Hybrid Work

Working From Home: Real Life Lessons

Yoga pants and sofas lose their appeal after a while, but there are ways to stay focused, collaborate and be well.

Read 6 minutes

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

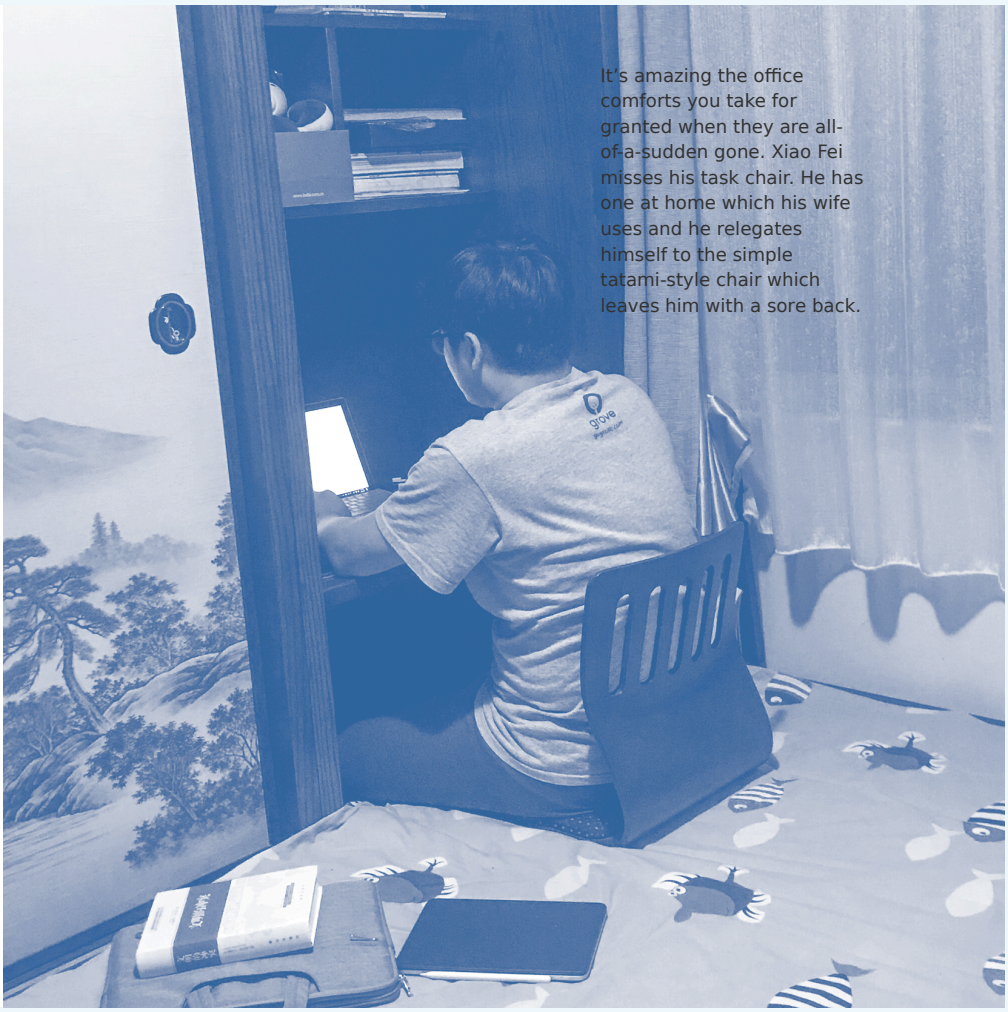
> “I love it when people say, ‘It would be my dream to work from home.’ I tell them, ‘Be careful what you wish for.’ Week after week feels like a test of endurance.”
>
> Krista Markell
> Coalesse and Turnstone
> Global Brand Communications Manager

Right now, more people are discovering what it’s like to work either at home or away from their teammates as a result of precautions surrounding the Coronavirus (COVID-19). For some, it’s a new experience and a steep learning curve. For others, it’s an amped up version of their typical day. Here’s what three people from Beijing, Munich and San Francisco are learning about how to keep a positive attitude and work flowing.

Beijing

Xue Xiao Fei’s Story

For the last month, Xue Xiao Fei, Steelcase Education market manager for Greater China, has only been able to go into the office a couple days each week. “Not only is work disrupted, but schools are not open as well,” he says. “My little boy cannot go to kindergarten and my wife is working from home as a school counselor.”



It's amazing the office comforts you take for granted when they are all-of-a-sudden gone. Xiao Fei misses his task chair. He has one at home which his wife uses and he relegates himself to the simple tatami-style chair which leaves him with a sore back.

"I am not alone on this journey. Our company culture gives us choice over where we work at the moment. Everyone is doing their best. And, you can tell we are one family."

Xue Xiao Fei
Steelcase Education Market Manager
Greater China

WHAT HE'S LEARNING

Xiao Fei is discovering he has to adjust work to fit with his family. He and his wife trade off conference calls so someone can always watch their son. "Little Jeff still 'participated' in two meetings last week when I was presenting," Xiao Fei jokes. Xiao Fei has shifted his work flow focus on deep work at night, after his son goes to bed.

While technology is extremely helpful, Xiao Fei says the same software that keeps him connected is also causing him to lose concentration. WeChat, DingTalk, Microsoft Teams chat and WhatsApp help him stay connected to teammates, but he also has to intentionally ignore the persistent digital intrusions they cause throughout the day or find times to focus when the notifications die down.

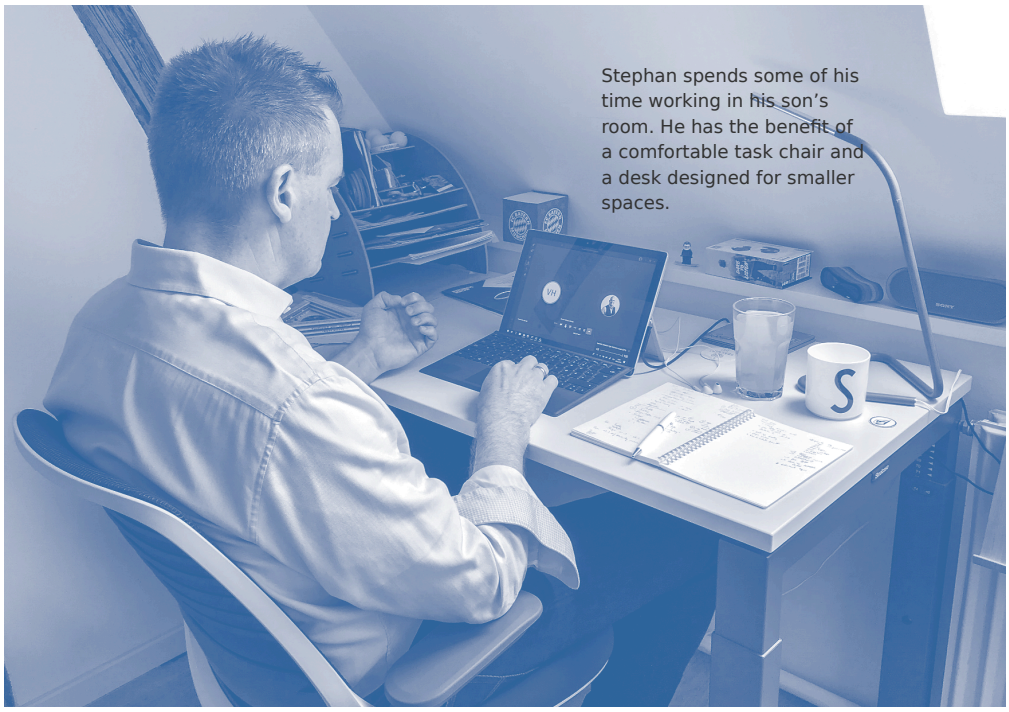
Xiao Fei says a strong internet connection is crucial, but even then, interruptions are frequent. He suggests people give themselves a buffer time between video calls to make sure everything is up and running. He finds that face-to-face communication is always better, so suggests people use their video if possible. Not seeing facial expressions and body language ends up taking more time because it's just harder to explain ideas without seeing other people on the call. He also suggests that video conference calls start with a clear agenda in order to run smoothly — knowing the plan ahead of time helps people recognize when it's their turn to contribute.

KEY INSIGHT

Xiao Fei says it's important to check in on people, even if it's not about a specific business topic. Each week Xiao Fei has regular meetings with his colleagues and his clients to find out how they are doing. "I am not alone on this journey. Our company culture gives us choice over where we work at the moment. Everyone is doing their best. And, you can tell we are one family," Xiao Fei says.

Munich
Stephan Derr's Story

In Munich, Stephan Derr returned from vacation in Northern Italy with his wife and two kids and is now spending two weeks at home waiting out a precautionary quarantine. As Steelcase vice president of sales, his usual week would be split between the office and traveling to see clients and team members. Now, he's spending 100% of his time at home and it's a big change for someone who usually interacts with other people all day.



Stephan spends some of his time working in his son's room. He has the benefit of a comfortable task chair and a desk designed for smaller spaces.

"This situation has validated how important physical places are to how I feel, how I get work done and how I connect with people."

Stephan Derr
Steelcase Vice President of Sales
Germany/Netherlands

WHAT HE'S LEARNING

"Technology is not the problem. The bigger problem is that I'm doing the same type of work all day long in the same posture. I might change topics, but the way I'm working is monotonous. It makes a difference when you're able to have conversations with other human beings in person," says Stephan.

He misses chatting at the coffee bar and seeing teammates in the WorkCafé in the office. And moving from space to space for different meetings, let him stretch his legs and boost his energy.

Now in his small Munich city center flat, Stephan moves from the living room to one of his kids' bedrooms depending on who else is home. His youngest son ends up losing his room more often since it's nearest to the family's Wi-Fi connection. Stephan says he doesn't get the same creative inspiration when he's in the same place all day long, so he started taking walks each night to make sure he gets physical activity and a new perspective.

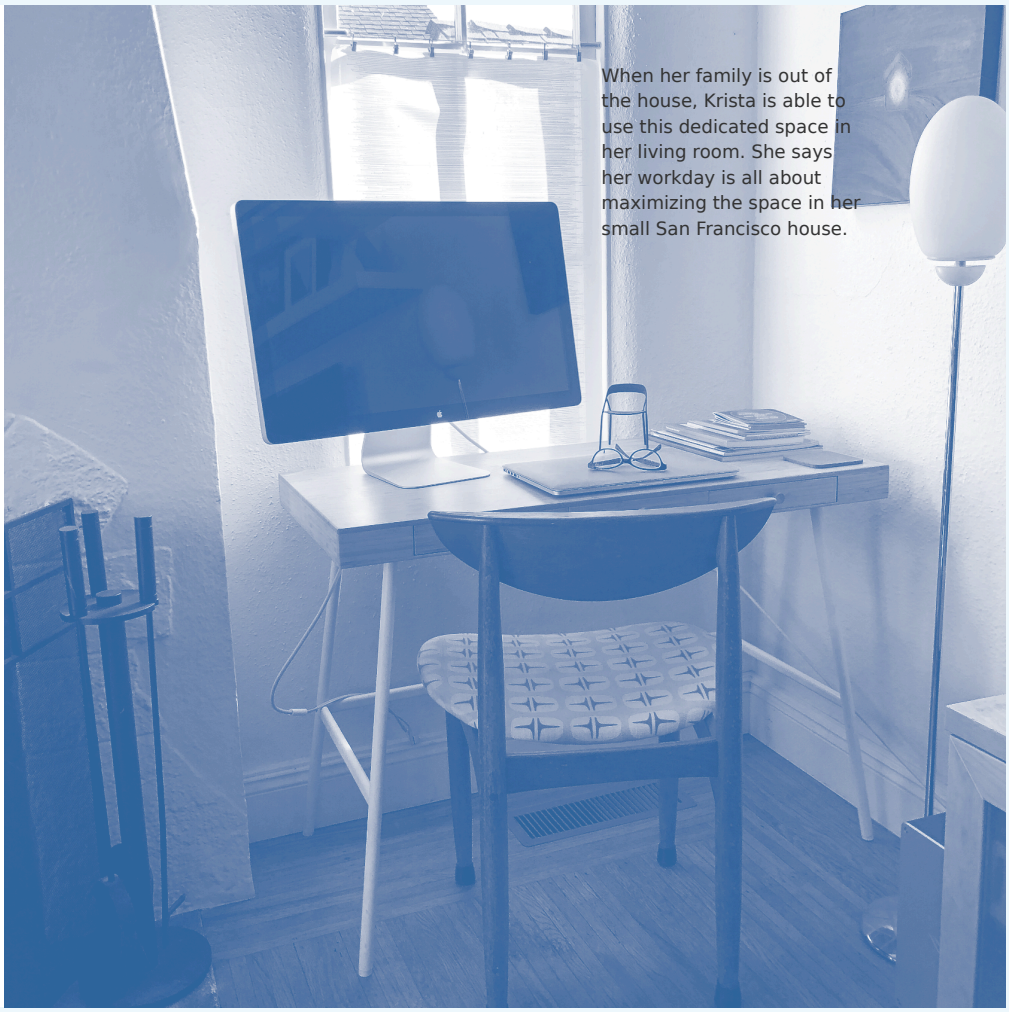
HIS KEY INSIGHT

“I’m seeing first-hand just how valuable our workplace is. I’ve heard it from colleagues and am experiencing it myself,” Stephan says. “This situation has validated how important physical places are to how I feel, how I get work done and how I connect with people.”

San Francisco

Krista Markell’s Story

Krista has worked from her home overlooking the San Francisco Bay for 12 years. Each month she flies to Grand Rapids, Michigan to connect with her team in person, but now, she’s grounded and exploring new ways to stay connected. She typically works in her two bedroom 900 square foot home where she moves between her bedroom and her dining room. Her location usually depends on whether her husband’s also working from home or if her teenage daughter is getting ready for school.



When her family is out of the house, Krista is able to use this dedicated space in her living room. She says her workday is all about maximizing the space in her small San Francisco house.

“The walls start to close in on me when I work from home too many days in a row. I build in routines similar to those I’d have if I went into the office. On those days, it makes me feel more productive.”

Krista Markell
Coalesse and Turnstone
Global Brand Communications Manager

WHAT SHE’S LEARNING

Krista’s experience is coming in handy as she draws on what she knows about how to be productive and stay connected from a distance. “It sounds so nice to get to work in your pajamas or yoga pants all day. But after awhile, I just feel really unprofessional. So, I get up and ‘get ready to go to work,’” she says.

Krista spends the majority of her day on video and conference calls using Microsoft Teams. Because she connects to an east coast team, she's often online from 6 am to 2 pm. "I have to force myself to get up and move around. I find myself sitting in the same place all day for hours at a time. It's easy to slip into unhealthy behaviors." If she's not careful, she can go for days at a time where she doesn't walk out the front door, so Krista has built in the time to take her dogs, Millie and Liesel, for a walk in the afternoon — forcing herself to get outside helps her rejuvenate and she often thinks of new ideas when she's up and moving.

Since Krista's entire team works across the country, they've made intentional efforts to build team cohesion from afar. They set up a specific text chain to make more informal connections, like simply saying "Hi" in the morning or sending funny pictures and notes. It's highly social. "We made a conscious decision as a team to separate this from work. I appreciate that it's a connection that feels different than everything else." Her team also uses the first five minutes of every meeting as social time to build in the social connections they don't have naturally.

HER KEY INSIGHT

"I feel for the people who are experiencing what this is like for the first time 24/7. It's probably not what they expect," says Krista. "The walls start to close in on me when I work from home too many days in a row. I build in routines similar to those I'd have if I went into the office. On those days, it makes me feel more productive."

Regardless of whether they were experienced remote workers or doing it for the first time, each person had similar advice for others who need to work from home: develop a routine, prioritize time to focus, make sure to get physical activity and explore ways to build and maintain personal connections, both with teammates and family or friends. Working exclusively from home is not ideal for most of us, but it can work on a temporary basis and can potentially develop some new good habits to maintain once you're able to go back to the office — getting up and taking a walk always makes good sense.