



EverProductive Guide **To Excel at Remote Work**

How To Build Culture, Get Results, Work and Lead
Teams from Home Like a Pro

Working from home can be very misunderstood. Some assume it makes people lazy and others swear it is their most productive time.

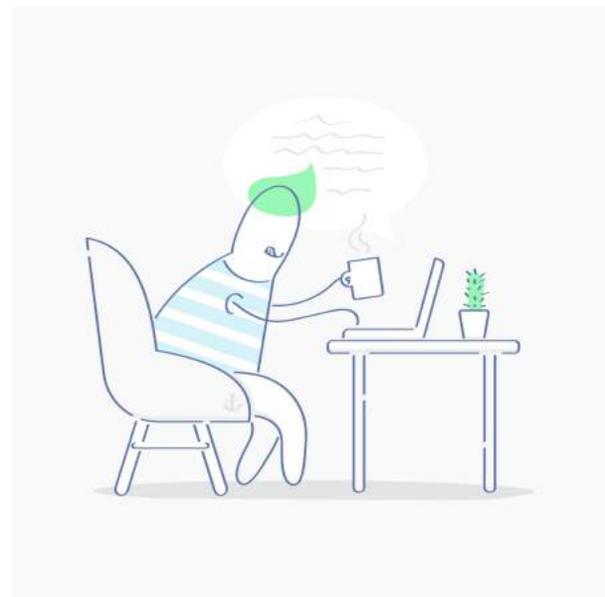
As of writing this in March/April 2020, we are going through one of the biggest work from home experiments with the Coronavirus at its peak.

I've been working 100% from home for 4 years and have led a team virtually for 2 years. Companies like Gitlab, have no office. They are entirely remote, with 1200 employees in 65 countries and are highly successful and productive.

How do they do it? It takes some mindset changes and ideas you may not have thought of. Here's a collection of lessons on how to work virtually and lead a team virtually like a pro to make it both highly engaging and productive.

1. Find ways to switch into 'work mode'

If you go to an office, you'll have some sort of pre-work routine. You wake up, grab a coffee, maybe watch the news, get changed into your work clothes, and head out the door with your favorite music in your ears. That's just an example, but I'm sure you can identify things you do every day before you go to work.



Because you've done these so many times, they've become habit. And because you're on the way to work, carrying out these habits signal to your brain that it's nearly time to work. This helps you get in the right frame of mind.

When you're working from home, your routine is totally broken, so it can be hard to get into the mindset needed to work. Pulling your laptop into bed while you're still in your pajamas doesn't help to switch your mind into productive mode.

I recommend creating a new routine.

Brush your teeth, have a shower, get dressed, and do as many of the things you would normally do as you can.

Once that's done, it's time to 'go' to work. Some people are still able to go out to coffee shops, but for many, non-essential businesses have been closed down, meaning home is the only place you can work from. If you're lucky enough to have a home office, then this definitely helps.

Otherwise, think about a spare space in your home that you could designate to work only. If you have a spare room, of course this is ideal. But if you don't, a spare side table and chair can be enough. Tuck it away somewhere you're unlikely to be disturbed.

Of course, a lot of people have their kids at home now too, so even this might be a struggle. If noise is a problem where you are, why not choose some uplifting, energizing music as your 'work music'. Put your headphones in as soon as you get to your desk. Before you know it, this will become a new work habit for you, and you'll be able to switch into feeling productive as soon as those earbuds are in.

2. Master the art of 'work bursts'

Pay attention to this one, as mastering 'work bursts' can make you super productive, really fast.

In difficult situations such as these, it's helpful to look for positives. And two major positives of working from home or remotely are:

1. You have more control over your schedule
2. You have fewer people distracting you.



This allows you to schedule your day around productive bursts, rather than arbitrary work hours. You can actually get *more* quality work done in less time.

So, what do I mean when I say 'work bursts'?

A 'work burst' is a short period of uninterrupted time, that you use to do *similar* tasks that you've grouped together. 'Similar' is the keyword here. Did you know, that when you switch between different types of tasks, your brain gets tired and your energy drains away? This is why work bursts are so effective. So, for example, rather than switching between say coding, then writing, then emails, all day, why not group all the coding work together and get them done in one solid hour?

One hour is the best timeframe for a work burst. Your mind will start to drift if you go for any longer.

How you organize your blocks is up to you, but here's how I do it. (Note - these blocks should not include meeting time! Rather focused work time.)

I plan 3 to 4 work bursts per day. One might be for doing product backlog work, one might be for covering admin tasks, one might be for organizing my team, or one might be for a specific project I want to push forward. Then I take a good rest between each block, to reset my mind and recharge my energy, before taking on the next one.

You might think... *Only three or four hours of work? That's not very much!*

I encourage you to try it out, and compare your results with how much you get done in a normal day. From my experience, I'm betting that not only will you be able to complete tasks that usually take you 7 to 8 hours to complete, but that you'll do *more* than you did before (and have time for those meetings too). You'll become more productive, and your mind will be clearer. Your stress will reduce, too.

I go into a lot more depth on this in the [EverProductive course](#) if you want to learn more.

3. Embrace an iterative mindset

An 'iterative mindset' means not being afraid to share work that is not 100% done. It means giving colleagues and managers an insight into your process, before your work is perfect. When you're working remotely, working iteratively is one of the best ways you can build trust by showing results and engaging the team.



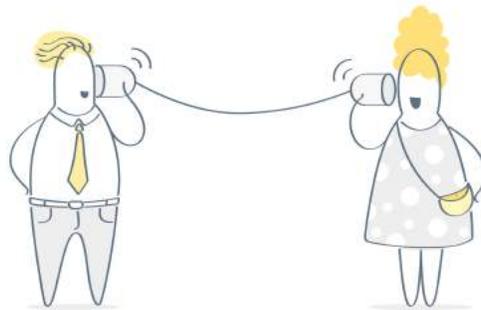
It can also help you focus on what you need to get done. I recommend you do at least one thing each day to move each of your projects forward. If you only have one project, I recommend trying to have three things progressed by the end of each day. Have *something* to show, even if it's not perfect. Your employer will be pleased to see progress, rather than perfection.

For employers, encourage your employees to share their progress with both management and colleagues on a daily basis. Create a culture of acceptance and progress, rather than judgment and criticism that makes people afraid to share. When people can share at an early opportunity, they can quickly get feedback and change direction if needed. This saves a ton of time down the line.

A step-by-step approach keeps things manageable, keeps communication open, and makes each small milestone a source of satisfaction.

4. Communicate early and often

One thing that takes a huge hit when working remote is communication. Of course, you're not in a face-to-face environment with your colleagues anymore. Some teams may have remote video meetings on Skype or Zoom or another platform, but it's still just not the same.



While teams that were *built* remotely shouldn't have a problem with this, teams that used to work together in person will likely struggle.

Management should be addressing this, implementing processes of communication that help everything to run smoothly, but sometimes employees will have to take it upon themselves.

Another crucial aspect leaders need to address is that employees who work remotely need to feel as if they have the same opportunities as people who work from an office. There should not be a discrimination. Good news is all the tactics in this guide should help facilitate that.

We recommend:

- Picking up the phone or setting up a Zoom meeting for complex issues – details can get lost in an email thread, and tone can get lost in translation.
- If you're unsure about what you're supposed to be doing, tell someone as soon as possible. Ask management for guidance on anything you're not sure about. Also bring to their attention anything you feel is not working, so they can work to rectify it.
- Having a resourceful, flexible mindset. It can be easy to get frustrated when methods of communication change, but try to be flexible. We are in difficult times, and the more patient we can be with ourselves and each other, the better.

5. Schedule time to be social

It's not only work communication that suffers when you're working from home. It's the culture and social interaction in your workplace that's gone. A lot of companies overlook this, but it's really important to keep this alive, for morale. Working from home can get lonely and the more we can raise each other's spirits and support each other, the better.



I highly recommend companies organize and schedule *informal* interaction, as well as work-related meetings and calls.

Think of it as people gathering around the coffee machine or in the office kitchen, but remotely. In an office environment this happens organically. When working from home though it does not. You NEED to schedule it. You could set up a scheduled video call where there's no work-specific agenda. You're just meeting to chat. This works really well for small teams. People could even have coffee, tea or beer to make it really informal and as if you're having a drink together in person.

My team just did a virtual happy hour – it lasted almost 2 hours and even some tequila shots were brought out. It was a lot of fun, everyone had a great time.

The team at Gitlab do something called 'breakout calls'. This is where they connect people with shared interests to get together and video chat. This is often not work specific at all. It could be about raising kids, or classic car mechanics, or basketball, whatever people are into.

Managers, remember, employees are people, not just 'resources'! Schedule informal interaction to combat loneliness, increase morale, and help everyone feel better during this difficult time.

6. Know what's important – focus on *output*, not *hours*

Many workplaces suffer from 'presenteeism' i.e. focusing on how many hours people are at their desk instead of results. Many employers don't *trust* their employees to produce good work without putting in a ton of hours.

I think this is wrong, and remote working is an ideal opportunity to shift the mindset of management from hours to output. In fact if a leader wants to successfully manage a team virtually, I believe they HAVE to embrace this.



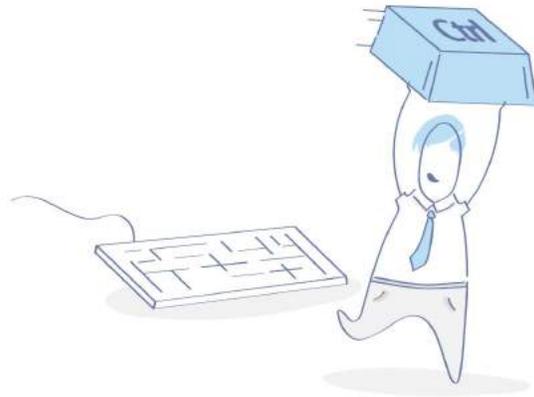
Focusing on results creates a better atmosphere. Employees feel trusted and respected as people who do valuable work, and what's more, it helps them value their own work more. Without needing to 'prove' to management that they're good employees, they can focus on what *matters* – pleasing clients, solving problems, and digging intensely into work for short time periods. This is what produces great results.

They'll also be able to have downtime when they need it, meaning they can recharge their energy and come back to work refreshed and excited to work. At the moment, many people have other responsibilities at home. They may have to look after family members or their children. They'll be cooking more because they can't grab meals out. People are under intense pressure.

It makes no sense to pile on more pressure by carrying on a presenteeism culture while remote working. While some people will have to work specific hours if they're customer facing, others can be more flexible to their. As long as the work gets done, that's what matters.

My personal management style is if you are delivering great results and getting things done, I don't care when or where you did it from.

7. Take control of your schedules and boundaries



When you work from home, it can be hard to create boundaries between your personal and professional life. It can end up that you're giving half your attention to your personal life and half your attention to your work, and can't give focused attention to either. This is stressful, because your mind is constantly switching between tasks, and makes for poor results.

When you go to an office, your work-home boundary is much clearer. Even if you still take work home or answer emails in the evening, you have a clear timeframe and location that indicates 'work', and another that indicates 'home'.

When you work from home, there is no clear timeframe and location. So, it's up to you to make artificial versions of these. We've already discussed location, but what about timeframe? I recommend you implement a schedule to manage your own time, and be disciplined about it.

Make sure you include:

- Time to move, and ideally work out, stretch, walk or anything that gets you up
- Adequate time to work
- Adequate time to take care of all your responsibilities at home
- Adequate time to rest

It's very easy to go to extremes when working from home. You may end up having work take over your life. Or, on the other hand, you may be very easily distracted and find it hard to work at all.

Implementing a schedule and sticking to it as best you can, incorporating 'work bursts', can be the best way to solve this problem.

Managers can encourage employees in this by sharing best practices and also having meetings about what people find is working or not working for them. Helping employees share experiences can be really helpful, and make people feel less alone, which can be a problem while remote working. Open communication about anything is a key theme here to be successful.

8. Recognize the positives



Whether you're an employee or manager, transitioning to remote working can be difficult. But there are huge positives of working from home. Like we already said, it can combat a culture of presenteeism and shift the focus onto results. I predict that as a result of this forced period of working from home, many companies will see the benefits and will offer more flexible working going forward.

Here are just a few of the benefits, for both employees and organizations:

- Remote working can help companies snag the best talent, without incurring relocation costs.
- It reduces business overheads because there is less office space to pay rent and bills for.
- Remote working can allow companies to hire cheaper employees if they are based in a very expensive location – for example, engineering talent in San Francisco demands a premium salary, but companies can hire equally talented employees from cheaper parts of their country or even internationally.

- Remote working vastly opens the pool of resources at your disposal. You no longer are restricted to hire people from the city your company is in, but you can attract talents from across the globe.
- Employees feel more satisfied with their work.
- People who apply for work from home jobs or who have worked them in the past are often more self-motivated and are more results-focused.
- Companies who offer flexible and remote working are at a *massive* advantage when hiring, as employees love this perk. People crave freedom, and if you can give it to them, you will have top talent lining up for interviews.

To sum it up, working and leading teams from homes can have massive benefits for all involved. It just requires some changes in mindset and more focus on awareness on how to keep communications, clear, opened and keep the culture between team members alive.

If you have any great work from home strategies or stories you felt we missed, please let us know! We aim to make this a definitive guide and will give credit. Email paul@everproductive.com

