HR Guide to Working From Home

To be a successful telecommuter, it is necessary to work with less structure and more freedom in completing responsibilities. Telecommuting is not as simple as staying at home and working. It requires careful planning and discipline. Get organized. Good work habits from the moment telecommuting begins make it easy to complete work away from the office.

The Location. Identify a safe location in the home as work space. There is no need to devote an entire room for the office at home. Some telecommuters have successfully developed a part of an existing room, a basement room or an attic for their work station. Locate the work station away from distractions. Working on the couch in front of the T.V. does not work! There is more information about the home office later in the guide.

Set a Routine. Set a work schedule for telecommuting days and stick to it. The agreement has an attachment for defining work hours. Begin and finish work at the same time on telecommuting days. This helps set a routine.

Replace the Ritual of Getting Ready for Work. Telecommuters will no longer have the traditional office rituals of morning conversations or coffee. Even the drive to work that symbolizes the beginning of the work day is missing. Set up new rituals for telecommuting days. Some telecommuters actually leave their house, go around the block, return, and begin the work day. Others play specific music or begin working after a morning exercise session or bike ride. Each worker should find a ritual which will work for them.

Make a Daily “Things-to-Do” List. Develop a list of goals and assignments for telecommuting days. At the end of the day, go over the list and see how much has been accomplished. It’s helpful to start the list a couple of days before telecommuting. This helps to plan for all the resources needed to support activities at home. Remember there may not be access to a FAX, copier, or even a computer at home. Plan the work accordingly.

Have an End of the Day Ritual. It’s a good practice to have a ritual in place to mark the end of the work day. Be creative in deciding what to do.

Managing the Work. As a telecommuter, it is necessary to manage work efficiently. It is up to the telecommuter to make sure they keep well-informed and continue with a high level of performance.

Maintain Contact with the Office. Be sure to stay in touch with the office during telecommuting days. Try establishing a buddy system with a trusted colleague or a secretary in the office who can be called once or more a day. Frequently call the office for messages and return phone calls. Do not fall out of touch when telecommuting. Decide early in the day how accessible to be.

Voice Mail. Voice mail is an invaluable telecommuting tool. If there is no access to voice mail in the office, consider using an answering machine while working at home. It will enable storing messages when unavailable. Decide if the office will tell callers to contact the telecommuters directly at home.

Set up a System at Home. Develop a system for organizing the work that will be done at home. Without the time to organize resources and materials there will be trails of paper and stacks of references everywhere!
Stick to Deadlines. While telecommuting, follow the same rules for deadlines as in the office. Don't miss deadlines. When mailing reports to the office, send them so they arrive the day they are due or earlier. When sending work electronically (by modem or FAX) it should also arrive on time.

Keep the Supervisor Informed. The telecommuter needs to keep supervisors informed about the status of the program, work progress, and any difficulty encountered. Supervisors are a client that needs information on a timely basis.

Attend Gatherings. Always attend office gatherings and group meetings. Don't become invisible because of telecommuting.

Train Family Members, Friends, and Neighbors. As a serious telecommuter, consider the work seriously. Be careful not to create a bad image for telecommuters. Train the people at home so there are not too many interruptions.

What Interruptions are OK? Determine what questions, favors, and needs may cause interruptions. Develop ground rules for the family to follow about interruptions while working remotely at home. Some telecommuters have their family determine the rules to ensure participation in the process. A family meeting is a prime opportunity to raise some of these issues. The rules should be understood by neighbors and friends. Remain flexible. Sometimes an errand may be the perfect break you need.

Office Supplies. Develop an understanding with family members about how office materials are used. Tell them what office supplies are for business only. The worker may want the work space to be off-limits to other members in the household.

Telecommuting is Not a Replacement for Child Care, or Elder Care. Do not assume working at home means the ability to take care of children, it is not a replacement for child care. When taking care of children and being a telecommuter, there are two jobs instead of one! This may preclude handling the job in a professional manner. Experience has shown that full-time telecommuting and full-time child care does not work. The same general guidelines apply when intense elder-care is needed.

THE HOME OFFICE

Most employees can create a temporary work area in their home that is adequate. However, for telecommuting to work there is a need to provide an “office” space with control over noise, interruptions, work equipment, and materials.

Criteria

Consider these basic criteria in organizing the home office:

- An environment that is free of safety and fire hazards
- An environment that promotes good work
- Adequate work space
- Access to telephone or electrical outlets
- Security and safety of work materials
• Separation from on-going domestic activities
• Temperature, sound and light control

**Liability/Cost**

1. The University shall not be liable for damages to the employee’s property that result from participation in the telecommuting program.

2. The University shall not be responsible for the cost of utilities or home maintenance.

3. At the home office the employee is covered under the Workers’ Compensation Law when performing official duties.

**Space Considerations**

A major requirement for the telecommuter is enough dedicated space in the home to support work-related activities. A spare room can be closed off from the rest of the house, or part of a room can be reserved for job-related work. The work setting should be large enough to accommodate files, computer equipment, shelves, and if needed, lockable cupboards. Those workers living alone can work almost anywhere equipped with the necessary electrical and telephone outlets. Those sharing a household must reach some accommodation with the rest of the family. Face-to-face business contacts are done at the official office, not in the home. Employees with conflicting needs for residential space during telecommuting hours may not be accepted in the program.

**Telephone and Electrical Outlets**

Expenses to prepare a home for telecommuting may include installation of grounded outlets, a telephone jack, or an additional telephone line. For those jobs requiring a computer, a grounded outlet is important in order to protect the employee. Newer residential construction will likely have three-prong outlets. Older homes may need these or other grounding methods added. These are expenses which the University does not pay for its employees.

1. There should be a surge protector between the electrical outlet and any computer to protect the equipment from faulty electrical fluctuations. No University owned computer equipment may be used in the home office without a surge protector, which may be provided by the employee’s department.

2. Consider whether a “work” phone is needed. The need for the phone should be determined by the supervisor in discussions with the telecommuter. This generally does not apply to occasional calls between the telecommuter and supervisor, but does apply when the telephone is an essential element of the work to be performed. Examples of the criteria used to establish employer provided phone needs are:

   • Use of the telecommuter’s personal phone is not possible due to personal needs (other family members, etc.)

   • It is necessary to make long distance calls on a regular basis, making it impractical to reimburse the employee (a University provided calling card may solve this problem on a limited basis)

**Security and Safety**
In homes where a “spare” room can be converted for home work, a lock on the door or even a well-trained family may be adequate protection for files, materials left out on a desk, and equipment. If the work is performed in a shared space the employee must habitually store all work items in a protected place. This might be a closet, cupboard, or table located in such a way that property is not misplaced, lost, thrown away, or harmed. All records, papers, and correspondence should be safeguarded for their return to the official work location. Computerized files should be similarly protected.

Sound Control

Protection of the telecommuter from household noise and the household from the telecommuter is important for a harmonious work environment. The noise of a printer should be anticipated before setting up an office in the bedroom or anywhere that its noise will disturb other family members. Unlike the situation in many open office environments, telecommuters can often insulate themselves by closing doors.