15 Tips for Working at Home

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If you're new to the work-from-home lifestyle, you'll need to change some of your habits and routines to make working from home a success.

Everyone who works remotely has to figure out when to work, where to work, and how to create boundaries between work and personal life. Working remotely, especially when working from home most of the time, means figuring out these issues and others. Here are tips for leading a better and more productive remote-working life.

1. **Maintain Regular Hours**

Set a schedule, and stick to it...most of the time. Having clear guidelines for when to work and when to call it a day helps many remote workers maintain work-life balance. That said, one of the benefits of remote work is flexibility, and sometimes you need to extend your day or start early to accommodate someone else's schedule. When you do, be sure to wrap up earlier than usual or sleep in a bit the next morning to make up for it.

Figure out what times of day you're most productive versus when you are more likely to slack off. You can use that information to your advantage by reserving your hours of high focus for your most important tasks.

2. **Create a Morning Routine**

Deciding you'll sit down at your desk and start work at a certain time is one thing. Creating a routine that guides you into the chair is another. What in your morning routine indicates you're about to start work? It might be making a cup of coffee. It might be returning home after a jog. It might be getting dressed (wearing pajama pants to work is a perk for some, but a bad strategy for others). A routine can be more powerful than a clock at helping you get started each day. Not everyone who works from home follows a set nine-to-five schedule. You might have a "getting started" routine at another time of day.

3. **Set Ground Rules with the People in Your Space**

Set ground rules with other people in your home or who share your space for when you work. If you have children who are home, they need clear rules about what they can and cannot do during that time.
4. Get Clear about Expectations from your Supervisor

When working remotely, the need to be organized, transparent and on the same page with your supervisor and your teammates becomes even more important.

Ask what form of communication they prefer – Email, phone call, text, Skype chat, weekly check-in meetings, team meetings, etc. Find out how general communication should happen when you have questions or are in need help. Also, find out how to escalate more urgent issues, as that may require a phone call or different mode of communication than the typical conversation.

Ask about work hours, meetings, assignments and deadlines – Does your team need to make sure you are all working at the same time? Do you need to overlap your workhours with your supervisors for a portion of the day? How much flexibility do you have with your hours? What meetings are you expected to attend and how? These are all questions you should ask so there is no miscommunication about what’s expected of you as you work remotely. An effective practice is to have scheduled check-ins with your supervisor and/or team to stay connected and avoid misunderstandings and assumptions.

5. Schedule Breaks

Give yourself adequate time during the day to walk away from the computer screen and phone. A lunch break and two 15-minute breaks are important to keep in mind as you plan your work for the day. Plan for them and take them. It’s important mentally and physically as you need to stand, stretch and walk around throughout the day in the same way you would in the office.

6. Don’t Hesitate to Ask for What You Need

It’s extremely important to set precedents early that you will ask for what you need to get your job done comfortably. Ask for what you need within reason. This could mean that you need more information or access to systems or files. Communicate these needs to your supervisor to determine what they can do to assist you. You could be working from home for weeks on end and you should be comfortable, and productive.

7. Keep a Dedicated Office Space

Dedicate a desk or table space for work use. Make sure it is close to a power source for your computer and cell phone, or near your home phone if preferred. It should be a space that is quiet and free from distraction, for example, not in front of a TV. Make sure you gather all the office supplies you will need to perform your work and keep them in that space so you are prepared to work effectively each day. If you do not have a home office or dedicated area and are using a shared space in your home such as the dining room, part of your routine can be setting up your work area as you begin your workday and then clearing it off and putting your things away at the end of your day. This can help ensure that you don’t feel overwhelmed by the presence of work during non-working hours.
8. Use the VPN and Determine How to Share Files and Info with Teammates

It is important to use a VPN whenever you're connected to a network that you don't control. UB has our own VPN that off-site employees need to access certain servers or websites that store information meant only for internal use. In any case, it's a good idea to get into the habit of leaving your VPN connected as often as possible because it's always safer to have it on than not. You may choose to use UB Box to share files and collaborate with colleagues, especially if you have trouble accessing common drives on the UB network where your team normally shares files. Be cautious of what type of information you are sharing via email, as it is prohibited to share Personally Identifiable information or PI (like SSN, DOB, etc.) via email.

9. Socialize With Colleagues

Loneliness, disconnect, and isolation are common problems in remote work life, especially for extroverts who need to be interacting routinely with colleagues. It's important to figure out how much interaction you need to feel connected and included. Even if you're highly introverted and don't like socializing, give the interactive experiences, like a WebEx or Zoom meeting, a try so that you're familiar with them if you ever decide you want to initiate collaboration using those tools yourself.

10. "Show Up" to Meetings and Be Heard

Certainly, you'll take part in video conferences and conference calls, but it's a good idea to attend optional meetings sometimes, too. Be sure to speak up during the meeting so everyone knows you're on the call. A simple, "Hey Everyone or Thanks, everyone. Bye!" at the opening or close of a meeting will go a long way toward making your presence known. Try asking questions for clarification or commenting on someone else’s idea to demonstrate you are actively listening.

11. Take Sick Days

When you're not well, take the sick time you need. Keep in mind that sometimes it's best to rest and get better so that you can be your best self in the long term. You must communicate that you are taking sick time to your supervisor.

12. Look for Training Opportunities

When you're not in an office with your fellow employees, you might miss those training and skills development courses that are taught in person. You should search out online training courses that can benefit your job performance. This is a great opportunity to learn something useful. Speak up and make sure you're included in any training offered. UB HR will be offering several virtual training options per week. Look for announcements about these programs on the HR website.
In addition you can request virtual career coaching or performance support if you need it to help you be effective and productive during this time. This is offered by the Organizational Development and Effectiveness department by emailing training@buffalo.edu.

13. Be Positive

Succinct and clear messages are great, but less face time with people, the less they may know how to interpret your tone in writing. When you work remotely full-time, you must be positive, to the point where it may feel like you’re being overly positive. So embrace the exclamation point! Find your favorite smile emoji. You’re going to need them. Try to infuse some fun into your interactions with colleagues. One group on campus reported showing their pets or kids’ faces at the start of their WebEx meetings sometimes. You could offer a short tour of the room you are working in or show what you made for lunch if it’s something you enjoy.

14. Don’t Be Too Hard on Yourself

The most successful remote employees have a reputation for being extremely disciplined. Some of us are new to this remote concept and will get better over time. It takes serious focus to do any full-time office job from an unconventional space. That said, everyone lets their attention drift sometimes. If you find yourself working one minute and looking at Facebook the next, don’t reprimand yourself too harshly. Instead, remember that this happens in the office setting too. Cut yourself some slack, then get back to work. Take notice of what distracts you most, and try to eliminate that distraction going forward. It takes time to find the best approach. Ask colleagues how they stay focused and avoid distraction. You may get some helpful hints and ideas.

15. End Your Day with a Routine

Just as you should start your day with a routine, create a habit that signals the close of the workday. It might be a sign off on your messaging app, an evening dog walk, or a 6 p.m. yoga video. Something as simple as shutting down your computer and turning on a favorite podcast will do. Whatever you choose, do it consistently to mark the end of working hours so work time doesn’t end up bleeding into after work activity time. It’s important to make the distinction and avoid overworking.

Make It Personal

Take these tips and make these work for you within your own situation. Perhaps, all these tips won’t work for you, but implement those that will make you most productive. Reach out to colleagues, your supervisor and/or UB HR for support.