can take a little extra effort. Plus, the isolation can quickly become a downer for those used to socializing at work. And some people, of course, would prefer to stay in the office.

So, first thing's first: you should probably sit up straight, eat some breakfast, and put on some pants. How else can you stay focused on the job and mentally healthy while working remotely? Here are four tips from work-from-home veterans and workplace experts.

Location, Location, Location

Try to find yourself a dedicated and comfortable spot to work that you can associate with your job and leave when you're off the clock — that means get off the couch, and definitely out of bed.

"It definitely helps if you have a dedicated space for working from home," says remote worker Matt Haughey, creator of the long-running community weblog MetaFilter, and writer for Slack. "I started doing this kind of work sitting at a desk in the middle of my living room of a small San Francisco apartment 20 years ago, and it was a pain to stay on task and not get interrupted."

Since then, Haughey has set up a dedicated home office where he can close the door and shut out distractions. He has also gone to local libraries to take advantage of their free Wi-Fi — but given that today's work from home recommendations are meant to prevent spreading COVID-19, heading out into a public place is likely counterproductive.

Find a Buddy

You might find it easier to be productive without your most chatty coworkers constantly buzzing in your ear. But social interactions — even with coworkers — can alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness. Durham University's Dr. Thuy-vy Nguyen, who studies the effects of solitude, thinks the psychological effects of working remotely for extended periods is often overlooked or ignored, despite it being an essential factor in our mental well-being and team bonding.

"We're used to social interaction," she says. "It facilitates cooperation and closeness."

To help fill the socializing gap while working remotely, Nguyen recommends finding a colleague you can hit up when you're feeling the need to chat with

someone. Alternatively, buddy up with a friend who works elsewhere and is going through the same experience. Hopping on a social video call instead of Slack or text isn't a bad idea, either.

Have a Plan

Nguyen also recommends that, when working alone, you should keep a more structured daily schedule than usual.

"Usually our time and the structure of our day are influenced by other people," she says. "You're going to experience your day as lacking the normal structures that you usually have. People might have a hard time dealing with it. So one of the things that we found in our trying to understand solitude, is that time spent alone is better if it's structured."

For Haughey, his schedule includes multiple breaks throughout the day, either to play with his dog or take a long walk around the neighborhood and grab the day's mail.

Think About How You're Communicating

Haughey says it's important to go beyond email and use other digital tools that can better replicate the in-person office experience and provide for clear communication.

"There will be a sense of isolation of course, and it depends on how well your team communicates, or how much they're willing to amp up communication using other tools besides face-to-face conversations," he says. He communicates with his team using chat apps like Slack and videoconferencing services like Zoom. "Screen-sharing is another killer aspect of getting people on the same page," he adds. "If I'm in a meeting to give feedback, chances are the host is sharing their screen as well so we're all looking at the same thing as we toss ideas around."

Harvard Business School's Prithwiraj "Raj" Choudhury, who studies remote work and the relationships between geography and productivity, found an interesting solution to boosting camaraderie among remote workers: pizza parties. While researching remote work habits at the U.S. Patent Office — which implemented a more robust "work from anywhere" policy in 2011 — Choudhury discovered a manager who hosted weekly lunches via videoconferencing.

"She would order the exact same pizza to be delivered at the same time so the team would have that bonding experience and still feel like a team," says Choudhury. "This is the future of work, so we cannot just keep doing stuff in the old familiar ways, we have to create new processes."

Furthermore, better communication while remote can help maintain your relationship with your colleagues, managers, and direct reports. It's also important for managers to encourage employees to share their opinions or concerns about a particular project so they don't feel like they're being dismissed just because they're not in the same room.

Remember Everyone Works Differently

Managers should remember that not every employee actually wants to work from home, a shift that can be stressful for some. As companies increasingly mandate that many employees must work from home during the coronavirus outbreak, it's key they communicate as much as possible and help employees struggling with the change, says Nguyen.

"If management actually forces people to stay at home, then that would add another layer of stress," she says. "Giving employees as much information as possible can ease the burden caused by the disruption."

8 Tips To Make Working From Home Work For You

Here are some pro-tips for working remotely, possibly for an extended period of time.

1. Get your technology in order.

THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

[Laundry Between Emails: Working From Home Goes Viral In The Time Of Coronavirus](#)

Technology is what enables remote work in the first place.

So 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 employer 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 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.

Coronavirus And Parenting: What You Need To Know Now

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.

If you are working from home with kids in tow, 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).
One note on play dates, though, since school closures are designed to limit contact among kids. Our *Life Kit* parenting hosts, Anya Kamenetz and Cory Turner, reported on managing parenting in the time of coronavirus, and cite this advice from Maria Litvinova, a scholar who has published several papers on school closures in epidemics:
"If the school is closed for a certain amount of time, even if it's long and difficult for parents to organize the care, it's important that they do not regroup children again because the effect of the school closure will be much less."

Families across the country are getting very creative with virtual play dates using video chat as well as platforms like Roblox, which allows kids to chat while playing a video game together.
Also, 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.

Here are more tips on managing parenting in the time of coronavirus, including ideas for working from home with little ones.

4. Manage expectations.

It's wise to have a discussion with your boss 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 Slack 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 overcommunicate, 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?

8. Do what you can; discuss when you can't.
Before the spread of the coronavirus, roughly half of American workers were doing at least some telework.   (Source: NPR News:Special Series Life Kit)

WORKING SAFELY AT HOME

Trips and falls are a common home injury. They can be avoided by keeping walkways clear. Power cords across walking paths are often the culprit and can be a trip hazard.

1 Be aware of your extension/power cords to minimize tripping hazards.

Keep work areas clean and uncluttered. Workers should make it a habit to clean off their workstation at the end of the workday to help clear clutter as well as clear their mind and make the mental shift away from working.

Computer equipment should be plugged into a surge protector and cords need to be in good condition. Don't overload electrical outlets or daisy-chain electrical cords together. Bad electrical practices can cause a fire.

2 Be careful not to overload electrical outlets to avoid fire risk.

There may be more than one person working in the home and shared workspaces can lead to injury. Try to give each worker a bit of their own space and a way to have their cords outside of the path of travel.

Consider safe lifting when making room in the home and setting up workstations.

Make sure standard life safety is taken care of – smoke alarms, fire extinguishers and carbon monoxide detectors need to be ready to use.

While working, use a secure Wi-Fi connection and company VPN access to keep sensitive data from prying eyes.

3 Keep your laptop and equipment in a secure place after hours that can be protected from damage or theft.

Phishing and other cybersecurity schemes are on the rise due to the pandemic. Workers can be distracted by the changing environment and may relax their thinking about cybersecurity when not sitting in the office.

Ergonomics Tips

Workers can set up an ergonomic home workstation following these tips:

4 Use a sturdy chair that can be adjusted. Refrain from sitting on very soft couches and chairs as they do not support the body evenly during extended sitting.

6 Place a small pillow behind your lower back while sitting to maintain the natural curve of your spine.

5 Adjust seating height, so your forearms are parallel to the floor when typing.

7 Use an external mouse and place objects — such as your phone, mouse, and printed materials — close to your body to minimize reaching.

Refrain from sitting on very soft couches; they do not support the body evenly during extended sitting.

8 Place your feet entirely on the floor.

Phone conversations are a great time to stand and walk about. Use an external mouse to promote more neutral wrist postures.

9 Alternate between sitting and standing throughout the day (about every hour) to reduce excessive stress on the lower back and legs while sitting.

10 Take short micro-breaks (approximately two minutes in length) every hour to stretch and move your body.

HEALTHY HABITS

- ♬ A daily calendar with a standard start and end time can help program in balance to the day and aid in productivity. Breaks throughout the day are important too. Workers should try to set up in a distraction free space, as much as they can, so that you are able to focus on work.
- ♬ Make an effort to get out of the house at least once a day – take a walk, get some air, stretch muscles.
- ♬ Stay hydrated and stock the kitchen with healthy snacks.
- ♬ Workers should prepare for the day as if they're going to the office. The morning routine, like a shower and getting dressed signals the mind to head to work.
- ♬ Communication is especially important. Connecting with others helps reduce feeling isolated, especially for those who are used to frequent face-to-face conversations. Social distancing measures can add more stress with workers not being able to connect with others socially outside of work.

Marsh statistic show regular telecommuting has increased by 140% since 2005 and that roughly half of U.S. employers hold jobs that are compatible with at least partial telework. That number is set to increase regardless of capabilities, as the threat of coronavirus continues to escalate, according to experts.

In non-pandemic times, worker injuries happen at work and are quite straightforward – they are usually workers' compensation claims. When the workplace becomes worker's homes, the claims determination can get complicated. While the site may differ, the exposure to liability is generally the same as if the worker was working on site. The injuries that happen when there is a fall over a computer cord at an office can be the same as a fall over a computer cord at home

Potential increase in claims for:

- ♬ back strain
- ♬ traumatic injuries from falls
- ♬ neck and shoulder strain
- ♬ headaches and eye strain

With or without a pandemic, work-at-home is becoming more common, and for many employers and workers, it comes as a significant change. Be patient while navigating this new world of work and keep the communication lines open to take care of each other. Periodically check in on co-workers wellbeing, during team meetings or on an individual basis. Now, more than ever, the team needs support.