3 Tips to Avoid WFH Burnout

Executive Summary

As millions of employees around the world have had to make a sudden and unprecedented shift to remote work amid the coronavirus pandemic, many might find themselves feeling like they need to work all the time to signal their devotion and productivity — and, as a result, may struggle to create healthy boundaries. Even more than before, afternoons will blend with evenings, and weekdays will blend with weekend days, leaving a sense of little time off. So, how can we "leave our work at the door" if we are no longer going out the door? Research shows it will be important to: 1) maintain physical and social boundaries; 2) maintain boundaries on how you use your time; and 3) focus on your most important work.

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Millions around the globe have made a sudden transition to remote work amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Not surprisingly, this has some employers concerned about maintaining employee productivity. But what they really should be concerned

about in this unprecedented situation is a longer-term risk: employee burnout.

The risk is substantial. The lines between work and non-work are blurring in new and unusual ways, and many employees who are working remotely for the first time are likely to struggle to preserve healthy boundaries between their professional and personal lives. To signal their loyalty, devotion, and productivity, they may feel they have to work all the time. Afternoons will blend with evenings; weekdays will blend with weekends; and little sense of time off will remain. It's possible that some employees may be asked to continue working remotely for several months.

Further Reading

Lots of research suggests that drawing lines between our professional and personal lives is crucial, especially for our mental health. But it's difficult, even in the best of circumstances. In no small measure, that's because the knowledge economy has radically transformed what it means to be an "ideal worker."

Our research has shown that workers often unintentionally make it hard for their supervisors, colleagues, and employees to maintain boundaries. One way they do so is by sending work emails outside office hours. In five studies involving more than 2,000 working adults, we found that senders of after-hours work emails underestimate how compelled receivers feel to respond right away, even when such emails are not urgent.

Covid-19 might amplify these pressures. Even for employees who have a natural preference to separate their work and personal lives, the current circumstances may not allow them to do so. Many schools are closed, and daycare may no longer be an option, placing additional burdens on working parents or low-income workers. Even companies that already encourage employees to work from home are likely to have some trouble supporting employees who face the many challenges of working at home in the presence of their families.

So how can employees continue to compartmentalize their work and non-work lives, given the extraordinary situation that so many of us are in today? How can we "leave our work at the door" if we are no longer going out the door? What can employers, managers, and coworkers do to help one another cope?

Based on our research and the wider academic literature, here are some recommendations:

Maintain physical and social boundaries

In a classic paper, Blake Ashforth, of Arizona State University, described the ways in which people demarcate the transition from work to non-work roles via "boundary-crossing activities." Putting on your work clothes, commuting from home to work—these are physical and social indicators that something has changed. You've transitioned from "home you" to "work you."

Try to maintain these boundaries when working remotely. In the short-term, it may be a welcome change not to have to catch an early train to work, or to be able to spend all day in your pajamas—but both of those things are boundary-crossing activities that can do you good, so don't abandon them altogether. Put on your work clothes every morning—casual Friday is fine, of course, but get yourself ready nonetheless. And consider replacing your morning commute with a walk to a nearby park, or even just around your apartment, before sitting down to work. Some workers have already come up with creative and lighthearted ways to maintain their usual work routines.

Maintain temporal boundaries as much as possible

Maintaining temporal boundaries is critical for well-being and work engagement. This is particularly true when so many employees—and/or their colleagues—are now facing the challenge of integrating childcare or elder-care responsibilities during regular work hours. It's challenging even for employees without children or other family responsibilities, thanks to the mobile devices that keep our work with us at all times.

Sticking to a 9-to-5 schedule may prove unrealistic. Employees need to find work-time budgets that function best for them. They also need be conscious and respectful that others might work at different times than they do. For some it might be a child's nap, for others it might be when their partner is cooking dinner. Employees with or without children can create intentional work-time budgets by adding an "out of office" reply during certain hours of the day to focus on work. A less-extreme reply might be to just let others know that you might be slower than usual in responding, decreasing response expectations for others and yourself.

Creating clear temporal boundaries often depends on the ability to coordinate ones' time with others. This calls for leaders to aid employees in structuring,

coordinating, and managing the pace of work. This might mean regularly holding virtual check-in virtual meetings with employees, or providing them with tools to create virtual coffee or workspaces. Through this disruption, keeping a sense of normality is key.

Focus on your most important work

This is not the time for busy work. Workers should be devoting their energy to top-priority issues.

While working from home, employees often feel compelled to project the appearance of productivity, but this can lead them to work on tasks that are more immediate instead of more important—a tendency that research suggests is counterproductive in the long run, even if it benefits productivity in the short run. Employees, particularly those facing increased workloads as they juggle family and work tasks, should pay attention to prioritizing important work.

Working all the time, even on your most important tasks, isn't the answer. According to some estimates, the average knowledge worker is only productive on average three hours every day, and these hours should be free of interruptions or multitasking. Even before Covid-19, employees found it difficult to carve out three continuous hours to focus on their core work tasks. With work and family boundaries being removed, employees' time has never been more fragmented.

Employees who feel "on" all the time are at a higher risk of burnout when working from home than if they were going to the office as usual. In the long-term, trying to squeeze in work and email responses whenever we have a few minutes to do so —during nap time, on the weekend, or by pausing a movie in the evening—is not only counterproductive but also detrimental to our well-being. We all need to find new ways—and help others do the same—to carve out non-work time and mental space.

These are just a few recommendations that can help workers maintain boundaries between their work and their personal life and thereby avoid burnout in the long run. Employees will need the flexibility to experiment with how to make their circumstances work for them in these unpredictable times.

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