

Ask anyone who has ever worked from home before and they will no doubt tell you that it isn't as convenient as it may sound nor necessarily the solution to finding work / life balance, especially when you have children at home to care for.

If you negotiate a work from home arrangement with your employer, you still have to conquer the distractions of household activities and chores, interruptions from your children and well meaning relatives and be disciplined enough to keep yourself motivated. However that being said, work from home options are on the increase, with employers and employees alike finding some mutual benefits.

As statistics have shown, our generation are more overworked and stressed than ever and to combat this problem, there are companies prepared to lead the way by offering alternatives to working the traditional nine to five job. Options such as part time work, job sharing, flexi-hours, telecommuting and working from home are becoming more prevalent in organisations.

The Solution to Work-Life Balance?

For many individuals, working from home is the solution to the work-life balance conundrum. The autonomy and comfort of working from home instead of the mundane commute to and from work, early mornings and office politics make working from home sound very appealing.

Yet personality is a key factor and working from home does not suit everyone. If you are the kind of person who loves the everyday social contact with peers or enjoys working in a close-knit team, then working from home is probably not for you.

Working from home requires a level of self-discipline, motivation and organisation that not everyone will possess. Do your research first and be wary of fraudulent website and online services which advertise work from home opportunities. Always read the fine print and check whether the organisation is legitimate before signing up. And before you take the leap, do weigh up the pros and cons carefully.

Work from home advantages

- ◆ Independence and control in your workday with the ability to structure the work hours around your own schedule and your family commitments.
- ◆ Chance to enjoy more family and personal time.
- ◆ No journey to work, saving time and money on fuel/transport costs.
- ◆ No office politics and distractions.
- ◆ Greater flexibility in your working hours.
- ◆ Tax advantages – you may be able to claim on utility costs and office equipment.

Work from home disadvantages

- ◆ Interruptions from family and general household distractions.
- ◆ It isn't the answer to the childcare dilemma, you will still require a carer if your child (ren) will be at home when you are working.
- ◆ Can be isolating and lonely as there is limited social interaction with colleagues or anyone to bounce your ideas off.
- ◆ Lack of technical support and equipment including login issues and slower download.
- ◆ Lack of work structure – you could find it difficult to separate work from home life.
- ◆ You have to be self motivated and organised.
- ◆ You may experience negative reactions from co-workers and clients.

What about my customers/clients how will I service them from home?

Many of us have jobs with clients we need to service and our employers may be concerned that the quality of client service will be affected if employees who regularly deal with clients are working from home. The way that home working affects relationships with clients will depend on the nature of the work. Obviously some jobs cannot be managed entirely from home but aspects of the work may be e.g. report writing. Jobs that mainly have telephone contact with a number of regular clients can often be managed from home. You may be able to meet clients when necessary at the client's place of work. Even professionals who are required to be at the workplace to see clients (such as doctors, social workers and teachers) may be able to spend some of their work time out of the workplace. For example, teachers can prepare lessons at home and social workers can write up case notes or organise services at home, or at the client's home.

What you will need...

To ensure that clients can always reach the home worker, employers may need to provide some technology and equipment. This may mean providing a dedicated phone line, answering machine, pager, mobile phone, e-mail and fax facilities at home and a diversion facility at work.

Tips for working from home

Many people start out working from home in the first instance. When the emphasis is on getting the work/balance right, possibly the greatest benefit is being able to achieve that balance - as well as earning a living - if you plan your time well.

Freelancers often start out working from home, for a variety of reasons. Some believe home will be a better working environment; others are going it alone to run a small lifestyle business. Other freelancers either work out of home to keep overheads as low as possible, dividing their time between the home office and the client's site.

Here are a few recommendations for making the most of working from home

1) **Workspace**

Make sure that you have a separate area for working. Install a separate phone line for business use. Ask the rest of your family to respect that you are trying to make some money while you are in the office. A separate area should be sacred so you can leave paperwork around so you are still able to walk away at the end of the day and switch off. Some people have found this particularly hard. In an office environment you walk away and forget about it - at home there's always the nagging temptation to do a little bit more before you go to bed.

2) **Get organised**

Invest in filing and online organisation systems for your home office to help reduce time spent on administrative tasks.

3) **Support network**

As more and more people freelance and work from home it's likely you'll meet others in the same boat. Since you are now away from the office network you're now missing those social perks, new contacts like these can be a good sounding board.

4) **Working hours**

Work around the hours when you work best as far as possible. You will need to take into consideration when your clients need to be able to get hold of you. Make the most of the flexibility that you have and make sure you take breaks to keep yourself refreshed.

5) **Time out**

Those living and working on their own especially need to plan time away from the desk as contact by email and phone is a lonely experience. Ensure you break up the week with meetings or time spent at your clients' sites, lunches, conferences etc. Do something at the end of each day that you associate with switching off.

6) **Work/Life balance**

Make a list of everything that is important to you, from your goals, your family, friends, gym, walking the dog, etc in order of priority. Allocate time each week in line with that priority and stick to it.

7) **Have a daily routine**

Make a list of things that need to be done every day from calling new prospects to having a cup of tea at 10.30 and answering emails. It will make sure you don't overlook them. Minimise disruptions - don't make a habit of doing non-work-related tasks during work hours, and don't encourage friends to drop by on a regular basis during working hours.

8) **Planning and lists**

When you first start working from home it can be very difficult to stay motivated and focused. Some tips: when you set yourself a task, break it down into manageable chunks. So you'll aim to have this bit done by 10am, the rest by lunchtime etc. That way, if you work fast, you can reward yourself with breaks.

Also list your achievements - so for every task still to do, here's one you've already done well.

9) Family

If you are working with kids or family at home be open as to what's expected of each other - i.e. a team approach. (One suggestion is to use one calendar for work and family - different colours for important activities so all understand when hard work has to be put in to take time out for those activities.)

10) All work and no play

Allow some time for doing the things you enjoy during the week. All work and no play is never good for anybody.

Negotiating with employers

Take time to consider your manager's concerns, the impact on your team and the impact on your job. You should also consider your job security and productivity.

Types of jobs that may be unsuitable for working from home

These are:

- ◆ positions that carry constant responsibility for training or supervising others.
- ◆ positions that require face-to-face client or customer contact at the workplace.
- ◆ positions where the home worker has little control over the flow of work.
- ◆ positions that require a high degree of supervision or monitoring.
- ◆ positions that involve a large amount of teamwork and daily face-to-face contact with other members of the team.

Employees able to work from home

These employees:

- ◆ are self-motivated.
- ◆ are self-disciplined.
- ◆ are capable of working without the need for constant direction and feedback.
- ◆ have good self-management skills.
- ◆ have good negotiation skills.
- ◆ are reliable.
- ◆ have good communication skills.
- ◆ are able to work in isolation from social activity and informal networks for extended periods of time.
- ◆ are able to recognise when to seek direction and feel comfortable calling a manager or supervisor to ask for help.

Making it Work

Although working from home offers considerable advantages to employers, many Australian managers are not taking advantage of these benefits, often because they do not know how to go about implementing working-from-home programs.

To make it work

- ◆ regularly access it
- ◆ ask for feedback from your Manager/s
- ◆ maybe do it on a trial basis to start with to see if it suits both parties
- ◆ communicate clearly to your Manager & clients
- ◆ separate your work space from your home space
- ◆ have the right equipment
- ◆ inform your clients that you work from home
- ◆ establish agreement with your Manager
- ◆ have trust
- ◆ have your family commitment or buy-in
- ◆ don't overcommit

Finding work from home work opportunities

To find out about home based work opportunities that suit you, you might find the following website useful www.homebusiness-finder.com/australia. It aims to help individuals find the ideal work from home opportunity based on interests, skills, projected income and lifestyle.

*Article source: extracts from Time on Time Out
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