

Crabby's telecommuting tips, redux



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Crabby Office Lady

Now that I've had some serious telecommuting experience, I'm equipped to debunk a few myths about this style of working and offer some useful real-world tips. No, it's not a fuzzy-slipped fantasy come true, but if it's right for you, you can make telecommuting work.

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Several years ago, I wrote a column that offered [tips for telecommuters](#). At the time, I was telecommuting once in a while; I certainly wasn't doing it full time. However, now that I find myself working from a home office almost all the time, it's time to update previous tips and offer some more.

Crabby makes some changes at home

Though I'm a bit of a solo flyer when it comes to the way I work — I don't need someone else to motivate me, and I can get things done on my own — this doesn't mean I'm a misanthrope. I do not despise humankind (although I get mighty testy with it sometimes). In fact, after about a year of telecommuting full-time, I found myself rather missing the friendly banter in the hallways, the seriocomic notes on the fridge about stolen lunches, and yes, even the interruption or two to talk about who's dating whom and who danced with a lamp at the last holiday party. It was getting so bad that I was even jonesing for a meeting with stale cookies and — gasp! — a never-ending PowerPoint presentation. In other words, I was getting lonely, and I began to wonder if I'd made a terrible mistake, that I was going to spend the rest of my working life alone with my crabby thoughts and my farting dog.

The bottom line here is that we're social creatures with certain needs, and in order to do our best work, we have to meet these needs.

Consider your personality

This may seem obvious to you, but I do think it's the most important aspect to telecommuting. See if you fit the mold:

- Are you self-motivated and organized? Can you set up a self-imposed daily structure?
- Can you limit the distractions around you (personal phone calls, bickering kids, the fish swimming around in his bowl...)?
- Do you have the necessary workspace and tools to make your particular job workable from afar?
- Can you work without someone imposing structure on you? Can you create your own structure just as easily — and stick to it?
- Do you have someone to take care of the kids while you take care of the business?
- Do you have a room where you can close the door to distractions? Do you have friends and family who can understand that just because you're home doesn't mean you're in "home mode"?

You may answer a resounding "Yes!" to nearly all of these — I know I did. But before you jump headlong into a telecommuting lifestyle, first try it out a couple of days a week for a few weeks (or even months) before committing to a full-time telecommuting schedule. You only know if you try. You may find that working a little at home and a little in the office may be the best solution for you.

Get out

Sometimes, when you work in an office, you may find yourself feeling perpetually irritated by the constant interruptions. Whether it's a coworker who needs help with something ("I'm remodeling my cubicle; can you help me move the furniture around?"), yet another planning meeting ("We need to start planning about the plan that's in place to start planning the next..."), or just the sound of all the clickety-clacking of keyboards all around you (sounding like a thousand demented tap dancers), perhaps you feel that you are constantly in a state of having

to regroup and refocus. And although that may seem to be a whole lot of bother and energy, I believe it's actually good for you. It teaches you to focus, perhaps even for a short time.

Remember: No man is an island (and now woman is an ... isthmus?). When you're alone with a humming computer and a snoring pet for eight hours a day, perhaps you should consider taking your work to a coffee shop, or even a library. Just having the daily buzz of other people around you may lighten your spirit a bit and offer up some of that human energy we all need. But remember: If you're going to sit all day in a prime spot at your local cafe, purchase something. You need it, the owners need it, and so everyone wins.

Cleaning the bathroom can wait

I know that this one is common to everyone who telecommutes. I have a few friends in other industries who work this way and we've all talked about it. The laundry hamper is overflowing, the dishwasher needs to be emptied, the sweater you wanted went on sale at the store at the mall, and your fridge is empty except for two different kinds of mustard, a wrinkly apple, and a bottle of vodka.

Yes, people, everyone has to deal with the daily chopping-wood-carrying-water chores that must get done in order to live a civilized existence. But unless you're a professional housekeeper, maid, or shopper, you are not being paid to do these things during office hours. And you're taking advantage of your company's trust that you will do your job at home as well as you would at the office — or better.

I'm not saying that on your way downstairs to your office you can't grab the hamper and toss a load in. But when a load of laundry ends up becoming an entire day of line drying, ironing, starching, and folding, it's time to rethink your goals as a telecommuter.

Don't get lazy about your setup

When I first started telecommuting, I didn't have an ergonomic office chair like the one they provided me when I worked in the office. I did, however, have a hard, wooden kitchen table chair that wasn't being used, and so I grabbed it. For more than six months I used this chair and gosh, strangely enough, I began to wonder why my back was aching, my legs were falling asleep, and my mood was starting to crash down by noon. That's right: I didn't follow my own advice to make sure my setup was as professional as it was back when I worked in the office.

So, I invested in a very good chair and now I feel better — much, MUCH better. I can adjust the height, the lumbar position, and the tilt — it has made all the difference.

If you need some more tips about working safely and ergonomically, check out my column [Ergo your way to less crabbiness](#).

Move

No, I don't mean you have to change houses. What I mean is GET UP AND MOVE. What I realized, when I started telecommuting, is that my body was in motion a whole lot less than it was back when I was working the traditional way. The bathroom is a lot closer, the kitchen is too, and I don't have meetings to run to, stairs to climb, people to avoid and dodge. I was often sitting at my desk for upwards of 3-4 hours without budging. Let me state the obvious here: This is not good for a body.

Now, I have my yoga mat in my office and while no, I don't spend a lot of time trying to send kundalini energy up my spine, I do take a few minutes each hour or two to stretch, yawn, breathe, and basically step away from the computer — if just for five minutes. Small things really do make a difference.

One thing I also do is take a walk, every day. Because I have two dogs, it makes it easier. They "remind" they haven't yet been walked by standing by my desk and staring at me (the way only dogs who wants something can stare). It's refreshing, it's good for the body, and for me, well, picking up the Crabby Office Dogs' business with a plastic bag that has a hole in it gives me lots of ideas for crabby tips (and I do mean crabby).

What do you need to do?

Sure, I made some changes and they seem to be working for me. However, what I did may not be the things you need. Maybe you're having trouble staying in touch with the folks you work with and maybe they're having a hard time remembering that you still exist. Maybe you need to be at meetings or even hold meetings, and your team or company is just not on board with all the technology that can help out. Be a good

telecommuting citizen and work out a solution using a variety of Microsoft and Office programs designed to help people collaborate from afar:

- [Live Meeting Home Page](#)
- [Create and manage a Document Workspace site](#)
- [Sharing notes with OneNote](#)
- [Office Mobile Home Page](#)

Before I leave you today, I do want to remind you that with any new situation, you should expect a period of adjustment. You may find yourself prone to distraction or furious house cleaning but if you recognize what's going on, then you can change it. If you're feeling isolated, get out a bit. If it becomes too lonesome or boring for you, perhaps telecommuting isn't right for you. Make sure you're doing what's best for you and your career.

"I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best." — Frida Kahlo

About the author

[Annik Stahl](#), the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Did this article help you?** feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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