

STAYING CONNECTED AND VISIBLE WHILE TELECOMMUTING

Getting Started

Telecommuting offers a delightful compromise between being employed full time (and enjoying the steady paycheck that comes with this arrangement) and experiencing much of the independence and privacy of self-employment. You can dress comfortably, saving substantially on your office clothing, and you can avoid the boring hours of commuting, saving substantially on gas, parking, and public transportation. As a telecommuter, you are also in a working environment that's all your own with no annoying coworkers nearby, which certainly promotes peace of mind.

Unfortunately, there are drawbacks to telecommuting. Among the most significant is falling “out of the loop”—being left behind, forgotten, or overlooked. You don't have access to the grapevine as you do in the workplace. And if you're not careful, you risk being ignored entirely when excellent, career-building assignments come up and you're not there to step forward to volunteer for them.

As a result, it's supremely important to build a plan for staying visible and connected with the people you work with, even if you spend much of your workday at your home office.

The following are key questions to ask yourself while considering whether to telecommute:

- How important is it to my boss to be able to track my performance and productivity firsthand?
- Can I trust myself to reach out to my coworkers on a regular basis, even if it's only for casual, social events?
- Does my organization offer built-in opportunities to return to the office and network?
- Does the environment already support telecommuters who are successful in their careers?

FAQs

Isn't it enough that I do my work and get the job done?

No. Work is about politics and perception, just as it is about productivity. So much work is done today in a teamwork environment that you must perform as a team member, even though you work largely in isolation.

What is the return for this extra investment in time and energy?

You will be remembered for promotions, raises, and important projects. When you market yourself as a key player in the organization, regardless of where you actually do your work, you are also less likely to be laid off in case of downsizing. By putting yourself forward, you also increase your chances of hearing incidental—but very significant—news and gossip that could change your future.

Making It Happen

Fit In with the Culture of Your Organization

Analyze how networks are built within your workplace and what behaviors are truly valued by your supervisors and the more senior members of your organization. If they have created casual, open-door environments where they welcome spontaneous visits, make a point of dropping in during the week. If they prefer formal appointments, set up lunch engagements or other dedicated times when you can regularly stay up to date with your department's news and projects.

Maintain a Presence in Your Company's Office

If possible, keep a desk and a direct phone line at the office. Furnish your workspace with pictures and business-related materials, so that there is no doubt that you remain an employee of the company.

Stay Visible "Virtually" . . .

Stay active and visible via your company's e-mail system, listserv, and other electronic communications. Try to answer all company e-mail within three hours of its delivery to you—immediately is best, whenever possible.

. . . and Physically

Attend all company-sponsored celebrations: birthdays, retirement parties, holiday festivities, cocktail parties, receptions.

Participate In Company-sponsored Community Events

Many companies are creating opportunities for employees to be directly involved with charitable and social projects. If your department is answering the phones during a telethon or repainting a home for the elderly, make sure you're there, too.

Market Yourself

Follow the example of independent consultants, who have to market themselves to build their business. You also must market yourself—even more so if you spend much of your time away from the office. Invite coworkers to lunch with you. Send them Web site references or clippings

that would interest them, especially information that gives them ideas or surprise insights that will further their careers.

Get the Office to Come to You

Whenever possible, offer to use your home as a meeting place. Your comfortable living room might be regarded as a welcome “retreat” from the office’s ringing telephones. It could be a great environment for group brainstorming sessions.

Don’t Forget the Bigger Picture

Remember to market yourself to your profession, as well as within your organization. Join your professional association’s local chapter, as well as the national organization. Go to as many meetings as your budget and schedule permit. Keep your contacts current, both inside and outside the company.

Get into Print

Publish at every opportunity. Write articles and reports for your internal publications, employee communications vehicles, and intranet, if your organization has one. Contribute articles to your professional journal. When it’s appropriate, invite your supervisor to be your “coauthor” on selected projects.

Common Mistakes

You Assume You Will Be Remembered

Just because your name is on the payroll, that doesn’t mean you’re on the minds of your fellow team members or supervisor. It is your job to make sure they don’t forget you.

You Become Caught Up In the At-home Routine

This is easy to do. You start getting comfortable moving from bed to breakfast table to desk to sofa and then to bed again. Try to get to the office at least once a week. If that is impossible, make at least two outside appointments every week.

You Forget Your Coworkers

The best way to ensure that you will stay visible and remembered is by remembering the people you work with. Do the same things for them that you would have done if you were working in the same office. Remember their birthdays or work anniversaries; congratulate them on a job well done; pass on employment opportunities to them; ask them for advice.

You Lose Touch with What Your Superior Expects from You

Without maintaining a consistent presence in the office, you risk losing that instinctual sense of whether your boss is pleased or not. Likewise, your boss may be very uncomfortable with a

telecommuting arrangement because they are not able to observe you working. Regular, one-on-one meetings with your boss, going over accomplished goals and agreeing to the next round of objectives, will make sure you both have the same definition of excellence. And you will have the opportunity to confirm that you are indeed achieving the goals set out for you.

You Lose Touch, Period

Suddenly you don't recognize the new jargon. The evolving technology has outpaced your ability to keep up. You performed some work based on an expired assumption or principle. The junior employee has been promoted far above you. You have never worked closely with any of the new faces immediately above or below you in rank.

Any of these signify one thing: it's time to return to the workaday world.

More help

BOOK

Jackson, Paul, et al. (editors). "Teleworking: International Perspectives: From Telecommuting to the Virtual Organization: The Management of Technology and Innovation" New York: Routledge, 1998.