

When Your Home Becomes Your Work Place - The Reality of Teleworking

Tim de La Cruz, PhD & Kristina C. Sayama, MPA
Cooperative Extension & Outreach, College of Natural & Applied Sciences,
University of Guam

Modern life has been significantly transformed since the COVID-19 pandemic. Our daily activities are now defined by social distancing and sheltering in place, thus the need to work from home or telework. All functions of living have been affected: longer bank lines and shorter banking hours, greater reliance on online social connectivity and limited social interaction. This is the new social reality prescribed to us by forces outside of our control.

The COVID-19 pandemic has no doubt presented challenges Guam's workforce. Initial reports have indicated that on Guam, over 7,000 workers, primarily in the tourist, airline, and service sectors have been laid off or furloughed. The front liner workers (to include medical professionals, law enforcement, and other workers who support the health and well-being of the community) continue to perform their duties and work in the community, often with the potential of risk to their own health. Finally, the last segment of the workforce are the employees who have shifted to working from home and working remotely.

While working from home is not entirely a new concept or practice for a large segment of Guam's working population, this traditionally has not been the norm. Working from home has been steadily rising stateside as a means to address spatial issues and reduce commute times. Prior to COVID-19, telecommuting typified the workplaces for thousands, if not millions of freelance workers, consultants, "influencers," independent contractors, and creative entrepreneurs. What can the rest of us learn from them? It is clear that telecommuting and telework requires a lot of adjustment by the employee and the family members

who share the home space. When an employee works away from home there are many obvious advantages: you are not socially isolated, clearer start and end times, lunch breaks with coworkers, face-to-face interaction, quicker feedback, more direct supervision, and advanced, reliable infrastructure (e.g. faster Wifi connection, computers, and other technology tools).

Adjustments to Work from Home

In this unprecedented event, adjustment to a new "business normal" has continuously been a process of evolving. Thus, you may be faced with greater than usual levels of stress, performance anxiety, challenges with procrastination and other adjustment concerns. Not dealing with these feelings productively can easily spiral out of control and make working from home very unpleasant, even causing working from home to a grind to a complete halt. However, if we reframe how we think about this new opportunity of being able to work from home, we can also identify some of the benefits, which may include the flexibility of time, or the ability to be innovative in addressing new ways to get things done – on a lighter note, every day is "Casual Friday."

Below are tips that may help you reap the benefits of teleworking:

1. Create a workspace

The boundaries of working from home are often blurry. Transform a corner of your home as a dedicated workplace. Use this space to set physical boundaries. Choose a space that inspires productivity and keeps you in the workflow hustle. To keep distractions to a minimum, consider a space with the least foot traffic. If you live with others, communicate your dedicated workspace boundaries. If space is an issue, close up or clear up workspaces until you will use it again. Having a bin or basket that you can keep all your work materials helps

with organizing. Additional tip: Dressing as you would go to work will signal everyone else in the house (and you) that you are in work mode.

2. Develop a work schedule

When feasible, create a work schedule that gets you into a routine and most especially aligns your schedule to when you are most productive. Be sure to communicate your work schedule with your employer. A work schedule avoids switching from one uncompleted task to the next, which is reported to be among the common distractions of home-based workers (Czerwisni, et al., 2004). There are free templates of weekly/daily planners you can search online.

Examples of a daily timeline:

8:00 am - 10:00 am	email, return phone calls, chat messages, project management app.
10:00 am - 10:15 am	break
10:15 am - 12:00 am	conference call
12:00 pm - 1:00 pm	lunch break
1:00 pm - 3:00 pm	project assignments and other tasks
3:00 pm - 3:15 pm	breaks
3:15 pm - 4:15 pm	continue with project assignments and other tasks
4:15 pm - 5:00 pm	prepare work for next day, daily work journal, clock out

An additional benefit of a work schedule is that it communicates to others you may have to interact with when you are available. When we are in our offices, we can often close our doors to signal to others that we are not available to meet or socialize. Some applications used may also allow you to put out a “do not disturb” signal.

3. Account for your Time

Expect that your employer will demand greater accountability of your time when you are teleworking. Be prepared to document your daily tasks, specifically if you are an hourly paid, or non-exempt worker.

Consider the following:

- Communicate with your employer your expected work hours.
- Keep a work schedule.
- Keep a work journal of your hours. For many public agency employees, documenting federal time and effort is necessary. Indicate what your plan of work is for each day, and what tasks you were able to complete
- Prioritize work.

4. Dive into the distractions

No matter how much you transform your home into your home office, it is still your home. Specifically, with children sheltering in place too, the distractions may be hard to minimize altogether. Give children the attention for their learning and support needs and communicate your work schedule with others in the home to minimize interruptions. Interruptions can impact your work progress and often require more immediate attention (Van der Meulen, et al., 2012). Schedule your time to support their needs as well. For example, the entire household will be focused on certain activities from 8:00 am to 11:00 am each morning of the week. Accepting that distractions are an inherent part of working from home may ease performance anxiety. Be flexible, but be responsible with your distractions by adjusting your time to another part of the day. Keep distractions to a minimum, but use these activities as an energizing break from work. Take necessary breaks, call fellow co-workers to check-in, and tend to the needs of the household. Then, return back to work on the next task.

5. Deal with isolation productively

Connect with co-workers. Schedule weekly conference calls to ease social isolation and increase productivity. Initiate calls with others, insist on frequent online meetings, or regularly connect to co-workers via your preferred instant messaging apps.

6. Set limits.

Working from home may lead to burnout if clear boundaries are not defined. Setting limits and boundaries is a healthy aspect of work-life balance (Wepfer, et al., 2017). In the midst of COVID-19, it is essential to keep a healthy work-life balance that may lead to overall wellness. Know when it’s time to clock out – and act on it!

For further information:

Contact the University of Guam, Cooperative Extension and Outreach at 735-2080 for help or more information. Additional publications can be found on our website at: uog.edu/extension/publications.

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