Managing and Working from Home

Juno's 7 Top Tips

'Work is a thing you do, not a place you go'

Scott McCool, New Statesman 2014

The way organisations view remote working has had to change over recent months.

Managers need to trust their teams to make remote working successful; team members need to take responsibility for earning that trust.

Transitioning from office to remote working seamlessly doesn't happen overnight. Here are some tips to help you manage yourself and your team:

1. Be 'visible'

Being alone shouldn't mean feeling lonely. And yet without 'intentional' communication and connection, as a remote worker you may feel some isolation at times.

Staying visible – even virtually so – is important. Taking ownership for what you need, when you need it and from whom, is down to you; it may not be picked up by your manager/ colleagues, particularly if they are also working remotely

2. Over-communicate

The key to being successful in any role is good communication, but when it comes to remote working, it is critical. You cannot communicate enough!

Since you won't be within chatting distance of your colleagues, it's important to keep in touch - whether in terms of the team's efficiency (progress on projects etc) or in terms of its morale (making the space to check how people are) .

It's important to signal to each other when you need either support or challenge, and how you want that to look. Stay aware of your feelings, needs and challenges, but also of those of others.

3. Interact socially

Informal, 'in the moment' conversations happen naturally when people physically work together. What sort of conversations have *you* had at the watercooler, drinks machine or in the corridor?

You may not have talked about work, but if you did, those conversations were probably different to the ones you'd have at your desk. Sometimes we simply need to get away from our work area and give ourselves a break in the company of others (but do bear in mind, we each have different needs about how often we do this – and with how many people!)

Chances are, whatever the topic at hand, you'll have felt a sense of engagement and maybe even built a relationship or two. It's easy to take these interactions for granted – until you don't have them.

4. Create virtual interactions

So, how might you replace these informal interactions 'virtually'?

Could you break for coffee or lunch together? Might there be a film or book that you encourage each other to see/read and you share your reactions and ratings? Is there an interest that each of you has, and you tell each other about it? Even better, you could encourage them to join you (virtually if not physically)!

It can feel strange to plan for such 'spontaneous' social interaction! Yet with remote working, if such communication isn't intentional, at least in the early days, the chances of it happening 'spontaneously' are slim.

5. Figure out your 'workstyle'

Get to know yourself and what works for you as a remote worker. Work with, rather than against, your preferences.

Unless you have other people working or living around you, or there are noise/space/other restrictions, then you can be fairly creative! Do try and find somewhere with natural light, as it's much better for mental and physical health.

Here are some work style guidelines to get you started:

a. Separate 'work' and 'home'
It's important to draw lines between work and home. How you make this separation will depend on you – there are no hard and fast rules.

For example, you might: get dressed for the working day as if going to the office; go for a walk when you'd normally commute; take breaks or lunch at particular times, before then transitioning to 'home life' as you might from a day in the office.

How you set up your physical work environment might replicate your office – or it might be entirely different! Either way, it can help to make your choice 'deliberate' - so while your chosen environment doesn't have to be conventional (desk and chair) it should ideally signal 'work'.

b. Know when to log on and log off
When the line between "work" and "home" starts to blur, you might find yourself at your computer screen for a longer period of time than you would be in the office.

This can be one of the most challenging aspects for remote workers, as the world is becoming increasingly connected. With no access to colleagues who might ordinarily pull you away, it's easy to lose track of time.

Though you may receive emails and texts at any hour, it's important to develop a habit of setting a time when you officially "log on" and "log off".

The best part of working remotely is having the flexibility to work when you are most productive, but be careful not to slip into working all hours, just because you can…

c. Know your 'prime time'

When are *you* most productive?

Are you a 'morning' or an 'evening' person, or do you have little preference?

Are you more motivated by taking small breaks throughout the day, or a longer midday break?

Also, pay attention to your energy patterns.

Do you prefer to work steadily to complete a deadline, i.e. work now, 'play' later, or are you someone who sees time as more 'elastic', preferring to break up work as you go along with what you see as 'play'?

Your choice of prime time may affect someone else in your household, or on the team. This needs some negotiation to ensure that you can work when it suits you best – but without affecting others.

d. Noisy or quiet?

Does background noise or music help you concentrate? The radio or your preferred playlists will help.

Prefer to work in silence? It might be time to invest in some noise-cancelling headphones or to find somewhere where you can work in peace.

6. Taking pit stops

Whatever your preferred energy pattern, it's worth remembering that most of us work best when we step away from our screens at regular intervals. A 20 – minute screen break to do something else is recommended for every hour of work at a screen.

As well as taking screen breaks, we also need to make time for 'pit stops' from work altogether across the day.

Pit stops can be anything that help you break away from your work-space. These happen naturally when you are co-located; you might visit colleagues or the coffee machine; join in a conversation around you that isn't necessarily about work. These are helpful 'distractions' that we don't have access to at home. Try setting reminders to move away from your screen, or to take a break from work altogether.

Because remote workers are far more likely to 'keep going', they can suffer from physical tension.

Where do *you* hold physical tension?

One of the most frequently mentioned signs of physical tension is in neck and shoulder pain. There's even a name for it – 'tech neck'!

It happens when you're working on a computer or looking down at your phone and the muscles in the back of your neck have to contract to hold your head up. And it's becoming more and more common.

The result? Headaches, neck spasms and creaky shoulder joints caused by holding your neck still for long periods.

Make sure you move and change position throughout the day so as not to allow tension to build.

It's also important to strengthen the muscles of the upper shoulder and neck.

Try this now: stand comfortably and lift your shoulders up to your ears. If you are clenching your jaw or holding your breath - relax! Now slowly drop your shoulders. And then see if you can drop them again. Aim to increase the distance between your ears and your shoulders each time.

Gentle shoulder shrugging at any time will improve movement and blood flow and can help ease discomfort.

7. Breathing better

We don't usually spend time thinking about how effectively we breathe, and yet, focusing on this can help you feel calmer and therefore has a real role in self-care.

Let's start with the basics. Breathe in and out through your nose and not through your mouth. This will relax you on all levels.

Air inhaled through our nose is filtered, so the air we use is cleaner. Nose breathing stops our mouths drying out (a classic and uncomfortable sign of stress). Our lungs take in oxygen from the air, with absorption of oxygen happening mostly during exhalation. Exhaling through the nose, which is smaller than the mouth, creates greater air pressure and is therefore slower, giving our lungs extra time to extract a greater amount of oxygen. On a final note, nasal breathing helps reduce snoring and can ensure a better night's sleep for everyone!

Here is a simple, yet very valuable, relaxation technique and you can pretty much do it anywhere:

5 step breathing

Once you know it, try working through it with your eyes closed; it's ideal to do before falling asleep as well as at any time during your working day.

First, simply breathe in and out through your nose, slowly. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. It should be your stomach rising on your in-breath more than your chest. If you are breathing really effectively, you will feel your rib cage moving outwards as well as upwards when breathing in. This takes focused thought and plenty of practice and may not be how you habitually breathe just yet. It can be learnt like any new behaviour and will give you real benefit: mental sharpness, calm, and overall health.

Now, you're ready for the 5 steps:

1. On your in-breath, tense your toes, feet and lower legs, then release them fully on your out- breath. Always breathing using your nose and not your mouth
2. On your in-breath, tense your knees, upper leg and bottom, then release them fully on your out-breath
3. On your in-breath, tense your stomach, and then release it fully on your out-breath.
4. On your in-breath, tense your hands, arms, shoulders and jaw, then release them on your out-breath
5. On your in-breath, tense every muscle in your body, release once on your out-breath, then see if you can release even more

Why not step outside and get some fresh air while doing this breathing exercise? Both body and mind will benefit. Stepping away from your work-space for a few minutes will give you enough space and distance for 'micro-recovery'. This is when renewed thinking happens, and even a different perspective if we are facing a challenge. You are quite literally 'taking a breather'.

Have a big stretch and yawn, as yawning gets rid of the excess carbon dioxide in your body and prepares the way for fresh oxygen supplies through effective breathing.