

How to stay focused and productive when working from home

Whether you're working from home in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic or in a distributed team, remote work can come with unique challenges. Especially if you're not used to it, it can be tough to channel the same level of focus that you might have in an office setting. And when you're suddenly away from the rest of your team, a lack of collaboration and connection can be difficult to navigate.

Establish clear working hours

"I'm a creature of habit, and though I could work from anywhere in the world, nothing beats routine. I run my errands in the morning, start my workday between 9:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m., and only work in my office space. I simply refuse to look at my work email once I've signed off for the day. Having a routine and boundaries helps keep me sharp and focused and allows me to enjoy my evenings."

Close non-work related tabs

"I've never worked in an office. I've had to create my schedule and train others who have been independent for years. To stay focused, I suggest doing two simple things before you start working in the morning: taking social media apps off your phone and closing any open tabs on your computer. It's easy to get distracted by the alerts. You can create a system to check them but limit your exposure."

Write things down

"I make sure to write things down on paper when I'm working from home. When you are working remotely, you will probably spend much more time looking at a screen than when you are in an office. I find that my eyes need regular screen breaks. Plus, nothing beats the satisfaction of scratching an item off your list! Clicking a checkbox in your online calendar just can't compete with that."

Tidy up first

"I find that my biggest distraction is when the space around me feels untidy. When I work from home, I tidy up as much as possible before bed and take a few minutes in the morning to finish any tidying. Then, I set out my tasks that need to be accomplished for the day and start working. I find this routine really helps my mind stay focused on my work instead of the 'home things' that need to get done."

Change out of your pajamas

"I suggest getting dressed in workwear every day. No PJ's while working from home! This helps shift your mindset from 'I'm just going to lounge around on the couch today'" to 'It's time to crush all my goals today.' This is a process I start the night before. I lay out my work clothes for the day ahead, which is an old habit from when I used to work in an office. It's a time-saver in the morning, and it helps improve my focus for the entire day."

Establish a designated work area

"I have a dedicated office that is separated from the main part of my house. When I am there, I am quite cut off from the rest of the house, and I can focus on my work. I appreciate that this complete separation is not always possible, but it's important to have some sort of physical boundary when working from home — ideally away from your bed, kitchen, and TV."

Eat your meals in a different room

"I find that it's helpful to eat your meals away from your workstation. Having the mental break and taking time for mindful eating will result in a more productive afternoon."

Step outside to reset

"When working from home, I always try to leave my apartment for a short break just as I do at the office for a quick reset. Most often, I'll run out and grab a coffee before my day starts or pick up some lunch. Leaving my apartment and workspace for a brief period allows me to move my body, get some fresh air, and provides me with a mental reset so that I can ensure I am productive upon returning to my work."

Take a real lunch break

"On days I work from home, I do my best to stick to my typical going-into-the-office routine. For example, I make sure that my alarm goes off at the same time. I shower and get dressed as though I'm going to the office. I take a break for lunch — and since I have eliminated commute time, I can give myself a pat on the back and sometimes wrap my day a bit earlier because I've been more productive!"

Start your day with mindfulness

"I have been running my consulting business out of my home office for five years. Just as I commit to conference calls and meetings, I commit to practicing daily self-care rituals. Instead of checking my email when I wake up, I read a daily affirmation. I commit to ten minutes of mindfulness a day, which typically includes a guided meditation or breathing exercise. My best ideas and solutions to problems come to me when my body feels energized and my mind is clear."

Incorporate bursts of movement

"I try to incorporate exercise throughout my day. I write for a couple hours, then move, and repeat this pattern throughout the day. My movement usually includes walking, yoga, and even doing household chores."

Open the window

"Over the years, I've learned to nourish myself while working from home through incorporating regular short breaks, standing up, opening the window for a deep breath, and going for a walk during lunchtime. Diffusing some essential oils for concentration and motivation also helps me a lot."

Take little micro-breaks

"I reward myself after I've completed various work tasks with walks outside, short breaks to watch YouTube videos, and snuggles with my dog!"

Assign timeslots to your tasks

"When writing a to-do item in my calendar, I assign the item a certain amount of time. When you are working at home alone, the time can really run away from you! I find it helpful to assign blocks of specific time to your tasks."

Set an alarm for 25-minute work intervals

"To stay healthy and productive when working from home, I schedule breaks into my workday by setting an alarm for 25 minutes any time I get in front of my computer. I focus on work for those 25 minutes and ignore other distractions. When the alarm goes off, I get up and take a break to stretch, move, reset my posture, and check my phone before getting back to work."

Schedule at least one call or meeting

"I tend to be extremely productive on the days I work remotely, but it can come with a feeling of isolation. I make sure that I have at least one call or meeting scheduled for the days I work remotely and have conversations on G-chat so the workflow can progress at an appropriate rate. Taking these steps allows me to stay focused and feel connected to my team."

Notify your team about your priorities

"Working from home can be hugely productive if you have the discipline to carve out chunks of time dedicated to key priorities. I notify colleagues when I am working from home and let them know that I will be committing the next few hours to important tasks and critical projects. This helps to minimize interruptions."

Switch up your working space

"My husband and I work at home together and now that my daughter's school is closed, she is studying remotely. We each have two areas set up in different ways that we can switch off to when we get bored. All desks are by windows and some include standing desks."

Stay connected to teammates

"Working from home can be lonely and having no colleagues or teammates to talk to can be emotionally exhausting. I make an effort to sync up with the team every day on video calls or over the phone. The daily syncs and occasional jokes help me stay connected and not lose my mind. Talking regularly to other humans is important for our productivity!"

By Marina Khidekel, Thriving in the New Normal - Thrive Global