

How to make remote working work for you

The notion of working at a fixed location for a fixed amount of time every day is incompatible with our modern lives. We are getting busier all the time, that any opportunity to flex our work schedules around our busy lives can be a real help. Enabled by advances in technology, companies are increasingly allowing their employees to work remotely so they can better juggle the complexities of their lives, and with wireless internet access we can, in theory, work anywhere we like. For most of us, the most productive (and convenient) location to work outside the office is in our own home, but for others, working in the local café can be just as helpful. For everyone however, the opportunity to fit work into otherwise unproductive times – on the train, in-between meetings etc. – can be a real benefit too, as it means less time wasted away from the family and the things we enjoy. So why should companies support flexible working, and what can employers and employees do to get the most from it?

Looking back just a few years, most companies viewed remote working with a degree of suspicion. Today however, a company that doesn't support flexible working is considered a dinosaur. Advances in technology mean that an employee can be just as productive away from the office than in it, and for the employee, the benefits are numerous and significant; saving money and time on the daily commute, spending more time with the family and being able to work to your own schedule are all realistic benefits. Just the change of scenery, even if it's just one day a week, can be a refreshing break from the routine and make an employee more creative and productive. Ultimately it comes down to a better work/life balance, which is something everyone should support.

Home working is good for employers too. A happier workforce is typically a more productive and loyal one, and with fewer desks required in the office, cheaper too. Home working is also a sign of a company's maturity, reflecting a modern work culture where employee value is measured not by the number of hours slogged in the office, but by outcome alone. If an employee works better outside the 9-5 routine, then the company that provides the framework to support this is better off financially, culturally and even ethically.

There are a number of considerations that the employer and employee should take into account however, to really get the most out of flexible working. Simply sending someone home isn't the answer. To start with, the employee has an obligation to find an environment where they can be productive. In most instances the best location is at home, because it is a fixed environment that the employee can shape to their preferences. For others it can be a public place like a café or a train, or anywhere else besides the office where they're comfortable and feel inspired. Being offered the ability to work remotely is an extension of trust on behalf of the employer, so the employee should respect that trust by ensuring they can actually *work* from their alternative location. The best way to achieve this is with a home office – a separate room that is set aside exclusively for working, that is quiet and offers the opportunity to be undisturbed. If the employee doesn't have a separate room that can function as an office, then any dedicated, quiet space will suffice, such as a desk in the corner of a bedroom. Peace and quiet might not be for everyone, but it always helps to have some form of dedicated work area away from the office. It is also important to build some form of flexible working routine. It might help to work remotely on a fixed day each week, so that you can save a particular task for that day where peace and quiet or a change of scenery is required. A degree of discipline is also required to be productive when working remotely, as is a consistent work/break routine. If you don't want to stay cooped up in the house all day, consider taking a twenty minute walk before starting work, leaving the house at lunchtime, or spending the afternoon at another location entirely.

For the employer, their obligations don't stop at just offering the 'perk' of flexible working. They need to back this up with the right support. Employees need to be given guidelines on what is expected of them when working remotely – whether that be to ensure they're available on their mobile or on instant messenger on their computer, or something more flexible than that. Clarity of expectations on both sides is important. The employer can also do their bit to ensure their employees have the tools to

be productive. Implementing VPN access to the company's network and giving employees laptops will ensure that working remotely is no different to being in the office. Better still, the employer should also consider migrating as much of their IT to the cloud as possible. Switching to web-based email and storage, and replacing desktop applications with web equivalents (such as Salesforce for CRM, Google Docs or Office 365 for spreadsheets) will all help to unify the experience between the office and home. Making use of web-based communications tools like instant messenger and VoIP will also help to keep your employees connected when outside the office, and reduce their reliance on email.

In order for these tools to be useful however, it is sensible for the employer to take responsibility for the internet connection that supports them, particularly if they regularly work from home. All of these tools put significantly greater demands on the employee's internet connection. The more they use cloud services, VPN, VoIP etc., the more critical their internet connection becomes to their ability to be productive. Reliability is therefore essential. Added to that, cloud applications and internet-based communications tools require more bandwidth than simple web browsing, in both the upstream and downstream, so good download and upload bandwidth becomes important. If the employee's internet connection isn't fast enough in either direction, or has arbitrary monthly download quotas (as most consumer internet packages do), then they could soon find that their connection isn't able to cope with business use. The consistency of the connection is also important. The majority of consumer ISPs offer no guarantees as to the consistency of the connection throughout the day, so users will find that their connection slows down at certain times. A business-grade connection, by contrast, will offer at the very least a minimum service guarantees at all times of the day, in addition to fast fixes if the connection goes down for any reason.

In the same way as an employer provides its staff with the tools to do their job in the office - a computer, email address, phone number etc. - then this should naturally be extended when they're working remotely. Providing its employees with a business-grade internet connection at home is the most cost-effective way that an employer can do this, as can the provision of a mobile 3G connection when an employee is working remotely. What's more, with the trend of bring-your-own-device yielding cost savings for many employers on computer hardware, not to mention the productivity and loyalty gains that such a move would bring, offering business grade internet connectivity to employees might end up being very good value indeed.. No boss can argue with that.