

PRODUCTIVITY

# How to Stay Focused When You're Working from Home

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No commute. No drive-by meetings. No dress code. Remote working can seem like a dream — until personal obligations get in the way. These distractions are easy to ignore in an office, but at home it can be difficult to draw the line between personal and professional time.

Consider when you're working on a project and get a call from a friend. You know you need to finish your work, but you feel rude for not talking when you *technically* could. Or think about when you're

planning your daily to-do list, but also need to decide when you'll squeeze in your personal commitments. Taking the time to put a few loads of laundry in the washer midday can seem like a quick task — until you find yourself making up that work time late at night. In the end, it's never entirely clear when you're really “on” or “off.”

As someone who has worked from home for 12 years, and been a time management coach for remote workers, I've seen and experienced the good, the bad, and the ugly. I've found that the most focused and effective remote workers set up boundaries for themselves so that they can actually get work done.

Here are some tips for how you can make remote work more productive and satisfying, whether it's an everyday occurrence or an occasional day away from the office.

**Establish working hours.** It may sound silly, but if you want to have a focused day of work, pretend you're not working from home. Before I became a time management coach, my schedule was chaotic. I didn't have a set time that I would be at my computer, and I would often schedule personal appointments or run errands during the day. And since my personal life didn't have boundaries, my work life didn't either. When I was home, I would feel guilty for not checking business email at all hours of the day and night. I never felt that I could truly rest.

But a big shift occurred when I set up “office hours” for working from home (for me, that was about 9 AM to 6 PM most weekdays) and clarified what was or wasn't acceptable to do during that time. I'd ask myself, “If I was in an office, would I do this task during the day?” If the answer was no, I knew I needed to do the activity before or after office hours. Household chores, errands, and spending time with friends all became activities that needed to happen before or after work. Sure, I would still field an occasional call from a friend during my lunch break, or if I had an urgent task like an emergency car repair, I'd make it happen during the day. But these were exceptions, not the rule. In setting this boundary, I not only created dedicated work time but also found that I could focus on personal items guilt-free “after hours.”

**Structure your day for success.** Maximize the effectiveness of your time at home by structuring it differently than a typical workday. For example, if you work from home only one day a week or on occasion, make it a [meeting-free day](#). If you can't entirely avoid meetings, reserve at least half a day for focused work. Choose a time that works best for you, based on any required meetings and your energy levels.

Then define one to two key items that you want to accomplish during this time. These could be tasks that require an hour or more of uninterrupted attention, or they could be items that simply require more creative, strategic thinking than you may be able to achieve in the office environment. It's also helpful to shut down your email during this period — or at least stay away from it for an hour at a time. Alert any colleagues of times that you'll be disconnected, so they won't be surprised by a delayed response.

**Set boundaries with others.** To make your efforts stick, be clear with the people who might see your work-at-home days as simply days you're at home. Explain to friends, family, and other acquaintances that the days you're working remotely aren't opportunities for non-work-related activities. For example, if you're home with your spouse, tell them, "I'm planning on being on my computer from 8 AM to 5 PM today. I'm happy to chat at lunch, but other than that I'll be occupied." Typically, when you set expectations and stick to them (say, really stopping at 5 PM), people understand your limits instead of assuming you'll be available. (I also recommend having a place where you're away from anyone else who might be home, such as an office or bedroom where you can shut the door and be out of sight.)

In situations where you may have unexpected visitors, you'll need to be diplomatic. If a neighbor pops by, be open for a conversation for a few minutes, just as you would with a colleague who stops by your desk. But don't suggest they come in for a cup of coffee or have an extended discussion. Instead, use a graceful exit line like "It was so wonderful to talk with you, but I've got some work to finish up," and then set a time to meet up after hours or on a weekend. Or, if your landlord says he'd like to stop by to do some repairs, offer a time or day that works best for you, rather than letting him take the lead.

If you do need to take on non-work-related requests during the day, set expectations for how much time you have, based on what your schedule is like in the office. For example, if your family asks you to run errands, estimate what you can do during a lunch hour, then commit only to that. For example, say, "I'm happy to pick up the dry cleaning and some milk at lunch, but I won't have time for full-scale grocery shopping until after work." Or break down errands into smaller pieces, such as, "I can drop off the car at the mechanic today, but won't get to calling about the health insurance question until tomorrow."

When you explain your limits, you don't need to do so apologetically. Lay them out factually, having the same respect for your time working from home that you would have if you were on-site. As you consistently communicate and live by these expectations, other people will begin to expect them, and you'll find yourself having more time for focused work.

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