



Modern comms technology and flexible working practices have led to a sharp increase in the number of business professionals working from home. But while home-workers benefit from freeing up commuting time for work and isolate themselves from the distractions in the office, there are challenges to overcome before every worker can say, there's no place like home. **Catherine Lee** of Kaleidoscope Services (*left*) offers some advice for those thinking of turning their back on the traditional office and making home their base

To some workers, there's just no place like home

Catherine Lee is the owner of Kaleidoscope Services, a provider of virtual assistant services to many businesses and professionals throughout the region. For more on its services, see www.kaleidoscope-services.co.uk

FOR MANY business professionals, the opportunity to work from home, either permanently or occasionally, is one that they are keen to grasp. If you're self-employed, it's an obvious option to start working in a spare room or corner of the kitchen; for salaried workers, the option to work away from the office might be preferred when your employer is located far from home, or where your physical presence isn't needed at HQ.

However, it's not for everyone: some people, when faced with the chance to work from home, find their day drifting away as household chores are performed ahead of work, or lack the discipline to focus on business projects away from familiar office surroundings.

Finally, there's the isolation: do you need face-to-face interaction with your colleagues to keep you happy, or are you content in your own working world?

To make home-working a success, here's 10 top tips to follow.

1 Plan your day

A good working day needs to be structured. Make strategic decisions about what you need to do, and when you need to do it.

Allocate time to spend on your priority client work. Pace yourself properly and use breaks to sustain you through a long working day. Set time aside for administration if necessary – book-keeping, correspondence, strategy and planning and, finally, marketing – meetings, networking and your online profile.



Set yourself a target: if you are satisfied with where you are, give yourself a reward... a cup of coffee, a rest, a catch up with the news...

2 Work with your body clock

If you're at your best at an unusual time of day, as a home worker you can work with that instead of against it.

As long as you're doing what you need to do for your clients and your business, home working gives you the freedom to work whenever you're alert and rest when you're tired.

Just make sure any evening or weekend working you do is your choice, rather than doing it in a haphazard way to catch up. That is not efficient or enjoyable home working, because it's hard to concentrate when you're constantly kicking yourself!

3 Set goals

The effect a goal has on your mind can't be underestimated. Once you have a goal, you know where you're going, what you have to do, what steps will get you there and what challenges you will face.

What's the alternative? Calling a client or two here, having a meeting there. It's too easy to fill your time to no purpose.

Don't be elaborate, just tell yourself in a firm voice, for example: "I will finish this task by 4pm tomorrow, it will take two hours, so I will set aside 9am to 11am to focus solely on that."

4 Reward yourself

When you hit your target, or get to the bottom of your to-do list, you need to celebrate, with simple, regular rewards: a rest, a coffee, and maybe 20 minutes catching up with the news.

To tell the difference between a reward and procrastination just check how it makes you feel.

If you're satisfied with where you're at, you're enjoying a justified reward. If you're starting to feel uncomfortable and making 'five more minutes'

bargains with yourself, get back to your desk pronto!

5 Set up great systems

It's crucial you create good internal processes that are right for your working style and your business, particularly if you are self-employed.

For example, when an invoice comes in, pick it up and open it! Cheeky I know, but we all know this is often the first hurdle.

Reference it and file it immediately. If it's payable in a few weeks, open a task in Outlook, date it and forget it until it's time to pay. When you've paid it, record it properly for the sake of your bookkeeper's sanity – especially if that's you!

6 Communicate with clients

Ring them, email them, Skype them. Send a pigeon or a smoke signal!

Good communication with clients is at the heart of good time management. It enables you to manage your own workload and plan ahead.

Talking to your clients means you can establish realistic timescales for all parties for completing the work you take on. The better you know each other, your ways of working and the way you prioritise in your business, the better you can establish a professional, friendly rapport that makes your relationship a perfect fit.

7 Build a support network

It doesn't matter how much of a rugged individualist you think you are while you're sat in your home office – no man or woman is an island.

Gather people you can rely on who will give good support or honest feedback – don't just look for clients, look for connections.

Balance competition with

collaboration and even befriend your competitors – they are your colleagues, and only they understand the nuances of what you do.

Don't just build your own network. Make introductions and bring like-minded people together – it's good, ethical behaviour, and your personal value will soar.

8 Be well prepared

Home working is also done in cafes and restaurants, business networking events and training courses.

Every time you leave the house, your personal brand goes with you – and it needs to be right. This takes preparation.

Before an event: get directions and plan your journey, gather the papers you need, plan your outfit and, most importantly, set your objectives and decide on your message.

To paraphrase a famous saying, if you don't plan to get something out of the events you attend, you are planning to get nothing out of them.

9 Exercise and eat well

Your level of physical activity can slump to nothing when you work from home.

If you're not naturally inclined towards exercise, block out half-hour slots in your diary. Think of an activity that fits your personality and goals, and learn how to overcome your laziness.

When it comes to food, some say, 'lunch is for wimps'. I say working for eight or ten hours without resting or eating hinders good concentration and productivity.

Take a proper lunch break, away from your desk, and

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Grooming has to be done... it makes you feel like you are at your own personal best... and with the growing popularity of webcams for business calls, you don't want to be caught at your desk in your pyjamas...

cook fresh food that you enjoy. Eat at a leisurely pace, without working.

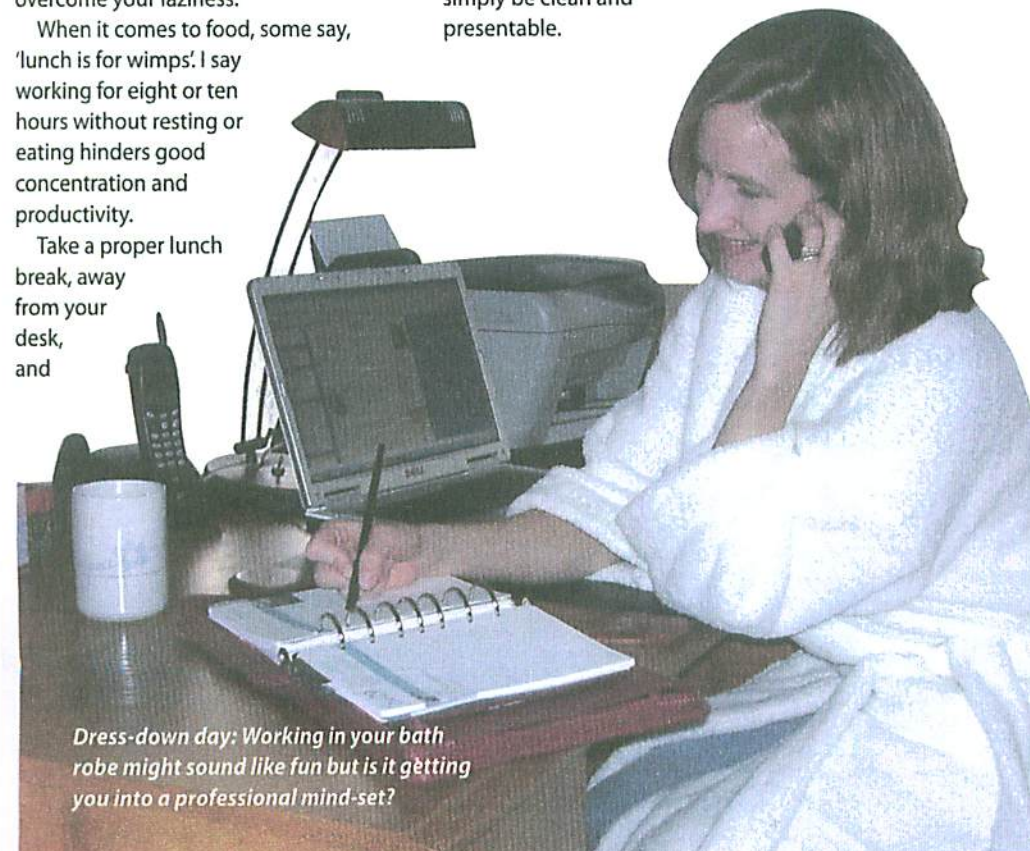
10 Shower and dress in the mornings

Grooming has to be done, even though no-one can see you.

I've made this a tip because it's often something we think we can drop when we become self-employed or start working from home.

The main reason for this is that it makes you feel like you are at your own personal best. And with the growing popularity of webcams for business calls, the danger of being caught at your desk in your pyjamas is very real!

You don't want to have to decline a call because you're not looking your best. By all means be comfortable, I'm not suggesting you sit there in a shirt and tie, simply be clean and presentable.



Dress-down day: Working in your bath robe might sound like fun but is it getting you into a professional mind-set?

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Measuring customer satisfaction

When asked, "what is unique about your business?", many business owners will respond: "we provide exceptional customer service." Yet, when asking that same business owner, "how do you measure customer service?", most will respond: "I don't." We should all regularly survey our clients to determine how we are truly doing. Valuable information can be gleaned from a properly constructed survey. In addition, depending on the industry you are in, a proper survey can reduce your liability. Taking the time to measure and manage customer satisfaction is a critical component to maintaining that which is most unique about you – the experience the customer has with your business.

Cameron Inglis,
Germinate

Fewer can be better

When I talk to my business clients, many complain that they directly supervise too many individuals, and consequently, do so ineffectively. I remember learning as a trainee that the Marine Corps hierarchy is structured to limit levels of responsibility to three: three members to a fire team, three fire teams to a squad, three squads to a platoon, and so on. Think about the hierarchy in your business and whether your managers might do a better job if they had fewer direct reports, too.

Craig Smith, Partner
Retained Earnings