NAVIGATING REMOTE WORK

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CHAPTER ONE

Clock-In Clock-Out

Some workers will never have the chance to work from home: air-traffic controllers, professional athletes, reality-TV hosts, oil-pipeline mechanics, and millions of other jobs. If you have one of these jobs, you have to be physically present with sophisticated equipment, dressed in a specific way, or respond in real-time to unpredictable situations. Although these jobs will never allow the flexibility of remote work, they do have sharp boundaries. When the show is over, the game ends, or the sun goes down, you know work is over. These jobs don't bleed into your home life because you can't work on them until the next workday.

But if you work from home, your essential tools are much more straightforward: a phone, a computer, and an Internet connection. Because these are always around, you are still a few steps away from work. You can receive an email and be at work thirty seconds later without any preparation or time to transition. This situation causes a surprising amount of stress. You can feel that you never really leave work, and you never fully arrive at home either. It is natural to feel boxed in by both or that you aren't present fully for either.

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The solution is to rebuild clear, strong boundaries between the two worlds. We can steal some of the ideas from physical jobs, such as clocking in to begin the workday.

Getting Started Routine

People who work from home love to make jokes about their morning commute: "*Oh man, it was brutal out there, another stalled toddler blocked the hallway.*" A long commute is terrible, but there is one upside that you might miss: the daily drive into the office was a consistent habit that helped you get ready to work. Even if you hate traffic, you might be surprised to find it was a built-in buffer between your home life and work life and that removing it can cause problems.

For example, many people who work from home roll out of bed, pick up their phone and start reading their work email while still rubbing their eyes before breakfast, getting dressed, or fully waking up. This routine might feel very liberating in the beginning, but after doing this for a while, you start to realize that it means that you are responding to the day when you aren't ready and creating more stress for yourself by always being at work.

It would help if you established a ritual similar to a pre-flight safety check. It should be something that you do every day in roughly the same way so that it signals to you that work is starting. Since you are in the privacy of your home, the great news is that this pre-work ritual can change into something that works for you, no matter how odd.

Perhaps you want to start your day doing one of these activities:

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- Meditating.
- Doing a crossword puzzle.
- Playing your guitar.
- Exercising.
- Walking your dog.

There are likely other ways that you can prepare your mind to be ready for work. It is perfectly fine if your starting routine might seem a little off to someone else; all that matters is that it works for you. In his bestseller **The War of Art**[1], author Stephen Pressfield describes his first steps to writing each day like this:

> "I put on my lucky work boots and stitch up the lucky laces that my niece Meredith gave me. I head back into my office, crank up the computer. My lucky hooded sweatshirt is draped over the chair, with the lucky charm I got from a gypsy in Saintes-Maries-del-la-Mer for only eight bucks in francs, and my lucky LARGO nametag that came from a dream that I once had. I put it on. On my thesaurus is my lucky cannon that my friend Bob Versandi gave me from Morro Castle, Cuba. I point it toward my chair, so that it can fire inspiration into me. I say my prayer, which is the Invocation of the Muse from Homer's Oddessey, translation by T.E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, which my dear mate Paul Rink gave me and which sits near my shelf with cuff links that belonged to my father and my lucky acorn from the battle at Thermopylae. It's about ten-thirty now. I sit down and plunge in."

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[1] https://amzn.to/2QeAqYQ

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These steps might sound absurd to you, but these acts of superstition work well for Pressfield, and they are more intentional than what most people do before work:

- Check email.
- See what the top stories are on Reddit.
- Check on sports scores.
- Open social media and catch up on what we "missed" while we were sleeping.

Starting your day like this might not be the best approach. You don't know how you will react to what has happened on social media or the news. It might get you motivated to work; it might upset you; it might make you laugh; it might make you want to crawl back into bed. Your warmup routine should not be exciting or unpredictable; create a calm, consistent start.

All these little tokens and rituals Pressfield mentions remind him of the importance of work; many of these toys call to mind powerful stories or important people in his life that he seeks to honor with his work. When a professional athlete puts on their uniform, it reminds them of who they play for, and your small routine should remind you of why you work. Say a little prayer if you have to, write down something you are thankful for, repeat your mission statement, look at pictures of your kids. Do something that starts with a gentle reminder of why what you are doing matters.

There is a tradeoff to how complicated you make your routine. Since you want to create a buffer between work and home, the system should not be too simple: just turning on your computer and closing your door isn't a routine because

it isn't unique, and it doesn't take long. Likewise, watching the movie Searching for Bobby Fischer before starting your workday would indeed be special but would take too long. When you do the routine, the next thing is work, every time. Pressfield knows that once he does an inventory of his magical little tokens and toys, work begins. He never does the routine otherwise; it is as regular and inevitable as a sunrise.

Don't be afraid to do dead-simple tasks:
- Drink one glass of water.
- Take a vitamin.
- Write one page in a journal.
- Take the trash to the curb.
- Eat some oatmeal.

Do something that doesn't require any motivation but that feels like a small win to help shift you into a productive state. For example, I read a few pages in a book to warm up my mental focus muscles, and then I listen, from start to finish, to one song without doing anything else. At the time of this writing LCD Soundsystem's "oh baby", played very loudly, is the choice, but it changes every few months. This reading and listening combo works for me, but it won't work forever. In a few months, it will be another song, or a short walk, or something else. Change your routine if something stops working; follow the juice where it takes you. I've started wildly productive days by singing, exercising, meditating, reading, walking, quick sprints on a bicycle, foam-rolling, making terrible music in GarageBand, having a conversation with our cat, and cleaning dishes.

As you will see shortly, you can leave yourself a "bookmark" from the last time you were working that can also help you

shift into thinking about work. Try as much as possible to start in calm control rather than just open your email and react to whatever awaits you.

Rituals for Ending Your Day

Once you get going, stopping can be harder than starting, and without a physical transition like walking out of your building and driving home, work can feel like it never ends. Downtime is essential for memory, creativity, and stamina[2], so establish a clean ritual to end your day and shift into your regular life.

Your stopping routine has to be more intricate than your starting routine because it needs to transition you back to the real world. Your work might be highly focused like that of a writer, developer, designer, editor, or analyst. Any job where you can get into a flow means that you will feel in control. Your computer hums and obeys; you listen to whatever you want, you look at whatever you want. You are in charge.

What you do after work most likely does not match this pattern. You do not control what is going on. Your music stops; you do not set the agenda and can't switch away from a slow-loading page. If your two-year-old wants to start a conversation by saying, "*Daddy today we today we daddy today at school we daddy today we went daddy oh then she said that the doggie...*" then you should be patient and relaxed, and not impatient because you are still used to the faster rhythms of work. Build in a short period to transition into this rhythm and mindset. Think of it as how an airlock is used to enter or

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[2] https://hbr.org/2012/12/the-upside-of-downtime

exit a vehicle in space: you first step first into an airlock area, which is neither inside nor outside to let their bodies can adjust between the two environments. You can't just fling the door open and expose yourself to the outside world. Create this in-between time and place to slow yourself down and prepare for regular life.

Take twenty minutes after work but before home, and close up everything, finish your day, but don't walk into the rest of your home. Do some sit-ups, pushups, your world-class Christopher Walken impression, etc. I went through a period where I would watch one episode of a typical TV sitcom or listen to a little bit of talk radio before ending work. It brought me back to the rhythms of conversation again and put me in a good mood.

During this transition, you might find that all sorts of loose ends, emails you forgot to reply to, and other work tasks will pop into your head. Don't jump back in. Instead, make notes to remind you of the very next action to take for each task that pops up. The act of writing down the next step in an open task can relieve the stress and tricks your mind into thinking that it is in a steady or complete state (an effect called the Zeigarnik Effect[3], it reduces the odds that it will pop back into your mind later and drag you mentally back to work. These notes can serve as an excellent starting point for the forgetful version of you that shows up for work tomorrow and isn't sure where to start. Ernest Hemingway is famous for ending his writing day in the middle of a sentence to know precisely where to start. I'm not suggesting you put a typo in the document you are working on, but the psychology in play just works.

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[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeigarnik_effect

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Once the buffer time ends, you *go home*, whether that means walking up the stairs, opening a door, or walking back from the coffee shop. Find an excuse to do something physical as well, much like you did to get your day started. Greet everyone and then change shoes, wash your face, or hug everyone. These actions signal to your body and your family that you are home.

Make Sure the Day Ends

After you end your day, your work should genuinely be over until the next day. Since work is so easily accessible and often includes coworkers in other time zones, it can feel like work is leaving us behind. Develop the discipline to not work for large blocks of the day, even when you could get involved.

Because it feels comfortable to *jump on this one email* or *check on this one issue* after dinner or when you are bored, it doesn't mean it is practical. There are clear diminishing returns for overwork; study after study has shown that working more than 40 hours a week leads to health issues[4], employee burnout[5], and strange cultural behaviors[6], such as pretending to work more while working very little. If a company forces people to work too many hours a week, they will do errands in the middle of the day, their results will decay, and a few months later, they are more likely to quit. Even from the

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[4] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22952309

[5] http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/report-summaries/report-summary-working-long-hours-review-evidence-volume-1-%E2%80%93-main-repor

[6] https://hbr.org/2015/04/why-some-men-pretend-to-work-80-hour-weeks

company's bottom-line perspective, pushing too hard does not work as a long-term strategy, and from your personal point of view, there are direct and obvious consequences to your happiness and health.

You should defend your off time as much as you defend your daily schedule. Think of your time off as a recharge time that allows you to be productive the next day. Rest is like eating; does skipping lunch increase how much you get done? This might be true for one day, but not if you just stop eating to gain a few extra hours a week. Skipping off time works with very similar mechanics, only it takes longer to get physically sick[7].

Putting the computer away can help but it is only part of the battle. Our mobile phones don't help us stay disciplined since they are designed to notify us of new information. If you must stay near a phone, put it somewhere that you can hear it if someone calls but not close enough to see a notification telling you that you got something that doesn't matter, like a new Slack reply or a single spam email. Explore your phone settings and see if there is a way to pause your email inbox or to disable unimportant notifications after hours. A simple rule such as *I only respond to emails from a computer and never a phone* (a rule I personally use) can cut through the power a mobile phone has over you. Another way to think about when to respond is to ask yourself if you would drive into the office to type up a reply, or would you do your entire starting routine again just for this message. This filter separates perceived urgencies from real emergencies. Unless your job description involves the phrases "nuclear launch codes" or "supplier of chicken to Chipotle restaurants", your job isn't

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[7] https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/workerfatigue/hazards.html

that important, and you should enjoy your time off.

But none of us work in isolation, and you might have coworkers or a boss that work very long or odd hours and expect you to be available when they are. If you work on a hybrid team with some workers at the office, you might also find that you have guilt that drives you towards working around the clock to make up for the freedom that is granted to you by your work arrangement. For many, especially younger workers, working a lot of hours is the definition of having a professional work ethic to build a good reputation. There is a lot to learn, and working 12 hours a day makes more progress than 8 hours a day. But once you establish yourself and your career, those extra hours don't automatically lead to better results. You most likely get paid to get the answers right, not for answering the most questions, and a rested brain performs better than an overworked one attached to an exhausted body.

Suppose coworkers send emails or instant messages at all hours of the day and assume that you will respond to just a few "quick questions". In that case, this puts your reputation in a difficult situation: if you don't answer, you appear lazy. If you respond, it encourages behavior that will harm yourself and the team. Every employee wants to get a lot done, have a good work ethic, and be celebrated for it. Even though your company cares about results, we sometimes allow our company's culture to create definitions of success in which working more hours means you are doing well, even if you don't get results. Ultimately this is a disagreement of what the phrases *work ethic* or *hard-working* mean.

An alternative definition of professional work ethic is that you show up to work in peak condition and spend work time

entirely focused on work. Instead of focusing on working harder through a higher quantity of hours, you focus on working smarter with quality hours. You show up ready to work:

- Hydrated
- Well-rested
- Excited to work
- With fresh perspective gained by your off-time

Someone who stayed up until midnight doing surface-level work does not fit this description. Answering an email at night feels like work extra credit, but you rarely actually receive it. More likely, you slowly wear down and find that any decisions you make during these late-night hours aren't as high quality as the ones you make during the day when you have more energy.

Working fewer hours but getting better results can be hard to explain to go-getting coworkers or a try-hard boss. Focus on yourself and your role as a professional. Explain that this is what works best for you, based on your experience rather than implying that they are all hard-working but not smart-working. As a concrete example, I've seen the following scenario play out over and over:

- Your boss sends an email to the team after hours or on the weekend.
- Some of the team weigh in with replies quickly. Everyone feels like they need to chime in.
- Some people do not respond because they are off work, and email isn't the emergency channel.
- Regular work hours start back up, and the minority that did not respond reply with **the correct answer or**

more thoughtful response.
- There is no parade for those that replied after hours, and their responses make it **more** likely that other emails will be sent off-hours, and people will be expected to reply again.

Let's repeat the last point: the ones that replied from their phones while at a child's soccer game or after dinner while watching TV do not get any credit. There is no award ceremony the next day for the fastest reply. They respond like you should in an *emergency*, but since it isn't one, the value of their response is shallow, and the risk to the employee and team is very high. Play this dynamic out over time, and you want to be on the well-rested side, holding the right answers and not in a rapid response team that functions poorly.

Letting your boss know that you never check email and have Slack muted between 6 PM and 6 AM, but will answer an emergency phone call, is a reasonable and professional expectation to set. It places the burden on them to detect when they are outside your normal work-time and assess if this is something that must involve you. A clear expectation allows you to communicate that when the situation indeed calls for it, you can be reached and put in the extra effort. You can also appear helpful while reminding them of when you go offline by checking in with them 1-2 hours before the end of your day to ask if there is anything that they need before you leave. These tactics put pressure on you to work a hard eight hours and get the answers right. If you close down your day cleanly, rest and recover, and then start the next day well, your motivation, engagement, and ultimately results will speak for themselves.

If we allow ourselves a large block of time in which we are

not allowed to work, we will find that our workdays are more productive because we have restored our energy, given our minds time to think over what we were working on, and improved our mood. The phone and work will be there tomorrow, and your starting and stopping rituals will make sure that you get started well.

Sample

This a sample chapter from Navigating Remote Work, which is a personal guide to help you become successful at remote work. To find out more:

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http://navigatingremotework.com
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