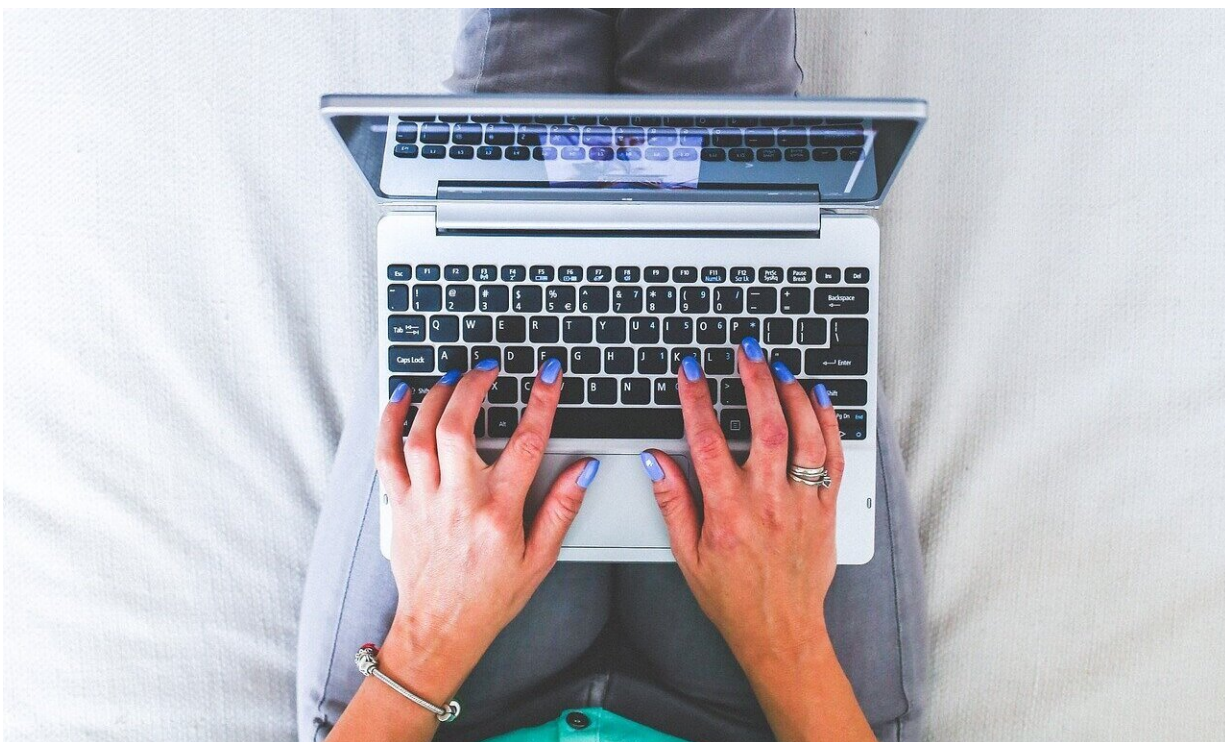


Top 13 tips to work at home amid coronavirus concerns

March 6 2020, by Jefferson Graham, Usa Today



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Many companies, most notably Twitter, are recommending working at home for their staff in the wake of the coronavirus. King County, home to Seattle in Washington state, where at least 10 people have died, has made the same recommendation.

New to telecommuting? We have some ideas of what you'll need to re-create the office experience at home.

1. Good internet connection

You'll get nowhere if you can't get online.

A tip: Work near the router to get the best signal, or splurge on a "mesh" system like Amazon's Eero (\$99 for 1, \$249 for 3) or Google's Nest Wi-Fi (\$149 for 1, \$269 for 2) which help evenly distribute the WiFi signal and make it stronger in the home.

If you don't want to spend and have poor internet, there's always the last resort: hotspot. The wireless companies make it possible for you to connect your computer to your phone for Internet, by going into Settings, but only for a finite period of time. For instance, my T-Mobile plan offers 200 gigabytes of data and then slows you to a crawl once you've used it all. How much is 200 GB? Who knows. They don't tell you. But in my experience, it all goes fast, within a day or two.

2. Dedicated space

Your home is likely to be quieter and less congested than what you have at work.

Still, a dedicated, private space, no matter how small, is a good start. "Put yourself in a place where you won't get distracted by personal stuff (laundry, kids, making dinner, etc). It can become a slippery slope," notes San Francisco based publicist Kat Eller Murray. That can be the kitchen table, the couch, somewhere that's comfortable and comes with a place to sit in for an extended period.

"A good supportive office chair at the right height. Ergonomics is important!" notes Los Angeles area photographer Kathy Carson Newman. (Spending \$10,000 for a chair might seem a little extreme, but U.S. TODAY sister publication Reviewed.com found a roster of more affordable chairs, ranging from the \$200 to \$800 range.)

3. Take steps to not be interrupted

That could mean a Post-It on the door during calls/meetings, or "asking people not to knock or ring the doorbell," notes musician Michael Gallant. "and turning down the volume on intercom buzzers if you live in an apartment building." Additionally, notify friends and family, "as some feel that work from home means you are on a break," notes Melissa Hourigan, a Denver-based publicist.

4. Meetings, part 1

Your office co-workers may like to do meetings, or [potential clients](#) may want to see your face and communicate with you. That's never been easier, thanks to a multitude of free meeting programs. But first, you'll need a webcam, if your computer doesn't have one built-in. You can pick up an inexpensive model for under \$75, or use your smartphone cameras instead.

5. Meetings, part 2

To communicate with others, there are scores of free programs for easy one-on-one conversations, like Apple's FaceTime, Skype, Facebook's Messenger and Google Hangouts. Many will let you bring in other users as well. Zoom is the new go-to program for companies and is also free for individuals. Meetings max out at 40 minutes, but Zoom calls are end to end encrypted, something Messenger and Hangout calls are not.

(Facebook says it looks to bring encryption to Messenger calls but hasn't rolled it out yet.)

Gallant adds a pro, video composition tip: "If you're doing video conferences, find a place with a non-distracting background and good lighting." That could be as simple as not sitting with the window behind you, because the brightness will cause the camera to expose for the window, and not your face, thus turning you into a silhouette. Instead, turn around, and be lit by the window.

6. Pro instant messaging tools

Sure, you can use Facebook's Messenger, WhatsApp or Apple iMessages to keep in touch in [real-time](#), and help tame the ever-growing email inbox, but many companies prefer dedicated networks designed for business. The top two both start at free: Microsoft Team's motto is "Work remotely without feeling remote," and has a starter plan with limited file storage, or \$5 monthly for the pro version, while Slack is free and charges if you make phone or video calls, \$6.67 monthly.

7. Headphones

You'll want a good pair of ear buds to talk on the phone hands free. Many swear by Apple's AirPods (\$169) and the new AirPods Pro (\$249), which stay in the ear easier. A cheaper alternative is Amazon's Echo Buds, which sell for \$129. Michael Oldenburg, a manager at drone maker DJI, likes them for meetings, "or just to block out noise."

8. Calendars

Share what you're doing with co-workers with a shared calendar. Free options include Google Calendar and Zoho.

9. Security

At home, as at work, your phone will ring, your e-mail will chime, and within the legit communication attempts will be spoofs and scams. Be on your toes at home as you would be at work.

"Hackers never let a good crisis go to waste," says Colin Bastable, CEO of awareness training firm Lucy Security. "People working from home get easily distracted, especially if they are normally used to working in the office, and they will mix work with personal email and web browsing. This increases the risks that they can introduce to their employers and colleagues, by clicking on malware links."

So once again folks, think before you click. And read up on our recent 11 steps for safer security tips.

10. Little things

A phone stand will take the device out of your hands and let you continue to work hands free. It's a great place to park your phone, as you talk on meetings, and have the device charging as you speak. You can pick one up for under \$10. A power strip will help you tremendously, as a place to plug in the laptop, phone and headphone charger and more. We picked up this 12 outlet Belkin power strip with surge protector for \$22 and don't have to hunt for an available outlet anymore.

11. Second screen

Our colleague Kelly Tyko swears by having a second monitor to expand her laptop. She can, for instance, have U.S. TODAY publication software on one screen, and Microsoft Teams on the other. "It takes some getting used to but I have a hard time not using extra monitors,"

she says. "So I bought the portable for times when I have to travel." She likes the Asus MB168B, a 15-inch monitor that looks like a stand-alone iPad, and sells for just over \$125.

12. Free phone calls: How to do international

You may have to make a call internationally, without access to the office phone system. Skype will let you do Skype to Skype calls for free, as will Facebook's Messenger, Apple's FaceTime and others. What if you need to dial a phone number? Skype charges \$5.50 for 220 minutes of time. The Japanese app Line will let you make international calls for free, if you watch an ad first.

13. And most importantly

"The willpower not to wash the dishes, go to the bathroom and eat all day long instead of working," notes Boston area writer Josh Bernoff. "It also helps to use social networks to interact with other humans but NOT WHEN YOU NEED TO CONCENTRATE." And don't forget to dress for work, even if you're at home.

"Get ready as if you were still going to the office," says Hourigan. "Don't get caught in your PJs when a video conference pops up."

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Citation: Top 13 tips to work at home amid coronavirus concerns (2020, March 6) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2020-03-home-coronavirus.html>

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