BLACKNIGHT GUIDE

TO

WORKING FROM HOME

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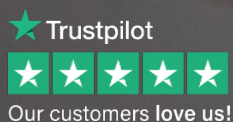
BLACKNIGHT
S O L U T I O N S

Taking care of *Irish* business since 2003

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Introduction

In March 2020 the world changed quicker than it had ever changed in history when the outbreak of Covid-19 hit critical mass. Millions of people who were able to, suddenly found themselves working at home. Many had never worked from home before, and it was a strange, new world for them.

Working from home is not like working in an office, and it's even harder when the rest of the team is distributed all over the world. Blacknight was ready for this, and the Blacknight team has been able to successfully work remotely since Ireland's lockdown began. Many of our staff have always worked remotely.

Through all of this, we've picked up tips and tricks to make working from home work for everyone. Whether you're a new remote working, managing a team of remote workers or the family living with a remote worker, this guide will help you make the most of working at home.

Working at home creates new challenges and new opportunities for companies all over the world. We hope that as everyone stays healthy and happy, the power of remote working can benefit everyone. Blacknight will be there with you with a suite of tools and the technology you need to manage a remote team.

Stay healthy, stay safe.

The Blacknight Team

10 Essential Business Tools and Tips For Remote Working

In this article I wanted to write about some other tools that can help smooth things over and keep you productive while you're working from home. This list is based on my own personal experience as a remote worker, so it will focus on tools I use personally but also some tools that I use at Blacknight, that we also happen to offer to our customers.

Office 365 Suite

This is the big one. If you're contemplating working with a remote team for the first time, Office 365 is basically the most "out of the box" solution you can get on the market. Not only does it have the basic stuff like email and calendaring, but it has Teams. Teams is a great tool for managing remote workers (and in your own office too). It has a chat function, group function, ability to share files, etc. It's an incredibly useful tool. You can even use it for audio and video calls with your team. It also has ToDo, which is a pretty great todo list app. That's on top of the standard suite of apps like Word, Powerpoint, Outlook, Excel, etc., which you can download or work with on the web (and your team can decide which work best for them). Blacknight offers several plans depending on the size of your team. And when you work with our sales team, we can help you get everything set up (when you do this through Microsoft, you don't get that kind of support). Read more about using Office 365 here.

Slack

Slack is another collaboration tool that is really popular right now. In fact, Blacknight uses it for its internal communications currently. It set the standard that other services like Microsoft copied. It allows you to have separate channels for each team in your company. You can create secret ones or public ones. You can have private chats with co-workers. It's an all-around great tool for collaborating with your co-workers. It's nerdy to say, but I quite enjoy working with it myself. It's searchable, secure, and flexible. You can upload files internally and link it to external apps as well – you can even have a bot that does things automatically (for example, we have a bot to remind us to order our Blacknight provided lunch). And like MS Teams, it also has calling and videoconferencing functions.

Skype

Another software used by many is Skype, who practically invented private videoconferencing. It's used less and less these days, but many people still use it for one-off calls or chats when they need to talk to someone outside their corporate intranets. It's great for conference calls and webinars. One of the most useful features is that Skype lets you buy a personal phone number that anyone can call like a regular phone. For example, in my personal business, I have a US and UK phone number so when people call me, it's like a local call.

Basecamp

This is one of my favourite online tools. I use it for my personal business and projects. Basecamp is basically a project management tool. It contains everything you need to manage a project of any size. It has chat; it has todo lists, it has a message board, it has file management, milestones and a calendar (with reminders). It's really easy to use and setup. Best of all, they now offer a free plan to get started on your personal projects. I pay for the business plan, which is $99 a month and it's worth every penny. I collaborate with several writers in different countries, so I set up one for each one I work with. Then we can all keep track of upcoming articles, projects and chat about anything relevant, all within the app. It's such an incredibly simple and useful tool.

Bear

I do a lot of writing – for my job with Blacknight and for my own projects. I like to write in a beautiful environment – I know it's silly, but it helps with the creative flow. That's why I use Bear for my notes and writing. It syncs with all my computers and devices using iCloud, so my stuff is everywhere. It's lightweight and fast. I used to use Evernote for everything, but it became too bloated and slow (writing long articles became a chore). You can customize the interface, tag things, search for things, etc. You can link it to a browser to easily save things as new notes. Notes are encrypted end-to-end. It also has a handy todo list function, which I use to manage my daily todo list. It's $15 a year and very much worth it.

VPNs

A critical tool for your remote team is a VPN or virtual private network. You can easily set up your own VPN with OpenVPN or use a third-party provider. This allows employees outside your company Intranet to appear to be on it, so they can access internal tools that are only available when they're on your network. Whether it's sharing large files, accessing tools, or using shared software, a VPN is a secure way to make sure your important corporate data stays private. Think of a VPN like a private tunnel between your employee's house and your head office. No one can penetrate it, and all your data is compliant with your corporate security policies.

Dropbox

I've used Dropbox for over a decade and couldn't live without it. For those not familiar with it, it's a tool that lets you sync files across multiple computers like they're just a folder on your hard drive. It's perfect for having important files in the cloud and easily shareable with others. For example, when I work on my own print magazine, I keep the files stored on Dropbox, so I can work on it anywhere. Then when I need to share it with the printer, I just give them the Dropbox link. It's one of those things that just works.

Backing Up

When you work remotely, it's important to have a strong backup strategy. We've all had a dead hard drive at one point (yes, even on my beloved Mac). You have to be ready. I follow a two-pronged backup strategy. I keep an external hard drive on my desk and keep a Mac Time Machine backup there. Then I use a service called Backblaze that basically uploads my entire hard drive into the cloud, and keeps it updated every day (it costs $6 a month). I've used it for years. Once you set it up, you don't have to think about it. When my Mac's hard drive died last year, I was able to order a clone of my hard drive from Backblaze, and everything was safe. If you want something a little more powerful, then you can't go wrong with Acronis Cloud, which is offered by Blacknight. This enterprise-level backup solution ensures that your most important data is safe in a data centre and easily accessible, but also encrypted so that only you can access it.

A Dedicated Server Lets You Host Any Tool You Need

I'm a little biased on this, as I recently got my own dedicated server for my own business purposes (I'll be writing more about this in the coming weeks). But a dedicated server from Blacknight can fill in a lot of the holes in software that you need. Best of all, you host them yourself, that data is yours, and you can keep the server completely secure to your team only. You can host files, important software and the tools you need to operate. Whether you need web-based software (like WordPress or a project manager), or rock-solid email, or just a fast connection to do your work, a dedicated server with Blacknight can solve any IT related problem you have with a remote working team. Get in touch with our sales team today to customise your solution.

Move Onsite Servers to a Data Centre

Many large enterprises will have a dedicated server on-site to use many tools and operate their intranet. Many have them in a closet in the office. Well, what if no one is in the office for an extended period of time? Servers go down, and internet connections can go down. We recommend moving the servers you need to operate and co-locate them in one of our data centres. This puts your important, mission-critical infrastructure into an environment designed to keep it up 99.99% of the time. You'll have rock-solid infrastructure backing you up, including the fastest internet connections in Ireland, an on-call emergency response team, and the latest tech to keep you operating. Talk to our sales specialists today to figure out what you need.

5 Ways Office 365 Can Help You Make Remote Working a Success

Millions of employees all over the world are suddenly finding themselves working from home during the Covid-19 crisis. Remote working is a great way to work – I should know – I've been doing it for over a decade. That being said, there's a ton of great tools out there to help you work and to manage remote workers. This time we wanted to focus on Office 365, which basically has a 'remote working in a box' solution for remote work and many may not realize that if they have an Office 365 subscription with Blacknight, they already have access to these tools. Here are some tips to make the most of those tools.

Stay in Touch on Teams

Teams can be your central tool when working remotely. It's basically a repository for all files and communications for a team working together. You can use it to create special workspaces for each project or team. You can do audio and video calls (and people who don't have Office 365 can join calls as well using special links). You can share files. There's a calendar function (that is of course linked to Outlook). You can chat with individual people, create group chats. You can also extend it with various apps and integrations. You can make a Wiki or document repository. It's pretty much an all in one solution for managing and working with a remote team. Best of all, it's included in your Office365 subscription at no extra cost. You can use the app in your browser or download the standalone app if you don't want another browser tab open.

Word/Excel/Powerpoint In the Cloud

The core of Office 365 is, of course, Word, Excel and Powerpoint. Using them with Office 365 adds some incredibly useful tools for team members who are spread out. For example, you can all edit a single Word Document together and– all changes are tracked. You can leave comments and feedback. Same with Excel – if two or three separate members of a team need to collaborate on different parts of an Excel spreadsheet, you can both do your bits in the same file without having to email it back and forth This also solves the problem of figuring out who has the latest version of a file – there's only one file, in one place.

Outlook and Calendar

Outlook is probably the one part of Office 365 everyone is most familiar with and keep open their entire workday. You can access it via the web, or you can download the standalone app. Outlook is an extremely powerful email management tool, and you can access your corporate email easily. The built-in calendar is also key to any organizations success as it's great for setting virtual meetings and seeing when your colleagues are busy or free.

If you're confused as to when to use email versus when to use Teams, we have some advice on that. We use email for more formal things – like setting assignments and communicating important things to co-workers and clients. We use Teams for all the little communications back and forth that are needed to get a task done – but which would crowd an email inbox with endless email threads. Think of email as the 'macro' solution and Teams as the 'micro' solution.

ToDo

Formerly the cloud todo list service Wunderlist, ToDo is a very nice todo list management system. It syncs across all devices, allows multiple lists, and you can share them with co-workers. When you finish a task and mark it off, it gives a satisfying little ding. Combine this with Teams, and it's a great way to manage all the steps in a project of any size. I've been using this tool to manage my various ongoing projects at Blacknight, and it's proven indispensable.

OneDrive

OneDrive is Microsoft's answer to Dropbox and Google Drive storage services. It works much the same way and is the perfect way for a team to share large files back and forth in the cloud. You can also share files externally with any outside stakeholders. You can store up to 1 TB of information – which is more than enough for pretty much any project. You can access it from anywhere on the web or install the app on your computer and keep it synced across multiple computers.

These are just a few of the apps that can help you succeed when working remotely. Blacknight sells Office 365 subscriptions, and we can link it to your own custom domain so that all your employees have cloud-hosted email, calendars and apps like this (but they must all use Office 365, you can't mix with other online email services). Your data is secure in the cloud using the latest encryption technologies, all managed by Microsoft. Data is backed up and saved in multiple locations – yes even when you accidentally delete something. Most of all – the entire suite offers you the flexibility to get your work done on the devices where work best – whether that's on a desktop, laptop, or mobile app, in the places you're most productive. We offer a 30-day free trial and now is a good a time as any to give it a go. After that, the Business Essentials plan costs just €4.20 /month per user.

12 Tips for Having a Successful Video Conference

As we all get used to the new reality of working from home, one thing we have to contend with is non-stop Zoom, Slack, Microsoft Teams, FaceTime, Skype, etc. video calls. In-person meetings have been replaced with virtual meetings. We're getting a sneak peek into our co-workers home environments, and it can be fun. Some companies are holding Friday happy hours on Zoom. Others are holding company all-hands meetings (like Blacknight did on Zoom recently). Most are just having important calls with colleagues to get some work done. This has created a whole new social situation that not everyone has been completely prepared for. This is all so new – there aren't exactly best practices in place for work video calls in many corporate policies. So, we thought it would be fun to put together a short list to help out. It's meant to be serious, but we also want to be a bit fun as well.

Put on Trousers (pants)

Seriously. If you have a video call, get dressed. This means trousers. You don't want to have to get up in the call all of a sudden and show your co-workers your stripey pyjama bottoms. No one wants to see that. Look presentable. You don't have to put on a suit and tie (unless it's a job interview!) but look like you would when you go to the office. Make yourself presentable. Comb your hair!

Check your camera angle

This is something I've noticed in the course of the Covid-19 situation. Lots of co-workers nostrils as many are working on laptops. The angle is unforgiving. No one wants to see your nostrils. I would suggest doing what my wife does – she sets her laptop on a stack of books for video calls, so the angle is straight on her face, instead of looking up at her.

Test the tool first – mic, video, etc

If you've never used the video conferencing tool before, play around with it before having an important call. All of them do fundamentally the same thing, but each one does things a little differently. Check your settings – make sure your microphone is turned on, and your camera works. We've all gotten on to a video call only to see someone talking, and not able to actually hear them or they accidentally share their screen and you see something you shouldn't.

Check your connection

Do a speed test before an important call. Make sure you have a good connection. A wired connection in your house or a connection near your wireless router is the best option. Wireless connections outside the house (like through your mobile) are not ideal – connections can be bad and the cell networks might de-prioritise data-heavy connections like a video chat. If anyone in your house is streaming something or you're doing massive downloads, pause them for the duration of the call. Services like Zoom and Microsoft Teams have been struggling with the extra service load right now, do the best you can on your end to keep a good connection.

Make sure you're muted/camera turned off when needed

All services give you the option to mute your microphone or turn your camera off. Test this function, know where it is. If you're not the main speaker in a call, it's a good idea to just keep yourself muted until you need to speak (in Zoom you can press the space bar to turn the microphone on – like a walkie-talkie). That way, no background noise in your house will interrupt the person you're talking with. There have been funny memes going around showing people who have forgotten to turn their camera off or mute the microphone and then doing something embarrassing. Don't be this person. **Don't become a meme.** Many of these sessions are being recorded.

Improve the lighting

Check your lighting. You know how when someone appears on TV, they look great? That's mostly down to good lighting. Now, you can't be expected to have studio lighting in your house. But you can grab an extra lamp or two and make sure you're evenly lit. Don't sit in front of a window – the camera will focus on the light behind you, and put your face in shadow. Your meeting partners want to see you, not the view behind you.

If possible wear a headset

I highly recommend picking up a USB headset online that has headphones and a microphone. Most people have headphones but rely on the microphone on your computer. This is like using a waterfall to fill a stream. The computer mic will pick up all the sound in your house and amplify it to your co-workers. If you have a headset, the mic will only mostly pick up your own voice.

Keep pets out unless the call is informal

Most people love seeing other people's pets, but if you can, try to keep them out of the frame. It can become a distraction for others talking on the call. If the call is informal, then, by all means, invite the cat or puppy in. This is also why it's good to get a headset; it will filter out any unexpected barks or meows.

Organise behind you

One of the biggest elements in selling a house for a good price is staging. Stage your video conferencing space too. I've seen most people plop their camera in front of their bookcases; this is fine. But at least make sure they're organised. Apps like Zoom let you block out the background or replace it; this is nice too as it keeps things distraction-free. No one wants to see a mess behind you while you're talking, it's a distraction. Tidy up. Organise the books. Or point the camera at an empty wall.

Posture and body language

A good rule of thumb to video calls is to look at it like you're standing in front of the person and talking to them. Social cues apply. Sit up. Listen intently, look at the camera as it apes looking them in the eye. Wait for them to finish speaking before talking. Be nice, don't be rude. The normal rules of conversation apply here, except with a second or two of delay. For example, put your mobile phone down. Reading your phone while someone is talking to you on a video call, is just as rude as doing it to them in person. With video calls, it's easy to fall into the mind trap that it's the uncanny valley and it's not 'real.' No, it's real, and it's a human you're talking to.

Prepare, prepare, prepare

If you're the host of a call and have to either make a speech or presentation, it's very important to be prepared. It's easy to feel like this is an informal setting, but if you have to present something, know the material. Have a written outline or a script in front of you to keep you on topic. Do a run-through beforehand (even testing the camera setup and lighting). Test your screen sharing, test the apps you're using, so there are no hiccups when it comes to showtime.

Meeting Hosts – Watch out for abuse!

This is more for meeting organisers. Watch out for abuse in meetings. A new term has been coined 'Zoom-bombing' where people interrupt meetings they're not supposed to be a part of and do things that are untoward. Apps like Zoom are working on fixes, but until then, keep an eye out for people who should not be on your meeting. And if a co-worker begins to do something that's not appropriate, cut them off. Change

settings to manually approve anyone joining you might not know. You can also password protect the calls as well.

Strategies for Working from Home if You Have Kids

Working from home has a completely different dimension to it when you have kids, and they're not in school. Which is the situation that many of us are finding ourselves in right now as we self-isolate from Covid-19. Many of us find ourselves being both the nursery/daycare, teacher, cook, cleaner on top of doing our actual jobs all the while trying to keep it together for the kids who don't completely grasp what is going on. It can be a bit much for parents to handle.

I've worked from home for almost ten years, and through that time, and when I started, I had a newborn baby. Now I have two kids, both school-aged and very much into the argument phase of their lives (which I suspect will never end!). When the children were younger, they were much more hands-on and required a lot more care during the day. Now that they're school age and have their own interests, it's easier to make working from home actually work.

Here are some tips I've picked up over the years for working from home while being a full-time remote working parent. I hope you find it helpful!

Bribery Is Your Superpower

I've talked about this in my previous posts on working remotely. I'm not above bribing my children to get them to cooperate during the workday. The carrot and stick approach works quite well when you're dealing with the expectation of a little human that pretty much just eats, sleeps and spends the day being entertained (living the dream, right?). Even at a very young age, your kids will have specific desires. Use those desires to get them to leave you alone for a while. Don't make promises bigger than you can keep or are willing to fulfil (do not, under any circumstance, promise a dog or a cat, so they're quiet for a Zoom call!). If you start losing track of all the bribes/promises/deals…. A simple shared spreadsheet between the adults can keep track of things. You don't want to buy Robux, the in-game currency for the popular game Roblox (see below), twice!

Movies and TV

When kids are very young, they'll often sit for hours and watch the same movie or TV show over and over. This is extremely helpful. Before they started school, I used to sit on the couch with them and watch movies over and over while I worked on my laptop. I can probably recite the dialogue from the entire Cars movie. As they get older, their attention begins to wander, and they'll sit for shorter and shorter amounts of time. But keep their favourite DVDs in a stack and ready to go. Better yet, if they're old enough, show them how to put it in. If you have a Smart TV or Roku or Firestick, show your kids how to work it – how to get to their favourites shows on Netflix or Disney+. When my 6-year old daughter gets up every morning now, I fix her breakfast, and she takes it into the sitting room and talks into the remote for it to pull up her favourite show.

You need a tablet

A TV is a great tool, but a tablet is a Swiss army knife. Each of our kids has their own iPad. They also have their own pair of wireless noise-cancelling headphones. This keeps them quiet and busy for hours on hours, especially when they really get into their games. It's also handy for long car trips when we're able to go on long car trips again. But it's helpful to keep a tablet, or even your phone, on your desk so that when they wander in while you're doing something important, hand them a device and tell them to bugger off. But don't rely on the tablet too much – and always check to see what they're actually doing. They can stumble across many things not appropriate for their age. Check app settings, check parental controls, etc. It's sometimes too much of a good thing too – staring at a tablet for too long can lead to irritability or tiredness. Kids get lethargic too!

Creativity!

Kids love being creative; young children especially. And this is something they'll definitely be missing from school. Set up a spot where your kids can do projects that allow them to be creative – and yes – make a bit of a mess. There are plenty of videos on YouTube kids can follow, or you can even take a break and do something fun with them. Even something like Play-doh or Lego can keep kids occupied for hours. Sometimes it's simple things like water-colour painting or putting some water in a washtub and giving your child some cars and letting them pretend it's a car wash. My wife used to make homemade slime from household ingredients. It made a terrible mess, but it kept them happy for hours!

Chores!

They get bored easily, especially right now when they can't go anywhere. It's a continual source of argument, especially with my son. So, when they come to us bored, we tell them we have something they can do: chores! Half the time they'll run away because they don't want to do chores. The other half of the time, they will be SO bored that they'll be willing to actually do them (and paying them for small chores certainly helps). Mine are at an age where they've started to become useful at chores (rather than just make more work for the grown-ups). If you have older kids (like teens) it's a great opportunity to let them learn some initiative and encourage them to find chores and activities around the house they might enjoy – or at least tolerate doing.

Have Ample Snacks

I had no idea how much kids eat until I had them. They eat an unbelievable amount of food. They don't eat three meals a day. They eat twenty. They are, quite literally, Hobbits. We've started bulk-buying the snacks. They are always ready and on hand for feeding. We keep most of them in a cabinet that they can reach so when they come to us and say they're hungry we just tell them: "You know where the food is." It's also important to have some healthy balance, pre-packaged snacks are not necessarily the healthiest of options sometimes (even if they're easy). We tend to buy fruit and cut it up and store it in the fridge for them. We try to push them away from potato chips… but sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do!

Naptime!

My kids have grown out of taking naps. And I miss them. But if you're kids are five and under, nap time is the most important part of the workday. Plan the work where you need to focus the most during the regularly scheduled nap time—also a good time to schedule that conference call or Zoom meeting. I used to be able to set my clock around nap time, and it was glorious (especially when they still took TWO naps a day).

Speak to Them – Tell Them You Have a Bloody Call

While my little ones have a reputation for being unreasonable creatures that seek only to fulfil the desires of the basic Human Id; they can sometimes be reasonable. Talk to them. Tell them your schedule for the day, or that you need to focus on a particular task or to get dressed so if they wander into a Zoom call, they are clothed. Give them a sense of ownership of the success of your workday (other than 'You like having a roof over your head?). It won't work all the time, but it will help.

Promise Walks or to play their games.

While we 'self-isolate' we're not supposed to go anywhere. But we can go on short walks around the neighbourhood or down the street as long as we stay away from others (follow all local government guidance on social distancing). Kids are like pets; they need to go for walkies too. Tell them if you get what you need to get done, you can all go on a walk together. Or kick the football around in the back garden. Or

play on the swingset. It's really hard to fulfil these promises – often by the end of the day, we parents are shattered from everything we've had to do during the day. So, don't make promises you don't want to keep. But a walk down the street, even if it's only a few hundred feet, will do all of you good.

Introduce them to new games that will occupy them

With the internet, we have unlimited entertainment options. And depending on their age, they may like various games. Find new ones they can play. Let them loose in an imaginary world, and they'll leave you alone for hours. My kids are obsessed with Roblox, a Minecraft like game where they build their own little worlds and play with their friends. It keeps them connected with their school mates. I bloody hate it; I've spent so much on the in-game currency they need to play it. But you know what? It's allowed me to get so much done (like writing this blog post – they're upstairs playing it right now).

This is all hard on the kids too

As 'grown-ups' we spend a majority of our mental energy worrying about the Covid-19 situation, the state of the world and how it's affecting us and our work. Kids process things differently and this is very hard on them. We started to notice this with our daughter (not so much our son, who hates school). Look at it from their perspective – they had a routine, they had school, they had friends and a social world you have no exposure too. Then one day, they were sent home from school and told they weren't going back. At first, it was fun! Like an early summer vacation. But a few weeks on, the cracks are starting to appear. Keep an eye on their emotional state. They will require a bit of extra attention during this difficult time.

You Need Flexibility

After bribery, the number one thing you'll need to succeed as a work from home parent is flexibility. You cannot expect your kids to leave you alone for an entire 9-5 workday. They will interrupt you. They will want your attention for something. They will want a cuddle or two here and there. This means you need to be flexible in your work habits and your expectations for what you can actually get done. Thankfully, with so many people working from home right now, managers and bosses appear to be very understanding – most of them have kids too!

Then, there is the night shift.

This fits into the above point I was making about flexibility. You cannot possibly expect yourself to get everything you would get done in a 'normal' workday when you're working from home with spouses, kids and pets. It's just not physically possible. Most employers are being pretty understanding. This is difficult for everyone. However, there will be instances when you need to get something important done, and the best time do that is in the evenings when everyone else has gone to bed. In fact, I did this last night myself. There's something to be said for knowing everyone is asleep in their beds, throwing on the noise-cancelling headphones and ploughing through some work. It can even be rewarding and enjoyable.

Send them outside

I'm lucky that I live in the middle of nowhere with several hectares of woods. If they get out of hand or too bored, we can just send them outside. They have all kinds of adventures in the woods (and get up to no good as well…). The weather is nice enough now that we can do this. We have a couple of cameras on the house, so we can keep an eye on their movements while we work. But you can do this with a back garden too. They can have plenty of fun and adventures in the back garden. Order that cheap slide from Amazon or get a paddling pool when it gets warmer.

Don't be too self-conscious; we're all doing this right now

You are not alone. Millions of us are working from home and parenting at the same time. Don't be too self-conscious about the kids appearing on your Zoom call or kids being heard in the background (also if you're not talking, mute yourself in a video conference!). Many others are experiencing the same thing right now. Employers of the world cannot expect office-level decorum in the home when everyone is literally forced to be there. We're all in this together, and it will end eventually.

Savour the quality time too

There is no denying that this isn't difficult. But when we are in the go go work world, it's easy to lose sight of the things that were most important to us. Don't spend all day fighting off the kids, try to savour the small moments too. This is a very unique situation, and it will likely never happen again. There are so many unexpected opportunities for quality family time during the day and weekends. Don't miss out on something special just because you need to turn something in. Any work can wait. Quality time with your kids as they get older will decrease as they become their own people and don't WANT to hang out with the whole family. Try to make the most of the time that they do. Eventually, this will end, and we'll all have to return to our offices and schools. There will be many things we will miss from the lock-in. My wife works in a high-stress job in Chicago that requires a four-hour daily commute before Covid-19. Having her home every day with the kids, and I is a wondrous treat, and I don't want it to end.

You got this!

Tips for Separating Work From Home When You Work From Home

Before Covid-19, many of us had a clear separation of work and home. Work was a place we went to. The home was the place where we lived and were most comfortable. They rarely met unless you occasionally worked at home. Now, all of a sudden, millions that are able to are working from home. It's a strange state of mind, working properly in your own home, the place where you generally think of as your escape from work. So, how do you separate the two when you never leave the place? As usual, we have tips!

Use a separate room if you can

This is the big one, really. Set up a separate workspace. Whether it's an office with a door, a guest room, a table in the garden shed, a spot in a cupboard (or under the stairs Harry Potter style), make a space that is solely dedicated to working. That way, when your workday is over, or you're on your lunch break, you can shut the door and put work away. Much like you left work before. This will not be possible for everyone, especially those working from home with kids around – often times you have to set up at a central point in the house to wrangle kids, pets and meals. Be careful doing this, because it can quickly feel like you're never leaving work and never leaving home. It puts you in a sort of purgatory state of mind. Also, having a separate space helps set the tone with the kids; they eventually understand that it's the place where you're working and treat it as much. If you don't have a separate room you can use, use a part of a room where you won't spend much time outside of work hours, that way you don't see work staring back at you when you're trying to relax.

Set a schedule

Try to stick to a regular schedule – and this is probably dictated by your employer anyway. But work the same hours that you normally would. You might have to pad it by a couple of hours on each end of the day depending on how many interruptions you had to manage with the kids. But if you set a schedule with yourself and with your family, everyone can be mindful of the clock (and it's a great exercise in introducing young ones to how clocks work). And then when you're workday is over, you can shut off and focus on home and hearth.

Distractions will abound

There will be dirty dishes in the sink, staring back at you. The laundry will need to be done. The dogs still need to go for walkies. There will not be a shortage of distractions when you work from home, especially if you're home with the kids and pets. Everyone has to work together to realize that during the workday, work must be done. It will be disheartening to have to do the chores at the end of the day after you've been working all day, but it's for the best. Your best work requires focus.

Get Noise Cancelling Headphones

This helps with the above. Get yourself a good pair of noise-cancelling headphones. This puts your mind in its own little workspace and blocks out all distractions. Music helps with work anyway. Sometimes I put them on and forget to turn music on, they just help quiet things down. Though I would not recommend this if you don't have someone at home to help with the kids, many times, it's not possible to tune out your kids completely. If there are multiple adults in the house, perhaps set a schedule of headphone time, so that everyone can have some and someone always has an ear out for the kids.

Mute Notifications in the evenings and weekends

Most people do this anyway, and most productivity apps like Slack and Microsoft Teams let you do this – mute your notifications, so you're not getting notified of work-related stuff during your off-hours. Unless you're on call or have a mission-critical role, most things can wait until the morning or Monday. Most employers understand this. If they absolutely need you they can simply call. But not having the notifications

on puts work stuff out of your mind, and you don't feel the need to respond to a Slack ping the same way you could respond to a Facebook or Instagram notification.

Take Breaks Throughout the day as you would in the office

When you work in an office setting, most people are chained to their desks all day with no breaks – many people have ample breaks or make a cup of tea. Tea helps fuel great work. So, take the time while at home too to take breaks and make a cuppa. It can sometimes feel like you're not doing enough when you're working at home, but if your managers have problems with our work output, they'll tell you. Just get your work done and keep doing good work, and you don't need to feel guilty for taking a break to brew a cuppa.

Create a Separate User On Your Personal Computer For Work

Many employers will provide a work computer for you. Obviously, only use this computer for work purposes. Do not use it for your personal stuff as that can create problems of ownership over the things you do on it. Keep your personal stuff on your personal machine. If, however, you're not provided with a computer, and you need to use your own machine, I would recommend creating a separate user account where you only do work stuff. This keeps your work and personal stuff separate and will keep your IT department happy as it'll be a more secure environment.

Exercise

We should all be doing this anyway so we don't put on the 'Covid-19' while we're all in self-isolation. But exercise can help keep you productive, and it gives you a release to look forward to. Some people even set up their laptop on their treadmills and answer their morning emails while they walk or run.

Get Dressed

I mentioned this several times in previous work from home posts. Always get dressed to go to work. You don't have to put on your suit and tie or put on all your make-up. But I've found that simply getting dressed properly helps your mind get ready to work. If you stay in your pyjamas all day, it keeps you in a pyjama state of mind. This isn't the case with everyone, but it really works for me (and my wife, who also works from home).

Set Expectations

Talk with your manager (or managers) and make sure that you are all on the same page for expectations while you're working from home. Make clear that you have responsibilities at home that you might have to tend to during the day. Make it clear that you will try to get everything done that you can. But some things might get pushed into the next day. Everyone needs some flexibility here. Many are in the same boat right now so everyone just has to put in a little extra effort to make this situation work for family and professional life.

10 Tips For Working From Home For The First Time

With the global outbreak of Covid-19 (aka the Coronavirus), many people have the opportunity to work from home for the first time, though often not out of choice. Offices are being cautious, events are being cancelled, and the global economy is starting to show some strain. This is a fast-moving situation with things changing every day. No matter where you are, you might find yourself unexpectedly working from home. If you've not done it before, this can be jarring.

If your employer has decided to let you or ordered you to work from home, here are a few tips from someone who has worked from home for over a decade. Working from home is not like working in an office. And it's easy to get complacent and comfortable in the one place where you're most comfortable.

Here are my ten tips to make the most of working at home.

Follow Your Normal Work Routine

This is the most critical. It's easy for your normal habits to break down when you're in the comfort of your own home. This can hamper productivity. So, if you're normally up at say 7 am to get ready for work, then continue to do so. Have your breakfast, have your tea, get ready for the day. Then sit down to work when you normally would. Try to stick to your normal work hours as working from home. The hours can blur between home and work if you're answering emails or tickets outside of work hours.

Always Get Dressed

You're at home. It's so tempting to just work in your pyjamas or your sloppiest tracksuit. I recommend always getting dressed, properly. You don't need to put on a suit and tie, but get dressed like you would when you normally leave the house. I would even put socks and shoes on. Though it might be a bit weird to wear shoes in your own house. This sets a mental tone for the workday and allows you to follow your regular routine.

Have a Workspace with a door

Working at home has just as many distractions, if not more than you would in an office setting. So, work in a room with a door, that you can shut. This isn't just for wayward children and pets; it works for spouses too (my spouse is always a great distraction because, of course, I'd rather chat with her than work). This also helps keep house noises low for important conference calls, of which I'm sure there will be many.

Plan snacks, meals and tea breaks

Most people are bad about eating during the workday anyway, but being at home is no excuse. You have everything there to eat, so eat properly. That means breakfast (before work, not after you've sat down to start). Take an hour break for lunch – make something nutritious (or not). In some European countries, you are required to have a lunch break anyway. Take the time. Also, plan in regular tea/coffee breaks in between meals. After an hour or two of intense work, get up and walk around the house to clear your mind.

Pet the Pets

If you have pets, they will require a bit of extra management. Your cat may or may not be pleased that you're home during the day, but be sure to give them some extra pets. I recommend setting up a blanket or old sweatshirt on the desk as a makeshift bed for the cat – this keeps them out of your lap and off your keyboard but still in their presence. If they're in your lap, you can't type (and you won't want to). Don't let them in your lap.

While your cat will act indifferent to your extra presence, your dog will be VERY EXCITED that you're there. It will expect to played with. My dog always brings his tug of war rope to my desk while I'm working, and I have

to disappoint him by telling him to go away. But occasionally literally throw him a bone. He'll be happy and reward you by laying at your feet (and possibly keeping them warm in colder climes). I recommend shutting a door when you have a video call, as pets will love to try and get on camera. Though this may prove popular with your co-workers if it happens!

Leave the TV Off

Most workers don't have a TV in the office, so don't turn one on at home, either. The TV will simply distract you. And daytime TV is usually rubbish anyway. It's sugary sweets for the mind. It will not help you focus in any way.

Blast Some Music

If you're alone, take the chance to blast some music to get the work muscles pumping. If your family is Corona-quarantined with you – make sure you have a good pair of noise-cancelling headphones (and make sure they do too!). Then blast to your heart's content.

Be Ready for Video Calls

This plays into the first tip of being dressed for the day (and hair combed or styled). You may have to do video calls with your colleagues. It's important to think about what will be in view of the camera. You can probably get away with a messy desk as that won't be visible. But my pro tip is to always make sure the area behind you is clean, as that's what others will see on a video call. I can't tell you how fixated I've become with what's behind co-workers on a call rather than what they're talking to me about. A good way to test is to open Photo Booth on the Mac or a similar app on the PC and see what the camera sees.

Managing the Kids

The hardest part of working from home is managing the needs and expectations of my kids. Thankfully, mine are both school-aged, so they're usually gone all day. But if you're stuck in the house because of Covid-19, chances are they will be too. So, be clear with them that you have to work. Give them things to do. Maybe sign them up for that new game they really want to play, that will keep them busy. Also, I'm not above bribery either. I often make deals with them, say you leave me alone to get my work done, and we'll do something special when I'm done though options may be limited if you're all stuck in the house. But usual parenting tips apply. Keep tablets charged, computers on, a stack of DVD's at the ready, snacks easy to find, and TV's tuned to the kids' channels. Give them advance warning of important calls so they know to leave you alone or keep the screaming to a minimum.

And if the internet goes out, you're all doomed.

Everyone Needs to Set Expectations

As someone who works from home all the time, it can sometimes feel like you're not doing enough. But as long as everyone – you, your bosses and your co-workers, have clear expectations, you can avoid the trap of thinking you're never getting enough done. It's also important to manage expectations with those you share your home with. Everyone has important work to do; you're all going to have to work together to make sure it gets done. And yes, your kids and pets have expectations too (if you have them), though those are usually easier to meet! Remember to keep in regular touch with your other colleagu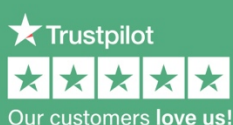es via Slack, Teams, Skype, Facetime etc.