

A guide for individual teleworkers



What is telework?

At its simplest telework means '**work from a distance**'.

It's about **flexibility**: flexible work locations and work times and flexible responses to the challenges of change.

Telework is about **resilience** and getting the most out of available resources.

Telework is about **you**: how you work and how you prepare for a changing world.

Introduction

Telework can be exciting and challenging. Organisations should provide training for teleworkers before telework starts but there is no substitute for experience.

Teleworkers the world over have found many different ways of improving their arrangements. Hints and suggestions, grouped by common issues, are presented on the following pages.

Adopt the suggestions that are appropriate to your setting. These hints could help to make the home office a much more productive and pleasant place to work.

Background

In 2004, the Australian Government established a telework taskforce to advise on options and impediments to the development of telework for employees and businesses.

This taskforce, the Australian Telework Advisory Committee (ATAC), had its final meeting on 27 February 2006 at which it recommended that Government encourage the growth of telework.

In support of the recommendations made by ATAC, a telework online resource centre has been developed to help promote the benefits which telework can deliver to business. It is available on the internet at www.teleworkaustralia.net.au.

Time management

Tasks and jobs benefit from planning—and telework is no different, particularly when it comes to time management. After all, the teleworker is away from the subliminal cues of the office and has to balance work across more than one location. Here are few ideas you might want to think about.

- **Plan your workload** and working week in advance. Know what you will do where and what resources are needed. Write your plan down and communicate it with those who need to know. This plan should become your prioritised ‘to-do’ list.
- **Measure** how your time is spent. It is important to know whether or not you are meeting performance requirements and what you waste time on. This will help improve your time management skills. Ensure you use a measurement system that doesn’t take too much time to maintain.
- **Make a ‘Basic Choice’** every day. The Basic Choice is the major task you intend to complete in a given time frame. It is the one task that you will focus on until it is completed—regardless of interruptions. It might be the first item on your to-do list but it doesn’t have to be. The Basic Choice you make could depend on deadlines, where you’re working, the time of day, the likelihood of interruption, the need for external resources and a balance between urgency (a short-term view) and comprehensiveness (a long-term view). Once the Basic Choice has been made, the task should be started immediately and it should be completed before any subsequent choice is made.
- A **simple ‘to-do’ list** can be useful and motivational. Be realistic—never put more on your list than you are likely to achieve. Leave some time for interruptions or tasks that take longer than expected. Review the list daily, keep it in sight all day and refer to it. Cross off completed tasks (it feels good). If you do something that is not on the list, write it down and cross it off. Group similar activities together (e.g. writing letters, or making phone calls).
- Handle incoming items only once—**apply the 4Ds** (Do it, Delegate it, Decide when to do it, or Dump it) to every new item you receive. If you can get rid of it immediately, it can’t distract you.
- Always **file as you go**. Use a system that is quick and easy. Don’t overfill filing drawers as it can become difficult to file and find information. Put the most recent information at the front of each file. Discard files as soon as you can (unless they need to be archived). Use a consistent filing system. Avoid a large ‘Miscellaneous’ file: as soon as you have five or six related items, start a new file for them. Use coloured folders: the visual cue will help you find and file things.
- **Cancelled appointments** and waiting for meetings can be frustrating. It is a good idea to call ahead to confirm times and have contingency plans. Carry reading material or other work you can do while you are waiting.
- Purchase more **supplies** than needed. It is irritating when you run out of something when the shops are closed. Continually visiting the stationary shop is counter-productive and not always an option.
- **Don’t procrastinate** over with your time management plans. If they are not working, find out why and change them.

Handling distractions

- **Stay focused.** Establish your work priorities and a time management plan. Remember, it's better to be doing something (anything) than worrying about everything else you could be doing.
- Establish and **agree guidelines** with your family. ("I am not to be disturbed between 10 am and 1 pm or between 2 pm and 5 pm.")
- **Work out a plan** and stick to it. Young children might not understand guidelines but they might understand: "If you can leave me alone until 4 pm, I'll take you to the beach/movies/etc." However, make sure you keep your side of the bargain.
- **'Educate' your friends.** If friends keep visiting or telephoning, let them know you're working and arrange a more appropriate meeting time.
- **Reschedule tasks.** If it is difficult to stop interruptions, work out when you are likely to be interrupted and try to schedule your working day around these times.
- **Create a balance.** Think about how your time management plans allow for personal and home-based tasks. Will you block out all personal tasks until you've finished working? Will you incorporate them into the same priority system you use for work tasks? Or will you decide, each morning, whether and when you will slot personal tasks into your day?
- Remember that **the kitchen isn't your office.** Some teleworkers put on weight—they keep snacking or have long lunches, instead of working. Stopping work to make coffee after every task is also counterproductive. (Some teleworkers use an insulated coffee pot or a vacuum flask.) It is also counter-productive to stop work to do unscheduled housework or gardening.

Productive workspaces

If you intend to work at home, it is wise to ensure that the home office is a discrete space, separate from other living areas. This can make it easier to concentrate and can also discourage interruptions. Moreover, you can close the door at the end of the working day.

Whether or not the office is in a separate room, a number of other points will need consideration:

- **Organise** your space. An efficient office will need work space, stack space, spread space, and archive space. The balance will be different in every office.
- Furniture used in the office must **comply with occupational health and safety** requirements.
- Think about **security**. If you have office files or equipment at home, these will need to be kept secure. It might also be necessary to secure your office equipment if children have access to your office.
- All furniture should be **mobile** (e.g. on castors) to ensure flexibility.
- **Make your office look and feel bigger** by choosing furniture with rounded corners. Use pale colours for walls and storage cabinets and try to keep the wall opposite the window clear of shelves or pictures.
- It is advisable that your home office is **properly lit** with a combination of ambient lighting and task lighting. Reduce glare and shadows wherever possible. Try to reduce the impact of 'natural' light and ensure that light sources are shielded from your eyes.
- Mount multi-way **power boards** on the wall (above desk height). This will help ensure that cables do not get in the way and plugs are not accidentally pulled out. Protect your computer from power spikes and surges. Make sure fuses and power boards can handle the power you use—particularly when air-conditioners or heaters are switched on.
- If your house (or suburb) is noisy, consider putting a small stereo in the office—quiet music and other 'white noise' can be very useful as an '**audio mask**' making external noises less distracting.

Trouble-shooting

- Are **missed deadlines** proving to be problematic? Change the way you estimate and plan your time, make more allowance for interruptions and remove distractions from the office.
- **Procrastinating** is normally the result of not knowing what to do first. Plan your time and clarify your objectives. Break large tasks into small units. Promise yourself a break if you can do 10 minutes work—once started it is easier to carry on. Or try starting another task instead.
- **Having trouble finding messages, files or papers?** Redesign your filing system and desk so it is quicker and easier to find information.
- **Incoming telephone calls** can be a distraction. Use an answering machine. Ask the caller how you can help and when would be a convenient time for you to call back to discuss things in more detail.
- Playing **telephone tag**? Leave detailed messages and encourage detailed responses so the discussion can advance. Say when you will be available. Make sure your answering machine is reliable and try to return messages within the same day.
- Make a list of the **challenges** that seem to occur frequently. Take the time to discuss them and see whether others have found solutions. Don't suffer alone: it is OK to seek help.
- Take your responsibilities seriously. Working at home can be relaxing but never forget **you have a job to do** and targets to meet.

You are a Champion!

Once you have started a new telework arrangement, you will be able to help your colleagues start teleworking as well.

- **Become a role model.** Keep your arrangement's evaluations up to date and act on correcting any issues quickly.
- **Promote your arrangement** to colleagues, friends, and other organisations. Wherever you mix with friends, business associates, or other managers, talk about what you're doing and how it's working for you. If you can point to specific benefits you have gained, promote them. If you've been able to solve a particular difficulty in a unique way, share the experience. But be honest as well: if you face a challenge you are having difficulty solving, talk about it. Others might have some suggestions.
- **Develop allies.** Try to find out who else is teleworking and see if you can meet with them regularly to share experiences, learn new tricks, and pick up ideas.
- **Gather information.** Telework is subject to change and there are new approaches being developed all the time. It's important to stay on top of all the relevant developments. You might come across a way of improving your telework policy and guidelines, or making it possible for more employees to start teleworking.
- **Help your organisation** develop and refine its telework initiative for other candidates. Individual teleworkers can be very helpful to an organisation. They have the experience and know what it's like. Get involved in the operation of the initiative. Help evaluate new applicants. Assist with changes to the overall initiative that might make it easier, smoother and more beneficial.
- **Help build an internal training curriculum.** Your experience could be useful to the organisation's training program. If there were things you needed to learn before starting telework or approaches that were successful for you, see whether or not they can be added into the training other teleworkers receive.
- **Form a support group.** Meet regularly with other teleworkers in your organisation—away from the office. Discuss the challenges you experience and share the solutions you have found.

More information

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