

Working from home: Guidelines for employees

by

Marius Meyer

Yesterday I shared some guidelines for employers in terms of developing and implementing a strategy for letting employees work from home during the lockdown. Today we turn our attention to employees. While employers are expected to have clear strategies in place to managing the approaches and processes of working from home, ultimately the success of the strategy will depend on the implementation by employees.

Here are some guidelines for employees while working from home during the lockdown:

- Conform to all the lockdown regulations to look after your health and safety during the lockdown. Prioritise cleanliness and hygiene at home and in your personal life. Don't assume that because you are at home that you are automatically immune to the virus. If you work from home and some of your other residents leave the house, the most likely people to give you the virus, is your closest family member or friend, and a person at a shop, petrol garage, roadblock or hospital.
- Read the employer's working from home policy or Covid-19 lockdown arrangement (permanent one or temporary one for the lockdown) and make sure that you understand all aspects thereof, if not enquire from your manager. Apply all the policy guidelines relevant to you.
- Make sure that you understand fully what your employer and manager expects from you in terms of availability, performance standards and other key requirements.
- Prioritise communication as your most important skill. Communicate clearly and to the point and provide clear and succinct feedback when needed.
- Create some "rules of engagement" or values for your family, such as respect, friendliness, kindness, eating together, no interruptions during business meetings, sharing of chores, no alcohol when working and so on. This will ensure that you maintain the optimum balance between the work and household environments at home.
- Decide when it is really necessary to communicate with your manager, ask for guidance and conform to these boundaries. Some managers trust their people fully

and will not require daily check-ins, while others need regular feedback. The circumstances may also determine the best approach to be followed, but find a way working for you and your manager.

- Plan and schedule your week and every day so that you have clear goals, actions and deliverables to achieve. Try not to carry over tasks to the next day, when you fall behind, wake up earlier the next day and catch up as quickly as possible.
- Use email in accordance with the general principles of email etiquette (See my #Day4LockdownSA article for clear guidelines available on Twitter @SABPP1 or www.sabpp.co.za). In summary, use email only when necessary and be succinct and clear in your communication.
- Prepare adequately for your online meetings, get all documents ready so that you are not unorganised or unprepared when inputs are requested from you during these meetings. Master the functionalities of these platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Skype and Zoom.
- Manage distractions and interruptions as far as possible. Make it clear to your family members that you are working at certain times, but be flexible to engage with them when it is necessary. Have a clear plan to keep small children engaged the whole day. You will have more problems if something goes seriously wrong at home while you could have prevented a crisis quickly by intervening at the right time.
- If you do not have a separate room as an office at your house, use a desk or table and transform it into a work station where you have everything you need without having to walk around too much. Ensure that you have all the resources you need during the lockdown, e.g. laptop, ear phones, stationary etc.
- Realise that your own level of self-management needs to improve. At your physical office, colleagues would often remind one another of deadlines and key project deliverables. Now you need to manage all of this yourself, thus be self-disciplined, committed and organised.
- Balance work, family, rest and fun. Now is the time to practice some of your favourite hobbies you may have neglected when you were too busy working or travelling.
- In addition to physical distancing, also keep your distance from the kitchen. Be careful of over-eating during the lockdown. Eat as much healthy food as possible.
- Ensure that you get enough sleep so that you are ready for the next day of working.
- Reward yourself when you have completed a complicated or major task by taking a break, watching a movie or podcast, or listening to music or enjoying your favourite snack.
- Get some exercise at home or in your yard if possible. Otherwise you will need a serious 21 day exercise programme after the lockdown. Also get some fresh air outside and spend at least 30 minutes in the sun, vitamin D is very good for your health.
- Allocate some time for social media per day so that you can be socially connected with other people, but be careful of fake news and being influenced by too many negative opinions, while staying alert and safe.

- Don't watch television the whole day, remember if you are supposed to work from home, you are actually working. Watch the news twice a day so that you know what is going on, or if the government has yet again made changes to the regulations that could affect you.
- Stay focused on your work and life in general. While Covid-19 and the lockdown is our current crisis, you are at risk of struggling from information overload given the fact that the media, radio, television, email inboxes and the Internet exacerbate the current level of information overload, let alone all the fake news doing the rounds.
- Use your employer's online learning opportunities or some of the open source e-learning platforms or TED-Talks available globally.
- Reach out to your colleagues by phone, email or online platforms, but be careful of not disturbing other people who are also working. Rather schedule specific online meetings to ensure that all parties can give their undivided attention when needed.
- Once a week, phone or send an encouraging SMS to your domestic worker, she is also very stressed during this time of no work and will appreciate your support.
- Schedule some times to focus on being creative in your thinking and actions. With limited interruptions you should be able to generate very innovative ideas that you may not have had if it was business as usual at the office. Realise that even after the lockdown, your employer will expect more creativity from you to help turning the organisation around due to the loss in business over this period of reduced business activity and economic outputs.
- Look after your mental health by staying positive and engaging in positive conversations with your friends, family members and colleagues. Be careful of loneliness, reach out to your friends and personal contacts. Make a list of all the things you are thankful for such as good friends, not spending any time in traffic, no office interruptions, no unnecessary physical meetings, and less contact with difficult customers and irritating colleagues and suppliers. Having said that, think about how you can build your relationships with all these parties.
- Reflect on your performance at the end of the day, give yourself a score out of 10 every day and decide what you can do better the next day. Measure your productivity and keep records for the purpose of performance management.

In addition to the above guidelines, some consulting or training companies such as Sereni-t People Development provide useful tips for working from home. Sereni-t states that it is essential to have a daily routine. Follow these companies on social media platforms such as Instagram. Also, many executive coaches have moved from face-to-face coaching to providing online and social media support. Follow some of these specialists on social media, they are useful sources of social and professional guidance and support, not only for managers, but also to all other employees.

The Covid-19 lockdown has created an environment in which work at home has become an overnight reality for many employees. There is a simultaneous risk and opportunity for you: Your employer may think that he or she can actually do without you. Or your employer may realise that you are indispensable. Working from home effectively and productively is one of

the best ways of building your personal brand and that of your employer still being able to deliver despite the odds.

If you can maintain or improve your productivity working from home, you are ready for the new world of work, a workspace that has transitioned from your office building to your home. Working from home during the lockdown is also a good time to demonstrate your perseverance, self-discipline, emotional intelligence, concentration and perseverance. However, despite the importance of your work, there are two things more important than your work: Your family and your wellness. You will have ups and downs during the lockdown. Some days you will feel that working from home is the best thing that has ever happened to you. Other days you will be highly frustrated, stressed, anxious and isolated. None of us can lose sight of the fact that companies, economic sectors and the overall economy and society will find it either impossible or very difficult to recover from the national lockdown. Let alone the perpetuation of the current levels of poverty, inequality and unemployment.

While the Covid-19 working from home arrangement is a short-term regulation enforced by government, the medium- and long term consequence of this is that working from home may become the norm, given the fact that in many office and professional jobs you can actually work from home. Let us rise to the occasion and make it work. The first week is gone, two weeks to go, or longer ...

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP) and Chairperson of the South African Wine Industry Professional Body (SAWIPB). For more information on the Coronavirus, visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za

This article was first published by SABPP on 3 April 2020 , see www.sabpp.co.za