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I Work from Home, but Now I Live at Work

How to Set Working Hours,
Protect Your Space, and Manage
Availability So Your Laptop
Stops Being a Housemate

PROBLEM?
RELAX.
YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

We've got a problem.
But relax.
It can be solved -
and we'll even have
something to laugh about.

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INTRO

Working from home was supposed to be convenient. No traffic jams, no searching for a parking space, no person microwaving fish at the exact moment you decide to make coffee. It was supposed to be calmer, more flexible, and generally more human. You were going to reclaim the hour you used to spend commuting and use it for sleep, exercise, breakfast, or at least ten minutes of sitting somewhere without looking at a screen.

After a while, however, you discovered a small problem. You no longer commute to work, but work has somehow commuted to you. And apparently it has signed an open-ended lease.

The laptop sits on the table. Your work phone lies next to your personal one. The charger lives by the sofa. Teams, Slack, email, or whatever communication tool your company prefers can reach you during dinner, a movie, Saturday coffee, and the exact moment when you are trying to remember whether you still have hobbies. Officially, you finished work three hours ago, but because the computer is only twelve feet away, a tempting thought appears: I'll just take a quick look.

And "I'll just take a quick look" is one of the most dangerous sentences in modern work.

I'll just check my email. I'll just reply to Paul. I'll just see whether the client answered. I'll just fix that slide because I already know what needs changing. I'll just send the file so I can have a quiet morning tomorrow.

Forty minutes later, you are still standing in the kitchen, but mentally you are already in a budget meeting.

The problem with working from home is rarely that people do nothing. Far more often, the problem is that nobody is quite sure when to stop. In an office, there used to be natural signals that the day was ending: people put on their coats, monitors went dark, someone said "see you tomorrow," and you walked through a door that at least symbolically changed your environment. At home, the transition from work to life can consist of closing one browser tab and opening Netflix on the same screen.

It is not a particularly impressive transition ceremony.

Then there is availability. If you work from home, people sometimes assume you are slightly more available. After all, you are near your computer. You are not commuting anywhere. Someone can quickly call you. One message after six surely does not change anything.

One message does not. The problem begins when "one message" happens every day.

At that point, work no longer needs to invade your life dramatically. It can simply nibble away at it ten minutes at a time. You reply during breakfast. You check something before bed. You review a document on Sunday so you can "have a calmer Monday." Monday may indeed become calmer, but Sunday starts to look suspiciously like its demo version.

This book will not try to convince you that the solution is quitting your job, moving into a wooden cabin without Wi-Fi, and supporting yourself by selling soy candles. Working from home can be an excellent way to work. It gives you freedom, saves time, lets you organize your day more intelligently, and in many cases allows you to work more calmly than in an office full of conversations, phone calls, and people asking whether you "have a minute."

The point is simply to make sure that working from home remains working from home instead of turning your home into a room located somewhere inside your job.

You do not need a perfect home office, biometric locks, or a rulebook the length of a constitution. You need a few clear decisions: when you work, where you work, when you are available, how you communicate those rules to other people, and what you do when you are the one who starts breaking them.

Because the biggest enemy of boundaries in remote work is not always your boss, your client, or your colleague. Sometimes it is you.

You see a message at 9:14 p.m. and think: I'll reply now and get it out of the way. You open the computer on Saturday because you remembered one thing. You answer messages while on vacation so nobody thinks you are unavailable.

Even though being unavailable is more or less the official purpose of a vacation.

So we are not going to build a wall between work and life. Modern work is often too flexible for that wall to function properly. We are going to build something more useful: a door. A door can be opened when there is a genuine reason, but most of the time it stays closed.

And if your job has been sitting on your sofa for the past few months, using your Wi-Fi and metaphorically asking what is for dinner, it is time to establish some house rules. Although ideally, it should eventually move out. At least after five.

Chapter 1 - If the Computer Is Right Here, When Does Work Actually End?

The greatest advantage of working from home is flexibility. The greatest disadvantage of working from home is also flexibility.

If nobody requires you to clock in at exactly 8:00, you can start at 7:30, 8:15, or 9:00. You can take a longer break in the middle of the day, collect a delivery, go to a doctor's appointment, or start the laundry during a conference call where your only responsibility is to listen.

That is great. Until flexibility starts to mean: I work a little in the morning, a little after lunch, a little in the evening, and all day long I am never entirely sure whether I am working or not. Then, at 7:30 p.m., you discover that you are still doing small tasks because you went shopping between one and two and somewhere in your head an internal department of moral accounting has opened a case.

"You should make up that hour." Nobody told you that. Nobody may even have noticed you were gone. But you already feel that you owe something to the corporate universe.

That is how a workday without clear boundaries begins.

Working Hours Are Not a Prison

Many people dislike the idea of setting specific working hours at home. After all, the entire point of working remotely is flexibility. Of course.

Setting working hours does not mean that every day at 8:01 you must be sitting perfectly upright in front of your monitor

and that at 4:00 your computer should automatically explode. The point is to create a default rhythm.

For example: I usually work from 8:30 to 4:30.

That one sentence solves a surprising number of problems. You know roughly when you start. You know roughly when you finish. Your colleagues can know it too. Your family can know it. Most importantly, your brain begins to understand that work is one part of the day rather than the factory setting of the entire day.

You can obviously move those hours when necessary. If you have a personal appointment in the morning, you start later. If a project requires an evening meeting, you organize that particular day differently. The flexibility remains.

The difference is that the exception stays an exception instead of becoming the operating system.

Without a default rhythm, every day has to be negotiated from scratch. Should I already be working? Can I take a break? If I took a break, should I work later? Is it okay to shut down the computer if I can see that someone is typing to me right now?

That is a lot of small decisions. It is much easier to tell yourself: these are my normal hours. Today I have a reason to change them.

Do Not Start Work by Accident

One of the strangest effects of remote work is accidentally starting your workday. You get up. You make coffee. You sit down with your phone for a moment. You see an email. You read it. You answer it.

Congratulations. It is 7:08 a.m. and you have just started work in your pajamas.

The problem is not the pajamas. Economic history has probably seen plenty of excellent decisions made in pajama bottoms. The problem is that your day started without you consciously deciding to start it.

That is why it helps to create a clear moment when work begins. It does not need to be spectacular. You do not need a gong, sandalwood incense, or a ritual in which you open Excel while facing the rising sun.

A simple sequence is enough. Breakfast. Shower. Short walk. Coffee. Sit down at your work spot. Open the computer.

Only then do you begin.

If your first contact with work is a notification you read while you are still in bed, work gets first priority over the rest of your day. The reply may take only three minutes, but your brain already knows that you are "inside."

The same thing applies in the evening. You need a moment that means the day is over.

Create an Artificial Commute

When large numbers of people began working from home, many discovered something surprising: commuting, irritating as it was, served a psychological purpose. It gave you time to change modes.

In the morning, you moved from private life into work. In the evening, you traveled in the opposite direction. Even twenty minutes in a car, on a bus, or walking created a buffer between "I need to reply to the client" and "what are we having for dinner?"

You can recreate that buffer when working remotely. When you finish work, go outside for ten or fifteen minutes. Walk

around the block. Go buy bread. Listen to music. Do not carry your work inbox in your hand.

It sounds simple because it is simple. Simple solutions often work remarkably well. Your brain receives a signal: we are changing context.

If you do not want to go outside, create another closing ritual. Close all your programs. Write down three things for tomorrow. Shut down the computer. Put away the laptop. Change the lighting in the room. Turn on some music.

The important thing is that finishing work should be an action, not a slow decline in activity somewhere between Excel and dinner.

Make Tomorrow's List Before You Finish Today

One reason it is difficult to stop working is the fear that you will forget something. That is why at 8:40 p.m. you suddenly remember: I need to call Maggie tomorrow.

You open the laptop just to write it down. Since the laptop is already open, you notice a message. Since you noticed the message, you answer it.

And Maggie has just cost you forty minutes of your evening even though you have not actually called her yet.

The simple solution is a short end-of-day procedure. Spend the final ten minutes of work writing down what remains unfinished and what needs to happen tomorrow. Do not build a gigantic productivity system if you do not need one. Five points are enough.

Tomorrow:

- reply to Maggie,
- fix the proposal,

- send the data to Tom,
- prepare questions for the meeting,
- check the invoice.

Your brain no longer has to keep those items in working memory. It can stop reminding you about Maggie while you brush your teeth.

Do Not Pay Back Every Break at Night

At home, we do things during the workday that we would not do in an office. We start a load of laundry. We collect a package. We open the door for a plumber. We make a quick trip to the store.

And that is fine. One of the benefits of remote work is being able to fit life into the day in a sensible way. The problem starts when you treat every private activity as stolen company time that has to be paid back later.

Half an hour at the doctor turns into an hour of work in the evening. Twenty minutes of shopping turns into checking your inbox at ten. A fifteen-minute conversation with your partner creates guilt as though you secretly abandoned a production line.

It helps to look at the day more realistically.

You did not work eight uninterrupted hours in the office either. You talked to people. You went for coffee. You waited for elevators. Someone told you the story of their bathroom renovation, which you never asked to hear but now you know the price of every tile.

Work has always contained pauses. Not every minute of private activity requires repayment with interest.