

Tips for Working at Home*

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These comments are intended for people who are truly WORKING at home as freelancers, contractors, consultants, or telecommuters. Not someone dabbling in a hobby or passing the time until a “real” job comes along.

Although prejudice against people working at home has decreased dramatically in recent years, some people still treat at-home workers as second class or those who “just can’t find a job.” Don’t do anything to support that notion.

Attitude

- People will hire you if they feel confident that you will do the job well and do it on time. Make sure you don’t disappoint them. Your reputation is what will get you work.
- Make sure you project a “can do” attitude. For an article called “Three secrets to successful freelancing: Attitude. Attitude. Attitude”, see <http://www.technical-writing.net/successfulfreelancing.htm>
- It should not seem as though you’re working at home – The way you answer the phone, background sounds, the way you conduct yourself.
- Make sure your clients feel comfortable calling you during business hours. Make it clear that you’re available and ready to work when they are.
- Stand up when you take that important call – You’ll focus more attention to the call and you’ll sound better.
- When meeting with clients or potential clients, dress as if you are coming from the office (you are). It’s OK to be overdressed, but just because you work in your underwear at home, it’s not OK to think of shorts and a t-shirt as getting dressed up for a client meeting.
- For your clients, you don’t work at home: you work in your office. Have your calls forwarded to your cell phone, but when a client calls and you can’t answer a question because the information or document is at home, don’t say, “I’m not home now,” but rather, “I’m not in my office now.”
- Learn to ignore distractions (laundry, pets, family, friends, the great outdoors) when you need to get a job done.

Equipment and workspace

- Establish an off-limits area – preferably a private place – and let everybody know that you’re not to be interrupted when you’re there. Remember that you’re working; it’s not as if it’s a day off.
- Buy the best equipment you can afford. Your peers in the corporate world have the latest equipment, the fast Internet connections, paid society memberships, etc. So if you’re serious about working at home, give yourself the same treatment. Be careful, however, of getting over your head in debt.

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- Install a dedicated phone line – So you can answer as if you're a real business, and with a real business message on the answering service. Disable call waiting and have the service pick up if you're on the phone. Also, don't use your business phone for your internet connection.
- Have a business-like email address. hotbabe@aol.com or coolguy@yahoo.com may have been OK in college, but this is not the first impression you want to make.
- Same with business cards. Nothing cute.
- Come up with contingency plans for technical difficulties that may come up (such as, how to send a file if your email server isn't working). Be religious about making backups.

Working with others

- Answer email and phone messages promptly – RIGHT AWAY! People in offices don't wait till the next day. This means you need to be aware of what's coming into your email inbox all day long.
- Don't hesitate to make long-distance calls. You may have to change your phone service to accommodate this need, depending on your clients and projects.
- You can interact mostly by email or phone. However, there are also some occasions when you MUST dress up and go into an office. When you do, be sure to dress one notch up from the state of casualness of your clients. Look bright, cheerful, and confident, no matter what your current personal state actually is.
- It's usually best to meet your clients in their offices but occasionally that won't work. If your home office isn't suitable for meeting clients, offer to meet at a coffee shop or over lunch (and you pay the tab).

Family considerations

- Make sure your family and friends respect your privacy, your work time, your work space, your clients, and the fact that your home is a BUSINESS. They must be made to recognize that you are not available to socialize during your "business hours" (whatever they are).
- Insist that your family members answer the phone in a businesslike manner.
- Make your home sound like an office by eliminating background noise and using business-like phone techniques. For an article that expands on this subject, see "Make your home sound like an office", <http://www.technical-writing.net/soundlikeoffice.htm>.
- Remind people – especially family members – that many times it doesn't look like you're working – We're thinking and planning, not pounding the keyboard. But we're still working – maybe doing our best work. And maybe that's when you go out to the coffee shop or the library, to do the work that doesn't look like work.

Reasons for working at home

- Remind yourself why you're working at home – For the freedom to work when and where you want to, and to choose your projects. To escape the office politics. To avoid long commutes. If you finish a project at 3:00 pm, you can quit for the day.
- Get comfortable – You may hear that some people do their best work when they dress as if they're going to work. But one of the joys of working at home is that you can wear whatever you want, so do it. Eat breakfast at 10:00; take your shower at 1:00. Take the dog for a walk at 3:00. So what?
- Do the work whenever you choose, when you are most productive, not necessarily 9 to 5. Don't hesitate to work on weekends or evenings if that's what works for you (or to get the job done).

Take care of yourself

- Learn something new every day – Make a point to learn something new about your work, the software you use, a piece of equipment you use, something outside your work, whatever.
- Go out every couple of days – At least go and get coffee and a bagel, take a trip to the bank, go to the post office, go to the library or a bookstore. Meet friends for lunch.
- Stay in touch – Call, send email, have lunch, go to association meetings and other get-togethers – so that you continue to meet and talk with people. You need to counteract the isolation of working at home.
- Some people like to have an individual or group they can bounce ideas off or that serve as an accountability anchor.
- Remember to cultivate the arts or other activities – One of the beauties of working at home is that you can take the time to enjoy the arts – music, painting, photography – whenever you choose. Ditto for sports, hobbies, or volunteer activities.
- Keep healthful snacks handy or you might be tempted to snack on last night's leftover dessert. And keep physically fit.

Finances and taxes

- Don't undervalue yourself. Charge at minimum double or more likely triple (per hour) the rate someone working full time at your level earns. You need to cover expenses, health care, and downtime that employed people don't need to think about. Remember companies are willing to pay you more per hour than they pay employees precisely because they DON'T have to pay you after the project is finished.
- You can do your own taxes. If you read the material that comes with the forms and call the IRS with questions, you will probably do a better job than someone you pay to do it.
- You will probably need to file tax reports quarterly, and may have to pay sales tax. Check with both the federal and state tax offices. You may also have to pay a local business, employment, or earned income tax.
- Keep records of all income and all business expenses.

Resources

- Don't buy a lot of reference books; the internet can answer most of your questions about style, standard usage, or whatever is appropriate for your field.
- Be an active member of your professional organization and go to local, regional, and national meetings. Get involved in technical discussions about your field.
- Check the websites and join forums of associations in your field.