

Working at Home? Here's 10 Ways to Be More Productive

By Alexandria K. Brown

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Ah, working at home... Visions of leisurely days, conference calls in comfy sweatpants, increased productivity with fewer interruptions. But the distinctions between work life and home life soon blur. You really should throw some laundry in the wash before you write that proposal. You have an hour before a meeting: Should you balance your books or clean the kitchen? And remember to call that client back right after you empty the cat box.

Welcome to the real world of working at home: unforeseen distractions, a lack of structured time, and sometimes a perceived loss of identity. But don't give up the dream just yet! By putting into place a few simple ideas, you can reap more of the rewards of working at home. Based on my experiences and those of my associates, here are 10 simple ways to help you stay on track.

****1. Separate Your Space****

Keep a separate, distinct work area in your home. (This is especially difficult if you're living and working in a shoebox studio, like I was when I started my business in New York City!) If you don't have a separate room, at least define an area, and know that when you're in it, you're in "work mode." Make sure your roommates and family are aware of this as well.

****2. Structure Your Time****

As your business and personal time mesh, it's more important than ever to structure your day. For example, if you regularly take a walk or go to the gym, try to do it every day at the same time. Value that personal appointment with yourself - even when you're very busy. It will actually help you keep your business on track! I like to get up early and work until noon, then I take a few hours off to enjoy lunch, do some reading, and take my daily jog on the beach. Then I'm back at my desk at 4:00 until who knows when!

****3. Outsource All You Can****

When I began my business, I made the mistake of acting as my own courier service. I soon learned how much time I was wasting by visiting clients too much just to pick things up and drop them off. Whenever you start thinking, "Well I can do that myself," STOP. Streamline your business, making everything as automatic as possible. Use outside services to stay focused on your **real work**. Get

accounts with an overnight delivery service, messenger service, virtual assistant (VA), bookkeeper, etc. Save your energy for your brilliant ideas! :)

****4. Use Technology to Your Advantage****

In-person meetings are very valuable when appropriate, but schedule them sparingly. Try to do most of your business via phone, fax, and e-mail using the best equipment you can afford. For most home-based entrepreneurs, when you're out of the office, you're NOT making money. So it's important that you can communicate flawlessly from where you are. And PLEASE do us all a favor and get separate lines/services for your phone, fax, and Internet! No one likes getting a busy signal.

(BONUS TIP: If your phone company offers voicemail, get it. Not only will your outgoing message sound more professional, but if you're on an important call and don't want to be disturbed, other callers can still leave you a message.)

****5. Group Your Errands****

Try to group your meetings and errands together to minimize your out-of-office time. Make a list in the morning of all the outside tasks you need done for the day, and attempt to complete them in one fell swoop. Even better, do what I do and designate just one day a week as your "blitz" day for errands and meetings. I like doing this, because then I need to get dressed up only one day a week! :)

****6. Stay Focused****

Make your workspace off-limits to other roommates or family members when you're working. For you animal lovers, this may go for pets as well. (My cat Francine gets *very* jealous when I'm not giving her complete attention!) Keep all personal paperwork such as bills and magazines out of sight, so as not to distract you from your projects.

****7. Beware of Yappers****

Many of your friends and family will be immediately delighted when they learn that you're working at home. They picture you lounging on the couch, eating potato chips, and waiting for their calls. When they call you simply to chat, politely remind them that you're working, and ask them if you can call them back after your day is over. It may take them awhile, but they'll eventually "get it."

****8. Work With Your Moods****

Keep track of your moods and productivity compared with the time of day. For example, if you find you're more alert in the morning, use this time to make important calls and do your creative work. Take advantage of your natural cycles. If you feel better after an afternoon nap, go for it! (I'm a BIG proponent of the catnap. In fact, I may start a support group. :))

****9. Suit Yourself****

To bring out your best work, make your environment perfect for YOU. How do you work best? With plenty of breaks, or with no interruptions? In silence, or with some light music in the background? On a cushy couch and coffee table, or at a business desk in an ergonomic chair? (My friends thought I was nuts when I spent \$700 on my Herman Miller Aeron chair, but they quickly understood why once they sat in it! And my spine thanks me every day.)

Also, find some places you can do work when you need a change of scenery. How about the

library, the park, or your neighborhood coffee shop? When I need to do serious reading, thinking, or editing, I take my work outside to the beach. The sea air, sunshine, and soothing waves help me think much more clearly.

****10. Break for People****

Feeling sluggish, lonely, or moody? Arrange for at least one social break during the week. (I aim for two or three.) Schedule breakfast, lunch, dinner, or even just coffee with a client, vendor, or friend. Join a business networking group, or sign-up for social activities such as dance class or recreational sports league. Don't go into hermit mode - it can be self-destructive!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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