Northwest (HHS Region 10)

PTTC Prevention Technology Transfer Center Network
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Working From Home & Keeping Your Sanity

In these times of the COVID-19 crisis, many of us are working from home out of necessity. And we may continue this trend, at least to some degree, when it is again safe to return to the traditional workplace. Setting up a workspace at home can seem daunting. Some guidance on setting up and working from home can be helpful.

Define Your Work Zone

First, designate a "work zone." If you have a spare room to use as an office, that may be ideal. If you don't, or wish to be more connected to your family when you're working, a work zone will signal you and your family that "It's time to go to work." Find a space in a room not frequently used by the rest of the family, and place a desk facing a window, sitting with your back to the room. This will get you in the "office" frame of mind, rather than the "home" mindset – and also remind others in your home that you're "at work."

The open floor plans currently popular in modern homes make it a little more challenging to find a workspace that is quiet and separate enough for you to concentrate. The dining room table is the most common spot for a home workspace, since this room is primarily used only during mealtimes. Other possible workspaces include a garage space, attic space, a storage room, even a corner of the bedroom.

You may find it helpful to put up a sign and a paper clock with moveable hands on the door to your office, or the wall or even the back of your chair to let people know you're working and when you can be interrupted.

Meeting Norms

Set norms for your virtual meetings and share those with meeting participants before or at the beginning of the meeting. Common norms might include:

Use video – Having participants turn their video on allows for a personal connection, and makes the meeting feel more like a face-to-face communication. It also encourages
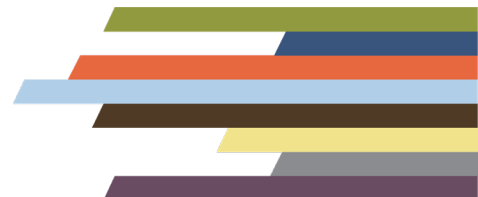
participants to attend to the meeting, participate in conversation, and resist multi-tasking. When participants attend to something other than the meeting, their investment and input is compromised, the team feels less connected and the collective creativity of the team is compromised.

Close unnecessary screens – Asking participants to close down screens they aren't using for the meeting supports participatory engagement. When the entire team is attentive to the work at hand, less time and energy is lost reattending after distraction, and more dynamic resolutions and ideas result.

Audio dial-in – Provide an audio dial-in option for those whose internet connection is not strong, but set the video option as the norm. Ask participants joining by audio to identify themselves when they speak during the meeting, so everyone knows who is saying what.

To mute or not to mute – A useful norm is to mute everyone as they join the meeting, which prevents transmitting background noise. Let participants know they are automatically muted, but that they can unmute themselves to share or respond whenever they want. Your or your tech buddy may need to watch for participants trying to speak when their microphones are muted and remind them to unmute in order to be heard.

Use platform tools – Another useful norm is the use of platform tools, such as the chat box, polling, white board, etc. as you would in a face-to-face meeting to support discussion, opinion sharing and the recording of input. Again, familiarize yourself with the purposes and uses of each tool and practice using them so you can do so smoothly to support, rather than interrupt, meeting dynamics.

Eliminate standing reports – This suggested norm might be a bit of a shock to some of you. But, standing reports are generally not terribly gripping, and people tend to tune out or multi-task during standing reports. It's hard to re-engage them and recapture their attention for important discussions, and you don't want to let everyone's best energy dissipate. Instead, provide written reports for download from your virtual meeting platform.

Lighting

Good lighting is important. A combination of natural lighting and desk lighting is best, if possible. Choose a window not in the direct sun, and place your desk or small table facing the window with your computer screen in front of the window. Good desk lamps shining down on your keyboard or desk surface effectively light your work area.

Ergonomics

Research ergonomics, and set up your office accordingly. Learning how to select a good desk chair and set chair height, keyboard height, monitor height and distance will allow you to work without getting tired or sore. Here's one resource from Mayo Clinic, the Office Ergonomics: Your How-To Guide.

Setting Up Your Desk

Declutter the space and set up your desk with everything you need for work, just like your regular office. Remove anything not needed for work. A personal picture or an item you find particularly inspiring are fine; your sewing project or your collection of baseballs calling you is not supportive of work efficiency.

Some kind of filing system helps to keep things organized. An inexpensive vertical file rack can be used to organize projects in folders, a paper stand is helpful for documents you're currently using, even a "Follow Up On" paper box on the desk can remind you to follow up on tasks in progress.

Working Smart from Home

Manage time proactively. Set regular work hours at home – hours that work for you! After all, this is one of the beautiful things about working at home. Of course, you'll need to iron out the details with your supervisory, but this is an opportunity to fit your work into your life, rather than your life around your work! This is a huge gift to yourself and your family, and studies have shown that doing so actually improves productivity!

You don't necessarily have to sit at your desk from 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Many employers are recognizing the necessity for employees working from home to work differently, in smaller blocks of time, at different hours of the day, and an increasing understanding that self-care and family needs are equally important at this time.

Schedule breaks. Set a timer to ring at least every hour and get up and move around for a few minutes, longer if your life requires longer periods with your family. Moving around refreshes your body and mind, and you return from even short breaks with a fresher and more creative mind.

Finally, at the end of the day or a block of work time, turn off the computer and/or monitor, close the door or clear the table if you're working in a common area, and resist the temptation to overwork. Take care of yourself, safeguard your family and personal time, and experience how working from home can be both productive and enjoyable.