Working From Home

Tips for Remote Workers

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Advancing Organizational Excellence

Organization is key to becoming a more productive remote worker

The best way to set yourself up for success while working from home is to get organized. I recently attended a webinar that stressed the importance of organizational skills, especially when faced with the added distractions and challenges of working remotely. Organizational skills are among the most transferable professional skills, helping you to be successful as a remote worker, back in an office setting and in your personal life. Organizational skills can be defined as "the ability to stay focused on different tasks and use your time, energy and resources effectively." This is especially helpful when working remotely, where added challenges include a lack of structure, procrastination, overworking, distractions and interruptions. Below are three tips from can get you on the right path to a more organized work day.

#1 Organize your workspace
Design your home office in a way that sets you up for productivity. Pick a spot that's quiet, ideally with a door that you can close for privacy. Keeping your desk clean and clutter-free is key: after all, a cluttered space leads to a cluttered mind. Arrange your work materials strategically in your home office based on how often you use them. Keep materials needed for current projects readily available on your desk, within arm's reach. Reference materials you may grab once or twice throughout the day can be placed on a nearby bookcase. Lastly, any archival materials that are not necessary for daily projects should be furthest from your desk, stored somewhere out of the way.

#2 Organize your technology

Technology is vital to getting our work done, but a haphazard technology system can be a hindrance to productivity. The first thing you can do is pare down your devices, making sure the only ones you have on your desk are those you use throughout your workday. Having a central charging station near your desk or somewhere within reach is a great way to maximize efficiency. Next, it might be helpful to store less frequently used technology in one, central location. Take the time to make this as organized as possible: store cables with their corresponding devices so you can easily grab exactly what you need and avoid frustration. Keep an inventory list of all your devices and cables, perhaps with a description or image of each for reference and easy access. Your organization system here should prioritize safety and efficiency: make sure not to overload outlets or use frayed cables, but find a system that works best for you.

#3 Organize your time

Perhaps the best thing you can do for your productivity is to organize your time. Set a start time and end time for your workday everyday, and stick to this schedule. Schedule breaks for yourself throughout the day — these might be more frequent than if you were in the office, but breaking up your day will help you be more productive. Use timers to remind yourself to take these breaks. At the start of the day, make a to-do list with all the tasks you want to accomplish throughout the day and do the most difficult tasks first. Finally, create a "distraction battle plan" to combat the added interruptions you face at home. This might include closing your office door; putting on noise-canceling headphones; keeping your phone on silent. Discuss your expectations with family or roommates about interrupting you while in your office.

Putting these tactics in place will help you get organized in your home office and work more efficiently. The best thing you can do is create a plan for getting organized and follow through on it. Be proactive about impending distractions and have a plan of attack. Setting a healthy work-life balance is key: make sure you give yourself breaks and put your work stuff away at the same time every night. Once you get organized, you'll be amazed at how your remote working productivity soars.

Time Management Strategies for Remote Workers

Time management has always been one of the most valuable skills in the professional world. But when working remotely, these skills are more important than ever. Working from home adds a whole host of new challenges that can cut into your productivity: interruptions from family members, roommates or pets, asynchronous communication with coworkers (causing projects to take longer), lack of structure and general lack of motivation. If you plan on getting anything done at home, time management is the key to success.

What is time management, exactly? It can be defined as the process of planning and allocating time for specific tasks in order to maximize efficiency. The foundation of time management is setting attainable goals and prioritizing tasks that help you achieve those goals. Like any skill, time management is learned: it requires consistent practice, patience and adjustment.. Implement any of the strategies below, and you will feel that you have a better handle on your time and your work life.

Strategy #1: Set a dynamic daily schedule
When working from home, your day does not look like it did when you were in the office. Therefore, you can't expect to schedule your day the same way. Plan on starting at the same time everyday, and begin by making a list of the tasks you need to complete that day — physically write it down, on paper, on your computer, on a white board, etc. Define your

priorities (see strategy #2), and estimate how long it will take to complete each of the tasks. Plan your daily schedule around these time estimates, adding in some contingency time — or "buffer" time in case projects take longer than anticipated. Additionally, work in some discretionary time to your schedule — time dedicated to any miscellaneous tasks you need to work on. Schedule open time in your day as well as frequent breaks. You're prone to more frequent interruptions while at home, so preparing for these will help you stick to your schedule. Remember, since you aren't commuting to and from work, this extra time at your desk helps to offset these more frequent distractions. Lastly, include your family in your schedule. If you have small children who will need your help with schoolwork, factor that into your schedule. Set expectations about when you are and are not available. Build your schedule in a way that is individualized to your needs.

Strategy #2: Define and prioritize tasks
When it comes down to it, productivity is all about getting tasks checked off your list. The best way to do this is to start with a comprehensive list of tasks that you keep close by on your desk. When determining which tasks are priorities, use this helpful guide, designating each of the tasks on your list as one of the four D's:

- **Do:** complete tasks now or in the immediate future (15 min to an hour).
- **Defer:** complete it later in the day or tomorrow.
- **Delegate:** assign tasks to someone else (a coworker, intern, etc).
- **Delete:** remove it from your list or morph it with another task that is related for maximum efficiency.

Keep referring to your list throughout the day as a reminder of your progress. Find a routine that works for you, whether it's creating a new list every day, every week, or something else.

Strategy #3: Find a time management technique that works for you
There are hundreds of time management strategies out there that professionals use to maximize efficiency. Here are two different techniques that you may want to test out in your workday, and adjust as necessary based on whatever works best for you.

- **Pomodoro Technique:** Break down your work periods into 25-minute intervals, which is often considered to be the length of time our minds can focus effectively. Set a timer on your phone or computer for 25 minutes, and when it goes off, take a 5 minute break.

Then work again for another 25 minutes. After 4 intervals of work, take a longer, 30 minute break — for lunch, for a walk, to socialize with family, etc.

- **18 Minutes:** This technique is all about being mindful of your productivity. Before you start your workday, take 5 minutes to sit and think about what you need to accomplish today to make it successful (make a physical list, if possible). At the end of each hour of work, take 1 minute to stop, refocus, and evaluate your productivity during the previous hour. At the very end of your workday, take 5 minutes to review the day. How did it go What did you learn?

Remember that these are just two techniques, and there are countless others. Experiment with these and others, and find what works best for you and your schedule.

Strategy #4: Be flexible
Ultimately, the number one skill that will help you be productive while working from home is flexibility. Remote working brings about added challenges for everyone, so being patient with yourself and your coworkers is key. Projects may take longer and require extra attention, as it is more difficult to communicate with coworkers and clients remotely. To compensate for these communication lags, consider what other projects you can work on concurrently to stay busy. Get creative in finding ways to participate in non-work activities, even if you have to stay in your home. Figure out the best way for you to intentionally put your work away at the end of the day and spend time with family. Other challenges will surely come up throughout the day that upend your previously laid-out work schedule, but if you prepare for this with a flexible schedule and an open mind, you'll find yourself being productive even in these uncertain times.

Tips for Managing Remote Workers

A successful and productive remote team is reliant on a strong manager to lead them. It is challenging to coordinate all your team members from their off-site locations, but despite this, it is still possible to conduct a productive atmosphere among them. AOE knows this better than anyone: having run a virtual firm for 17 years with highly efficient and happy team members, we know what works and what doesn't.

AOE President Kimberly Kayler shares these tips for managing remote workers. These practices will not only lead to increased productivity, but better communication between team members and a more connected, collaborative team dynamic.

- **Check in with your team via phone, not just email.** Make up a reason (any reason) to make this happen.

- **Make sure you have a good feel for what your team members are doing.** Weekly goals are a great practice, and you may consider daily check-ins as well. For example, our team sets new goals each week and we update one another on our progress.

- **Get together with your whole team at least once a week — via video conference (preferred) or conference call.** Find a reason for a quick catch-up. For example, Kayler requires her team members to share what they learned in work-sponsored professional development workshops so that the whole team can benefit. The topic can be anything: as long as you get the team together for 30 minutes or so, the response will be positive for team morale.

- **Have a space for team members to share non-work stuff — family, hobbies, etc.** One way would be to use a private Facebook group to share events or information with one another. For example, we have done virtual baby and wedding showers, celebrated birthdays, and even had a book club for a while!

- **Training can be done, in most cases, in a virtual environment.** All it takes is a little organization and creativity by the trainer. Use your network for help: find out how other companies are running their trainings.

- **Make sure the team knows the company goal, the department goal, etc.** Tie it into all your meetings, projects and trainings. Constantly connect these back to the overall strategy.

These tips will get you started, but the best thing you can do is keep the line of communication between you and your team open. Make yourself available to them as best you can. Get creative in finding ways to stay connected to your team — during the work day and outside of it. Be flexible as team members adjust to the circumstances and work with each member individually as needed. These tips are a great place to start, but working remotely is an adjustment for everyone. Be patient with figuring out what works best for your team.

Video Conferencing Etiquette: Best Practices

This spring, given the current public health crisis, many of us are trading conference room meetings for virtual ones. If you're new to video conferences, the idea of turning on your computer video camera and running a meeting through this medium can be daunting. Despite its challenges, the video conference is worth trying out for your group, as it is the closest you can come to simulating the in-person meeting experience. I recently attended a webinar that explored best practices for running a successful virtual conference. The following tips will get you started and help you avoid common pitfalls that can derail an otherwise well-prepared meeting.

#1 Setting the Stage
Preparation is key to a successful virtual meeting. Make sure the image you present to your coworkers is professional. Pick a clean, uncluttered background for your video; dress professionally, as if attending the meeting in person; if you plan to share your screen during the meeting, make sure your desktop is clean and all unnecessary tabs are closed; use two monitors, if possible, to best organize your tabs. When creating the presentation itself, think about how to best engage your audience. Explore the software features your video meeting application offers: such as chats, Q&A, or polls. Prior to the meeting, email the agenda and/or handouts to participants. Right before the meeting, make sure to sign on early to get settled. Test audio and video right away, so you can troubleshoot if necessary. Make sure to have a checklist or agenda nearby, so you can stick to your meeting schedule and stay on task.

#2 Delivering the Meeting

It's time to start the meeting! Try to stick to your start and end times as much as possible. Let your participants know if you plan to record the meeting, and make sure you begin the recording right away. Before you dive into your message, this is also a good time to set some ground rules. Ask your participants to keep their microphone on mute if they are not speaking to avoid interruptions; ask them to use the "raise hand" feature (if your software has it) when they want to contribute; use the chat feature for questions or comments. When communicating over video, it's important to focus on your delivery. Look directly into the camera, speak clearly and at a measured pace. Continually check your audio and video to ensure everyone is receiving your message properly. If your meeting is over an hour in length, schedule a break to allow everyone to refocus.

Have a game plan for handling questions and discussion during your meeting. If your group is large, consider assigning a moderator to guide the conversation. When answering questions, make sure to repeat the question before answering it to ensure everyone understands. Use the chat to share files and links with the group. The best measure of a good virtual meeting is how well you engage your audience, so make sure this is a priority. Choose a format that allows everyone the chance to contribute, whether via speaker or through the chat. Ask your participants both abstract questions — with the intent of expanding the conversation — and specific questions — with the intent of getting everyone involved.

One of the greatest fears with delivering a virtual meeting is technical difficulties. If this happens, don't panic! Create a backup plan ahead of time in case certain features don't work as planned. Have options ready for participants that have technical difficulties on their end — send out the recorded presentation after the meeting, have a call-in option, etc. If possible, have an IT person on the call to troubleshoot problems. Whatever the case, remember to be flexible and keep your participants in the loop about the situation. If it comes to it, reschedule the meeting for a later date.

**#3 Concluding a Meeting/Next Steps**

When it comes time to conclude your meeting, quickly review your agenda or checklist to make sure you completed everything you set out to accomplish. Take final questions and pause the recording before signing off. Follow up with your participants with any additional information, relevant resources/documents, and details on any upcoming meetings. Lastly, take the time to review how the meeting went. Check the recording, and consider how well participants were engaged. Make a list of what went well and what could be improved, and refer to that list when preparing for your next meeting.

Executive Presence on Video Conferences
Part 1: Video Conferencing Pro Tips

Video conferencing is a great way to coordinate remote workers to present trainings, deliver important information and engage in productive team discussions. However, virtual correspondence between several parties is not without its challenges, especially for the executive or leader in charge of the meeting. In this first article of a three article series, we will highlight several pro tips for running a well-organized, stand-out presentation and demonstrating leadership before, during and after the call.
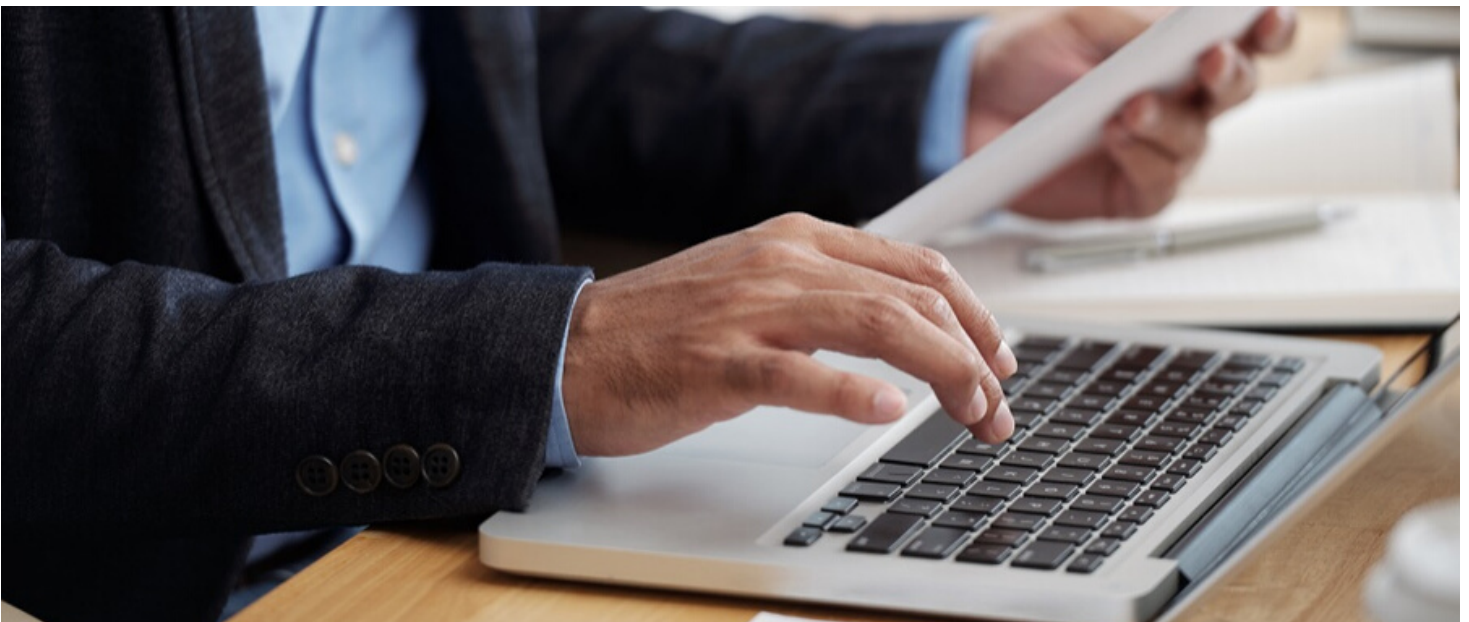
- **Diligently prepare for your video conference.** If you are new to virtual meetings, prepare for the challenges in communication: awkward pauses, people speaking over one another, etc. Also prepare the visual presentation. Never underestimate the value of a high quality powerpoint presentation, as this will be the main visual aid that your audience will see. Finally, prepare a meeting agenda beforehand so you stay on track and your audience knows what's to come. Use a printed version if possible to limit the number of tabs you need to juggle on your computer screen.

- **Introduce yourself early and speak up.** The best way to assert your presence and demonstrate leadership is to introduce yourself when first speaking on a video call. This sets a precedent for others to follow, allowing everyone to better engage with the call participants. If you know the names of the participants, it is also a good practice to address others on the call by their names when engaging in conversation, as this shows a commitment to getting to know workers personally.

- **Keep the presentation engaging.** You may need to be extra conscientious of the level of engagement by your audience, as it can be easier for a participant to feel disconnected over video versus in a conference room. Continually check the facial expressions of your participants to see if they are engaged or disengaged during specific parts of a presentation. Prepare to steer the conversation in the right direction during discussion or questions, as it can easily fall off topic. Establish hand signals early, so that if the discussion is lively, you can direct their attention back to you to continue on. Utilizing Q&A is a great way to prompt discussion, transition topics or to allow participants a chance to clarify things they did not understand at the end of the presentation.

- **Use visuals to support your content.** Sharing your screen is a great feature that allows you to reference a powerpoint presentation, relevant websites or documents. If you do plan to share your screen however, make sure your desktop is organized and you only have relevant tabs open. You can also utilize your webcam to share visuals: for example, if you are speaking about a specific product, you can hold the physical product up to the camera for participants to see.

- **Avoid distractions to enhance the conversation.** Distractions such as technology or unwanted noises that get picked up by your microphone can inhibit productive discussion in a video conference. Do your part to limit these interruptions: silence your cell phone, keep email turned off for the duration of the meeting, find a quiet room to take the call and mute your microphone when you are not speaking (and encourage others on the call to do the same).

- **Record your meeting.** One way to keep a record of your meeting would be to assign a notetaker prior to beginning the presentation. These notes can be compiled and sent out to participants after the meeting so that they can reference the parts they missed or be reminded of the most important information. Another way to do this would be to record the video and audio of the presentation — if your video conferencing platform has this feature. This allows you to send the full presentation out to participants afterward, or upload the video somewhere for those who could not attend. If choosing this option, remember to let all participants know that you will be recording before beginning the presentation.

Executive Presence on Video Conferences
Part 2: Master Video Body Language

Video conferencing is a great way to coordinate remote workers to present trainings, deliver important information and engage in productive team discussions. However, virtual correspondence between several parties is not without its challenges, especially for the executive or leader in charge of the meeting. In this second article of a three article series, we will discuss how to effectively engage your audience using body language and by cultivating a professional image virtually.

- **Perfect the art of eye contact.** Knowing the appropriate way to use eye contact on a video call will drastically improve your online presence. For informal meetings, perhaps with your immediate team in a conversation-based setting, it is okay to look at your screen where your team members' faces are when speaking. However, in a formal setting in which you are delivering a presentation to the group, practice looking directly into the camera lens while speaking, so it appears to your listeners that you are looking directly at them.

- **Learn how to use hand gestures on video.** You might expect that your hands will not be seen by your audience, but oftentimes, hand gestures are easily picked up by your webcam when set up at an appropriate distance (capturing your upper torso and head). Hand gestures can add value to your delivery, so it is best to prepare as if the audience will see your gesturing. As with most types of communication, there are good and bad ways to use hand gestures. They can best be used to emphasize certain points, to emphasize size or quantity ("big" or "small") and to visualize numbers (using fingers). Be wary of hand gestures that can deter from your professionalism: pointing at the camera, waving hands frantically, and crossing your arms are all examples of what not to do.

- **Use confident body posture.** This can be achieved through a number of strategies. First, keep a good distance between you and the camera, positioning your whole head and upper torso in the frame. When presenting, sitting on the front part of your chair helps you keep upright posture and feel more alert and engaged. Remind yourself to keep a straight back, shoulders down and relaxed, and lean in slightly to stay engaged. If you are only a spectator in the conference, it is okay to keep a more relaxed posture, though you never want to be slouched down in your chair.

- **Consider your wardrobe choices.** Some colors and patterns show up differently on camera than in person. Solid jewel-tone colors appear best on camera, versus neon or extremely dark colors. Floral patterns and stripes, as well as shiny fabrics do not translate well on camera. Simple cuts without too many frills — elaborate collars, buttons, etc. — appear most professional. Remember, you only need to be professional from the waist-up, but if you choose to stay casual on the bottom, ensure that your camera does not extend that far down.

Executive Presence on Video Conferences
Part 3: Preparing your Studio

Video conferencing is a great way to coordinate remote workers to present trainings, deliver important information and engage in productive team discussions. However, virtual correspondence between several parties is not without its challenges, especially for the executive or leader in charge of the meeting. In this third article of a three article series, we will discuss the technicals of setting up your studio, focusing on how to best leverage your audio and video components.

- **Position your camera strategically.** The camera angle is most flattering at eye level, so you may want to elevate your computer to achieve this angle. This is not only the most flattering, but it also helps you to maintain upright posture. You'll want to check your video before joining the conference to ensure the video is hitting you just right. Make sure there is not too much space between the top of your head and the top of the screen. You'll want the video to include the top of your torso as well, not just your head.

- **Lighting is key.** Make sure your face is well-lit so your audience can see you. Natural lighting is the best, so facing a window can offer optimal lighting. If you aren't able to access natural light, a lamp is a great option. Some lighting pitfalls include having lighting sources directly behind you, casting a shadow, and blinding sun rays coming through the window, blinding you. Experiment with positioning prior to your meeting to find the best lighting spot. Be flexible: your go-to video conferencing spot may differ from where you get the majority of your work done.

- **Aim for crisp and clear audio.** This may require the most amount of preparation and trial-and-error. A great way to test the audio before your conference would be to call a friend or co-worker beforehand using the same audio mechanism as you will in your meeting. This gives you time to troubleshoot problems — poor connection, spotty sound, lags — without having to interrupt your meeting. One of the greatest impediments to clear audio is background noise. Do your part by turning off music, closing windows, silencing your phone and using headphones with a microphone built-in to minimize unwanted sounds from getting picked up. Make sure participants mute themselves whenever they aren't speaking so that sound only comes from one source at a time.

- **Be mindful of your backdrops and backgrounds.** Make sure the backdrop you present to your audience is organized and professional. Does your camera pick up on kids toys

or laundry in the background? Test this out beforehand to ensure your audience only sees what you want them to see. If you anticipate presenting video conferences regularly, you might consider investing in a plain backdrop to hang behind you so you don't have to worry about what your home office looks like on camera.

Expand Work from Home Check-Ins to Awareness of Loneliness Signs

While employers everywhere are reading blogs on the best ways to transform their teams with the new virtual environment, many tips are being shared on how to keep folks connected via video platforms, chatrooms and the like. AOE has even written some of those blogs, offering tips on video meeting etiquette and staying connected with your team. While these tips are needed as so many of us have quickly shifted to a work from home environment, the suggestions usually address productivity, not true human connection. Interestingly enough, many of us are feeling more disconnected despite these tools. Also interesting is the fact that studies have shown a huge connection between loneliness in the American work environment and productivity.

In an article in Forbes, Dr. Doug Nemecek, the chief medical officer for Behavioral Health at Cigna, stated that modern technology is helpful for workplace flexibility, but it may be contributing to loneliness. And, he continued, people who are lonely are less engaged and feel less productive at work. The ability to work from home, or from anywhere other than a collegial office, Nemecek added, can lead to isolation and then a feeling of loneliness.

In another Forbes article, it was noted that loneliness actually poses a greater threat to health than obesity, and its life-shortening effects are comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Furthermore, it is rampant in today's workplace. The source of this information? Vivek H. Murthy, former Surgeon General of the United States and a guest on Grant's podcast. Due to the significant time we spend at work, he says, it is incumbent on business leaders to be proactive in tackling the problem of loneliness as it impairs performance, creativity and decision making.

The list of studies goes on and on, earning loneliness the label of a modern epidemic despite there being more ways than ever before to connect with friends, family and co-workers. Experts note that, though is seems counter-intuitive, those that feel lonely are less likely to reach out and build connections as they give into the feeling that they are alone. It becomes an unfortunate self-fulfilling prophecy. And this lack of connection didn't just start with our current pandemic, rather, our society's dependency on technology as well as folks working and even eating at their desk before scrambling out the door for family and other activities. There is simply less and less connection in the workforce.

So, how do we address this phenomenon? While our instinct may be more video chats and

check-ins, many of these scenarios aren't creating a real connection. What about the corporate happy hour? The mandatory fun activity? Researchers note mixed results with these activities as they typically result only in building relationships with your existing work team and fail to create deep connections with those outside your immediate circle. Experts suggest that what is needed is a return to basics, to include making time for small talk at the beginning of a call, asking personal questions about family and hobbies, and not being in the habit of simply planning, reporting and doing the business of your work. Make sure all interactions are authentic and transparent, and actually build time into your day for interaction. Stop by someone's desk (or make up an excuse to call someone just to say hello in today's virtual world), show up to the meeting early (even if virtual) so you are forced to make small talk, and go out of your way to get in front of those outside your typical work circle.

What ideas do you have for creating true connections with your team? How do you beat the lonely blues?