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JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

I've Worked From Home for 22 Years. Here's What I've Learned.

The rules change when you move from an office to your spare room. Here's how to be both productive and healthy.

By Alexandra Samuel

Updated March 29, 2020 10:04 pm ET

How do you balance productivity with health and well-being when you're working from home, rather than at the office?

It is a question many people are now grappling with for the first time, as Covid-19 closes many workplaces and sends people into the relative isolation of the home office. But in our house, it is business as usual: I've worked from home for the most of the past 22 years, and for the past four, my husband and I have worked from home together. (And we still like each other!)

But I'll be honest: The first time I found myself working from home, in my mid-20s, I had a tough time. And since then, to make sure I don't sink into any more funks, I've been very conscientious about staying connected to the outside world, balancing my productivity with what's good for my mental health.

That is more challenging for me now, just as it is for everyone else: I really miss the coffee shop where I usually spend at least three workdays a week. But it is possible, because I already have some basic habits in place that ensure home-based work doesn't compromise my well-being.

Here are my secrets:

Let go of the eight-hour day

If you're working in an office, much of your eight-hour "workday" is made up of meetings in which you're mostly listening, in addition to water-cooler chat, collegial conversations and random interruptions. When I've worked at an office, I've considered it a good day if I get 4 hours of decent work time.

Since my solo workdays are uninterrupted, I can get more done in 5 hours than I'd accomplish in 8 hours at the office. Conversely, if I consistently work more than 5 or 6 hours at a stretch, I can get really burned out and isolated.

So I try not to get hung up on whether the clock on the wall says 5 p.m.; my workday ends when I've completed the work I need to get done, and if I reach my limit or get restless before then, I take an extended break or get outside for a walk.

I also try to book in video or phone calls to make sure I get human interaction. On days when I don't have many business calls, I try to call at least one friend or family member in the midafternoon, when my productivity starts to flag. If I have brainless tasks like clearing out my inbox or invoicing clients, I take care of that later in the evening, after I've had a chance to refresh and interact with some humans.

Choose three things a day

When you aren't using the business day to decide when work starts and ends, you need some other structure that lets you know when you've put in a day's work. So I like to pick my top three priorities for each day, and share those three commitments with a colleague (or group of colleagues) early in the day, via chat or email, so I have a sense of accountability for what I get done. I start my day by jotting down major items like: Create the spreadsheet with the list of all the variables for our data project; write first draft of remote-work story; send all outstanding invoices.

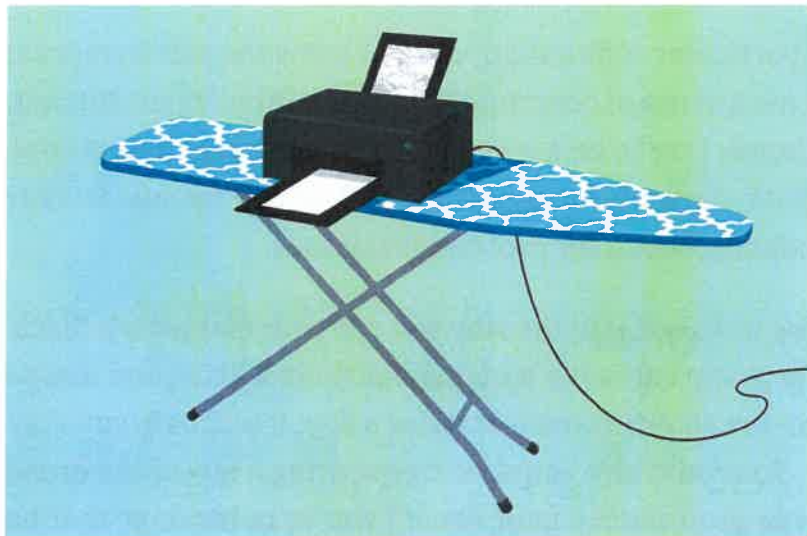
Sure, you'll have other emails to address or calls to answer, but those three big things will be the center of your day, and you'll fit the other stuff in around the edges. At the end of the day, share your accomplishments (even if only one or zero out of three) with the colleagues you're using as accountability partners. They don't have to be people you work with; they can be friends who commit to this practice so you all stay sane while working from home. This won't only help you focus your days, but will give you a sense of community and support for your daily work effort.

Choose a new time-management system

If you're going to enjoy the advantages of letting go of the eight-hour day, you need a different way of managing your time and ensuring you're working at an appropriate pace.

Your daily "three things" can be part of that system, but it is also helpful to set up some other structures to help you see where your time goes. The productivity expert Mike Vardy came up with the term "time theming" to describe the idea of committing certain days, times or weeks to specific tasks or types of tasks; you can create a separate "time theming" calendar inside your calendar app, and use that to plan and visualize which parts of the day or week you're going to spend on different types of work.

It also can be very useful to install a time tracker like Timing.app or ManicTime on your computer, which runs in the background and lets you see where your time has gone. You can even build simple rules so that you get visual reports that break your time down into productive vs. unproductive time. Take a look at how you've used your time, either once a day or once a week, and it will help you find an appropriate pace that preserves both your productivity and your sanity.



At home, there is more flexibility to work according to your natural energy cycles.

PHOTO: JON KRAUSE

Respect and work with your natural energy cycles

When you're working in an office, you have to show up and put in a regular day's work whether you're bursting with energy or burned-out and in desperate need of a break. When you're working from home, you have more flexibility to work with these natural cycles—as long as you don't let them rattle you.

I used to freak out whenever I hit a solo work slump, like the day or week after a big project or a vacation, when I just couldn't focus or get much done. During these crisis times, slumps are a little less predictable: Some mornings I wake up really worried, and just can't focus, but one day this week I went into overdrive, pulled my first all-nighter in a decade, and exhausted myself for the next day.

Now I've learned to accept these downturns, so instead of worrying that they mean I'll never again get anything done, I use these natural ebbs to take care of personal tasks (booking a whole bunch of catch-up calls for the day after I finish a big piece of work, or using a listless day to cook a whole bunch of meals for our freezer). Or I use them to take care of those work projects I never have time for when I'm on deadline, like updating my email filters or reorganizing my files. I find these organizing tasks help clear my mind and get me back into the groove of work, so it is easier to get back into the flow of my primary responsibilities.

Of course, there are practical reasons why you may not be able to just go offline for a day or even an entire afternoon. What you *can* do is plan on tackling most of those emails and messages during the windows when you're in full-on work mode, and then tack on a couple of short surgical strikes at other times in the day or evening, to handle time-sensitive messages that can't wait for your next work window.

Be a regular

Until recently, I was a regular at one particular coffee shop, where I know the cafe owners and enough of my fellow regulars to give me a sense of community and a little collegial chitchat. Now that I'm working entirely from home, I try to be a regular in a few different online contexts: Facebook groups, Twitter lists and Slack channels for people in my field and for solo workers, so I have a sense of collegiality and a sounding board for professional issues.

Even if you've previously been sparing or surgical in the way you use your company's Slack or Teams conversations, now is the time to start actually hanging out there a little, and maybe even commit to joining in the just-for-fun channels once or twice a day; it will help you stay more connected to your larger team. You could also consider frequenting a few of the broader online communities in your industry or professional field, even if you've never done that before; it may be a while before you can go to a trade show or conference, and this will help you build or sustain comparable relationships online.

“Seeing” the same people in the same context, day in and day out, provides a vital sense of continuity and community, and makes it possible to dive deeper, into more interesting conversations, because we aren't starting from square one each day. Those networks are more important than ever now, so I stay logged into several different Slack workspaces and even leave the dreaded notifications turned on!

Yes, it is a little distracting, but hearing from clients and colleagues in real time helps me feel like I'm still part of a larger workplace and professional community.

Take time to reconnect

Whether you come from an office where collegial chitchat is part of the meeting routine, or from a shop with a let's-get-straight-to-business culture, now is a time to think carefully about how you can build and sustain collegial relationships when you have exactly zero in-person

contact. Even if you normally function at a brisk professional distance, you may find that the lack of body-language cues or coffee-line greetings suddenly makes you feel less connected to your colleagues, and frays the unspoken bonds of trust that let us work effectively together.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What tips do you have to share with other readers about making work-from-home productive and bearable?

If you can, slow down just a bit now that you're at home, take a few minutes at the beginning and end of each web conference or video call to just connect with your colleagues as actual humans. Ask them how they are doing, or for their best tips for coping with a cooped-up existence or just share a piece of your own personal news. These little investments in relationships pay enormous business dividends, because people are more effective at collaborating when they trust one another, and actual human conversation builds trust. Just as important, these interactions will make you feel more connected and help combat your own sense of isolation.

Wear a fitness tracker

The last time I switched from office work to remote work, I gained 20 pounds in the first year, just because my baseline level of activity went from moderate (walking from parking lot to office, walking from desk to coffee maker, walking out to lunch and back) to zero. Wear a step counter and commit to a minimum daily step count; take a walk early enough in the day that if you haven't hit your step count, you can plan on running the laundry up and down the stairs a few more times, or find another errand to get yourself moving.

Set up mental-health check-ins

When you're working from home—and especially if you're doing that while living alone—it is really crucial to have some kind of structure for checking in on your own mental health and well-being, so you don't get lost in a sea of work and deadlines. When I returned to working solo a few years ago, I experimented with a few different mood-tracking and daily-reflection apps that prompted me to reflect on my mood and emotional state at least once a day.

Now that kind of reflection has become part of my morning ritual: I do a kind of self-scan each morning to see what kinds of emotions are sitting in my body (once you get used to this kind of practice, it really does feel quite physical), and if it seems like I'm low or anxious, I try to exercise earlier in the day and eat more carefully so I don't ride a blood-sugar roller coaster. I also talk to a therapist every couple of weeks, and my husband and I have an evening check-in every day.

Schedule a standing date

Just as remote work sets your baseline physical activity to zero, it sets your baseline social interaction to zero (well, not counting anyone you live with). I've found it very helpful to have standing dates that ensure I have some social interaction every week, even if I don't get organized enough to make plans. These days, that consists of a 4 p.m. walk with one or two friends, every single day, so that I get outside and see someone outside my immediate family. (Don't worry, we practice social distancing.)

I also scheduled a standing morning video call with a new colleague. It isn't something I'd do in a more conventional work situation, but right now, it ensures we both get a focused start to our days, and even more important, it is helping us build a collegial relationship while fighting isolation.

Remember, tackling remote work in a healthy way is a skill, just like any other professional skill. It is going to take a little time, and a little practice—but by prioritizing your well-being, as well as your productivity, you may even discover that you actually prefer working from home.

Dr. Samuel is a technology researcher and the author of "Work Smarter With Social Media." She can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

Corrections & Amplifications

The boxes representing flexibility to work anywhere and not having to commute were incorrectly sized in an earlier version of the Out of Office graphic in this article. The graphic has been corrected above. (March 31, 2020)

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