

Workplace Technology (A Special Report) --- The Annoyances of Working From Home: It's the little daily frustration that can make a big difference. Here's how one longtime veteran of remote work solved many of them.

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FULL TEXT

In the war between office and home office, I've picked a camp: I'm Team WFH, all the way. But that doesn't mean I'm impervious to its many annoyances.

My secret is that after more than 20 years of remote work, and even longer as a die-hard tech geek, I've built up a repertoire of gadgets and tricks that take the edge off some of the little aggravations that can ruin the joys of remote work.

I don't pretend that most -- or any -- of these problems fall under the category of Big Issues. But it's the small, quality-of-life frustrations that can do the most daily damage. So with that in mind, here are my favorite fixes for the things that most bug me.

I miss collaboration.

There is no substitute for the day-to-day mind meld that can happen when you work side-by-side with trusted colleagues. When you're working remotely, it's harder to communicate project updates, requests for feedback, or guidance when assigning a task.

A giant screen can help -- and I'm not talking about a 28-inch-monitor. Our living room now features a projector and a 100-inch movie screen, and it makes an enormous difference. When I can fit all 30 columns of a spreadsheet on a screen, and walk a junior colleague through the steps I need her to take on, it makes it much easier to provide clear guidance. And when I can project my work in progress on the big screen, I can get quick feedback from my husband when we run into each other during a midmorning coffee break.

I'm tied to my desk.

One of the few things I miss about office life is the sense of variety: between meetings, hallway chitchats, professional-development events and collegial lunches, I could count on a change of pace (and scenery) throughout the workday. Working at home, I get tired of staring at the two feet of wall surrounding my desk and monitor.

The key: make it easy to relocate. The solution? A laptop docking station and hub that connect my monitor, mouse, webcam, backup drive and power supply. Now that leaving or returning to my desk no longer requires a festival of plugging and unplugging, it's easy for me to take my laptop out to our deck or into the living room if I need a break from my home office. Changing my work locations throughout the day has made my days a lot less tedious.

Who's stealing my supplies?

If you share your home office (or even your home) with other people, there's no telling where someone might put that client file, your spare USB cable or your favorite pen. That's why you need to label everything -- so everyone knows to put it in the same place. The right label maker makes it easy: Mine connects to my phone or laptop, so I

can dictate or type up my labels instead of pecking them out on miniature keys. Yes, I could just label things by hand, but my family members take my organizing systems more seriously when they're backed by an official printed label.

My Wi-Fi is slow.

Nothing is more exasperating than intermittent Wi-Fi if you are depending on it to stay connected to your office, colleagues or clients. If your home network slows down when more than one person is working from home, a few simple investments can make a big difference. First, get a good-quality router, and plan on replacing it every few years. (Routers have a limited lifespan.) In addition, we have Wi-Fi extenders on our upper and lower floors: If I'm working from the offices on our ground floor or in our loft, I connect to the Wi-Fi extender on that floor, for a more reliable connection. Finally, to ensure my kids' Netflix watching and online gaming doesn't disrupt my work or presentations, I use my router's Quality of Service (QoS) feature to give priority to the Wi-Fi connections on my computer and my husband's.

No accountability.

One of the difficulties of remote work is that when you have a really productive day, nobody notices. And even more dangerous, nobody notices when you have a day where nothing much gets done. Since I'm more productive when I have some sense of accountability for what I get done in a day, I've used different online tools to create that accountability for me. For a long time I had a "Lone Wolves" group on Slack, where I would share my top three daily priorities with a circle of fellow freelancers, and then we'd all check in at the end of the day to report on what we'd accomplished. If I have a day where I get a really remarkable amount of stuff done, I list it all in a "yay, me!" post on Facebook (though I don't do that more than once every month or two, because it's a bit obnoxious). And a few friends swear by Focusmate for the same benefit: It lets you make virtual co-working dates so that you feel accountable for how you've spent your time.

I lose track of time.

One joy of remote work is that it's easy to fit personal tasks into your day, like planning dinner or shopping for a gift. But by the same token, it's easy to lose track of the time and nuke your productivity with personal distractions. To keep an eye on where the day (or week, or month or year) goes, I keep a time tracker running in the background on my phone and computer. The tracker lets me set up simple rules to categorize different keywords or categories as personal or professional, and color-code them so I can see at a glance whether I've had a work-first or personal-first kind of day. And when I worry that I've let my work hours get out of control, I can use the timer to see whether I'm really spending more time at the keyboard.

I miss people.

I have a few co-working buddies who keep remote work from feeling solitary, but I still miss the opportunity to meet new humans and tap into ideas from outside my usual orbit. While I look forward to the day when in-person networking events feel viable again, I have found some online options to fill the breach. For a good stretch of the pandemic, I hung out on Clubhouse, an audio social network where I formed connections with new colleagues and got to hear from other people in my field. One of the people I met on Clubhouse let me know about Lunch Club, which is kind of like networking roulette: The service sets you up on virtual networking dates with other people you might find interesting to meet.

I'm tethered to email.

The same technology that makes it feasible to work outside the office also makes it next to impossible to turn work off. It's easy to feel like you have to be accessible by email 24/7, which makes it hard to do focused work and contributes to burnout. But turning off (or ignoring) email isn't feasible if you have a demanding boss or client. The solution? Text-to-email notifications that alert you when you get an email from that can't-miss manager or client. Just set up a mail rule in your email client that forwards your boss or client's emails to the email address associated with your mobile phone number. Once you know that you won't miss a crucial message if you unplug, it's a lot easier to keep email from taking over your whole life.

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