

# The Economist

## Earning the Continued Right to Work from Home

by Julie Winkle Giulioni and Jennifer V. Miller

The current health crisis has dramatically altered what is meant by 'workplace'. Nearly overnight, office workers transitioned from traditional collocated environments to remote make-shift offices in dens, spare bedrooms or on dining room tables. For many, it's been a hardship and they're counting the days until they can return to the collaborative space of a shared physical working environment. Others, however, are finding their groove – and have discovered they really are more productive and happier because of the work-from-home ("WFH") lifestyle. If you're in the "sign me up for WFH!" camp, now is the time to begin building the case to gain the support needed. These three strategies will set you up as a highly effective virtual contributor – and earn you the right to remain remote.

We suggest taking an inside-out approach, starting with your WFH mindset and then moving to outward ways of demonstrating your WFH-readiness and value.

### GET REAL ABOUT REMOTE

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to a continued WFH arrangement starts with what's going on in between your ears: how do you view remote work? Prior to pitching a plan to your employer, invest some time in reflection. Do you truly have what it takes to be an effective long-term remote worker? Here are two questions to ponder.

- **Can you commit to the arrangement long-term?** The 2020 pandemic has given you a taste of extended WFH. Now that you've had a trial run, are you ready to accept the challenges that come with being a remote worker? The isolation? Consistent self-motivation? Lack of empathy (and even jealousy) from co-workers who don't have this arrangement? The potential reduced access to career opportunities? These are important factors to come to terms with before making a long-term WFH decision.
- **Will you be able to honor your work schedule?** The key to successfully working from home is to treat your "working time" as sacred. It will be important to show your employer that they're getting the full value of your time. For instance, if you have young children or eldercare responsibilities, consider this hard truth: you need daycare. Although WFH allows for a somewhat more flexible schedule, the reality is that to be your best self at work, you need to be fully present.

Do yourself and your loved ones a favor and continue to offer them the attention they deserve while offering your employer the same.

### INVEST FOR SUCCESS

It's one thing to WFH occasionally, like when you're waiting for a repair person. It's quite another to do it over the long haul. So, if you aspire to continue working from home, you'll need to invest in the infrastructure that makes it possible – and makes you more effective.

- **Define your work 'place'.** Identify a serviceable and dedicated space that allows you to feel, operate, and be seen (at least online) as a remote professional. It speaks volumes to coworkers and your manager to see you dial in from a consistent location – rather than from a couch one day and a lawn chair the next. So, create an appropriate place where you can go – and where you can leave the work behind as well.
- **Furnish for function.** Working off your bed or from a dining table doesn't allow you to put forth your best effort and it's simply not sustainable. At a minimum, ensure that you have an ergonomic desk and chair. Despite the flexibility the working from home permits, you'll still spend considerable hours there. So, make sure you have the furniture that literally supports you in putting your best face forward.
- **Take your tech to the next level.** Veteran WFH professionals agree that the right equipment can take you from remote rookie to virtual virtuoso. That means upgrading your bandwidth for glitch-free communication. It also means that if you spend a lot of time videoconferencing, you may need to go to the next level with a professional camera, lighting, and external microphone. These small investments in the details can make a big impression on those in a position to endorse your continued home-based work.

### REMAIN VISIBLE WHILE VIRTUAL

One of the most frequently cited challenges reported by seasoned remote workers is the tendency toward 'out of sight, out of mind.' Pre-pandemic, those who worked from home could easily become invisible and drop off their managers' radar screens. And the problem is magnified now that the number of remote workers has grown so dramatically.

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Compounding this challenge is the reality that many leaders are distrustful of the virtual arrangement. In many cases it's because they've not yet mastered the art of effective goal setting, check-ins, offering support and holding others accountable remotely. In other cases, they've been burned by people who've taken advantage of the situation.

As a result, if you want to earn the right to work from home after this crisis has passed, you must take responsibility for raising your profile with actions that range from simple and almost cosmetic to more profound.

- **Be ready for your close-up.** You can literally enhance your visibility by always being prepared and willing to turn your camera on. Be honest—don't you wonder about those who refuse to appear on video? Have they not showered? Are they folding the laundry? Are they at the beach? Including your face as one of those tiles onscreen sends a subtle message about your professionalism. It says that you're committed and ready for work. So, set your default to 'video on' so that you enter each meeting live. You can always pause the camera – but you'll have left a visible impression of professionalism and availability.
- **Check in early and often.** In the virtual world, you can no longer rely upon casual, organic opportunities to connect with others. Additionally, your manager may not be as communicative with you as with those who are co-located. So, it's incumbent upon you to take responsibility for reaching out more proactively and frequently than in the past. Otherwise your projects – and even you – risk being sidelined.
- **Leverage value for visibility.** Distinguishing yourself by contributing more to the team is a powerful way to garner greater positive attention and demonstrate your ability to drive results virtually. Look for problems that need to be solved, gaps that must be bridged, customer journey pain points that have been overlooked, or interdepartmental hand-offs that aren't working. Offering to take on a high-profile project provides the opportunity to grow your influence and networks all while proving that you possess the self-leadership required to make important things happen remotely.

If you're one of the professionals who've found that the pandemic's mandate to work from home is really "working" for you, now is the time to lay the groundwork for continuing that arrangement. Use these three strategies to prepare your mental outlook, your physical presence and technology to set yourself up for success.

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