# A Matter of Habit: Tips for Working Remotely

Offices provide people and protocols to tell you what to do and help you stay focused. But at home you might find it more challenging to stay on track and use your time wisely.

One thing's for certain: The better your work habits—particularly your organization and time management skills—the easier it will be for you to be a productive remote employee. It's up to you to structure your time on a daily basis. Since no one's looking over your shoulder, you're the one responsible for developing, regulating, and enforcing routines and deadlines.

Just as if you worked in the company office, your manager will need to see measurable results. You and your manager will have to set your performance goals. But because your manager's supervising from a distance, you'll need to break down those goals and outcomes into several smaller steps. As a remote employee, it's your responsibility to complete them without the close supervision or guidance you may have had at the office.

Here are some habits that will help you succeed:

**Prioritize your tasks.** Establish a plan of action, based on importance and due dates, how long tasks will take to complete, and what skills are required. By completing tasks that require less time and effort first or during certain parts of your daily schedule, you'll have more time to devote to the more difficult jobs.

**Stay in your seat, concentrate, and complete a segment of your work.** Procrastinating remote employees tap their computer keys for bit and then bounce into the kitchen for a soda. After quick calls to friends, they return to their computers—only to be interrupted by the dog pleading to go for a walk or the mailman with a delivery. Heck, it's almost lunchtime, why not fix a sandwich? And another half-day slips away without accomplishing half of what needs to get done.

The trick to meeting deadlines and managing time effectively is to stay seated and hack away until you've completed a predetermined amount of work. For example, if your goal in an hour is two written pages, 10 telephone calls to vendors, or whatever it may be, then don't get up until it's completed.

If you finish the task in less time than you've estimated, that's great —but don't take a break just yet. Instead, get started on your next assignment and work on it until you use up the time you'd allocated for the previous task. That way, you'll improve your estimation skills—and at the same time get a jump on your next order of business.

**Create a reward system of breaks.** After you've achieved your goal for a particular time slot, give yourself a break commensurate with what you've accomplished.
You might need a 5-minute stretch break every hour, or you may prefer to skip the short breaks and spend a longer break relaxing at lunch.

**Pace yourself for the long haul.** Overwork can be just as big a pitfall to remote workers as procrastination. While you might think that putting in lots of extra hours will help you get more done, studies have shown that overworking actually reduces productivity. In addition, without proper rest and relaxation, your mental and physical health will suffer.

One way to avoid overwork is to set firm starting and stopping times for work. Although you may work before or after the typical nine-to-five schedule, it's usually necessary to have some overlap with traditional office hours so you can contact your manager and coworkers. No matter how you schedule your day, you'll succeed as a telecommuter only by working at a steady, comfortable pace and spreading your workload over a reasonable period of time.

Finally, here are answers to some frequently asked questions:

**I'm afraid that when I'm at home, I might lack the motivation to get the work day started. What are some ways to get going in the morning?**
Set regular business hours for your work-at-home days and stick to them. You probably wouldn't dream of waltzing into the office an hour late or taking a two-hour lunch, so apply the same rules when you're working at home. When you first start working remotely, you might kick off your day with a brief "good morning" call to check in with your manager at the office. That way you have an opportunity to discuss any needed adjustments to your workload—and to reinforce that it's "time to get to work."

**I love the idea of working remotely because it gives me the freedom to work the way I want to. But what do I do when I come up against a problem that I don't know how to solve?**
If you're like most independent workers, you wouldn't think of pestering your boss for help whenever you encounter an obstacle that demands extra effort to overcome. However, to be successful as a remote employee, you need to recognize when you've spent enough time on a problem and you're not getting results. That's the time to call and ask your manager or a coworker for more input.

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