

Six ways to make 'work from home' click

Recognise it as a new experience, continue to reach out to peers, de-stress, self-evaluate. This will help in a smoother transition



With more and more organisations announcing working from home, we, as employees, are going to struggle over two or three weeks to adjust to a new rhythm of work. Work from home (WFM) or telework is not a new concept and has been an experiment with mixed results in several countries. However, the scale at which employees are asked to work from home now, in the face of Covid-19, is unprecedented.

Three boundaries

Working from home alters three boundaries: spatial, temporal and psychological.

Spatial: When employees work from home, the physical boundary separating work and home disappears. We can no longer walk to another desk for assistance, and this can be quite uncomfortable for first time remote workers. Infrastructural challenges (of remote logins or data security) can seem daunting and breed a sense of insecurity. The loss of friends and colleagues to whom we can complain, or vent exacerbates the feelings of physical isolation.

Temporal: Prior research shows that in remote work, employees tend to lose perspective of the beginning and end of a working day. Many people are likely to either work fewer hours or longer hours till they get adjusted to the routine. These altered timings can have implications for communication with colleagues, especially when work schedules do not overlap or overlap for shorter periods of time. Such changes in time schedules also result in blurring of boundaries between notions of personal time and work-related time.

Psychological: One is more likely to find it difficult to negotiate personal and professional spaces while working from home. In the Indian context, WFH may be seen as a “part holiday” and the expectation would be that the employee should participate in the social and familial activities at home.

In dual career households, with children at home due to closure of schools, it is possible that women employees who WFM experience more intense role conflicts as the family expectations on the role of a mother or wife may override their professional responsibilities. Finally, most employees may not live in homes where privacy and separate space for office work might be available.

Therefore, employees are bound to experience a sense of being professionally ineffective and this can affect their moods and emotions, doubt their own self-competence and impact their own professional identity.

How to manage?

We need to recognise that working from home is not just another form of work. It is a shift in role identity since employees who were working in offices need to learn skills and knowledge associated with a new form of working. This will impact their self-definition of who they are and their success in a new context.

The role shift is from a zone of comfort to one that is initially unfamiliar and ambiguous, but then becomes not only fulfilling but also of potentially greater value to the organisation and themselves. We propose six steps that can enable employees to manage this role shift.

First, recognise that WFM is a new experience and approach the entire process as you would a new assignment.

Second, evaluate your own strengths and weaknesses in this new context. These strengths and weaknesses might include new skills — like remote client management, or written communication. This self-assessment will have a direct bearing on your self-development.

Third, consciously ensure that you are reaching out to your managers and peers. Working remote does not mean working alone. It only means that we need to find alternative mechanisms to engage with our networks.

Fourth, you might experience cognitive overload. A new typical workday could include working by yourself, getting on a conference call, answering WhatsApp messages, posting information on a collaborative platform, working on your emails and then going back to an audio call. Context switching constantly puts pressure on your cognitive and emotional well-being, which means you could end up feeling physically and mentally exhausted.

Make sure you take time off every two hours to stretch and do some light exercises, walk around and relax your muscles. Use meditation apps on your mobile to de-stress with deep breathing exercises. Set a timer and an alarm for this.

Fourth, do not start surfing the Internet during your scheduled workday. When you are working remotely, the propensity to do this will increase. There may be no vigilant supervisor or visible peer pressure to prevent us from reading non-work content. Therefore, the need to exercise a higher degree of self-discipline becomes important.

This is particularly true for work that is not motivating. Often at work, a manager or a peer is likely to raise the status of an activity in a corridor or a physical meeting. This will no longer be the case. Being mindful and disciplined on how much time you spend on non-work activities is important.

Fifth, remote work changes the nature of learning on the job. We learn from our social environments, from meetings and interactions with others. All this constitutes our tacit knowledge. This tacit, unstated learning is the most difficult to replace.

And so, while working from home, it is important to prioritise your learning. It can be as simple as devoting half an hour each day to doing something new — take a course on your e-learning module, watch a Ted talk, do a course on Edx or Coursera. These will be valuable investments in the future.

Finally, become more self-aware. Many smart phones provide you with analytics on your technology usage. Look at the hours you have logged in and the actual hours you have worked. This will give you a good sense of where you spent your time. This data will provide you deep insights about yourself. You don't need a boss to evaluate your productivity in the WFH context; you can evaluate yourself. It is this autonomy to evaluate your performance using data which will be of immense value when the normal returns.

The difference between effectiveness and productivity lies in the fact that you are the master of your own time in the former and you are a slave of another in the second.

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