Hybrid Work

Work From Home Boundaries You Need to Adopt

How to avoid distractions by managing digital, physical and work-life boundaries.

Read 5 minutes



This article is part of our Steelcase 360 series Making Distance Work about working remotely.

By creating intentional ways to manage digital, physical and work-life boundaries, you can take more ownership over your day, instead of letting someone else do it for you.

It's easy to see evidence of a rise in home-based work — just look at what apps are most popular right now. DingTalk, a business app designed to integrate scheduling, administrative, collaboration and chat functions, became the most downloaded app in China following the Chinese New Year. In other parts of the world, Tencent Conference, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger all registered in the top 10 app store downloads in February. There's an obvious commonality — all of these apps are designed to help people connect when they aren't physically together.

With more organizations encouraging people to stay home temporarily, over the long-term it's creating some new challenges. At first you might think it's wonderful because no one can stop by your desk and interrupt you, or no loud colleagues will be distracting you. But, at home, there are new distractions to watch out for and — if left unchecked — they can cause your brain to feel like a pinball machine.

Here are some boundaries you may need to establish so you can get work done and stay healthy.

Digital Boundaries

SCHEDULE TIME TO RESPOND

Every time we're distracted it takes 23 minutes to get back on track, so it's important to try to minimize (or even better, eliminate) our Pavlovian response to notifications. Turn off email pop-ups and app notifications. Instead, schedule time during your day (or twice a day) to respond. Let everyone know by updating your app status or adding your schedule to your email signature or auto-response. Let people know if it's an emergency, they can (gasp!) call you.

PICK A PLATFORM

Those apps can help keep work moving, but can also keep us hopping from platform to platform and one device to another to stay on top of incoming communication. In fact, DingTalk is often called "DingDing" by Chinese workers, echoing its default notification sound. Encourage your team to pick a platform and stick with it. You may need more than one to handle project files and instant messaging, but the fewer the better.

MANAGE SOCIAL MEDIA

Perhaps the easiest way to stop distractions is to do a better job managing your social media use. Cal Newport, author of Deep Work, advocates quitting entirely. However, when you find yourself suddenly isolated at home, social connections may be a good way to keep relationships intact. Instead of calling it quits altogether, consider how you can manage your use of social tools — eliminate notifications and identify a dedicated time to check in, so you can stay focused throughout the rest of your day.

Physical Boundaries

CHOOSE YOUR TERRITORY

Some people are juggling spouses who are also working from home and children who can’t go to school. It can be hard to focus and space is likely at a premium. Whether you use the dining room table or your kid’s desk, carving out a spot that tells people “I’m at work” makes a big difference for your ability to focus.

BLOCK VISUAL DISTRACTIONS

If you don’t have a home office, it’s easy to be distracted every time someone walks into the room. After all, our early ancestors’ peripheral vision developed to be extremely acute so they could detect motion from potential predators. It’s no wonder we almost can’t help ourselves from glancing up when someone walks by. Block out “visual noise” with plants, bookcases, even your computer monitor to keep yourself focused. And, tidy up your workspace to eliminate visual chaos which can also be distracting.

CONTROL NOISE

The number one complaint in the office is noise, but it can be even more of a problem at home. Kids watching TV, loud neighbours and dogs barking are all real-life distractions. If you can’t shut a door, look for ways to mitigate background noise by using headphones instead of your computer for conference calls. And, when scheduling your time, consider when you’ll need quiet and when you’re most likely to get it at home, then block that time on your calendar.

Work Life Boundaries

RESPECT YOUR CALENDAR

It can be easy when you work from home to roll out of bed, open your laptop and work late in the evening. One colleague in Hong Kong encourages his team to do the exact opposite. He says 20% of their time should be spent planning and everyone needs to "respect the calendar." You may need to take a call at 6 am and another at 7 pm. But, then you might fit in a run during the day or some time outside playing catch with your kids. Whatever you do, plan your day and stick to it.

IDENTIFY BURNOUT

Some stress is a necessary part of life. But, as Dr. Tracy Brower, Steelcase applied research consultant, writes for Fast Company, it's crucial you have a system in place to identify and prevent burnout. Be able to recognise its symptoms, audit your energy and write down how activities make you feel, and identify behaviours that make you feel like you're thriving. Then, ask if you're doing those things every day.

PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

We have the opportunity to train our brain into positive habits. Mindfulness—keeping your mind tuned into the here and now—appears to be one of the best ways to accomplish this. Research in the journal Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging shows that even as little as 30 minutes of mindfulness a day for eight weeks can strengthen connections in our brains and reduce sensitivity to the brain's threat-detection network (i.e. distractions). Practicing mindfulness allows us to recognise when our minds wander and redirect our attention.

Working from home requires a new kind of discipline. Boundaries may be less about balance and more about control. By creating intentional ways to manage digital, physical and work-life boundaries, you can take more ownership over your day, instead of letting someone else do it for you.

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