

ALUMNI ASSOCIATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

REMOTE WORK GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

Remote working is here to stay, irrespective of COVID-19, and is rapidly gaining traction worldwide. This guide aims to bring you up-to-date with good remote working practices and equip you to move confidently from an in-person role to remote working. Although much of this guide applies to those who are self-employed, the emphasis is largely on those who are employed by an employer.

WHAT IS REMOTE WORKING?

- Remote working entails working from a site not normally regarded as your physical office or workplace, most often your home.
- Partial remote working entails working from a remote place for some days of the week, while still working in the conventional “away from home” mode for the other days.
- In its most extreme form, you may work for a company that does not maintain an office or central physical workplace — this is often called “fully remote.”



WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

It's crucial that you check with your employer regarding what form of remote work is expected from you. If partial remote work, or “hybrid,” is your working mode, it is equally important that you check which days of the week you are supposed to be physically “in the office” and whether these days are fixed or variable.

FINDING YOUR REMOTE WORKING RHYTHM

When finding your remote working rhythm, it is important to know that

- Remote work does not make equal sense in all jobs and presents varying challenges depending on your job category.
- Remote work usually works better in fields such as educational services, professional, scientific, and technical support and services, management of companies and enterprises, finance and insurance services, and information and communication services.
- Remote work does less well in agriculture, food services, hospitality, and retail services. If you work in these latter fields, remote work is difficult, frustrating, and sometimes impossible.

In many jobs, hybrid working is the only doable model, and only some aspects of the job lend themselves to remote work. In such cases, finding your work rhythm can be quite challenging as some parts of your job can be completed from home, while for others, you will have to be at the office, warehouse, factory, etc.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

REMOTE WORKING TRIAL PERIOD

If you have a choice, ask your employer for a remote working trial period of a few weeks. If it would help, mix working from home with some days of being “in the office” during this time. This will help you find a reasonable home working schedule and some rhythm, as working from home can often be subject to unforeseen disruptions arising from your home situation.

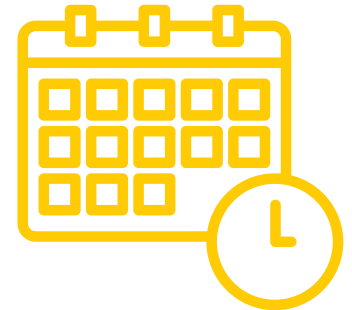
If you do not have such a choice, accept that the first few weeks will be characterized by “trial and error” as you discover what works and doesn’t.

PRESCRIBED AND FLEXIBLE HOURS

Finding a schedule and rhythm that works for you is crucial to working from home. Check with your employer about flexible work hours, specifically on prescribed presence times. These are times when your employer expects you to be at work and available for immediate communication.

Depending on your situation, some find it easier to schedule flexible work hours early in the morning, before households start moving around, or later at night when things have quieted again.

Once you find your rhythm and schedule, inform your employer of your preferred arrangements for the non-prescribed hours. Try to stick to these “working hours” as rigorously as possible and ensure your family and friends know what these are. This will help you structure your day and keep to it



UP & DOWNSIDES OF REMOTE WORKING?

You’ll find that remote working has some upsides, including:

- Reducing your travel costs and saving travel time
- Enabling you to job-hunt across geographical restrictions
- Increasing your productivity as you “get more done”
- Customizing work schedules to your specific environment and context

Equally so, remote working has some downsides, including:

- A measure of social isolation
- Distractions at home, especially from children (if applicable)
- Lack of access to general information
- Difficulties with personal and career development and supervision
- Ineffective meetings and poor meeting attendance
- Counterproductive and unsynchronized work schedules of team members

On the plus side, specifically designed interventions can help overcome most of these potential downsides and significantly minimize their effects.



WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

COPING WITH HOME DISRUPTIONS

Coping with disruptions while working from home is a big challenge, as these disruptions come in all shapes and sizes and at any time. Organizing a secluded and separate space in your home for working helps limit interruptions, especially if you can actually “close the door.”

If your home situation allows it, and if needed, you can arrange for communication to only occur by messaging during your “working hours”.

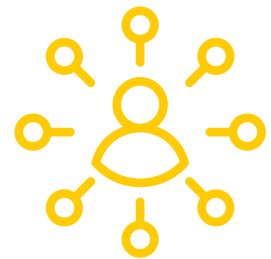
Disruptions are bound to occur despite all of these arrangements, but this is also true of traditional office or factory work environments. As you explore working remotely, learn not to expend too much emotion or energy on such disruptions, but reset your schedule and rhythm as soon as possible.

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LACK OF GENERAL INFORMATION

You can overcome social isolation by asking team members for a regular time each week to catch up on developments in work and personal lives. You can also use these sessions to discuss general information about the broader work environment. If you aren't a part of a team, ask your supervisor to arrange such sessions.

Use, but don't overuse, the “cc” option in your email to ensure a flow of information. You should also learn to use the “do not send” or “retract” options on your email messages. Sometimes it's better to hold back for a few hours and consider the need to include all recipients before clicking “send.”

If you are a team member, make it a habit of occasionally calling your colleagues for a “good old chat.”



PERSONAL AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND SUPERVISION

Ask your supervisor for specific arrangements, ensuring that you remain connected. These arrangements should include interactions directed at your personal development and career progression. Discuss with your supervisor how the actual performance evaluation will work.

REMOTE MEETINGS

Remote meetings require some practice to work effectively. If you are the team leader, set some “rules” or best practices regarding starting and ending times, who cannot make it, taking minutes or notes, speaking times and turns, and resolutions. If not, ask the team leader for the “rules” on these matters and contribute towards upholding these arrangements.

Suitable meeting technology is important in ensuring the effectiveness of meetings. This will be discussed further later in this guide.

UNSYNCHRONIZED WORK SCHEDULES OF COLLEAGUES

Unsyncronized work schedules can be resolved by understanding your colleagues' prescribed and flexible working hours. If you are a member of a team, ask the team leader to sort this out, but approach colleagues outside the team directly for their work schedules.

When you start remote working, remember that your physical office or factory environment has upsides and downsides. As you learned to cope with the downsides of working at an office/factory, you will also learn to cope with the downsides of remote work. As time passes, these may become quite “normal” to you. In other cases, our attitude often decides whether remote work will work out—approach remote work as an opportunity to grow and develop, not a crisis.

SPACE & 'TOOLS' FOR REMOTE WORKING

Remote working is easier if you have access to a suitable space and appropriate hardware and software “tools.” Space normally refers to a designated area in your home that forms your workstation. A separate room is ideal, but in most cases, one has to settle for a designated space in your home.

The “tools” required for productive remote work vary according to context and need, and some essentials are listed below.

CONNECTIVITY

Stable wifi connectivity is an essential aspect of remote working.

SECURITY

If security is an important factor for you or your employer, a Virtual Private Network (VPN) may be required. A VPN is a special encrypted channel between a computing device and a VPN server at your company's office, factory, or a VPN service provider.

Encrypting all data and communication between you and your employer ensures greater security.

COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Tools such as old-fashioned phone calls, WhatsApp, text messaging, and emails work well for basic communication and can be used individually or in groups, subject to some limitations.

More advanced communication may require more sophisticated tools, including Skype, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, Slack, and Zoom. These have advantages and disadvantages, but they are suitable for video conferencing, which helps create a closer “real-life” feeling to meeting interactions. You can find a quick and useful summary of these tools in “Take Control of Working from Home Temporarily” by Glenn Fleishman (2020) and published by alt concepts inc.



WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

REMOTE WORKING TRIAL PERIOD

Poor or limited connectivity will hamper your effectiveness in working remotely. If you have poor levels of connectivity, arrange for a service provider who can provide you with a better deal, and talk to your employer about helping with sharing any additional costs

WORKSPACE

Ensure you have a solid work surface, such as a table or desk, and a chair supporting lengthy periods of sitting. Also, ensure you have adequate lighting for your workspace and learn to take short breaks every hour or two, possibly getting some exercise.

COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Usually, your employer will contract with the providers of one or more communication tools mentioned earlier. Most of them offer tiered packages with the free package subject to limitations, which, while suitable for most forms of one-on-one communication, may not be suitable for other, more varied forms of communication. These would require business packages. Apart from connectivity and data costs, you should not have any costs. All you have to do is master the communication platform in question, which is normally quite straightforward.

GETTING STARTED ON REMOTE WORKING

Don't wait to start remote working until everything's in place and there are no issues. Rather, get the basics together as a starting point and learn and improve as you go.

In the beginning, speak to your colleagues often and share frustrations and successes alike. Learning from one another is an important factor in mastering the challenges of remote work.