Working From Home: Survival Tips

By Sande Olson   August 10, 2014

Preface: This article is a complication of challenges faced by home-based workers. It is not reflective of all positions, but is a collaborative effort reflecting employees and entrepreneurs.

As a professional working remotely, friends often tell me how lucky I am; how luxurious it must be to work-at-home (aka "work-from-home or home-based-worker"). Yes, on one hand, it can create financial savings and allow more time for family. And, on most days, I feel fortunate to be able to work from home, especially in my field… but there is a downside. It is sometimes difficult to balance your work and home life. Work often spills over into non-business hours.

Working from home as an employee means you "seem more available." Leadership, peers, and co-workers-- especially those living in different time zones-- can unexpectedly tie up your day or place added work requests on your virtual desk with little notice. There is an overriding perception that "you're working from home, so you must have time to spare." (Sadly, this perception is sometimes shared by spouses and/or family members too.)

Not true. This is the one perception that is hardest on home-based-workers… that and the underlying attitude that translates "you have it easier than those who go into work." If you are a hard-working individual with great work ethics, nothing could be further from the truth. You book your day, respond to clients, schedule meetings or perhaps training events; travel, complete projects, make appointments, meet deadlines, and fulfill quotas.

Yes, your company may love you. You may even be the company's poster child for effective work-from-home employees. That recognition, however, is a two-edged sword because you can frequently find yourself feeling a need to prove your worth. Sometimes this means you'll work through the night to meet a deadline even if it's someone else's problem.

You can't tell people that lack of planning isn't fair to your priorities… because you really want to be a team player. And, no, you can't remind people to PLEASE go back and read information you painstakingly made available online (potentially avoiding emergencies altogether). Emails

are easy to ignore. You'll find that no one likes to read, so expect to be called upon to explain information already made available. This is true of co-workers and customers, and admit it… sometimes it's true of you.

Yes, working from home can be great. The diversity of your work flow can be challenging and problem-solving can be rewarding, but there is a downside to being a home-based worker. Perhaps in reading this you'll recognized the challenges, sense the potential for a bit of frustration. If you work-from-home, you can probably add stories of your own; both positive and negative. But you probably wouldn't change it you could.

So, how do we work-from-home overachievers balance our days, especially if we also have children and pets, normal household chores, a spouse and/or family responsibilities? Here are some suggestions collected from a group of home-based workers who have successfully worked from home for 4-8 years either as employees or as self-employed entrepreneurs:

> **Home.** Give up on having a spotless home. It can be done but you must become a tireless expert at time management. Unforeseen emergencies waylay the best of intentions. Learn to be okay with clutter. Most of us have.
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> **Children.** Keep smaller children in daycare. At least for part of work day. Many home-based workers use daycare full-time. Older children may be heard to repeat, "I know, interrupt only if I can't stop the bleeding, someone is unconscious, a bone is broken, or the house is on fire."
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> **Support Network.** Develop a work-from-home friends network, especially if you are a parent. When we are truly frustrated, it sometimes helps to call a supportive home-based worker friend. They understand we simply need to vent; we aren't looking for "solutions." Letting go of stress by talking can be good. Just be careful. Talking through stressful situations can increase stress levels (e.g. re-living the situation). Learn to recognize when this happens and stop talking. Simply stop talking and take a deep breath or two. Support group members can't be our dumping ground.
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> **Exercise.** Take exercise breaks. Get up and stretch often. Many home-based workers create sitting and standing workstations. Exercise is a great stress reducer. Put exercise into your daily routine. Allocate 15 minutes to go for brisk walk, ride a bike, stretch, do yoga in the back yard… anything to release stress and move away from the computer. It works.

Stay Neutral. Most of us have learned not join in on the chaos. Meaning we do not get pulled into the emotions and frustrations expressed by coworkers seeking assistance. Hard to do, but it can be done.

Access. Seasoned home-based workers turn off their phones and stop reading emails after a set time each evening. This takes practice, but there are few things that truly can't wait until normal office hours.

Breaks. Regularly schedule "pamper-me" time. Actually leave the house for lunch. Go get your nails done; get a pedicure. Anything to get you out of the house, if briefly. Again, take breaks to stand and stretch. And, **do not** delay restroom visits. Medically speaking, not a good habit to form.

Dress. Over time, staying in your pajamas can become quite tempting. Especially if you are not participating in video conferencing on a regular basis. But, getting up and getting dressed for work affects your overall attitude, and the way you interface with others. Seasoned home-based workers make a point to not give in to the temptation. Once you do, it is hard to return to a consistent routine of dressing for work. Consider video conferencing (e.g. Skype) for some meetings. It is good to get in front of people. It makes a difference.

Working from home has advantages, but it isn't for everyone. Some people find working from home becomes too isolating, others recognize they simply are not self-motivated enough to be successful in a work-at-home environment. But, for those who can balance work environment and home life, it can really be rewarding.

If you are a work-at-home worker, and find yourself challenged by the demands of your day, try some of these suggestions to help keep your world balanced. Perhaps, like most of us, you will find working from home is worth the challenge. Personally, given a choice, I wouldn't change a thing. I love the diversity of my work flow. It works well for me, and for many others. It can for you too, you just have to keep life balanced.