



Home sweet office

Is working from home really a relaxing option?

When you're waiting for a train that's running late – again – or stuck in traffic that hasn't moved for ten minutes – again – working from home can seem like a really good idea. Surely a leisurely breakfast with the family, a glance through the paper, then a 30-second stroll to the office has to be less stressful than one or two hours of commuting every day? And how much could you achieve if, suddenly, you had all that extra time?

Organisational psychologist and author of a number of best-selling books including *Stress: myth, theory and research*, Dr Jim Bright agrees that working at home can have significant advantages. But there are disadvantages to consider before you pack up your city desk.

“Social isolation is probably the biggest problem,” he says. “People working alone miss casual interactions during the day as well as events like Friday night drinks.”

There can also be a problem with relationships.

“Where one partner is working at home and the other isn't, there can be resentment of the ‘it's OK for you' kind,” says Dr Bright. “There can also be a subtle pressure on the at-home partner, especially if she happens to be female, to take on more of the domestic chores. It's as if working at home doesn't count – her partner is much more likely to expect his dinner on the table than if she were working somewhere else.”

Then there's the problem of concentration.

“Some people find it hard to stay focused when they're surrounded by distractions like dirty washing or a messy house – even the TV,” he continues. “At the other end of the spectrum are those who find it hard to *stop* working. It's easy to put in a very long day when you can just fall out of bed, switch on the computer and stay there.”

More time with the family

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the majority of people who choose to work at home are running either their own or a family business, and over a third have children under 15 years of age. Like many other mothers, Catharina Vaag was motivated to start her own home-based business by the desire to spend more time with her son.

“Before Niklas was born I worked in TV then the media industry in sales and marketing,” she says. “But I was already thinking about working at home. I’d seen that the concierge business was growing rapidly in the US and the UK and thought it could do well here. So, when I was on maternity leave, I started doing some research.”

She has now been running *Busy Lifestyle Managers* for 18 months.

“It can be lonely,” she says. “I do miss brainstorming, and having someone to share business ups and downs. And I miss having an IT expert on hand when something goes wrong with the computer!”

However, for Vaag, the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages.

“I love the fact that I don’t waste time on travelling – time that I can now spend with my son. I have a lot more flexibility – it’s much easier to fit in things I like to do for myself, like swimming, as well as things I need to do with Niklas. I also get more satisfaction from my job because I’m in control so, overall, I feel a lot less stressed. I will make a real effort to stay at home, however big my business gets”

Have hard drive, will travel

For Danielle Walley, home proved to be less appealing.

“After 10 years in an advertising agency, I was ready for a change,” she says. “I decided to set up my own consultancy, Walley World, and working from home was the most cost-effective and practical option. But I soon realised that being so isolated just didn’t work for me. I had switched from working closely with twelve other people to being totally alone all day – fine when I was busy, but not so good when things quietened down.”

That didn’t mean she was ready to return to corporate life. “I really enjoyed the freedom that came with running my own business. I loved being able to take, say, Wednesday off and work on Saturday instead without having to explain or apologise. And I also loved the fact that, when I needed to put in long hours, I could at least look forward to some financial reward.”

In the end she discovered a workable compromise. “I’ve found that most of my clients like having me on site while I’m working on a project. That suits me perfectly – I’m still my own boss and I’m still based at home, but I get to spend most of my time in a much more sociable environment. As long as I can plug in my hard drive, I can work anywhere. It’s the best of both worlds.”

Break out box

Would working at home work for you?

Working at home is not for everyone. If you're disciplined, motivated, organised and comfortable with your own company you're off to a good start – and these tips might help.

- Create a separate space for your office, preferably one with a door you can close. It's important to have a clear separation between work and home.
- Keep up contacts with colleagues and friends and get out of the house when you can. Do lunch!
- It's not compulsory to answer a ringing phone. Install a separate line for business and use an answering machine out of office hours.
- Crying babies, barking dogs and warring siblings are not professional background noises. Shut pets outside, lay down ground rules for older children and try to have someone else take care of the baby when you need to talk business.
- Take responsibility for your own occupational health and safety. Sit comfortably. Get up from your desk regularly. Do some stretching. Don't make a habit of eating at your desk.
- Remember that some people find it *more* stressful to work at home.