

The COVID-19 Outbreak – Working from Home Series:

How to Keep Focused While Working Remotely

In less than a month, our lives have been upended by the coronavirus pandemic. Schools are closed, organizations are navigating the logistics of helping employees adjust to new work-from-home (WFH) policies. People have heavy thoughts, uncertainty reigns supreme and many are simply feeling overwhelmed by the weight of new developments completely beyond their control.

At the same time, businesses are finding ways to pivot and innovate to stay alive even in the midst of wide-ranging—and rapidly escalating—COVID-19 social distancing measures. Some are even finding opportunity to develop or offer new products or services. Others are discovering that WFH can, indeed, work—if it's managed properly. That means maintaining both workplace culture and engagement while working remotely.

Whether you or your employees are new to working from home, or have experience with what was only recently a workplace perk instead of an outbreak-mandated necessity, we can all agree that staying focused in a crisis can be challenging. The camaraderie of the workplace has been disrupted. For many, children and other family members are under foot at all times and technological hurdles may be causing more than their fair share of headaches. The good news: it's only been a few of weeks. You'll get the hang of the WFH lifestyle if you embrace some important principles.

Here are four strategies to keep yourself (and your employees) focused and productive in this new WFH environment:

1. Maintain your usual routines.

When the world feels upside down, there can be a feeling of lost control. This fear can create anxiety that wreaks havoc on an individual's focus and may leave people in a heightened state of stress. So, think about what the beginning and end of the workday needs to look like. If you were used to going to the gym before work, perhaps walk around the block or start your day with a workout at home before turning on the laptop. Think about how your previous routines made you feel, and how you can modify those activities to include these elements in your new routine—even if they may now be slightly different. Doing so helps to eliminate thoughts of what you're missing while detached from the normal work day-to-day, and helps to maintain a sense of normalcy.

2. Go 'old school' with your to-do list.

The frequency of COVID-19 social media and TV updates can create worried thoughts that derail your workplace focus. One strategy that helps mitigate the feeling of overwhelm is to focus on your actions and develop simple, clearly-defined goals. Create a to-do list and identify your top three priorities for the day. Write them down on a note pad. Writing help provides clarity of action and a sense of control. You can still put them into your favourite productivity app for a sense of relief when tasks are accomplished. Defining

your 'win' for the day is one of the pillars of achieving WFH focus. Then, at the end of each day, identify your priority tasks for the next day to maintain momentum.

3. Communicate and set workplace boundaries with others at home.

Maybe you have multiple people working from home right now (e.g., a partner or a roommate), or you have children or other family around who would normally be at school, work or elsewhere. Identify your work zone and stick to it, especially if you don't have a home office. Set boundaries and make it clear when you're doing work and when you shouldn't be disturbed. That can be as simple as shutting the door, taping a coloured piece of paper on the door or wearing headphones (the noise-cancelling variety are particularly useful when WFH is a necessity). Let others know your home-but-not-home-during-work hours. Use language to reinforce this, such as telling kids that "Mom is going to work now." Share your weekly schedule with your partner, such as scheduled video conference calls that may require quiet or assistance with children's activities (but remember to keep confidentiality protocols in mind when sharing information on work activities).

4. These are challenging times - be flexible.

WFH works quite well in a crisis because it provides the flexibility to accommodate differing circumstances. That's especially important at a time when full-time WFH arrangements are new for most Canadians, leaving many searching for ways to make this sudden reality as productive as possible. Facing the inherent and unavoidable uncertainty of the future can seem daunting but letting go of the demand for certainty is another key to maintaining focus. If you do not have to control the outcome, then you're free to relax. Being flexible right now can help control the blurring of separation of home/work you might be experiencing—and lessen some of the anxiety that is associated with it.

Last point: try implementing these strategies now, both for yourself and recommend them to your employees. The faster you establish a new routine, become comfortable with it, and focus on the workplace tasks at hand, the easier the WFH transition will be.

To learn more and for assistance, contact Flashrock HR.

