

Work-at-Home Survival Tips | Part 1, Boost your productivity

17 Tips to Help Boost Your Work-at-Home Productivity

OPC has long embraced workplace flexibility. With projects from New England to Hawaii, Alaska to Florida, working remotely is necessary to maintain OPC's commitments to our public infrastructure clients. Now, with stay-at-home orders in place to minimize exposure to COVID-19, workers the world over are adjusting to home offices.

To help with the transition, we have gathered some information from lessons learned on how to make working from home more productive. Here are some tips to help you get the most from your home office, whether during the lockdown, or thereafter. (If you are working at home with kids, check out our parent-specific tips here.)

Tip 1. Pick Your Spot. Designate a workspace for yourself. While it can seem enticing to lie in bed with your laptop or turn your couch into a desk, using your resting places for work does not encourage focus. Find a spot with great light, few distractions, good reception, and ample space to spread out notes and files. Call it your office, and "leave" that office at the end of your workday (to the extent possible). Having a designated spot makes it easier to minimize distractions so that you remained focused until you sign off for the day. If you're not at home alone, staking your claim to a certain place also minimizes arguments. If changes such as sunlight, routines of other household members, or noises from neighbors causes interruptions in your workspace, think through a flow of workstations that you can maintain. For instance, start the morning in the den but move to the kitchen in the afternoon. Just make sure to move your work to your designated morning spot and charge your laptop there at night so that you are ready to start in the right place tomorrow.

Tip 2. Set a Work Schedule. Without your coworkers eyeing you, it can be tempting to loosen up your workday and tell yourself to work all night and weekend. However, it tends to lead to tasks taking



longer than they would have if you were confined to office norms for your schedule. As a result, you will likely either under- or over-report your actual hours. To stay efficient and maintain discipline, stick to a schedule, get your work done within that time, and sign off as close to your schedule as your work requires. Keeping regular hours makes it easier for your coworkers and clients to know when they can get a hold of you. Of course, being at home all day means that unexpected emergencies don't wait until the end of the work day. Your son gets a bloody nose, the sink gets clogged, your pet bird gets loose. Things that would ordinarily be a phone call to your office (or a surprise when you get home) are now front and center. Adjust your schedule accordingly and communicate to your supervisor so that they know that you may be offline sooner than expected.

Tip 3. Plan Your Day in Advance. As the first two tips alluded to, we recommend unplugging from work at the end of your scheduled day. But part of having a scheduled day is planning out your work for tomorrow. Before you sign off, end the workday with a clear idea of what work you have to do and when you plan to do it. This will help you to wake up with a sense of purpose. With the isolation that many of us are

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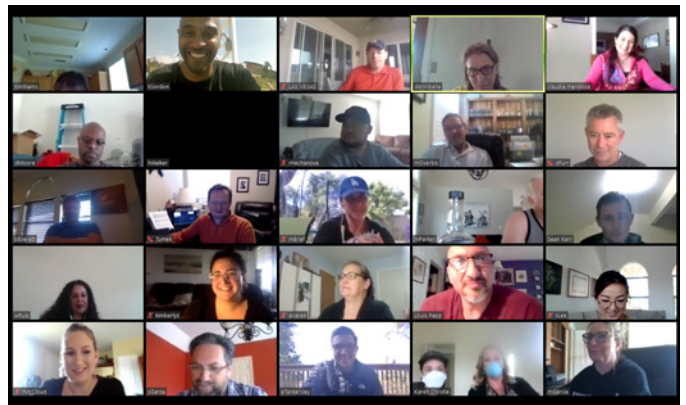
experiencing during the quarantine, OPC recognizes that staying motivated is a big part of staying productive. It also can be used to quickly inform your boss of what you have on your plate and identify capacity to take on new tasks.

Tip 4. Dress the Part. No, working in pajamas all day might not be the most effective way to dress. Even though you are at home, a change into at least business casual clothing helps you to take yourself seriously. This doesn't mean you have to put on a suit or heels, but it does mean a step up from bedhead and bedclothes. A good standard is to dress as though you may have to answer the door for a stranger. Changing your wardrobe also tells the other people in your household that you are at work and keeps you ready for an unexpected video conference.

Tip 5. Incorporate a Commute into your Routine. While one of the big perks of working from home is not having to travel, it can be beneficial to schedule a "commute" before and after work for a change of scenery. Otherwise, under quarantine, feeling like you're stuck within the walls of your home office can make the day seem dull. Add a small ritual or different place to be right before signing into your computer and again after signing off. Whether it's walking the dogs, checking the mail, or watering the plants, getting some fresh air before settling down to work can clear your head. Or how about a "commute song" to give you a sense of heading to and from work? This tip doesn't just help you as you get in and out of work mode; when you transition back to the office, having to account for a commute again won't be such a big shift.

Tip 6. Communicate and Stay Connected. For those not already used to working from home, the lack of interaction with others may be daunting. To maintain personal connection to our coworkers, OPC hosts a weekly virtual "Wine and Time" video conference, and many other companies are starting to have online happy hours. You may find that regular team meetings are more lively as we are all just excited to talk to one another. Take the time to stay connected with your office friends and outside

peers, but remember to avoid any misinformation or business sensitive topics. In light of the COVID-19 quarantine, communicating change is especially important, both from the top down, and the bottom up, as organizations and individual employees are trying to respond appropriately. Communication also means coordinating with team members, supervisors, and external parties. Even though you may be working from your patio, it is still important to be responsive, prompt, and professional in all communications.



Tip 7. Pick up the Phone. We all know that it can be difficult in isolation not seeing other people as often. Email and instant messaging is great, but voice options provide a human touch that we could all use right now. Whenever feasible, call to connect with clients and coworkers. It can be the most effective way to fix miscommunication and misunderstandings while we all adjust to home office life. You may find that your clients, being in the same sudden transition to working at home, are a lot more tolerant of delays or scope alignment issues. Picking up the phone to call them is normally the best remedy.

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Tip 8. Stay Secure. With the high alert due to the global pandemic, many unscrupulous spammers, hackers, and phishers are actively trying to take advantage. Be suspicious of any unexpected email attachments, requests for private information, text messages from unfamiliar numbers, or email from misspelled addresses. Remember to take extra precautions since you are likely working on a virtual network but on your home internet connection. This means that your security may not be as robust as your office connection, creating a system vulnerability. Without a large office facility for safekeeping of hardware, this also means keeping your computer, phone, and peripheral equipment safe. Since most people are at home, cars parked outside can be targets for theft, so do not keep important work files or devices in an ungaraged car, even if parked in front of your own home. As a good rule of thumb, your laptop and other work items should not be visible in your car if you must travel with them and leave them unattended.



Tip 9. Have Back-Up Plans. Did your cat disconnect your router? Is the network slow, preventing you from uploading a large file? Did a storm knock out power right before you saved your work? Without having your office manager, IT department, and facilities group just down the hall, you need to have plans ready for potential mishaps before they happen. Likely, your office support team is still happy to assist, but there may not be a loner laptop to spare when you need it. Right now, the computing crises you have will

be localized to you. This does not mean that you need to panic-buy backups for all of your company-issued hardware and software. Instead, we recommend that you take a moment to think through likely emergencies and potential quick fixes. Saving your work regularly to server drives or company cloud accounts is wise so that there is a backup that can be restored in an emergency. If your internet connection is unreliable, ask your IT department if it is okay to save work on a removable USB and upload work to your company server over VPN during off-peak hours. Make sure that cords and power strips are kept in low traffic areas and know where extra ones are. Keep essential supplies stocked and batteries charged. Allow time for things to go wrong and to move slowly. Above all, treat your company-issued equipment with care, remembering that it is not yours. Consult with your IT department on the most secure ways to back up your work and raise the issue with your team.

Tip 10. Track Your Time. Of course, working at home with family in the midst of a major crisis, may mean you need to be unavailable from time to time. Keep honest track of your time, entering timesheet information often so that it is not forgotten. Particularly for billable employees, be sure to honestly track those times that you need to attend to the home side of your home office along with when you get back to business. Update your status on services like Skype, Outlook, or Slack so that your team knows where you are if you need to be away for a while.

Tip 11. Find Your Groove. Got a looming due date and need to really focus? Not only can music help you to reduce stress, maintain positivity, and get through the day, having a soundtrack is an effective timekeeper when you need to stay on task. If you have a deadline approaching, putting on an album or a familiar playlist to give you a sense of time is both calming and invigorating. Check out OPC's staff picks for their lockdown music playlist here: [OPCPlaylist2020](#) Remember, you don't need to be high-tech with the latest music app - your old-school FM radio does the trick. Since radio programming is done in time blocks, it is great at keeping dialed in while alerting you to the time and important news.

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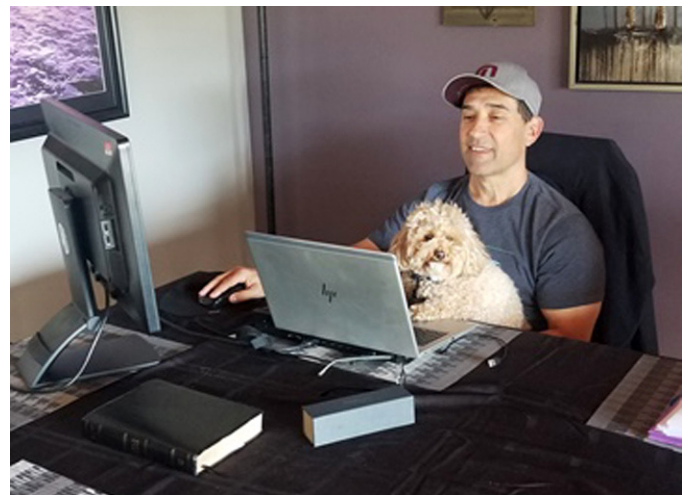
Tip 12. Dim the Lights. As our earlier tips suggest, it is a good habit to sign off at the end of your workday and avoid working in bed. If you need to work through the night, be sure to do so in your designated work area with ample light, not sitting up in bed in the dark. Sticking to your defined work-centered environment helps you to focus on the task and get the work done so that you can truly sign off for the night. Avoid too much screen time before bed. Studies have shown that excessive blue light at night can impact vision and circadian rhythms, making you less effective in the long run.

Tip 13. Sound Management. A good headset can be almost as important as a phone when working from home. Even if you don't have anyone to disturb with your calls and music, headphones help you from hearing your own voice back on conference calls. With the popularity of Skype, Zoom, Teams, and GoToMeeting during this lockdown, headphones are selling out quickly. So don't fret if a model you've heard about is unavailable. You don't need a microphone headset, although it can be helpful. Just a regular set of earbuds or headphones is enough to reduce feedback and help you sound more professional in web conferences. But if you step away from your workspace, remember to unplug your headphones and keep speakers and ringers on so that you hear calls and messages coming in.

Tip 14. Be Ready for Your Close-Up. With the integration of online conferencing platforms during the lockdown, not showing your face is becoming more socially frowned upon. So that you don't seem antisocial, it is a good idea to be ready for a video chat or an impromptu Zoom meeting. As we mentioned in another tip, it's a good idea to put on at least a casual wardrobe and be reasonably groomed so that you look appropriate on camera. Make sure that you don't have a lot of sunlight or bright light behind you that will make you seem like a shadow of yourself. Also, check the positioning of your camera so that viewers don't just see up your nose or the top of your head. You can generally sign into a meeting platform without

creating a meeting to check how you look on screen. If your office space is cluttered, consider moving to a different place. Additionally, Zoom allows you to mask your background. OPC will be putting out more tips soon on video conferencing, click here to subscribe to our monthly newsletter OPC: On the Move.

Tip 15. Include Sanity Breaks. Especially for those working at home who live alone, you may look up many hours into the workday and realize that you have barely moved. If your home office is not ergonomically optimized, your work position may be taking a toll on your body. If you have kids or pets, you may already have others vying for your attention to get you up and moving around. But, if not, consider adding a couple of 5-10 minute sanity breaks into your day, along with a proper lunch. Maybe a few yoga poses? A ten minute HIIT burst? Step outside to smell the roses? Dance break? The lack of social interaction can make the workday monotonous, so shake it up a bit!



Tip 16. Stay Motivated. With little human interaction, it's easy to feel like "what's the point?" Plus, with constant COVID-19 updates and 24-hour news, some might find it hard to focus on work. Set realistic goals for yourself. Even incorporating the tips that we outlined, it can still feel demoralizing being home alone. This is a good opportunity to remember why working from home may have seemed appealing at

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other points - more time for family, hobbies, relaxation - and to take advantage. It is also a good time for gratitude - having your health, steady employment, and the technology that you have available is a very good situation to be in right now. As isolated as you may feel, we are profoundly connected as a society. If you still feel unmotivated, reach out to a coworker or friend for a quick pick-me-up, and remember that we are all in this together.

Tip 17. Take Notes and Improve. Since every home office is different and we all have different jobs to do, these 17 tips are hardly exhaustive. And even the veteran home office workers probably see some areas for improvement within this list. Circulate the entire article with your coworkers. Add in a couple of these tips today and take note of any productivity improvements. Catalogue what is distracting you. Note strategies that are helpful to you to make them into habits. Found a workaround that's working for you? With many millions working from home right now, there is probably someone else who can benefit from what you are doing. When you identify some good tips, just like we at OPC have done, be sure to share them!



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Overland, Pacific & Cutler, LLC (OPC)

opcservices.com



Corporate Office:
3750 Schaufele Avenue
Suite 150
Long Beach, CA 90808



Corp Headquarters :
562.304.2000



socialmedia@opcservices.com