Tip Sheet: Telework – Tips for Success

Telework, also called telecommuting, is one of several alternate work arrangements becoming more common in today’s working world. Although advances in technology have made it possible for many more individuals to work from home or other remote locations, that is only one of the reasons for increased interest and participation in telework and other flexible work. Improved work-life balance for employees, improved employee retention, environmental benefits, and reducing commuter traffic are only some of the other reasons.

It is important to understand that there are challenges to telework as well. Here are some tips on how to be a successful teleworker collected from books, articles, online toolkits, and from teleworkers themselves.

**Know Your Organization’s Policies**

Your organization should have a telework policy. This is the guiding document for the telework program. Study it carefully. If you have any questions about the policy, ask your manager. It is your obligation to understand your responsibilities outlined in the policy. It is to your advantage to understand your employer’s responsibilities.

Your organization may have other policies that pertain to telework, such as a data security policy, electronic communications policy, home-office safety policy, or an equipment policy. You should understand them as well. Make sure you know the consequences of failing to follow your organization’s policies.

When policies don’t work, when they don’t adequately address an issue or when they are so restrictive that they hinder productivity, you should inform your manager or telework coordinator. The telework policy is revised from time to time, so identifying where it doesn’t stand up to real-world situations can be useful. Similarly, technology-related policies may have been written before telework was formally instituted at the organization and may also need revision. The IT department may not be aware of any incompatibilities unless teleworkers speak up.

**Look For Training Opportunities**

In addition to any telework training your employer may require, be on the lookout for additional training opportunities that can enhance your skills and productivity as a teleworker. Many employers provide, or will pay for, training. Classes, seminars, workshops, and online demonstrations on new collaborative tools, data security, and other technology may be particularly valuable for teleworkers.

**Be Professional**

Just because you can work in your sweats and slippers at home, it doesn’t mean your work can be less than professional, particularly when dealing with clients. When talking with clients on the
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telephone, they should not be able to tell if you are working from home or the office; i.e. no barking dogs, screaming kids, or televisions in the background. Remember to return your coworkers’ phone calls and emails promptly.

Develop Good Communication With Your Manager
Teleworking will be more comfortable for you and your manager if you have a system for informing your manager of your schedule, what you are working on, and what progress you are making. If you telework only once a week or occasionally, an email the day before that states what you will be working on at home, along with your home phone number, may be all that’s necessary. If you telework more frequently, it may be necessary to have a more formalized protocol. Some managers like to use a form to list your work and goals. If you experience any problems at home, especially if they may delay your work, be sure to let your manager know.

Plan Your Telework Day
Plan ahead of time what you will be working on at home. Take additional work so you will be sure to have enough. Many teleworkers save their most difficult tasks for home where there are fewer distractions. Take some non-computer work with you in case you have computer problems that you can’t resolve quickly. What will you need at home besides your work? Will you need client or coworker phone numbers? Will you need any reference material?

Planning ahead means you won’t have to call the office frequently to have coworkers email files to you. Your opportunity to telework should not become additional work for them. Some teleworkers buddy-up with a coworker who teleworks a different schedule. When you are working from home and need something, you call your “buddy”; when they are at home and need something, they call you.

If you have call forwarding at work, switch it on before leaving. If calls are forwarded by a receptionist, make sure they know your telework schedule. Make sure anyone else in the office that needs to know has your schedule and phone number. Leave a note with contact info at your office workspace so people who are looking for you will know where you are and how to reach you.

The Meeting is ... When?
A number of teleworkers are involved with clients or partners in other time zones, including some in other countries. So, if you have a teleconference or online meeting scheduled, make sure you really know what time it is in your location. Keep in mind that not all countries, and not even all states observe Daylight Savings Time.
Plan for Emergencies
For minor emergencies, like a sick child or bad weather, you may be able to work from home if prepared to do so. Think about what you should have at home at all times in order to be able to do some work. Your organization may have a plan for dealing with major emergencies, and telework may figure into that plan. If you have a role in that plan, make sure you understand what you are supposed to do. If you have any questions, be sure to ask your manager or emergency coordinator.

Establish a Work Routine at Home
Some teleworkers like to replicate normal office hours, while others may work best very early in the morning or very late at night. You should adopt the schedule that allows you to be most productive, within your manager’s requirements. If you need to be in frequent contact with clients or coworkers, then you may be required to work normal office hours, or at least be available during core hours. Regardless of the schedule you choose, most teleworkers are more productive if they set regular hours with a regular lunchtime and regular breaks. If you have a tendency to overwork, being on a regular schedule may help you control how long you work.

Get Control of Distractions
The home can have its own distractions; chores, TV, family, friends, neighbors. If you aren’t careful, your home life can use up your work day. Don’t be shy about telling family, friends, or neighbors that it is time to get back to work - that you have a schedule to keep and deadlines to meet. Set ground rules with family so they know when they can or cannot interrupt you.

Embrace Technology
If you are the kind of person who learns only the software you need and then only reluctantly, you may want to stretch yourself and explore some of the many software and online applications that can benefit teleworkers. These are discussed on the Equipment & Tools page in the Technology section. How much you need these tools will depend on the type of work you do from home and how frequently you telework. If you want to telework more days in the future, you will almost certainly need to know how to use the technology that makes it possible. In some organizations, the IT support teleworkers need is lacking. You may need to become adept at troubleshooting problems yourself, but don’t be shy about seeking help from your employer. IT support will have to be part of the program if they expect a significant number or employees to telework.

Take Security Seriously
Your organization may have created a security policy that provides guidelines for teleworkers. If not, then there are a couple of things you can do on your own. If you are using your own computer, make sure it has up-to-date firewall and anti-virus software. Have a plan for backing up data and stick to it. Be cautious about saving or overwriting different versions of the same
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document. Don’t be careless when taking home files, whether on paper, disks, or flash drives. We’ve all heard stories about files being left behind in restaurants, or getting stolen from cars.

**Be Flexible**
Regardless of how carefully you plan, there will be times when you are needed at the office on a telework day. You may be needed for a meeting, to see a client, or to help your coworkers. You may be needed at the office to fill-in for sick coworkers. There may be days when the work you took home turns out to be something best done back at the office. There will be bad weather and other emergencies that create unexpected telework days. In other words, be flexible, and try to be prepared for anything that may happen.

**Stay Connected to the Team**
If you telework occasionally or once a week, then staying connected to the team and office activities won’t be a problem. However, for those that telework frequently, it may take a special effort to stay connected to what is going on back at the office. Some of your coworkers may resent the fact that you can telework and they cannot. They may consider you to be “on your own”, and not be willing to help keep you informed. Others may have no ill will, but will just forget to tell you about meetings and office events. Sometimes, “out of site” really is “out of mind”. You can overcome this by staying in touch with your coworkers. Let them know that you are available to work with them, just like when you were in the office. Let them know they can call and email you at home (some people feel like they are intruding when calling you at home), and don’t hesitate to call them. Hearing your voice will help them understand that you really are working at home. Introduce your coworkers to the new communication and collaboration tools you are learning. Make every attempt to attend office events and functions.

**Keep Records**
Sooner or later your manager may want some documentation of what you’ve been doing at home. It is very difficult to reconstruct this weeks or months later. If you and your manager haven’t set up a formal work assignment system for tracking what you do when teleworking, you should keep a record of your own. Write down the days you telework, the work you planned to do (or were assigned to do) from home, what was accomplished, note if you made deadlines, and note if you failed to make a deadline or if any other problem occurred, along with the reason for the problem. There are a number of simple ways to keep this record: You can use a day planner, create a form of your own, or send an email back to your office computer. If either your work or telework itself comes into question, this record of what you accomplished on telework days may protect you and may help save telework at your organization.

Source: www.teleworktoolkit.com