

THE ULTIMATE WORK-FROM-HOME GUIDE

Everything you need to work remotely—for an employer or yourself

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The work-from-home job force just got a big push from the current global coronavirus pandemic, but even before COVID-19 became a factor, increasing numbers of people have been saying goodbye to their 9-5 job.

Thanks to ever-evolving technologies like Skype, Facetime, Slack, Zoom, Google Hangouts, authenticator apps, and [cloud computing](#)—not to mention texting and email—it's no longer necessary to be in an office full-time to be a productive member of the team. In fact, many kinds of work can be done just as effectively, if not more so, from a home base.

Top fields for remote work include computers and IT, education and training, and healthcare; positions include customer service reps, virtual assistants, data entry and transcription, teachers, and more.

A variety of top global firms, including Amazon, Dell, Humana, Kaplan, and Salesforce, offer remote work opportunities, but it's also important to be aware of scams.

As appealing as remote work is to employees, it wouldn't be such a strong trend if employers didn't also recognize benefits from their side of the desk. Companies with work-from-anywhere policies can boost employee productivity, reduce turnover, and lower organizational costs, according to a recent research at Harvard Business School.^{1 2} Telecommuting workers with very complex jobs who don't require a lot of collaboration or social support can perform better than their office-based counterparts, according to another study.³

Also, in the event of a natural or manmade disaster, a distributed workforce is in a better position to keep operations running, even if some of the group goes offline.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

To work effectively from home, you'll need to make sure you have the technology you require, a separate workspace (preferably), Internet service that meets your need, a workable schedule you can stick to and ways to connect with others.

HOW TO WORK EFFECTIVELY FROM HOME

Whether you're working remotely one day per week (or more) or full-time—by choice or because of a health scare or weather event—it's important to ensure that you are set up to be productive. This includes having a designated workspace with the right technology; ways of dealing with kids, pets, and other potential disruptions; and a schedule that allows for the social contact and stimulation that ordinarily comes from being in a workplace with others.

Here are strategies and tips to be successful as a remote worker.

Know the ground rules

Does your employer require a nine-to-five schedule, or is there flexibility? Are you allowed to work on public Wi-Fi? Which tech tools might you need, such as Zoom for video conferencing, Slack or Microsoft Teams for group chats, or Trello for project management?



If you work for someone else, it's important that your employer spells out the ground rules and ensures you have the appropriate equipment, such as a laptop, as well as network access, passcodes, and instructions for remote login, including two-factor authentication. Be sure to do trial runs and work out any problems that might impede your work.

If you work for yourself, you may need many of the same tools.

Set up a functional workspace

Not everyone has space for a designated work area. This is, however critical to have a private, quiet space for your work. If you can, separate your work area from your personal spaces and use it just for work, not for other activities. This does not have to be large or fancy.

Get the internet speed you need

If you have kids who are at home sometimes, their FaceTiming and Xbox habits may slow your connection and download speeds. Moving as close as you can to your Wi-Fi router can help (devices that are distant tend to draw on bandwidth), or you can consider switching to Ethernet. You'll likely need a dongle since laptops don't have Ethernet ports these days plus an Ethernet cable to connect your computer to your router. Wondering if your most-used

website is down? Check isitdownrightnow.com, which monitors key websites and services to see if they're working. [

Use phone apps

If your job involves making long distance and/or international calls, Google Hangouts, WhatsApp and Skype all let you call over the Internet across the globe on the cheap. And if you and the person you're calling are on the same service, the call will be free.

Minimize distractions

If you have a barking dog or a jack-hammering worker outside your windows, consider investing in noise-cancelling headphones. And if the kids are home and you're without childcare (say, during the summer or a natural emergency), see if someone else in the house (or a neighbor in a similar situation) can take turns with care of the children.

Plan extra social interactions

Some folks love the thought of working in solitude, but even the most introverted among us can start feeling a little claustrophobic after a few weeks at home, alone, staring at the same project for long hours. It can get lonely. Be ready for that, and try to schedule some connect-with-the-outside-world time, like a lunch date (even if you take it at 3 p.m.), a videochat with a friend, or an exercise class.

Where Work-From-Home Jobs Are

Work-at-home jobs are no longer limited to [multi-level marketing \(MLM\)](#) outfits, like Amway or Avon. Improved technology and the need to cut costs and/or keep [overhead](#) low have encouraged businesses of all sizes and in a variety of fields to create more work-from-home opportunities.

The Top Types of Work-From-Home Jobs

Not all work-at-home jobs are for corporate employees. Many people work for firms as freelancers, choosing to form their own businesses. As noted in several instances above, companies are increasingly turning to these [independent contractors](#) to fill a variety of positions. Working from home also offers the opportunity for those who have the time and organizational skills to manage two or three jobs at once. It is not uncommon for enterprising types to eventually turn a freelance work-from-home job opportunity into a small business, even to the extent of employing others.

Here are some of the most common work-from-home options. Some are more on the unskilled/entry-level side, while others require specialized training and expertise.

Virtual assistants

Think of a [virtual assistant](#) as an off-site secretary. A traditional secretary comes with many expenses to a company, and if the company is small, it may not need a full-timer. Virtual assistants work from home, often communicating with the boss via chat, Facetime, Slack, or another real-time service. They can do most of what a traditional administrative assistant does—responding to emails, creating business documents, calling clients, scheduling appointments, handling social media, bookkeeping and data entry—but at a lower cost. Key talents for this sort of job include good communication skills and some office experience.

Translators

International companies need translators all the time. They may translate files and documents, or transcribe and translate conversations and conference calls. People who speak uncommon languages are even more in demand, and these home-based jobs are plentiful.

Call center/customer service representatives

Many companies, large and small, outsource their customer service work to home-based agents. Since some English-speaking customers may have trouble communicating with agents who speak English as a second language, or have heavy accents, a growing number of firms are seeking more call-center workers in the U.S.

Most of these types of jobs entail inbound calls, helping people with orders or account information, but some also require outbound calling. Most also come with a set work schedule—though the pay is often by the hour (or sometimes minute), while you're on an actual call. The typical qualifications needed for this type of job are good communication and people skills, with most employers requiring a background check. An outgrowth of the traditional customer service job is that of the chat agent, who answers customer questions live via the company's website or social media.

Data entry and transcription

Although they can be two different types of jobs, data entry and transcription jobs usually require the same skills and qualifications. Data entry involves

entering facts and figures into a software program or spreadsheet. It could involve entering payroll data, catalog or [inventory](#) items, or working with a customer relationship management system.

Transcription work involves creating documents from audio files. This is typically done for businesses that need documentation of meetings, workshops, conference calls, or podcasts. In most cases, the employer provides the software and content management system needed for the work. For both jobs, employers generally look for detail-oriented people with good typing skills.

Teacher/tutor

With the growth of online education, there is a growing demand for online instructors. Virtual schools are popping up everywhere, offering elementary, high school and college-level programs of study; faculty can typically work from anywhere.

While many online teaching jobs require teaching credentials, jobs for online tutors do not (although an educational background is often desired). Tutors for advanced subjects, such as calculus and physics, can earn a higher hourly rate. There are also opportunities to simply do standardized test scoring at home. Scoring jobs may require a teaching background or a college degree, at a minimum.

Avoid the Scams

Obviously, work-at-home jobs have come a long way from those old "make money stuffing envelopes" ads. But for anybody looking to earn a living without leaving home has to be very careful.

Do your homework on a potential work-at-home employer. Make sure that the company is established. If you can't find evidence that it has a physical address and sells a product or service, it's best to avoid it. Be sure to track down contact info too, and test it out. Many con artists pretend to be working for household-name corporations, either directly or as [sub-contractors](#).

As with any job, there should be an application and probably an interview: Anybody who is legitimately looking to hire someone wants to meet—or at least talk to—applicants. Lastly, you shouldn't incur any [out-of-pocket](#) expenses to be hired. If a work-from-home opportunity requires you to pay a fee up-front or buy a "start-up kit" or make any other sort of sizable

cash outlay, then it's probably a scam. You will, however, most likely need to



invest in a fast, reliable internet connection, if you don't already have one, and a high-quality audio headset.

Tips for the Work-at-Home Life

Though the idea of being your own boss, setting your own hours, and operating within your own four walls has merit—and definite benefits—it comes with a few drawbacks as well, for both the [self-employed](#) and the telecommuting employee. When it's happening in the shadow of a national health emergency, it adds an extra layer of discomfort and uncertainty. Here are three tips to help strike a healthy balance.

Stick to your work schedule

Every person who has spent time working from a home base will have to deal with a lack of understanding from people who think working from home doesn't really mean working. The burden lies upon you to set your working hours, stick to them, actually work during those hours, and refuse to let anyone else dissuade you from the idea that you're truly employed.

Unfortunately, home life has its own distractions that can burn precious daylight and put well-meaning home workers behind on important projects. In addition to the typical interruptions in the nine-to-five (vendor calls, power outages, accidents, pet or child needs), there are personal boundaries that will continue to be pushed.

Close family members have to understand that you can't help them move during the workday, or even chat on the phone for an hour. Setting limits if you have children at home can be especially tough. On the positive side, letting kids see you work hard at something you love—even at the parts you don't love—can greatly influence their future career choices and entire attitude toward work.

Beware of workaholic tendencies

Efficiency and flexibility are two of the top ten reasons that people want to work from home, along with shorter hours (what might you accomplish with eight straight hours of keyboard-pounding, uninterrupted by emails or daily staff meetings). But sometimes flexibility is too much of a good thing. When your office is always there, waiting, with that deadline looming over your head, it's pretty hard to just close the door and pretend you've left for the day. Many home-based workers find themselves working more hours, not fewer, logging in work time on nights and weekends, just because it's there and they can't ignore it.

It's true that many work-at-home professionals keep a five-hour day, as opposed to an eight-hour day. This does not mean, however, that they work less. Hours are often calculated as "billable hours," meaning that for every hour spent performing a task that they charge for, there are many minutes spent doing non-compensated administrative tasks.

Don't bet on saving money

Without a daily commute, mandatory lunches and the cost of office-appropriate attire, it may seem that working from home will peel some costs off your budget. But additional outlays can crop up. The expense to set up an office may include laptops, printers, internet service, cell phones, business cards, web hosting, business services, and software. Forget about using your existing equipment for your business if you plan on taking the full cost of each as a tax [write-off](#). Personal and business purchases need to be kept separate in order to comply with tax law.

So, hold on before you try to deduct half your [mortgage](#) for "office rent" or the entire cost of your internet. There are strict limits to what can be claimed as [deductions](#) or [credits](#) on your return. You can deduct valid work-related expenses, but only the percentage that is actually used for your work. So if you pay for an internet service that is also used by your spouse and children, and even yourself for non-work-related matters, you can't deduct the full cost – only the (estimated) portion that is exclusive to employment-related matters. The same goes for office supplies, telephone bills, and utilities.

The Bottom Line

Working from home can be exciting, empowering and even profitable, provided you are realistic about the pros and cons. Whether you are a freelancer, a company part-timer, or a full-time employee who just doesn't hit the office on certain days, it's a way to escape the daily grind. But there are added responsibilities that come with freedom, not to mention planning, foresight, self-discipline, and focus. Oh, yes, and hours of uninterrupted hard work. As many home-based employees will tell you, it's not easier to work from home—it's just a different location.