



The Truth About Working from Anywhere

Part 2: Best Practices for Working on the Go

Thought Leadership Series: The Case for Workforce Mobility

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Executive Summary

Whether you were an early adopter of the mobile work lifestyle or are a newcomer to the world of flexible work, there's always something to learn about getting more done.

Fortunately for everyone, sage advice is readily available due to the open nature of the distributed work culture. Your virtual colleagues want you to succeed, because they want the workforce mobility trend to continue to grow. What is good for you is good for the whole. So suggestions abound about how to establish yourself and then operate as a mobile worker.

Maximizing the value of mobility depends on mixing a full measure of planning and flexibility with ample collaboration and communication — not that different from a recipe for success in any professional environment.

Preparing for Personal Success

Today's technology is the baseline from which all mobile work flows. For example, remote access programs enable you to connect to your work computer through other computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones. Collaboration tools enable online video conferences, connecting distributed co-workers in just a few clicks. Indeed, technology is available to support the mobile workforce in a myriad ways, but one variable is location. Try these tips for increasing effectiveness when working at home and on the road.

AT HOME

Create a work space. Your couch doesn't count. Having a desk and a chair (or a whole room) that's only used for your work creates an island of productivity within the sea of your daily life. Make sure the space offers quiet and privacy, and enables you to store the supplies and equipment that you need to be efficient. Moving your laptop all around the house to work diminishes your focus and sends the wrong signal to your family that work is pervasive.

Set office hours. That doesn't mean it has to be 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Create a schedule that works for your personal productivity rhythm. If you are an early bird, start at dawn; if you are a night owl, finish after dark. Consider breaking your work hours into two chunks. Having set hours will create boundaries to your workday and communicate to others that your schedule is not open-ended. Without clear expectations for yourself, your colleagues and your family, you may find work creeps into nearly every hour of the day.

Get dressed. The running joke about mobile workers is that they are forever in their pajamas. But with today's technology favoring video conferencing, you may find yourself in and out of view several times a day, so getting dressed is part of getting on with work. No, your daily work-at-home wardrobe doesn't have to include business suits or high-heeled pumps, but wearing comfortable, presentable clothes is important. It's another cue that creates the idea that work is something you put "on" for part of the day and something that ends when you change clothes.

Balance, don't blend, competing demands. In the world of mobile work, flexibility is your greatest ally, but don't make it an enemy by overusing the freedom. For example, keep household chores in check during your workday. Tossing in a load of laundry when you get up from your desk is OK, but don't run to the grocery store. Once you take work time to do home tasks, you may feel compelled to take home time to do work tasks. Balance such demands, don't blend them, otherwise you may find yourself shifting back and forth haphazardly and not satisfied with your performance in either the work or home realm.

Take care of yourself. Without the interruptions found in the office environment, home-office denizens can find that half a day goes by without appropriate breaks for water, food and mental refreshment. Forgetting to take care of basic needs doesn't make for a healthy flexible work environment and impacts your time away from work. You'll feel more tired and agitated when you try to shift from work back to free time. Keep a glass of water on your desk, eat lunch, stand up to stretch and go outside for fresh air. A lap around your cul-de-sac will give you a few minutes to connect to your community and time to think about who and what you are working for.

ON THE ROAD

Make a list. Stop having to rethink what to bring on your next work-on-the-go trip. Have a checklist that includes a complete rundown in at least these categories: electronics and accessories; work essentials; travel essentials; and international needs. Be like Santa Claus — make a list and check it twice before you fly around the world.

Carry the gear you need — and a backup. Invest in extra batteries, battery-powered chargers, adapters and cords. Keep all these organized in a grab-and-go plastic baggie. Bring a high-quality hands-free headset for your phone so that you can participate in video conference calls in noisy places and still hear and be heard. And for those times when gaps in connectivity prevent you from accessing something important on your smartphone or laptop, carry a few flash drives and upload essential items in advance. You can also save web pages to your computer, so your reference material doesn't go away even if your Internet connection does. Finally, never break the cardinal rule of work on the go: Don't let your electronics escape your hands. Checked baggage spells trouble.

Choose your spot wisely. Finding new and spontaneous environments in which to work is part of the fun of being in the mobile workforce. Whether at a café, in the hotel lobby or at the local library, there are lots of places to choose from, and you get to make the decision yourself. Look for the common denominators that make you successful. Do you need a large, flat surface to spread out? Can you focus while people are chatting in the background? Do you need an electrical outlet to recharge your battery pack? Knowing your work-on-the-go prerequisites makes settling down in unknown territory less disruptive.

Appoint an alternate and engage your allies. You don't have to travel alone — even if you are. Before you are 36,000 feet in the air, designate a backup contact at the office so your clients can always get through to a human to get answers they need or find out when you will land. Having some help to coordinate basics when you travel will provide peace of mind for you and others.

Similarly, don't isolate yourself when you travel. Use video conferencing tools for an after-work chat with a family member or friend. There's comfort in being able to shrink distances so readily, and it's nice to know that these folks have your back until you're back.

Plan time to recharge. Sure, working on the road can mean longer hours in several time zones, but working relentlessly can be counterproductive. Make time to maintain your physical and mental health with exercise and breaks. Do at least one fun or enriching thing on each trip. Pick up a good book for the plane flight. Go to the hotel gym instead of sitting in your room. Take two hours to stroll through an art exhibit at a renowned museum.

Improving Interactions with Others

With the basic elements of your mobile work world established, what's left to do but get tasks done? A lot. It turns out that being effective in the distributed work environment means focusing on interactions with clients, co-workers and bosses in new ways. Absent physical proximity to these people, you need to intensify your commitment to communicating and connecting. Here are a five ways:

1. **Communicate more frequently.** Workshifters agree that because they don't see people in person on a regular basis, they need to consistently communicate the status of work and projects to show progress and track milestones. Making time for additional reports can be a challenge, but it will help those around you who may wonder whether your remote work environment is as productive as the office environment. Set a disciplined communication schedule to create a strong track record for being reliable and successful from the field.
2. **Structure your collaboration.** Mobile collaboration tools, like Citrix's GoToMeeting, are fantastic to connect remote team members, but there must be good business reasons for bringing people together. Get in the habit of structuring collaboration around action and outcomes.

In "Read This Book Before Our Next Meeting," author Al Pittampalli argues that "modern meetings" aren't used to make decisions, but should support decisions by using the group to resolve conflicts or improve coordination. While mobile work creates flexibility for employees, that flexibility should not extend to loosey-goosey meetings. Define your interactions and what you want to get out of them.

3. **Set boundaries and stick to them.** Use mobile collaboration and remote access tools to work from anywhere life takes you, but set boundaries and a schedule of availability. Broadcast your planned work hours, and don't be afraid to tell colleagues you're busy. Ask for what you need: "I'm right in the middle of something. Can I get back to you in 15 minutes?" If you want people to respect your schedule, be respectful of theirs. If you are calling out of the blue, start the conversation with a question: "Is this a good time?"
4. **Evaluate levels of urgency and work accordingly.** Email creates a feeling of urgency because it happens in the here and now. But it's not always the case that immediacy equates to importance. While correspondence is a critical part of everyone's job, so is thinking, planning and creating. Those tasks shouldn't take a back seat while email drives. After handling truly urgent communications, close your email for a time and work through priority tasks. Workshifters report they make more significant progress on projects that way. Processing emails in batches, rather than trying to deal with them as soon as they come in, cuts down on interruptions and rebalances your day. Ultimately, your bosses will appreciate your work product more than your instantaneous response to routine emails.
5. **Fight isolation.** You can only be a solo font of energy and inspiration for so long before your well runs dry. So pick up the phone and invite a colleague to meet for coffee. Plan a trip to the home office. Join a local business networking group. Build these interactions into your schedule. The rejuvenation gained by authentically connecting with others is significant.

Indeed, isolation can undo the advantages individuals gain in the flexible work environment. So acknowledging the perils of loneliness and separation can help remote workers find solutions to prevent it. Allowing your social skills to wither will wither your professional skills as well.

There's a common refrain in this new era of work: Work is where you are, not a place you go. Make sure to use the strategies above to keep the "you" at the center of the equation. You are the unique factor that no one else can bring to the mobile workforce.



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