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Title	How to make remote working work
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Publication date	2020-04-01
Publication information	Accountancy Ireland, 55 (2): 65-65
Publisher	Chartered Accountants Ireland
Link to online version	https://www.charteredaccountants.ie/Accountancy-Ireland/Home
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/11327

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How to make **remote working**... work

Dr Annette Clancy lays out the ground rules for a successful spell of remote working.



The work restrictions and social distancing introduced by the Government in response to COVID-19 may prove to be a watershed moment for flexible/remote working. The immediate shutdown of many workplaces forced hundreds of companies and thousands of workers to get creative about how to work and deliver services to clients and customers while observing public health protocols. As many are finding out, however, working from home presents a whole new set of challenges. So, how can we make flexible/remote working work?

KEEP GOING TO WORK

Not everyone has a home office or even their own room. Yet, you must still go to work. First, acknowledge the change in your work situation. It is not the same as going to the office. You may, for

example, have to juggle childcare so be realistic about what you can achieve given the current circumstances. Discuss this with your employer and work around it for the time being.

Then go to work. This is as much psychological as it is physical. Your home is an obstacle course of exciting activities, which throw themselves into your path before a deadline looms. Laundry, dishwashing, reorganising books (by colour, author or topic?) all seem to take on an urgency previously unheard of as the clock ticks closer to the dreaded deadline. You must defend yourself against this distraction before you begin.

Create a workspace at home. This could be as simple as defining part of the kitchen table as the place where you put your laptop, phone charger and papers. Keep this clear of all other personal items. When you sit down at this space, you are at work; when you leave, you are at home. Maintaining this boundary is essential, otherwise work and home will become blurred. This is important when you work from home because it's easy for work to bleed into your personal (psychological and social) life and before you know it, you are on your computer at 11pm and again at 7.30am.

KEEP COMMUNICATION CHANNELS OPEN

People go to work for myriad reasons. Obviously, there is the work itself, but we also develop our sense of identity through work; we make friends and develop relationships (some life-long). These relationships can feel threatened when we are no longer close to our work colleagues. People who work at home (even those who are

used to it) can feel isolated and lonely.

If your business uses technology such as Slack, Google Hangouts or Skype, for example, these are probably your go-to communication tools. But if not, it's crucial to build in times when you check-in with your colleagues by phone, text or WhatsApp – whatever method works for your group of colleagues. Managers who have no experience of managing teams remotely will need to take particular care to check in with their people as it is easy to lose contact in a remote working context.

KEEP THINGS NORMAL

Social distancing can quickly turn into social isolation unless we keep some semblance of normality. We may not be able to go to the pub on a Friday with friends or go out to dinner with colleagues, but we can organise 'virtual coffee dates' or 'remote lunches' using Skype, Zoom or Facetime. This means organising specific times to be together online, but away from work.

Of course, it isn't the same as being in the same room. And yes, it is a bit 'weird'. But the main point here is to maintain social contact to ensure that workers do not succumb to loneliness, and for managers to engage in non-work conversation with their colleagues.

Once you crack it, we may look back on this time as the research and development phase of a new way of working.



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