Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Setting Work-Life Boundaries When You Work from Home



- Communication and work-life boundaries
- Staying focused
- Managing the temptation to overwork
- Maintaining boundaries

One thing that makes telework so attractive and convenient for many people is the flexibility. However, without a clear difference between work and non-work time, some teleworkers allow work to creep into the time that should be reserved for relaxation, family, and other personal needs. On the flipside, some teleworkers find that they have trouble keeping their personal lives from interfering with their work and affecting their work performance.

Creating and maintaining effective boundaries between work and the rest of life will be an ongoing challenge for you as you manage a telework schedule.

Communication and work-life boundaries

One of the most difficult aspects of telework is learning how to establish boundaries and then communicating them to co-workers and your manager in a positive way. Here are some ways to do that:

- **Know your manager's expectations**. Talk with your manager regularly about work expectations and know what is needed in terms of work output. Whether you're already teleworking and want to adjust your schedule for better balance or are just getting started, up-to-date information about your team's goals and your manager's expectations are essential. Set up a regular meeting with your manager to ensure that you stay current with team needs.
- **Determine when you'll be "on duty" and when you'll be "off duty."** Take the time to analyze your schedule to determine when your manager, team, and customers need to interact with you the most. When should your workday start and when should it end? Is it important for weekends to be off duty? Will there be times when you're not working but are available for urgent questions? If you have the flexibility to take breaks from work during "normal" work hours, for example, to go to the gym at lunch a couple of times a week, how will you shift your workday to make up that time?

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- **Talk with your manager about your weekly schedule.** Prepare a draft of how you would like to set up or adjust your schedule and discuss it with your manager. Negotiate a plan that allows you time to recharge and come back to work energized. Reassure your manager that you are still committed to your job and that you, of course, expect to flex your schedule like the rest of the team when there is a work crunch.
- **Let co-workers or clients know when you will be available**. A regularly updated voicemail message is even more essential when you work from home. An example would be a voice message that says, "Hi, you've reached Mary. I am in the office today, but I will not be available to return calls until 11:30 a.m. If you need immediate assistance, please call Account Services at 555-624-6475." This lets people know that you're there; you're just not available at the moment they called. You could also use an electronic calendar that others may access, send out a weekly schedule, or issue email reminders about when you'll be "out of the office."
- **Talk about and agree on some ground rules with managers and co-workers.** These could include expectations about how quickly you will respond to email and voicemail, how frequently you will communicate with managers and co-workers to update them on your progress on shared work, and how to contact you in case of urgent work issues. Agree on these ground rules with your manager and co-workers -- and possibly your clients -- so you all have the same understanding of when you will be available, how quickly you will respond to different kinds of messages, and whether rules apply in urgent situations.
- **Use technology wisely.** Use voicemail and email to your advantage. As long as co-workers and clients feel sure that you will respond in a timely manner, you can decide to allow yourself blocks of uninterrupted time to focus on important work. You might come up with a special signal as a way of alerting you to an especially urgent request. Sometimes it can seem like emails, voicemails, texts, and instant messages are controlling your life, but if you can make a conscious effort to use these technologies wisely, they will work *for* you.

Staying focused

You may want to talk with fellow co-workers and friends who telework, as they may have tips. Also, there are a number of good resources including the website for TelCoa (***http://www.telecommute.org***), an organization that promotes telework and telecommuting, and Michael Dziak's book, *Telecommuting Success: A Practical Guide for Staying in the Loop While Working Away from the Office*. Here are some suggestions to help you stay focused in your home office:

- **Establish a workday routine.** Many teleworkers find that setting and sticking to a regular routine is helpful for maintaining focus. You may want to establish a schedule that's similar to the one you had when you worked in an office. Begin and end work at the same time each day and take regular, scheduled breaks.
- **Avoid multitasking.** Don't try to get the laundry done or prepare dinner while also working on work tasks that require focus. Instead, take breaks from work to do other things if you need to. Many employees who work from home spend more concentrated time working on computers than they would in the office. Taking regular breaks, like getting up to stretch or take a walk, can actually increase efficiency and reduce errors.
- **Talk with family members about minimizing distractions.** Make sure that all members of your family understand and respect the fact that even though you're home, you're working. You may want to set some guidelines, like agreeing that you're only to be disturbed if there's an emergency or determining who will answer the door or phone when you're working.
- **Look at your home office.** Is there enough room for all of the things you need? Do you have the right equipment? Is it physically separated from the activity of your home? Is it quiet enough for you to be able to concentrate? Is your office ergonomically correct? Any of these things can affect your ability to concentrate. Your employer may have guidelines and even consultants to help you with this.
- **Get organized.** At some point, you may start work on a project and realize that you've left an important file in the office. If this happens to you frequently, you may need to come up with better solutions to avoid having to deal with missing materials. Make lists of all the things you

need, including files, equipment, and supplies, and think about what you'll need for specific projects. When you have everything you need at hand, you'll find it easier to focus on your work.

Managing the temptation to overwork

Once new teleworkers master the basics and solve the problems of distractions and focus, the opposite problem -- overwork -- often sets in. There are many reasons why teleworkers overwork when they work outside of the office, including the following:

- fear of being seen as less productive or less accessible than in-office workers
- unclear communication that creates rework
- manager or co-worker expectations
- access to work during "off hours"
- a lack of routine that signifies the regular beginning and end of a workday
- losing track of time in the absence of office routines

If you're not sure whether you're maintaining a healthy balance between work and life, ask yourself some of the following questions:

- Do I worry that I'm not spending enough time with friends or family because of work?
- Do friends and family complain that I'm always working?
- Do I often find myself working late at night or early in the morning (or beyond my "normal" work hours) when there isn't a work emergency?
- Do I ever go into my home office to do "one last thing" and end up working for several more hours on work that I could do the next day?
- Do I regularly work on weekends?
- Do others (my manager, co-workers, customers) expect to be able to reach me outside regular business hours?
- Do I work when I'm at home or on vacation because my office is so accessible?

If you are having trouble turning work off, it's important to come up with a plan to create and maintain a separation between your home and your work. You can do that by establishing schedules, rules, and routines.

Maintaining boundaries

The best way to maintain the boundaries you've set is to remain committed and firm. It's easy to let things slide by working a little later than normal "just this once" or answering calls or emails during your off-duty time. Here are some tips for maintaining boundaries between work and the rest of your life:

- **Create signals that indicate to family members or others in your home when you are working and when you're not.** Some people close their office door when they are working as a signal to family members that they aren't to be disturbed. Others may post a schedule in a common area or talk to family members about the coming workday.
- **Create as much separation between work and home as you can.** Have a dedicated workspace in which you only do work. If possible, make it an area that's away from the common areas of your home. Install a separate phone line for work calls that you can turn off in the rest of your home after work, and if you have an office door, close it when you are not working so you can't easily hear the phone or see your computer.
- **Take scheduled breaks.** Just because you're at home doesn't mean that you shouldn't stop for lunch or a break; leave your work area and eat in another part of your house or go for a walk.

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