

# Working from Home

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According to the United States Census Bureau, nearly 4.2 million people worked from home in 2000. No long commute, no sweating over finding a parking space, no dressing up, no staff meetings—what's not to like? On the other hand, when you work from home and problems arise, it's up to *you* to solve them. More than that, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that, since you're home, it's okay to call friends, watch that DVD you've been sitting on, or just take a nap. Working from home can be a wonderful thing, if you can manage it.

## What You Need to Know

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### How do I begin working at home?

If you're employed by a large company, it may have already seen the mutual advantages to having some workers performing their duties from a home base. So, obviously, the first thing you would need is the permission of your company or manager to do some of your work at home. You might need to make the case for this, but many companies are already endorsing this work option and are looking for employees who are interested in trying it. In fact, in the most recent "Best Companies to Work For" survey, 82 allowed employees to telecommute or actually work at home at least 20% of the time.

If you are self-employed (depending on the size of your business), you may have rented commercial office space and are now thinking about moving your office to your home. The decision to do this, of course, depends on whether most of your work is online or by phone and whether you have customers or clients who need to meet with you in your office space. Also, there are often zoning restrictions that might affect your planning.

Then again, you may be thinking about changing jobs and finding work that is 100% home-based. Some Web sites actually track work at home careers. There are also sites that focus on the special interests of women who want to work from home. But, as with any new job, it's important to talk to as many people as you can before making a commitment. There are plenty of resources you can check out, and it's important to watch out for work at home scams.

### Are there tax advantages to working from home?

If your decision to work at home is linked to a decision to work for yourself, you'll find that having an office in the home may qualify you for tax concessions. Tax relief may be available on your mortgage interest, heating, and telephone bills, and the cost of capital equipment and services needed to

support your business. Your accountant will guide you on what tax benefits you may be eligible to receive. There are also general guides that you can read.

## What to Do

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### **Create—and Stick to—Boundaries**

There are some classic “rules” for being successful when working at home. To start with, working at home works best when you have dedicated space set aside and used only for your job. It’s hopeless trying to balance your laptop on your knees in the kitchen while you attempt to avoid intrusions from family or friends; you need to set rules for yourself and others so that everyone can support your efforts rather than sabotage them.

In fact, the biggest problem to working at home can be the others in your life who think that home is just that—a place to live, not work. If there are other people at home, be clear about the time you set aside for working. Non-work interruptions can be frustrating when you’re trying to get something done to a deadline. Establish boundaries by establishing in advance how you’re going to manage your time at home, including things like the beginning and ending of your working day. (Again, having a separate area or room to work in is key here, as you can close the door and cut down on disturbances.)

If your work requires you to receive visitors, try to find an area where they won’t be distracted by your domestic arrangements. Having to ignore the pile of laundry on the kitchen floor is simply not businesslike, no matter how friendly you are with your guests. If you’re unable to avoid these situations, find a local hotel or restaurant where you can meet for an hour or two. Again, this is about creating boundaries that will enable you to maintain focus and create an impression of professionalism.

If you’re an extrovert and enjoy the buzz of having other people around, it’s important to recognize and adjust for this. You could try planning a certain number of days in the office and balance these with quieter, more productive days at home. If you’re self-employed, you may need to schedule visits and meetings sufficiently regularly for you to feel involved with and energized by others.

### **Stick to a Routine**

Admittedly, working at home can be confusing for your family, but it can also be confusing for you! It’s important to differentiate your day between being “at work” and “at home.” If your working and resting times become confused, it can feel as if you’re always on duty; and when you *do* take a break, you can feel guilty that you aren’t finishing a project. This differentiation comes naturally when you have to travel to and from work; but when your routine changes, you’ll need to find a way to make this shift

yourself. You need to create “signals” (such as closing the door) that announces to all that you are now *at work*.

Although the idea of wandering into your office pajama-clad may appeal, get up and get dressed as if you were going into the office. Obviously you don’t have to wear a suit or very smart clothes, but getting changed is another “signal” that you’re starting your working day.

Plan your day so that you don’t find yourself wasting time. The advantage of working from home is that you have greater control over interruptions. People will no longer be able to wander past your desk at will and ask you for information or, worse, to do something for them. A great deal of time is wasted in these “Oh, by the way...” moments that happen mostly because you’re accessible or visible.

## Take Regular Breaks

Make sure you take breaks throughout the day. Most people’s concentration starts to diminish after about 20 minutes, and, if you continue to work after this time, thinking can become a struggle. Taking a break, perhaps a short walk, can re-energize your thinking capability. Of course, breaks need to be balanced by the need to be productive.

The only danger here is that you can find your workday ending up as a long detour. Try not to get distracted by picking up something else that needs doing. You’ll only end up wasting time and lowering your efficiency by spreading your energies too thinly.

## Ensure That You Retain Your Work-Life Balance

Two special notes about working at home. First, after a few weeks, you can find yourself feeling that you need to be working all the time; and, since the work is right there at home, you can find that you feel that you are *always* on-duty. Thus, it’s critical to get away from your job from time to time; you may even want to set a personal rule that you leave work at a set time (just as you would, most days, if you were commuting to work at an office or store). Second, the solitude of working at home can be a harsh reality, especially if you are highly social and enjoy walking down a big company corridor to find someone to join you for coffee or a meal. Here, too, the thing to keep in mind is that you must manage your time so that the at-home isolation is not something you grow to resent. This will only drain your productivity. In short, working at home requires you to be aware of work-life issues just as much as if you were at a large corporation.

## What to Avoid

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### **You Lose Focus**

More than ever, when you work at home, you need to have a daily task list and you need to measure your own productivity. Flitting around from task to task can create a feeling of being “in the flow,” but may not be very productive. If you worry that you may be prone to finding “displacement” activities rather than doing the work that needs to be done, spend a few minutes at the beginning of the day creating a “to do” list. This will focus your energy and make sure that there’s a valuable output to the day’s activities.

### **You Waste Time**

Anyone who has worked in a company with lots of employees knows that people can come to work and then spend the day goofing off. Guess what? You can work from home and do the same thing! It’s easy to pass a lot of the day on the phone and to find that, as a result, you have to work late to actually achieve anything that day. It’s a question of discipline. Give yourself time to be in touch with others, but keep control of it. Consider keeping a work clock handy. Or you might consider any of a number of software packages that can help you track your time.

## Where to Learn More

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### **Books:**

Kalita, Jennifer. *The Home Office Parent: Raising Kids and Profits Under One Roof*. Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing.

Williams, Beverley, and Don Cooper. *The-30 Second Commute: The Ultimate Guide to Starting and Operating a Home-Based Business*. McGraw-Hill, 2004.

### **Web Sites:**

Homeworking: <http://homeworking.com>

Work-at-Home Careers: [www.workathomecareers.com](http://www.workathomecareers.com)

Work-at-Home Moms: [www.wahm.com](http://www.wahm.com)

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