

# How to Succeed in Your Office Job When There Is No Office

The coronavirus has many of us trying to be productive at home. Here are some tips for all of us, including our bosses.

By Julie Weed June 21, 2020

The challenges of working from home are myriad. There are children to tutor, dogs to walk, shows to binge on. Hallway hellos and brainstorming at the whiteboard have given way to the stilted cadence of Zoom meetings. But three months into the work-from-home era, some best practices are emerging.

## For Everyone

- **Shift your mind-set.** More than ever you will be measured on output, not how many hours you sat at your desk. "It's a different way to approach work" and translates to more freedom to design your day, said Ann Herrmann-Nehdi, the chief executive of [Herrmann](#), a multinational company that creates tools to help employees communicate better. While there are still

unavoidable meetings, creating chunks of time to turn off notifications and focus deeply on your own projects, called “time-boxing,” can lift the quality of your output, she said.

- **Take the initiative.** Don’t expect your higher-ups to have it all figured out. Almost every aspect of work is being reconsidered, so jump in with suggestions, big or small. Even figuring out new Zoom or Teams features and giving a quick lesson can be useful. Ms. Herrmann-Nehdi said a colleague recently began creating infographics that better explained her work findings to her remote teammates than the usual slide deck.
- **Speak up quickly if something isn’t working.** “Raise a flag if something looks off,” said Lauren Kaplowitz, a customer success manager at Lively, a small company that helps people manage health savings accounts. The business is based in San Francisco but she is working from the Seattle area. Check in with others to see if they are experiencing the same problems, Ms. Kaplowitz said. It’s harder now for managers to see that you are spinning your wheels and aren’t making progress, so let them know.
- **Re-create “in person.”** If you do your best collaborating in the same room with a work partner, use technology and block a few hours to “share a room,”

Ms. Herrmann-Nehdi suggested. That way, you and your teammate can see each other, view each other's screens and share a virtual white board for ideas.

- **Find office allies.** Brainstorm, review work together before submitting it or just check in. Crossing paths in the break room is a thing of the past, so Ms. Kaplowitz schedules short "coffee chats" via videoconference to catch up with colleagues on work, or just to talk.
- **Remove distractions.** Without the boss periodically peeking over your shoulder, it's easy to take a quick break and realize an hour later you're still on that unending Twitter or Instagram scroll. Take social media off your work machine. Leave your phone in another room.
- **Use what worked before.** Take home with you the best habits you formed at the office. Setting priorities and communicating, for example, are still essential to effective work. Iyobosa Bello-Asemota, an investment banking analyst at Morgan Stanley, creates financial analyses for a number of different teams. She makes sure to keep them all apprised of the tasks she is juggling and how she is organizing her time. "It helps set expectations and is something I've always done," she said, but it's even more important now that the teams are physically separated.

- **Don't forget career advancement.** Keep thinking and talking about the areas you want to improve, the parts of the company you want to explore and how you may get there. While it's not as easy as poking her head in an office, Ms. Bello-Asemota carves out time to connect with her mentor, a vice president at the firm, to get feedback on topics like work style and the level of responsibility she is being given.

## For Managers

- **Overcommunicate.** Provide additional context. Explain the "whys" of decisions and their possible effects to replace the information picked up organically in the office. Make sure to clarify goals, identify resources and explain where to find information, Ms. Herrmann-Nehdi said. If you can, share how the company is doing financially, what's going on with reorganizations, layoffs, raises and when staff can expect to be back in the office.
- **Make consistency a priority.** Updates should come at predictable times and days. "It's important to have a consistent cadence to communication," especially when so many other things are uncertain, said Tracey Armstrong, chief executive of Copyright Clearance Center, a 500-employee organization that helps

companies license copyrighted materials. Managers should also regularly check communication channels like email, text, Slack and Teams to make sure they are not creating a roadblock.

- **Meet differently.** In phone calls and videoconferences, take extra time to encourage questions and engage those who haven't chimed in, Ms. Herrmann-Nehdi suggested. Afterward, reiterate shared information, confirm understanding and distribute decisions, actions and key discussion points in writing. Frequent short meetings like a daily "Stand Up," where team members each say what they are working on that day, resources they need or challenges they face, can keep them from moving in the wrong direction.
- **Rotate responsibilities.** New ways of doing things offer new experiences. Brooke O'Berry, vice president for digital customer experiences at Starbucks, helps team members feel comfortable in videoconferences by rotating roles so everyone gets a chance to lead the meeting or act as a moderator, managing the questions and suggestions in the comment stream or chat window.
- **Repurpose your teams.** Find new ways to meet old objectives. Ms. Armstrong's trade-show team, whose goals included increasing awareness of the company's

services, now meets that objective by raising the company's presence on LinkedIn, working with employees to fill out their profiles and post content from the company.

- **Keep Experimenting.** Jean-Claude Saghbini, chief technology officer at Wolters Kluwer Health, a global provider of health care information technology, said at the beginning of the pandemic his team was working "beyond full capacity" in creating ways to get things done to keep their systems updated for front-line health care workers. Now that the situation has changed from a "sprint to a marathon," Mr. Saghbini said, managers must keep checking in with employees to hear what's working and what isn't, and to keep making adjustments. Along with feedback on new processes and technologies put in place for remote work, "managers need to ask employees about their individual constraints like child-care hours," he said, "and design around each person's constraints."
- **Find ways to highlight your teams' great work with higher-ups.** Upper management may be physically out of sight, Ms. O'Berry said, but "it's important for the team to still feel recognized."
- **Remember the extra stress.** Employees aren't just figuring out how to work from home. They are

managing newly full households, and worrying about a potentially deadly virus as well as economic fallout and social justice issues. Part of understanding that is accepting messiness, and showing your team that you are not immune to it, Mr. Saghbini said. "If your kids interrupt your video call, if you have to get off the phone because the plumber is there, if you just don't want to turn on your video that day, as a manager, do it, and show that's OK."