

Secrets to staying motivated when you work from home

By Christopher Elliott

Congratulations if you've just quit your 9-to-5 job and settled into a home office. What's next? Well, it's sink or swim.

Many self-starters who thrived in an office fall flat when they come home to work. For some of you, being home alone drains your creativity and productivity. You miss the energy of a workspace with like-minded people, colleagues to bounce ideas off of, and work pals who make work fun.

"Staying motivated is a huge problem," says Alan Weiss, president of Summit Consulting Group, an East Greenwich, R.I.-based organizational consulting firm. "When you're at home, the procrastination factor goes way up."

Making it past Year One

I've worked in a home office since 1994, and I know what he's talking about. There's a piece of conventional wisdom that says 90 percent of people who move from a 9-to-5 job to a home office will fail within the first year—but that if you can make it past the first-year mark, you'll be successful. I have no reason to doubt this.

How did I make it past Year One? In a word, fear. I was petrified by what might happen if I didn't make it. Would I come crawling back to my employer, begging for my old job? So fear of failure helped me to develop new clients and keep the ones I had. I think fear is a powerful, and necessary, motivator.

But there are other ways to stay focused when you shift to a home office. Here are 10 tips from various experts.

1. **Keep office hours at home.** Even though you ditched the 9-to-5 office job, don't ditch the regular working hours, say experts. "You have clients or employees that need your attention and you are expected to be available to them between the hours of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.," advises Dana Korey, a professional organizer and owner of Away with Clutter, a home-based business in Del Mar, Calif.

Now, this doesn't necessarily mean you have to work a traditional schedule. For example, my hours are 5:30 a.m. to 7 a.m., followed by a one-hour break to get the kids ready for school. Then I work until 11 a.m. and exercise for an hour. And I'm back at my desk from noon until 4 p.m., when the kids come home. I might also work from 7 p.m. until 8:30 p.m., to accommodate some of my West Coast clients.

2. **Plan your hardest work for your most productive hours.** You know there are times of the day when you can be super-productive and other times when you can't do a thing. Use those "dead" times to focus on correspondence or calls. For example, Diane Danielson, chief executive of the Downtown Women's Club, a social networking Web site, does her most taxing projects in the morning. "At night, I blog and do other online PR work, because I can do that while watching 'Dancing with the Stars,'" she says.
3. **Be a taskmaster.** "Get organized," says Todd Dewett, an associate professor of Management at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. Many organizational experts suggest making a list of goals and checking them off as you complete them. Dewett recommends using organizational software and other applications that allow you to access your office computer remotely, to make sure your productivity is at its highest level, even when traveling.
4. **Limit your distractions.** If it's easy to get sidetracked at the office, it's even easier at home. There are bills to pay, pets that need attention, garden work, and snacks in the kitchen. And TV. "Keep the TV and home-related mail and chores out of your office," says Cynthia McKay, chief executive of Le Gourmet Gift Basket, a Castle Rock, Colo.-based franchise with a network of more than 500 domestic and international home-based workers. "Log time in and out for breaks and lunches to make sure you are keeping track of your activities."

5. **Keep certain rooms off-limits to you (and your family).** You have to set boundaries when you work from home. For example, forget those hotel ads where the executive is lying in bed, in his pajamas, typing away on a laptop. It's pure fantasy, say home-office pros.

"While seemingly obvious, many home-office professionals have no dedicated space in their homes in which to work," says Jennifer Kalita, Washington, D.C., small-business consultant and author of "The Home Office Parent: How to Raise Kids and Profits Under One Roof" (Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing, 2007). And certainly, your family members should know that your home office is off limits to them during working hours.

6. **Dress for business.** Just because no one is looking doesn't mean your personal habits should head south. Because if they do, your business is likely to follow, say experts. "Don't ignore the basics," says Liz Bywater, president of Bywater Consulting Group in Yardley, Pa. "Sit down to a healthy breakfast and lunch. Get dressed for work every morning. Don't lounge around in your pajamas, as that can easily detract from viewing yourself as a vibrant, productive, successful business owner."

Some of my clients insist on speaking with me through Skype, which allows you to have a "face-to-face" conversation by video. And I can't afford to look like an unshaven surfer with a Hugh Hefner complex—which is pretty much what I look like when I'm not following Bywater's advice.

7. **Mind your e-mail and phone calls.** For many home-based workers, incoming messages are the No. 1 distraction. "Don't open your e-mail until you've accomplished one major task you wanted to complete that day," advises Tsufit, author of "Step Into The Spotlight! A Guide to Getting Noticed" (Beach View Books, April 2008). Also, get caller ID. "Don't answer the phone during the workday without checking your call display," she says. The point isn't to close off communication with all of your friends. It's to prioritize your communication, putting your clients first.
8. **If you have kids, get help.** A lot of stay-at-home workers try to manage kids and work at the same time. Bad idea, says Cheryl Carter, a home-office pro and co-owner of Party for a Living, a Cleveland special events company. "If you are serious about growing your business and have young children, either hire in-home child care or take the kids to day care," she advises. "Working from home needs to be treated as a real job."
9. **Take time off, like you would in any other job.** If you step on the accelerator all the time, you'll burn out the engine. Find time to spend with your family or loved ones, and commit to it as much as you would your work. "Take a two- or three-day vacation once a quarter," says Jacqueline Simonds, the co-owner of Beagle Bay, a publishing company.
10. **Be nice to your employee(s).** "Don't forget to take care of yourself," says Christine Durst, chief executive of Staffcentrix, a Woodstock, Conn., training firm for home-based careers. "Eat well, exercise, breathe, and try to find time to relax." Home-based workers tend to be the harshest taskmasters, figuratively running themselves into the ground. That's no way to operate a sustainable business.

Indeed, if you take all of these steps seriously, you may still wonder how to maintain the right balance between work and the rest of your life.

"Balance takes practice and time," says Jamie Yasko-Mangum, president of Successful Style & Image, an image-building company based in Casselberry, Fla. "There will always be times when you are going to have to work late at night because some deadlines demand it. But make that the only exception. Have fun and enjoy it."



About the author Christopher Elliott is an Orlando, Fla., writer and independent producer who specializes in technology, travel, and mobile computing. His work has appeared in numerous newspapers, magazines, and online. You can find out more about him on his [Web site](#) or sign up for his [free weekly newsletter](#).