

Master the Art of Working Remotely

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Over the past five years I've worked off-site and online for employers across the country using email, chat, and web-based collaboration apps. My work life has been the envy of my traditional nine-to-five friends. While they suit up in an office-appropriate outfit, grab the briefcase, and brave a commute every weekday, I get to work from home (and my employers get to save money on office space).

But working with people in different cities and time zones with minimal face time presents a whole new set of challenges. While the tools available for working remotely are better than ever, it's how you use them that really counts. Constant and clear communication is the key to a good remote working relationship. Here are some best practices I've found for working remotely online.

Sharpen your email skills. Email will be the primary means of communicating with your remote worker or manager, so you've got to get good at staying on top of your inbox. This is especially important if you're in different time zones and wake up to new messages sent while you were sleeping and send out a few before your local quitting time. If you're the remote worker, give messages from your manager high priority and turn them around quickly to assure him or her that you're actually working at home (and not playing Guitar Hero). Be clear and concise in your replies, and make sure you cover all the bases to avoid unnecessary back and forth. For example, if your remote worker or manager sends an email with several questions or comments embedded in the body of the message, reply inline so that that conversation is easy to follow and quote. If your remote co-worker sends a request or message that will take more than a day for you to act on, don't leave him or her hanging. Reply with an acknowledgment: "Sounds good. I'll get back to you about it on Tuesday." Where possible, avoid sending file attachments with revisions back and forth. Instead, opt for online collaborative tools that let everyone work on the same master copy in the cloud, like Google Docs, Zoho, or Approver.

Be "present" via instant messenger or Web-based chat. Even if you're not sitting at the office, you can be available to chat as you work via instant messenger. Not every office uses IM, but when your project requires short bursts of communication or consultation, instant messaging is quicker and more efficient than email. While all the classic services like AIM, Google Talk, or Yahoo Messenger can work if your client uses them, there are other options as well. Web-based group chat Campfire is an excellent option when you or your client doesn't want to install an IM program. You access a Campfire group chat by just visiting a web page. Campfire provides a virtual "room" where you and your client can drop in and out, and exchange short messages and files. The chat transcript stays in one place that everyone can bookmark, every conversation transcript is archived and searchable, and you can easily swap files without worrying about firewalls or incompatible instant messenger programs or protocols getting in the way.

Collaborate online with the tools that best fit your client and project. Whether you need to co-edit a single spreadsheet or organize a giant to-do list into sub tasks, there's a free or cheap web application that can help you get it done. For contracts with a milestone-studded timeline, shared to-do lists and files, and multiple people involved, you want an online project management app. Leading web-based project management tool Basecamp offers a central hub where you and your clients can log in, manage task lists, dates, track billable hours, share files, and have conversations on a per-issue basis in comments. A company I work with, Pelotonics, offers a similar solution. To collaborate on individual office documents, like a spreadsheet, document, or slideshow, try Google Docs or Zoho, where you can even chat with your collaborators as you edit inline. A hosted wiki, like at Editme.com or PBworks, offers a shared knowledge base that you and your client can add to, edit, and keep revisions over time. Many modern webapps for individuals offer some level of sharing or collaboration abilities, including Google Calendar, Evernote, and Remember the Milk.

Set up regular voice or video chat check-ins. As online workers, it's easy to start relying entirely on textual communication mediums like email or IM instead of the phone. But it's easy to forget how people on-site bond with small talk over the water cooler, or during cigarette or lunch breaks. Not only can a regular 10-minute phone or Skype call save you time by preempting long email threads, it can also help you touch base in a human way. The

sound of your remote manager or freelancer's voice saying "How was your weekend?" or "Welcome back from your vacation" can go a long way to building an effective working relationship.