

Working from Home

For the first time in 22 years since I passed the bar, I will soon be working from home while my new office is being remodeled. I'm anxious about the change. No commute. No parking garage. No elevator. No janitor. No rent check. Wait, the last one sounds pretty good.

Any advice for being productive at home instead of hanging out in the hot tub or playing video games all day?

I did this awhile years ago and the most important thing for me was setting a work schedule. A calendar - which we all use anyway - forced me to stay on task and not be tempted to throw a load of laundry in the washer or pick up one more thing around the house.

I set appointments outside the house so I had to get up and dressed so I wasn't tempted to work in my t shirt and shorts - well, maybe Fridays!

I also designated and prepared an office, which 15 years ago seemed important but now not so much.

I just work at the island in my kitchen but it's more mindset than anything.

Good luck,

Reta McKannan, Alabama

Sounds silly but change clothes to "go to work." Sure you think "hey I can work in my PJs." Change out of your PJs into something else, so it is clear you are "going to work." You may change into a t-shirt and jeans but you are getting dressed for the day.

Also, have a designated work area. Don't work at the dining room table. Don't work on the couch. Work at a designated area that you can step away from at the end of the day.

Both of these draw a mental line between work and home so you feel you are "at work" when working.

If all else, reward yourself. "If I write this Complaint, then I can play video games." Or "as soon as I finish my to do list, I can knock off early." But don't say "Okay, since I am home, I can throw in the laundry while I write the complaint." or "man I have to write that Complaint but did you notice how dirty the floor is?" Home to do list does not interfere with the work to do list just because you are home.

Elizabeth Pugliese, Maryland

I've been working from home for the past two years and have learned a few things along the way.

First, dress like you are going to work. It sounds like a small thing, but I have found it makes a difference in my outlook. When I first started working from home, I took the easy route and wore jeans or exercise clothes when I was working -- basically the same things I wear on the weekend. Although I got things done, on some level I didn't feel like a lawyer. So I started dressing up -- nothing fancy, but nice wool slacks, a pretty sweater, jewelry, nice hair and makeup -- the kind of things I would wear in a "business casual" office. You know what? It made a huge difference. Not only did I feel more "lawyerly," but I was able to accept last-minute meetings and lunch invitations without worrying about changing my clothes. When I ran errands, such as checking my P.O. Box or going to Staples, if I ran into a friend or client, they could tell immediately that I was a practicing lawyer, not a stay-at-home mom. I am sure there are many lawyers who have a different view of what to wear to a home office, but dressing up worked for me.

Second, stick to a schedule and try to work during regular business hours. I was more lax about my schedule when I first started working at home. I might spend too much time reading the newspaper in the morning and get a late start on the day, knowing I could make up the time by working into the evening. But I later realized that the morning is my best time for serious thinking, so I am careful not to squander it.

Third, make sure your friends and family know that even if you are home, you are still "at work." My mother knows I am home during the day so she tends to call whenever it suits her. I'm trying to get her to call in the evening, after work, so I don't get distracted and can stay focused.

Fourth, don't let work take over your whole day. I still struggle with this one. When I am drafting an appellate brief, it is easy for me to spend 10 or 12 hours at my desk, researching and writing. So I have to push myself to take a lunch break, and to turn off my computer at a reasonable hour so I can eat dinner and get to bed at a reasonable time. If you are a goal-oriented person, as most lawyers are, when you work at home it is easy for work to completely take over your life. Try to not let that happen by setting a schedule.

I hope this helps. I look forward to hearing about others' experiences.

Ginny

Virginia Hinrichs McMichael

I have an actual office but work from home, other than meeting new clients. Part of that relates to the tiny size and hot box situation with the actual office. But still.

I've read many times that dressing up for work makes a big difference. But I don't do it. Very often I don't feel like a lawyer, and admit that I feel most like a lawyer when I get dressed up to meet clients, although I am doing the work of a lawyer all of the time.

As a side note, I am an avid distance runner and cyclist. Since I already struggle with making time for those pursuits, I never feel like spending the time needed to do my hair, make-up, clothes (which also involves ongoing dry-cleaning and greater expense), etc. Basically I don't have another hour to devote to the way I look. If I didn't work out every day, then I'd probably feel differently.

I do have a separate office in my home, but I mostly work on the couch on my laptop, or standing at the kitchen bar (I like to sit / stand when working). I used to use the dedicated office more, and do believe that helps with the mental distinction between work time and home time.

Still, my primary distractions are online. I think I would have those anywhere. I struggled with those for a long time. But I finally found an app called Cold Turkey -- which I actually don't yet have installed on my new computer --and which I just remembered yesterday is the reason I haven't been as productive the last week or so. I set up URLs on that app for all social media, and Gmail. As long as that is installed, and I have my to-do lists, I tend to have the problem of working too much because I'm at home, not the other way around.

I agree with the idea that you should pick a time when you are going to stop working. I like to cook dinner but have been eating out way too often lately, usually because I don't stop working until I'm starving at 8 p.m. or something.

As far as things like doing laundry, I think those can actually help you stay productive (as opposed to checking Facebook). Whenever I am buried in some work, and need a break, throwing some clothes in the washer actually gives me a break, while allowing me to feel productive. Just make sure you tell yourself mentally "I'm ONLY going to put clothes in the wash, nothing else, then get back to work."

In many ways I think you can accomplish more at home. But you will have to identify your distraction points, and find ways to deal with those.

I don't have a hot tub so that's not an issue. :)

Tina

I disagree with most of what you have been told. Do what works for you.

I am pushing 13 years practicing law from home and 4 years as an insurance adjuster working from home. We have raised 4 kids. Before, my office was the living room. When we moved, I got a dedicated space - off the master bedroom.

I wear pants every day, but today is Friday, I have no appointments and I am not in the mood for a collared shirt. So I am wearing a fitted T and jeans.

I am working now and will keep working until about 7:30. Then I stop to take the kids to school. I will take my wife for a cup of coffee and be back around 8:30. Kindergarten pick up is at 11:30 and if I am home, I go with my wife. The trainer comes at 11:45. I will work until 5 or so today, but there is no set time.

The point is that we all have different needs. There is no one size fits all advice for working from home. This works well for me. In July, my wife starts back to work a few days a week. I am sure I will have to change what I am doing. So being flexible is important. And just let everyone else in the family know that when you are in your office, they need to be quiet if they come in.

Jonathan G. Stein, California

I agree with Tina and Jonathan, do what works for you.

Part of the appeal of working from home is flexibility. Some days I work in my pjs, other days I have meetings or court and work in a suit. I do have a designated office, but I also try doing some house chores during the day if I have time, or play with my dog if he's feeling bored and I have some spare time.

Some days I work 12 hours, other days I work 4 hours. It depends on my workflow, tasks that need to get done, and my life plans.

And I don't miss my commute at all. It was one of the best things of working from home. When I was working in MA and needed to head into Boston to report to the main office from a satellite office, my commute was about 1.5 hours each way - 30 min drive to T station garage, parking car, waiting for train, 20 min train ride, 10 min walk from train station to office - you get the idea. My commute now is from bed to coffee machine to office. I save 3 HOURS each day of my life to devote to other things, so yeah, I guess I can throw in a load in the wash now and not feel so bad!

Sincerely,

Sharon Barney, Pennsylvania

I too agree with all that has been said and have heard the same advice from others.

Do what works for you, but treat it as work/office and not an extension of your home. If you dress a certain way for the office, really consider sticking with that and do not change much except the surroundings.

One thing to be mindful of is will others in the household respect the home/work separation? My father, years ago, would work from home and when he did he follow the mentality that the home office was an extension of his office. He wore a shirt and tie every day, so did so at the home office. The issue was more of his wife's. She would call during the day with the honey do list since he was at home all day (switch

the laundry, change that light build, etc.). If there are others in the household, make sure they know it's not a day off for you.

I will note that your commute only became shorter and you are the janitor now too.

Phil A. Taylor, Massachusetts

Hello all!

The only thing I will add to the great advice that others have already given is this. I've had a home-based business for almost 19 years now.

While I have always had a designated office from which to work, I find my most productive space in my current home is an upstairs bedroom. My mother moved in with me a few years ago due to some health issues. And while she is still pretty self-sufficient (thankfully), she still wants constant "attention"...somebody to talk to on a regular basis. So I find that even though I tell her I have work to do, she still finds a reason to talk to me (about a TV show she just watched, or a phone conversation she just had with another relative, etc.). She knows now that when I close the door, I'm working. Sometimes I've had to literally close the door in her face (in a loving way, of course), but she knows not to bother me during those times. So if you have others in the house with you, they have to understand what boundaries you need to get through your work days.

I like the "Business Use of the Home" tax deductions too! (that's me in my Accountant's hat talking now...)

Best wishes,!

JB Hilliard

Further to the online distractions Tina mentioned, I have found a Chrome extension called "stayfocusd" to be helpful. You can give yourself a set amount of time for distractions (Facebook, the news, etc.), such as (for example) 30 minutes a day during working hours. Once you exceed your limit, an attempt to access a blocked page will instead result in a screen that says "Shouldn't you be working?"

<https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/stayfocusd/laankejkbhbdhmipfmgcngdelahlfoji?hl=en>

Kevin W. Grierson, Virginia

And don't be discouraged if the first few days or weeks are rough-going. It definitely takes a while to make the mental adjustment to home=work. It's an adjustment and a process! As others have said, you'll find the system that works best for you, but give it a little time.

Betsy Ehlen, Illinois

I have very bad news for you Kevin.

I'm a little hesitant to tell you because, if you like StayFousd, this may seriously interrupt your Zone-like focus. LOL. :)

I started with StayFocusd. First I found a few different ways around that extension almost immediately. You can disable the extension on Chrome, for one thing. I can't remember if the app actually prevents disabling but there was a time when it didn't.

I had a few other issues with making that app always work, yet not interfere with other sites (like the nuclear option seems like it caused other problems). I can't remember the details but just know that I had some issues.

Even worse, any other browser works just fine with StayFocusd installed. So those truly determined to find online distractions can get around StayFocusd.

OTOH, I immediately fell in love with Cold Turkey because it doesn't have any of those issues. You can set a timer that stops your entire computer from accessing whatever sites you designate. The paid version (only about \$11 if I remember correctly, and which I have) lets you set a schedule or a timer. The timer works best for me. There **might** be a way around this app. But, so far anyway, I haven't found it. :)

Another warning: if you buy a new computer, install Cold Turkey immediately. Otherwise you might be like me today -- checking FB and Gmail in between calls, rather than working in between calls!

The only reason I still haven't installed it is bc I'm returning this computer AGAIN. I just ordered laptop #5 yesterday from Dell, and hoping that one will work well enough to actually justify installing everything I need to be productive.

Tina Willis

I've been working from home for the last eight years. Before that I had my own office suites in Center City Philadelphia. But even they are, I would sit and read the newspapers with my coffee instead of working. It turns out that my most productive time is the afternoon. So I let myself have coffee with the newspaper in the morning and home too.

I do have a home office in the second bedroom in my apartment, and it contains files office supplies computer equipment etc., much of it neatly Houston cabinets, but a lot of stuff on Low cabinet top surfaces. Although I am mostly paperless, there still a lot of paper that comes in, such as CLE materials that I have run out of space for. Since it's in booklet format, I'm not scanning it.

At first I did not get dressed in the morning. But after my husband died, I decided that wouldn't work too well since he was no longer there to run out for meals and light shopping. So I did start getting dressed in the morning and have continued with that. Since I never got very dressed up even to go to my office, I have stayed with casual dress, and never found that to be a problem.

Bottom line: everyone has to play to their own strong suit.

Miriam Jacobson, Pennsylvania

Lots of good advice. So I will give you what works for me.

Shoes. Yes, i know it seems odd, but putting on shoes helps me get in work mode. I am a pretty casual guy, I usually work in jeans and a polo. At home i can wear shorts, but if i put on shoes mentally that gets into work mode.

Even when i have to work on the road at my parents' house.

Music. Put my headphones on and get to work. Also helps tune out distractions like the noisy guinea pigs across the room or the construction outside.

Desk. I don't do the couch because it is too easy to turn on the TV. Right now I would have way too many soccer games to choose from.

Matt

Matthew S. Johnston, Maryland

The downside to working from home with no commute is that you don't get any days off for bad weather. Or as I say "unless I trip on the way to my desk I'm making it to work."

Elizabeth Pugliese

I personally don't do well working from home. If my house is clean, all errands run, etc., then I'm good but if I'm home and living room is a mess then I can't really focus on work until living room is clean, errands run... I'm too distractible that way. Conference calls make me a little nervous because my dog goes nuts at the mailman and having other participants hear that is unprofessional; you can hear my doorbell if it rings, etc. I don't know how you are about those things but they present problems for me. In the fall when my daughter starts school (1st grade) full time, I plan to lease office space.

I second much of Virginia's advice, particularly not getting into routine of wearing too-casual clothes because, for me, those things also affect my mindset, at least after a while. There is a lot of good advice in this thread--good luck.

Julie S. Mills, Ohio

I know stayfocusd can be defeated in a variety of ways, but I need something to remind me to get back to work, not something to make it impossible to be distracted. If I'm determined to be distracted, I'll find a way. What I really need is just a nudge that there are other things I should be doing.

Kevin W. Grierson

Those are great points. It definitely sounds like you are more disciplined than I am where online distractions are concerned. I need 100% unstoppable protection!!

Tina Willis

I make appointments on my Outlooki/iPhone calendar to do the work I really MUST do. So I get nagged by the desktop and by the phone and by the browser outlook window. Can I ignore them? Yes. But I keep getting nagged, and sometimes, OK, often, have to move those appointments to the next day, and eventually I'll take care of the MUST-do work. It may be client work or admin work, but I schedule it. And I do look up from whatever to see why the device is chiming or making a sound. Since it includes doctor, hair and nail appointments, I'd better pay attention!

Miriam N. Jacobson

1. Get dressed for work. Makes a big difference.
2. Allocate work space. Don't roam around the house with laptop on couch, bed, etc.
3. Allocate work hours.
3. Go for walks on your break so you feel like you went outside a bit. Otherwise, you will feel like a prisoner stuck in your cell all day.
4. If there are others at your house, tell them about your work hours and work space. Tell them that they cannot speak to you about anything unless it's an emergency or otherwise urgent.
5. Go in the hot tub and play some video games...before or after work :-)

Shimon Yiftach, California
