

Working it from home--Crabby's tips for telecommuters



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Crabby Office Lady

While working from the comfort of your own home may seem like a fuzzy-slipped fantasy come true, it does have its pitfalls. Let's scope out some of the ways you can make this "telecommute" thing work.

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Notice I mentioned "fuzzy slippers" in the introductory paragraph up there. It's because I know that many of you who've never actually worked from home have an image in your head that involves, you, your pajamas, a homemade latte, and a purring cat on the monitor. Let's cut to the chase here and take a clear look at the facts about telecommuting.

Is telecommuting right for you? A checklist

Working from home isn't for everyone. If you're prone to distraction or procrastination and live for the daily drama around the water cooler, perhaps you ought to reconsider. But if you think you may be right for this type of work, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you self-motivated and organized? Can you set up a self-imposed daily structure?
- Can you limit the distractions around you (personal phone calls, bickering kids, the fish swimming around in his bowl...)?
- Do you have the necessary workspace and tools to make your particular job workable from afar?
- Can you work without someone imposing structure on you? Can you create your own structure just as easily — and stick to it?
- Do you have someone to take care of the kids while you take care of the business?
- Do you have a room where you can close the door to distractions? Do you have friends and family who can understand that just because you're home doesn't mean you're in "home mode"?

If you've answered a resounding "yes" to most of these questions, chances are you'd make a decent telecommuter.

Working it from home: Myth versus fact

Now, are you prepared to dismiss your fantasies about telecommuting? Let's look at a few of the most common misconceptions.

Myth

You'll have lots of free time on your hands.

Fact

Now that you don't have coworkers or a boss breathing the same air as you, it can be challenging to stay focused. It can help to start work at the same time each day, limit distractions (yes, "General Hospital" counts as a distraction), and stick to a schedule.

See, if you don't buckle down, focus, and take this seriously from the start, you may find your work procrastination manifesting itself in super-organized closets, a spotless refrigerator, or a worn out dog dreading one more walk around the block. (Let me tell you, sometimes even cleaning up after the Crabby Office Dog more than once a day sounds pretty good compared to writing a status

report..) If any of these things start to happen, however, you may find yourself with more free time than you ever thought possible since you'll be out of a job.

Myth

You need to become an über gadget geek and set up your home office to handle every techno-trick that comes your way.

Fact

Unless you plan to be a telecommuting crime fighter, setting up your home office with what you'd normally have at your work office is probably sufficient (and, of course, it depends on the type of job you do): A desk, a chair, high speed Internet access, a working computer with good security (your company should require this anyway), software that is compatible with what the rest of the office is using, and a door that closes (and maybe locks) is usually a good place to start. Once you're in the swing of things, you'll figure out what you need and don't need. Remember: You don't want to spend in gadgets what you're saving in transportation costs.

Myth

You're the Lone Ranger, doing your own job with your own horse on your own time.

Fact

Unless you're the boss, you aren't the Lone Ranger; you're Tonto (and anyway, even the "boss" plays Tonto to someone...). Make sure you regularly check in with the person who actually *is* your Lone Ranger. And while you're at it, stay in touch with your coworkers too. They may forget you exist. This could mean visiting the office for important meetings or making good use of some of the Office technologies such as [Live Meeting](#), [Document Workspaces](#), or the [OneNote shared note-taking sessions](#).

A few tips

Now that we've debunked some of the more common myths about working from a home office, here are a few tips to get you started. Of course, you may have some of your own to share, so please write to me at crabby@microsoft.com and share them with me. You can never be too rich or have too many telecommuting tips, and I'll share some of the best reader suggestions in future columns.

Get out of the house once in a while

We humans are a social species, which means that having some form of contact with each other is necessary for our health and sanity. While you may feel terribly "lone wolf" sometimes, getting out of the house is still a good idea, if only to breathe some fresh air. And for a change of pace you can take your work with you to a local café that has high speed Internet access (and great scones).

Little manners tip: If you're going to sit in the same spot all day at that café, make sure you actually purchase something — coffee, a doughnut, a soy smoothie, whatever. The owners of these places don't make a living by admiring the sound of your fingers clicky-clacking across the keyboard day in and day out. You're making the big bucks sitting there, so don't be afraid to spend a bit of it.

Stay in touch with work

No man is an island, no woman is an isthmus (or something like that). You rely on your manager and your coworkers just as they rely on you. So...stay in touch. Make sure you have a phone line that is just for work (perhaps a fax line too, or you could use some of those nifty [fax services](#) and cut out that extra piece of equipment), be available during normal business hours, and get your work done on time. Also, be sure to make — and keep — appointments; you'd do this if you were working in the office, so don't slack off once you're a disembodied voice on the phone. Oh, and if you can attend team meetings in person, consider doing so. If you can't, call in. Everyone will appreciate your efforts, and you'll be a good example of how telecommuting can work.

Expect a period of adjustment

I talked to several telecommuters for this column, and every one of them said that they had to go through a period of adjustment when they felt downright isolated and even lonesome. One even said he felt such acute empathy and anxiety for his son's single fish that he ended up buying it a friend who promptly ate the original fish, but that's another story for another day (and don't you dare tell the son that his beloved fish is really a murdering, smug-faced imposter).

Seriously, though, if you're not comfortable being alone, then telecommuting isn't for you. If you're beginning to compare yourself to a fish swimming alone in a bowl, telecommuting isn't for you. If you're taking too many trips to stare at the contents of the fridge, telecommuting isn't for you. But if these are all passing things or one time incidents, give yourself some time and know it will take some getting used to working from home.

Now that you're ready, is your company?

Many companies have their own policies regarding telecommuting. Some companies flat out forbid it. But, hey, even if that's the case, maybe you can be the rogue in the bunch. Someone has to hoe the first row right?

Maybe you're that one person who will show them telecommuting isn't just good for you; it's good for the company, good for the environment, and even if it turned out not so good for my friend's son's *original* fish, at least another live creature got to experience life outside the pet shop....

"If you are idle, be not solitary; if you are solitary be not idle." — Samuel Johnson

About the author

[Annik Stahl](#), the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the [Did this article help you?](#) feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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