

## Staying Engaged and Effective While Working Remotely – Part 2

By STRUCTURE's Editorial Board Members

*The article represents a collaborative effort by members of the STRUCTURE magazine Editorial Board. Text enclosed in quotes denotes personal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Working at home provides unique flexibility that you do not have at an office.

“It allows you to enjoy the sights and sounds of nature, be it the birds at the feeder hung on the patio or the flowers in the backyard. You can eat lunch with your family, spend time with a pet, defrost something for dinner ahead of time, or throw in a load of laundry rather than do it on the weekend.”



Try to use the benefits of being at home as motivation, rather than sources of distractions or excuses for not getting your work finished. Some people may lack self-discipline, but, maybe even for those folks, the opportunity for the “30 minutes of exercise daily” will be the ticket. Remember that if you cannot effectively work from home, you will miss out on these benefits.

### Defining the Workday

When it is time to get to work, and after any family needs have been attended to, it is essential to create a routine and define a workday that replicates the “normal” office experience as much as possible. No one suggests that wearing work clothes at home is necessary, but the best results can be achieved if a separate home office can be created. If two people are working from home, this

may be difficult. “A separate office or space of your own can be closed off at the end of the day, just like leaving the actual office. If you normally leave the office at lunch, do so at home as well, if possible, even if it just means going out for a walk or a quick errand.” Our brains need a chance to relax from thinking about work. Burn out will occur if the typical 8-hour day becomes 10 or more hours because one can never “leave the office.”

First, set a time for the start of the workday. While hitting the snooze button is very inviting, the alarm should be used to set the day in motion and establish a time for finishing the day, so don't ignore it. Secondly, get up and dressed for the day as you would normally. Sure, the suit jacket is most likely unnecessary, but maintaining a routine of personal hygiene helps to stay motivated. You will most likely be interacting with colleagues and clients quite often on virtual calls, and you will appear more



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professional if you act more professionally. Third, have a designated work desk that only has work-related material around it. Establish a to-do list for the day or week and, once you get settled in at your desk, start tackling it. The usual stream of emails, calls, and chats will keep you engaged and hopefully result in a stream of completed tasks that is motivating. Everyone feels good when they finish something. Finally, accept that there will be some distractions throughout the day, just like there are at the office. “If you expect to focus from 8 to 5 without distractions, then you will end up frustrated when life does not work that way.

Instead, set out to work knowing that you may take a few more breaks than you would at the office or that you may need a significant break in the middle of the day to attend to family issues. These may seem like longer days, but don't forget that you didn't have a commute, and you should have taken some breaks along the way!”

### Engagement with Others At Work

Since we are working in “bubbles” or in “silos,” more senior staff should make an extra effort to engage with the younger staff. The younger staff cannot ask casual questions as easily as when they are at the office, so make sure they know they can contact you at any time during the day, even after normal work hours, if something important comes up. If the younger project staff is still working, then you need to be too. Consider setting up office hours when staff knows they can speak with you. Nothing can be more frustrating and discouraging for a young engineer than to feel stranded or left alone when they need help.

### Environment

Like everyone else that is new to working from home, there is a learning curve in determining what works for each person. Having



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a comfortable, quiet work environment with some natural light is no less important at home than in a traditional office. Having a room that can be closed off from the rest of the house and free from distractions is ideal. It will take time to optimize your home office to work effectively; you may need to buy a worktable or standing desk and a comfortable desk chair. Remember to get up and walk around from time to time to stretch and move. You did this at the office unconsciously as part of work, but you have to force yourself to do it at home.

Obviously, with roommates, spouses, children, or pets sharing the same home during regular work hours, it can be challenging. “We love them dearly, but working at home with young kids, particularly small ones, can be a slow-moving disaster. Most of us are just not set up at home for private, uninterrupted telephone or video conference calls at all times during the workday. Realistically, we may never be. Interruptions from kids are no longer unexpected and can be a source of bonding with most people since they know what you are going through, and they are glad it isn't them.”

On the other hand, it can get out of hand too. “Like screaming kids on the airplane or in a restaurant, you can only push it so far.” While it is not something to make a habit out of, an emergency video or snack (having ice cream or popsicles on hand seems to work) might buy some time in a pinch, and parents should remember to cut themselves some slack for doing so. Try not to feel guilty. Also, don't make ‘perfection’ the enemy of the ‘best I could do’ under the circumstances. Setting up a scheduled rotation with your spouse, the neighbors, or grandparents (if they live nearby) might also work to free up several hours a day.” Understand that you may find yourself working at odd hours or adjusting from an ideal schedule. Communicate this clearly with your supervisor, and as long as you are completing tasks on time and within budget, they will likely accommodate you. It is important for everyone, senior or young, children or not, to try and remain empathetic during this time. Those trying to work at home with young children may not be enjoying the situation either!



EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS ARE ALL LEANING MORE HEAVILY ON VIDEO CONFERENCING. GIVING A TECHNICAL PRESENTATION, MAKING A PITCH TO A CLIENT, AND CONDUCTING A PERFORMANCE REVIEW ARE ALL VASTLY DIFFERENT OVER VIDEO CONFERENCE VERSUS IN PERSON.



be very attuned to these kinds of issues and proactively deal with them to re-assure staff that every possible effort is being made to help them. It is important for management to remember that work is just a part of life (about 1/3), and everything else their staff does outside of working hours in a COVID world is more complicated and stressful.

### Communication and Engagement with Clients

During economic downturns, the best practice is to increase marketing and business development efforts, not decrease them. Making contact with clients and potential clients to share a lead is appreciated, even if they are not likely to bring you work directly. Since we rarely see our contacts in person now, the tendency for reluctant marketers, like many engineers, is to assume that you are invading the client's privacy, so you send an email instead or, worse yet, do nothing. Getting out of your comfort zone and being bold (for an engineer) is the best approach. "What do you really have to lose? The firms that are most likely to emerge from the pandemic in strong positions will make additional marketing efforts by doubling or tripling the number of calls they would have made pre-pandemic. Some of these calls will be to new contacts, but some ought to be to people you haven't spoken with in a long time." You will be pleasantly surprised at the positive reception you will get if you have information to share and are willing to strategize on how you can team with your clients in a way to make you both more successful.

These calls to check-in and offer resources can also be applied to your internal clientele or coworkers. When at the office, it is easy to ask others for help with tasks or technology challenges. Calling or emailing junior staff to ask for help may be perceived as unnecessarily delegating or shifting burdens and can lead to resentment. "Remember, the staff can't see that you are hard at work on something else. Instead, call them and offer to help them

Technology can also present difficulties that reduce effectiveness and productivity and result in lengthened workdays. "Home internet and wireless routers often just do not work as well as those in most office environments, particularly in major metropolitan areas. Downloading and uploading large files over home systems takes more time. Even if a connection directly to the office system via a VPN is possible, the process can still be limited by the equipment at home. Also, many remote workers are now relying on the use of personal cell phones for work." Your firm will likely need to invest more in computers and computer systems and possibly subsidize the cost, or outright purchase, home internet upgrades for you, better personal cell phone plans, and office equipment like scanners and printers.

The unwritten rule for many firms is that management does not care how the work is done so long as it gets done. But if the effort required is much greater when working remotely due to various obstacles and inefficiencies, this could result in lengthened workdays, employee burn-out, and displeasure. Management needs to



with something that you don't ordinarily do, like calculations." Take to the opportunity to strengthen your interactions with the staff and forge stronger relationships.

External and internal communications are all leaning more heavily on video conferencing. Giving a technical presentation, making a pitch to a client, and conducting a performance review are all vastly different over video conference versus in person. On the recipient's end, there is a temptation to disengage or half-engage, turn off the camera, or get distracted by something else. Can this be countered on the deliverer's end? "Politely encourage people to turn on their cameras and over-prepare with a lot of questions to ask the recipient in case of dead air. Consider sending information in advance to establish that a conversation is expected rather than a one-way conversation. But, as with all effective presentations, the best way to keep someone's attention is to have something very interesting and pertinent to say that is specifically targeted to the audience." Do some homework in advance so you can reduce the "boilerplate" and get right to the point with the information the audience needs to hear. Also, consider the software platform utilized for these interactions, specifically presentations. Different formats provide different opportunities for participant engagement. Learn them and use them.

The temptation to disengage or half-engage increases when the video conference numbers go beyond two or three people, depending on the situation. "It's not the same as sitting around a conference table and reading body language, so be prepared to give more active verbal signals than normal. If the number of questions is low, or the audience seems to be quiet (which is the tendency), then be prepared to ask a question to start the conversation." While more people in a meeting can be efficient for conveying raw information, fewer people in the meeting can be more effective, much like a well-run in-person interview where there is clearly a leader running the show supported by staff.

"Even with all the technology at our disposal, don't forget the power of a care package or a hand-written letter. Sending something tangible to a client or a staff sets you apart and creates a lasting impression."

## Gensler Survey

The mega consulting firm Gensler published its *U.S. Work from Home Survey* on May 26, 2020. From April 16 to May 4, they surveyed over 2,300 full-time U.S. office workers at companies with 100 or more employees. This was one to two months after most stay-at-home orders were put into effect. They found that only 12% of U.S. workers wanted to work from home full-time and that 70% wanted to work in the office most of the week.

The top reason given was they missed meetings (who knew?) and connecting with colleagues face-to-face. Three out of four said they missed the people. 55% said collaborating is more challenging when working remotely, and 51% said staying up-to-date on the work of others is more difficult from home.

Perhaps surprisingly, Millennials (aged 24 to 38) and Gen Z (younger than 24) workers found themselves less productive and less satisfied working from home. These workers found the experience more challenging, more stressful, and less productive than their older peers.

## Conclusion

We hope that you found this two-part series worthwhile and that you have discovered several takeaways that you can implement in your office today, in the future, or when employees are generally working remotely. There is no doubt that some people like working remotely or from home, but we think that the surveys we have referenced and the Editorial Board's experiences show that more people prefer being in the office at least most of the time.

There is no denying that humans are social creatures, and they like being together. Computer technology, primarily video conferencing, has made it possible to be separated, but we have all felt that, while we can still do our work, it is just not the same.■



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