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Telecommuting: Eight Tips for Success

You're a technical communicator who has spent months pitching the idea of telecommuting to your manager. One day she finally says, "Okay, make it work."

Now what do you do?

In this article, I'll explain how I've "made it work" for over four years, all while receiving stellar reviews from my managers and clients. I'll provide tips on setting up a home office, maintaining work discipline, staying connected with colleagues and clients, and easing a doubting manager's anxieties.

Tip 1.

Create a Telecommuting Agreement with Your Company

Creating a telecommuting agreement is the first thing you should do once you've received approval. The agreement serves as a clear guide for what you can expect from your company and what your company expects from you.

A good telecommuting agreement should include the following:

- Your company's telecommuting policy
- The address from which you'll be telecommuting
- A regular schedule of work hours, including start, end, and break times
- Contact information during work hours, such as phone numbers, e-mail addresses, or instant message IDs
- Company assets you'll use during your telecommute, such as computers, printers, fax machines, software, and so on
- A list of expenses the company will reimburse, along with expenses that you agree to pay

Tip 2.

Set up a Productive Home Office

Your office is where you'll spend most of your day, so it must be comfortable, accessible, and furnished with the equipment you'll need to do your job.

Location

You need a quiet place outside the main thoroughfares of your home, especially if you have a family. For example, the kitchen table is not the ideal place for your "office."

Ideally, you want a separate room all to yourself—a spare bedroom or maybe a quiet corner in the basement. If you do not have a separate room, try carving out a corner in your bedroom or any place that is not in a high-traffic area or near a TV. Make sure the place you choose has plenty of lighting, power outlets, a phone jack, and a cable for your Internet connection.

Furniture

I bought an L-shaped desk that has plenty of space for my computer, reference books, and various other notebooks I use throughout the day. I also invested in a high-backed leather chair, which not only supports good posture but looks darn fine in my office. And if you plan on printing lots of paper, you'd better have a good filing cabinet or two.

I bought my office furniture new, but you have several options if new furniture is too expensive. Go to any office supply store and ask to purchase one of the display models. Check your local thrift stores or consignment shops for used office furniture. You could even try asking your company's facilities manager if there is any extra furniture you could take off the company's hands.

Technology and Equipment

Internet connection. If you're going to be a successful telecommuter, it is almost mandatory that you have a broadband Internet connection. You need this because you will do a lot of communicating, document transferring, and possibly even attending or conducting Web seminars over the Internet. A dial-up connection will not cut it. Whether you choose DSL or cable, a broadband connection should be as much of a given as a phone line.

Computer. The computer equipment you need depends on what kind of work you'll be doing. A project manager who occasionally works at home may need only a laptop with minimal hardware and the basic Microsoft *Office* suite; an online help developer may need the latest desktop hardware with Adobe *RoboHelp* and *Photoshop* installed. Whether you have a laptop or desktop computer, make sure it has the software and hardware you need to do your job. For software, make a list of the applications you need, then present this to your manager. For hardware, get the highest-level processor, RAM, and hard drive that you or your company can afford. All of this equipment should be listed in your telecommuting agreement (see Tip 1).

Other equipment. Fax machines, hands-free speaker phones, printers, scanners,

battery backups, surge protectors—I have them all, and all have come in handy throughout my telecommuting experience. Seriously consider whether you need any of these. If there's even a chance you might need them, then it's a good idea to invest in them. Try to get your company to pay for them; if it won't, go easy on your budget by looking for display models at retail stores or searching thrift stores for used models.

Tip 3.

Keep Your Old Routine

When I first started telecommuting, I set my alarm for the same time I had set it when I was working in the office. When I got up, I put on the same business-casual clothes, ate the same breakfast, drank the same coffee out of the same travel mug ...

You get the idea. All of this put me in the mindset of *going to work*, even though my office was only ten paces from my kitchen. As much as possible, keep your work routine the same—at least when you're first starting out.

Tip 4.

Establish Daily Goals

At the start of each day, write down a list of things you want to accomplish that day, whether it's two chapters of a user manual or six online help topics. At the end of the day, go over the list and see what you accomplished. If your goals were too ambitious for your work day, don't get discouraged. Just try scaling back the following day and see how it goes. The purpose of this exercise is simply to keep you focused on your work throughout the day.

I track the time I spend on projects right down to the hour. I do this for two reasons. First, I want to have a log of my time just in case my productivity ever comes into question. And second, I submit the logs to my manager on a weekly basis. It makes her feel more comfortable to know exactly what I am working

on—and that I am not surfing the Web all day.

Tip 5.

Minimize Distractions

Unless you're a robot, it's likely you'll be tempted from time to time to blow off work for an hour to watch your favorite soap opera or play that addictive new computer game you just bought.

You must be strong! If you don't trust yourself, you may have to take some drastic measures. Unplug the cable from the back of your TV and uninstall that computer game. You can hook everything up after you "go home" for the night. Work time is time you are being paid to work. If you hired someone to put a new roof on your house, you wouldn't want to see that person goofing off, right?

It's also important to realize that telecommuting is no substitute for child care. If you have young children, you must arrange for someone to care for them while you work. It's not fair to them or to your company if you attempt to do two full-time jobs at once.

Tip 6.

Be Accessible ... But Only During Work Hours

Just because you're at home doesn't mean you're available 24/7. It's important that your coworkers understand this. Establishing regular work hours—and making them widely known—will keep your late-working subject matter experts from calling you at 7 PM to discuss those edits you sent just before you "went home" at 5 PM.

Tip 7.

Stay Connected to the Company Office

"Out of sight, out of mind" is a common problem faced by telecommuters. You may not get copied on the latest of-

fice news, or your coworkers might forget to include you in the teleconference for project meetings.

You may also face the jealousy of colleagues who aren't allowed to telecommute. Jeffery Zbar writes in *Teleworking & Telecommuting* that "backlash often stems from not knowing what the teleworker is doing right now. The better the communication practices and the more the remote worker chats with office workers, the more likely skepticism will be minimized."

For these reasons, it is vital that you remind your manager and coworkers that you are not only an active part of the team, but that you are an effective contributor. Following are some suggestions for keeping in touch:

- Provide your manager and coworkers with constant updates on what you're doing. You don't have to barrage them with e-mails every ten minutes, but send a status report at least once per week (see Tip 4).
- Contact your clients and colleagues before they contact you. Doing so shows you haven't forgotten about them. It also helps you deal with situations before they become crises.
- When you're back in the office, schedule face-to-face meetings with your manager, coworkers, and important clients. Doing so not only helps them remember what you look like, but also gives you the chance to thank them for supporting your telecommute.
- Promise small, deliver big. In other words, if you tell a client you can deliver a manual in two weeks, deliver it in one week. If your client asks for an online help system, use your help-authoring tool's single-source functionality to deliver a formatted PDF along with the online version. Always exceed your client's expectations. Nothing proves you deserve to telecommute better than results.

Tip 8.

Don't Ruin It for the Rest of Us!

Telecommuting is a privilege that can be revoked at any time.

Think of yourself as an ambassador for the "telecommuting nation." If you're one of the few telecommuters in your office, your manager will look to you as an example of what all telecommuters are like. If you're a stellar worker, your manager might allow others to telecommute. If you abuse the privilege, you'll create one more manager in the world who doubts the practice. That manager will tell her manager friends what a rotten experience she's had, they'll tell their friends, and so on.

Don't let that happen.

Treat each day of telecommuting as a blessing and a gift. If that's too touchy-feely for you, then treat each day as if your job depends on reaching your goals for the day. The more motivated and productive you are, the more likely it will be that your manager will tell other potential telecommuters to "make it work." 🗨️

SUGGESTED READINGS

Dziak, Michael J. *Telecommuting Success: A Practical Guide for Staying in the Loop While Working Away from the Office*. Indianapolis, IN: JIST Publishing, 2002.

U.S. government's guide to teleworking: www.telework.gov/index.asp

Sample telecommuting agreement: www.robsteiner.com/docs/telework_agreement_sample.pdf

Zbar, Jeffery D. *Teleworking & Telecommuting*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Made E-Z Products, 2002.

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