

The “Working from Home” Myth

By John C. Dvorak

I started working from home around 1982 when I became a full-time writer. I learned a few things along the way that I'd like to share because it's not as easy as it looks, and some people simply cannot handle it.

In fact, many artists and writers who could easily work from home still prefer to do that work somewhere other than their house. A small guest house, a garage office, or a converted shed will serve this purpose for a lot of people who need rigid boundaries defining home and work environments.

I personally prefer my large home office filled with computers and, nowadays, a podcasting lash-up. As long as I have a door to close, this works for me. Let's go over some of the problems that this sort of environment creates and what you might do to prevent the whole thing from going off the rails.

The main considerations for working from home include determining your work hours, figuring out how to complete your tasks during that time, and adjusting the amount of time that you spend with your partner and children.

First—your work hours. Early studies of amateurs who worked at home for a major company determined that people overworked themselves when at home compared to being at the office. This is problematic because the office workers always assume that the person working from home is goofing off most of the time. If you get a lot done, it is always assumed that you could have done more.

Because the office is generally filled with distractions and the day has a lot of breaks, you should always get more done working at home. So what I am about to say is controversial, but to work at home effectively you will have to sandbag or cut production. You can do this with a clear conscience if you work on a project-by-project basis with certain time constraints. If you finish early, which will happen almost always, you'll have to sit on it and do some reading or develop more background information on the project. Casual research is what I'd call it.

Nobody will be suspicious or complain if you are getting obvious work done at what appears to be the exact same pace as you would in the office. This is the only way this works.

Combined with the fact that you are using your own resources (computer, phone, lights, desk) and not that of the company, this is a money saver for the company so it's a plus for everyone.

It also allows you to be “in” the office all day through the office VPN (Virtual Private Network) and, ideally, via a phone extension routed through the office phone system. You may as well be in the office as you are available all day. You can, in fact expand your workday from maybe 8 hours to a more relaxed 10 hours to finish your projects with a lot of “me” time for eating,

watching TV, or whatever you want to do in-between actual work. Your day is wide open for you to manage as you wish. This covers the accessibility.

Then comes the spouse. During this Covid-19 situation, both heads of household are usually stuck with each other, putting a strain on the relationship. Traditionally, one partner might work from home while the other one goes to the office. Though shared household duties are becoming more commonplace, any person working from home will still be expected to do the dishes, vacuum, and clean up. The comment, "Well, you were home all day. What did you do?" is common. Stern rules have to be agreed on in advance. You are not working from home to do housework, or household errands for that matter.

Children in the house are always problematic. Generally, they are at school, although you can combine homeschooling and work-at-home environments and make it work.

I always said that when the office door was closed, that meant "do not disturb" and I made everyone agree to it. But unless you hate kids, it is very easy to let them come and go with questions, requests, or complaints. I've always seen it as duplicating the office environment almost exactly, only your office co-workers have been replaced by children. Usually, the amount of your time that they will waste is far less than an office worker who might want elaborate counselling or feel like gossiping. The kids will want a sandwich or some help doing a math puzzle.

It probably takes a few years of working from home to get the hang of it and some of you might never get the hang of it or ever like it at all.

This brings us to the downsides, which are many. The biggest one is the one mentioned above but it is part of a wider set of problems created by the modern office milieu.

Socializing is in fact important to many office workers, so much so that many will marry each other despite the risks of office romances. What better place to meet a mate? This falls off drastically with the work-at-home environment, which is best done by those already married.

Team building, while important to many companies, is impossible when you're working from home. I used to think this was a bogus argument, but I've changed my mind on that issue.

Office politics is very important for job security. If someone at any given office does not like you, they can spend a lot of time trying to get rid of you. This is a very common problem and it happens all the time. It is usually engineered by someone who wants to take your position. It is much harder to accomplish if you are in the office all the time.

Then there are the head-counters who know you are not supposed to be in the office but still see it as some flaw. When the company gets pared down, consider your head automatically on the chopping block because you are just never seen.

I have seen some people who manage to make themselves indispensable to avoid the "never seen" problem, but it takes a lot of effort and cunning, which most good employees do not do well.

So these Covid-19 edicts of late that encourage or even demand that you work from home are doomed to fail for most of the people who have not had years of experience working from home.

Luckily, they do not have to worry about the office politics or other factors if nobody is in the office – that's the only upside. All of the other elements, however, are in play.

And then we have the problem of managing a workforce that is mostly at home. This is another skillset that few people have. Few executives know how to do this efficiently. It's a disaster all around. This is probably a good time to hope that current Covid-19 panic and lockdowns end soon.

And if anyone expects this moment in time to change the way business is done "as we realize the benefits of working from home," they are fooling themselves.

Working from home is difficult and the few tips I've included in this essay only make it slightly more doable for the novices who should be keen on getting back to the office, which is their true comfort zone.

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