

7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE HOME OFFICE WORKERS

A practical guide for people working from home.

Contents

..... 1

7 Habits of Highly Effective Home Office Workers 3

 Habit 1: Dress for the home office. 3

 Habit 2: Create a dedicated workspace 4

 Habit 3: Habit setting..... 4

 Habit 4: Use the digital tools & get good at them 4

 Habit 5: Manage distraction & procrastination 5

 Habit 6: End your workday 6

 Habit 7: Set clear boundaries for the other people who share your space..... 7

About the author 8

Reach out and connect..... 8

7 Habits of Highly Effective Home Office Workers

Having worked flexibly from an office & from home for over a decade, and then more recently run a business from a home office, I have learnt a thing or two about what it takes to successfully work from home.

Firstly, not everyone finds working from home fun. In my years as an employee, I was happily working from home but had colleagues who had learnt that for them it was not a benefit at all but more of a prison sentence. They needed the social interaction and contact with the outside world and got cabin fever after a few hours of this so called “benefit”. If you are more extroverted and thrive on the energy that others bring, working from home will take its toll on your motivation and energy. So, the tips that I am going to share you will need specifically! If you love working from home and find it easier than being in a busy, disruptive office, then you will need to pay attention to some of the tips and not to others.

Habit 1: Dress for the home office.



I used to get onto calls and virtual classes at 3.30am so that I could work with my US colleagues. At 3.10am I would roll out of bed and in my pj's , with a cup of tea find a spot in my house that had the best (at the time) 3G reception and engage as actively as I could with my colleagues to help me stay awake. But that was the ONLY time I would work in pyjamas. To work at home, you need to be in the mental state that comes with being dressed, hair done, teeth brushed, and video conference ready. Being “video ready” also means that your “background” is clear. If you work in a messy environment it affects your mental focus. So, clear your desk/kitchen table/dining room table or wherever you are going to base yourself for the day. It sounds ridiculous to put make-up on to stay at home, but you are not on holiday. You are not there to relax and feel comfortable in sweatpants and no make-up. You are there to work and be productive. What you look like impacts how you feel and your attitude. Give yourself a good chance of success by looking good, despite your home environment. (The equivalent make-up comment is likely to be shaving for gents 😊)

Habit 2: Create a dedicated workspace

Not all our homes have options around where to work. You might need to double-task your kitchen table to be both the breakfast nook and your work desk. Look around to find a spot that is the best option. Clear it. De-clutter as much as you can. Move it somewhere where you can capture as much natural light as possible but be careful to angle your laptop to avoid glare and squinting into the sun. Put everything you need in one place.



Maybe you can invest in a shelf, or a decorative box or the like, but have your cables, light, mouse pad, note-book, post-it notes and stationery, headphones all easily accessible. It is frustrating to go hunting to find accessories when you are in the flow of work. If you can glam-up your space in a way that makes you feel happy to be there (a plant, a picture...) do it. But don't take too long on this – it can be a wonderful procrastination technique. A good chair is also great, but just start with any chair (dining room chair... kitchen stool, Pilates ball) and some cushions to lift you and support you. Running out to buy the perfect chair can set you back quite a few \$ and isn't critical until this becomes a more permanent way to work.

Habit 3: Habit setting

If you lie in bed and read /watch YouTube/ Facebook/Insta surf for 30 minutes because you now don't need to battle traffic, you are undoing a perfectly decent habit that served you well when you had to drive to an office. Just because you are at home, don't undo the habit at the start of the day. Rather bank the time for later in the day or use the extra 30 minutes to get ahead of your day, your development or your health. If you used to wake up at 6am and be out the house by 7am, continue that habit and be at your desk at 7am. Use that traffic time for learning. There is so much available to you to learn remotely, attend webinars & webinar recordings, read articles and journals for your industry or start ticking off your "when I've got time" list. You just got time! Congrats! What will you do with it? The neuroscience suggests that the first hour of your day is the most productive time if you can stay off email/instant messaging etc. If you have a thinking project to do, that first hour is golden. Planning, prioritising and taking big decisions – also are energy rich brain functions, use the first hour when you have your best brain. Don't waste it, use this opportunity to invest your bonus time wisely.

Habit 4: Use the digital tools & get good at them

Many companies have virtual collaboration platforms e.g. Slack, Microsoft Teams, SharePoint & even less formal WhatsApp groups already in play. They were there for when you sat 2 meters from your teammates, but all that did was prevent you from talking to each other. Now that you need to collaborate virtually, you need to flex the muscle of virtual sharing and collaboration.



That means make an active effort to let people know what you are busy with, where you need help, what your priorities are for the day/week. Specifically, your manager. When a manager has an open and communicative team member, they instantly trust you to tell them when things are going well and when they are not going well. Sending a little update message will help them know what you are doing so they can give you any additional info that they might have line of

sight to, but you don't. Plus, they can redirect your activities if they know what they are for the day/week. For a lot of managers, they will feel a loss of control because they can't see you. Help them feel like they are in control by keeping them informed and updated at least once a day. You don't need to ask them for anything, just script a SHORT update: *Hi, just to let you know that today I am focused on building the content for XYZ and am hoping to have got to 80% by the end of the week. I have a few virtual meetings to check in on the demand planning for client Y today and will let you know if anything changes.*

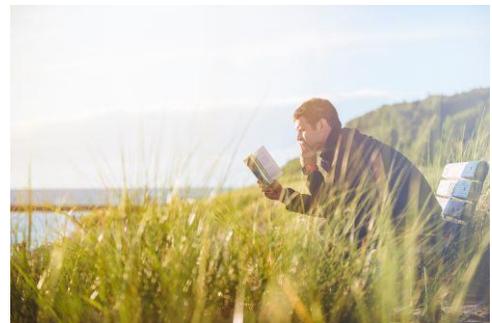
At the end of the day give a little update: *Hi, managed to put some really good thought into the design, found a great resource on line that helped stimulate my thinking, am looking forward to presenting it to the group on Friday. Still on for that presentation? Assume it is in SKYPE? No change from the client meetings I had, so all on schedule. Am doing a webinar tomorrow morning on how to be a great virtual meeting facilitator, so that I can do a great job on Friday. Signing off for today.*

If you have access to virtual collaboration tools, e.g. zoom / skype / google hangouts / team etc. but you are not really using them, take that extra travel time to invest in building or advancing your virtual skills. YouTube has a million video's dedicated to "how to" and these tools have features and functions that not only are pretty impressive but can make you a master at digital collaboration without needing an IT degree, just a little bit of curiosity and a willingness to try. These tools are tough to break!

Habit 5: Manage distraction & procrastination

Loads of people battle to get things started. This is at work and even more so at home or in a home office. You might be one of them. Procrastination can be a good thing. You might have delayed just enough for more information to come to light that changes the direction of the work. Or your failure to start, might capitalise on a complete change of direction and you don't need to do the work at all. OR you end up with anxiety, all-nighters and huge quantities of guilt. So – bottom line,

procrastination is not always bad, but not all good either. What I want to focus on though is managing your distractions. When working from home, the fridge seems to have its own beckoning voice. So does the kettle & the pantry and suddenly sorting that cupboard looks terribly important. Be alert to these distractions. The best way around the distraction is Tip 1 and



Tip 3. The habit to start at your normal time and then build in appropriate breaks of an appropriate length. You don't need 17 hot beverages a day. You need a jug of water and a glass on your desk, refilled once or twice. You don't need to eat more than 2 or 3 times during a workday, which includes a snack. So, although we know our brains need breaks, you can easily get by with 5-10 minutes every hour, rather than one big break or a break every 6 minutes!

Using a timer is very effective. All cell phones have them, so set yourself a timer for 40 minutes and then go deep into a piece of work. Time box your email time in a similar fashion so that you are not constantly email checking (unless that is you job!). When you have completed 40 minutes, stand up, walk around, stand in the sun, do some mindful breathing. Reward yourself with a break. Before you start your next block of time write down what you did for your completed time block. Writing down what you did to stay accountable to YOU is a brilliant way to keep yourself on task. If you get to the end of a day and your "what I did today" list is empty or only has one vague hint of work on it... then it is time to get an accountability partner. You can pair up with another WFHS (work from home struggler) or find a WFHM (Work from home master) mentor and help keep each other on the straight and narrow. Plus talking to someone at the start of the day, midday and at the end of the day can be a little bit of voice to voice or virtual face to face human contact that keeps you motivated. Ask each other:

- **Morning Check-in:** What will you do today? What do you think will get in your way? How will you overcome this?
- **Midday Check-in:** What have you done so far today? & What is your afternoon plan?
- **End of day Check-in:** What did you achieve today that you are proud of? What do you need to do differently tomorrow to overcome any challenges from today?

Habit 6: End your workday

The concept of work-life balance morphed into work-life integration. And with the digital devices, wearable tech and unlimited access to work, we have become "always on". This is counter intuitive and not healthy for brains, bodies or relationships. The struggle when you have a work-from-home situation is that your laptop is always there... calling you.... Distracting you from being present for other people and priorities. Plus, oddly enough your brain actually does much better when it has sleep, rest, exercise and relaxation. Working 18 hours a day is not the best way to maximise your brains resources. There are in fact diminishing returns the longer you work. What gets us all though, is this perceived guilt of not working when we could be....

A piece of advice I was given ages ago by a female executive on a women's leadership course was: "IBM will take as much from you as you are willing to give." It was profound. The boundary setting was up to me. No one else was going to swing by my home office at 10pm and stop me from working. No one. It was up to me to say enough is enough. Now when one has an unproductive and stupidly distracted day with an empty "done" list, then pile on the guilt for a moment and then press reset for tomorrow. But when you have an average



to good day, with good time management and work that is ticking along as it reasonably could be expected. Then by all means, shut down the computer. Go and hang out with the important people in your life. Cook something interesting. Go for your run etc. Totally guilt free. Your work is not your life. Your life is your life and work is a part of it. Working from home allows for massive flexibility, but that can be a noose. Flexibility can be marvellous to accommodate family commitments etc. But then be clear about when you expect to be “at work” and when you expect to be “at home”. Trying to email, participate in a conference call and pick up kids from soccer all at the same time, is a work-life-integration nightmare, with the victim being you! Figure out a time schedule (that is open to change), and then work towards ending your workday consciously. Close the lid, log-off, check-out, go off-line. Reboot. Your brain will thank you.

Habit 7: Set clear boundaries for the other people who share your space

So, turns out your home office is likely shared by the people who share your home! In many cases this includes little humans, who find it delightful to have mommy and / or daddy accessible all day! It could also be animals, noisy neighbours, elderly parents and domestic helpers. All these people happily occupied your office without you, and now they find you there! If your home office is in the middle of the kitchen and your kids are in and out and constantly stopping for a catch-up chat, cuddle, snack etc... then it is highly advisable to either move the location of your workspace or if the kids are old enough, and with other adults, set up some clear boundaries for what and when you are available for being your home-self, as opposed to your working-self. Your working self has deadlines, hopefully likes to get work completed to a high standard and prefers having conference calls or virtual meetings without the sounds of babies crying in the background. Although sometimes these are unavoidable, if you can get it right 90% of the time with occasional blips then you are doing well. Some practices that I have found work well include:

- A closed door with a sign on it
- Headphones that are an indication that I am working
- Keeping regular office hours that everyone knows about
- Setting up a getting home routine i.e. when the kids get home take 20 minutes to chat and then go back to work
- End of day dinner is sacred: Always being fully present and available before, during and after dinner for at least an hour.

The trick with all of these is to be FULLY PRESENT wherever you are. If you are at work, be at work (even if it is from home). If you are not working, then be fully present in the conversations you are in, look your family in the eye, put your phone away and mute any annoying alerts that take your attention for the time you have allotted to being home.

About the author

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Angela is a passionate South African who has travelled and worked across the world, but chooses South Africa to call home. Her 20+ years international corporate experience with PricewaterhouseCoopers and IBM, as a leadership development facilitator, designer and speaker & the very grounding reality of taking her job as mom to 3 children very seriously, are the foundation for her business: Tandem Learning and Leadership Solutions: www.tandemlearning.co.za.

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When Angela is not growing leaders in corporates, she is growing future leaders from the ground up in her home in Johannesburg. Her 3 high school children keep her very busy and challenged and for respite she runs and cycles with her husband of 20 years.

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