WORK-FROM-HOME HABITS OF EFFECTIVE PEOPLE

How to be Productive When Your Routine Changes

VitalSmarts®

Table of Contents

" Your ability to respond to life's challenges ultimately depends on your ability to master your habits. **"**

— Emily Gregory, VP of Product Development at VitalSmarts

The New Normal

A survey we conducted in late March reveals that a majority of corporate employees have been sent home to work. **Nine of ten were given less than a week's notice. And one in four were given less than a day** to pack up their comfortable, fully-equipped offices and head home with the expectation to be productive—all while on the cusp of an economic recession and amid a global pandemic.

If the prevailing perils weren't distracting and concerning enough, workers have quickly discovered that the kids are. Or the dog. Or spotty internet service. Or trying to work from within the closet, or—as was the case for one of the authors of this document—from within the car in a McDonald's parking lot. And while these are minor inconveniences given the possibilities, they still pose a threat to productivity and, ultimately, to our livelihoods and recovery.

If six weeks ago we were pining for that work-from-home perk, now we're pleading with peers over Slack, "When can we get back in the office?"

How times change—*and* continue to change.

Leaders and experts say this virtual and distanced way of working and interacting could be the new normal, at least for several months, and maybe longer.

This presents a host of challenges to personal productivity.

A MAJORITY OF CORPORATE EMPLOYEES HAVE BEEN SENT HOME TO WORK

9 of 10
were given less than a week's notice.

1 in 4
were given less than a day's notice.

> **"** Habits are surprisingly delicate: when circumstances change even the slightest bit, they can fall apart. **"**

— Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit*

Productivity in Jeopardy

It turns out working from home is not a welcome treat for everyone. According to the survey of 1,465 people, this "new normal" has taken a toll on productivity. **More than one in three employees say they feel less—or much less—productive when working from home.**
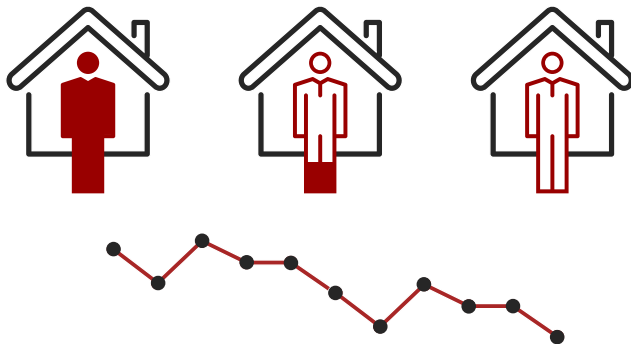
The five biggest challenges people have encountered at home include:

1. Feeling disconnected from colleagues (47 percent)

2. Limited or outdated technology (36 percent)

3. Too many distractions (32 percent)

4. Lack of focus (29 percent)

5. Feeling disorganized (27 percent)

The home environment can be disorienting and difficult. It requires that people proactively reach out to colleagues, accept some amount of isolation, and stay self-motivated. And for those who have never worked virtually or remotely, it also requires they adapt. Expecting the same results in a different context is a recipe for failure. In short, **new environments require new behaviors.**

Some people have figured this out. While a third of respondents say they've struggled to stay productive, one in four say they are more productive at home. Another 37 percent say they are equally productive. Some even report unforeseen advantages to working from home, including more time to themselves, no commute, improved health, and more time for family.

But how?
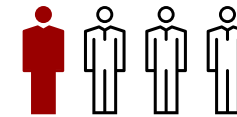
One in four respondents say they are more productive at home
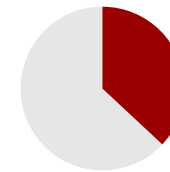
37 percent say they are equally productive at home

Advantages to working from home

Time   No Commute   Health   Family

Seven Work-from-Home Habits for Greater Productivity

We received more than 2,300 open-ended responses detailing the habits that contribute to effective work at home. We then analyzed those responses to identify overlap. Here are the most common habits people shared for staying productive at home.

ROUTINE RULES ALL

The most common work-from-home habit, shared by more than 300 people, is to keep the same routine at home that you had at work. Schedule your day just as you would if you were headed to the office, and be consistent in how you plan your day and spend your time throughout the workweek.

BREAK OFTEN AND WELL

Without the meetings and interruptions found in an office environment, people who work from home can find they work hours on end without taking a break. Avoid burnout by scheduling regenerating breaks throughout your day. Take a walk, get a healthy snack, or connect with a friend or colleague.

ARRANGE AN OFFICE SPACE

Don't underestimate the value of a designated workspace. The ideal space has a door, a desk, and a comfortable chair that will enable you to focus and separate you from home distractions. Even if you don't have a lot of space, carve out an area in your home where you can set up your equipment and leave it intact at the end of each day.

DRESS FOR THE JOB

Productive people get ready and dressed for the day as if they were headed to the office. Putting on "going out" clothes, rather than lounging in pajamas, tells your brain to act and behave more professionally. It also helps delineate work time from the rest of your day.

CONNECT CONSISTENTLY

Communication is always important, but paramount when distance is involved. The most successful people checked in frequently with colleagues, managers, and direct reports. The medium of communication didn't matter as much as the consistency.

TACKLE YOUR TO-DOS

To-do lists, project plans, and strategies are ubiquitous to success. Productive people relied heavily on their workplace habits while working from home. They have curated to-do lists and project plans that help them stay focused on the most important tasks at the most important times of the day. Lists were also helpful as a way to stay engaged and motivated when you've lost some of the peer pressure to help you do so.

START, STOP, AND RESET

Successful people start and end their workday at the same time, each day. Since work is never out of sight, they find it vital to be strict about "clocking out" so they can regroup and get ready for the next day.

Three Surprising Productivity Habits

Our study of human behavior over the past three decades has taught us many things, not least of which is this: some behaviors matter more than others.

Certain habits have a compound effect, influencing results in all facets of life. This comes as no surprise with some habits—diet, exercise, and sleep, for example—but can be eye-opening with others. Here are three unlikely habits our respondents said significantly contribute to their productivity at home.

GET OUTSIDE

It's easy to get sucked into a busy workday that is often void of coworker distractions, lunch outings, and casual breaks. Successful people found that one of the best ways to rejuvenate themselves during a long day at home was to simply go outside.

STRETCH

Finding a few minutes to get up from the desk and stretch was a common habit. Blame it on the less-than-ideal office equipment, but people seemed to spend more time stretching sore backs, necks, and legs at home than they do at the office.

MANAGE STRESS

Due to the unusual circumstances surrounding COVID-19, many people were diligent about managing their stress. One of the most common habits was to simply avoid watching the news. People also relied heavily on meditation and exercise.

" **There are no organizations or individuals without habits; there are only those who deliberately design them and those who do not.**

— Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit*

Habits By Design,
Not By Default

Productivity is a byproduct of effective and efficient *activity*. We are always generating output. But whether our output contributes to the results we want depends on our ability to align behavior with intentions, to match action with aspiration. And that requires we become master of our habits.

Nowhere is this ability so critical than in the face of change. **When life changes—whether circumstances, goals, expectations, or values— we, too, must change.**

The science of habit formation tells us that a habit actually has three parts. First, there is a cue, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use. Then there is the routine, which is what we typically think of as the habit. Finally, there is a reward, which helps your brain figure out if this particular loop is worth remembering for the future. This is called The Habit Loop.

Behind the effective work-from-home habits outlined above you can see the habit loop at work. If you consider your own habits, you'll find that cues and rewards bookend your routines. This belies an important principle of behavior change: **changing our habits is as much about design as it is determination.** Mastering our habits involves will *and* skill. Understanding how habits work, in other words, makes them easier to control. Once you break a habit into its components, you can fiddle with the gears.
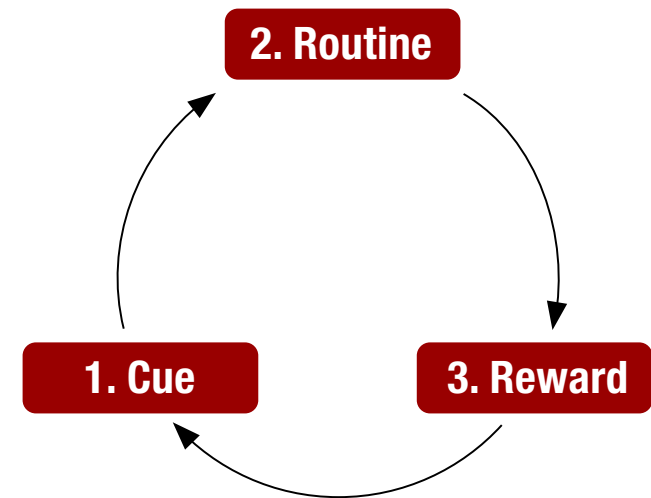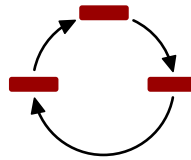
2. Routine

1. Cue

3. Reward

SPOT THE LAG

Identify where you're not getting the results you want and identify the habits holding you back, as well as the habits that will produce the results you want. If you can't see where you're lagging or stuck, ask a mentor or manager where you could improve or find other opportunities to identify the skills needed to improve.

MAKE IT A RITUAL

Create a routine around the new habit by engineering your environment—time of day, place, people, objects, and the like—so that it's conducive to doing the habit. Set up reminders, or cues, and arrange your world so that doing the behavior comes easier.

REWARD YOURSELF

Every time you complete your new routine, reward yourself. Maybe you indulge in a special treat or an activity. This becomes your incentive, not the results you hope for. The results will follow and become their own reward in time, but reward yourself immediately to fire up your motivation in the beginning.
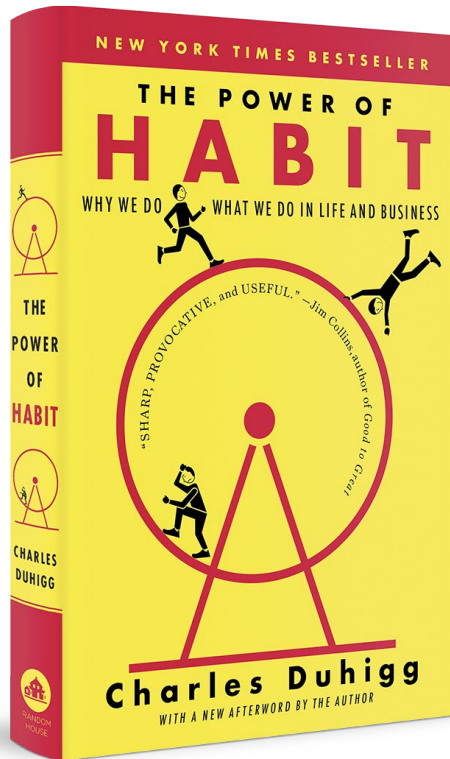
> **"** When we are no longer able to change a situation,
> we are challenged to change ourselves.

— Viktor Frankl

THE POWER OF HABIT™ TRAINING

To learn more about developing habits for increased agility and effectiveness, check out The Power of Habit Training, available virtually and on-demand, based on the best-selling book, *The Power of Habit*, by Charles Duhigg.

www.vitalsmarts.com

VitalSmarts®

About VitalSmarts

Named a Top 20 Leadership Training Company, VitalSmarts is home to the award-winning Crucial Conversations®, Crucial Accountability®, Getting Things Done®, The Power of Habit™, and Influencer Training® and *New York Times* bestselling books of the same titles. VitalSmarts has consulted with more than 300 of the Fortune 500 companies and trained more than 2 million people worldwide.

www.vitalsmarts.com