TAKE CONTROL OF

WORKING FROM HOME TEMPORARILY

by **GLENN FLEISHMAN**

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Read Me First

Welcome to *Take Control of Working from Home Temporarily,* version 1.3, published in May 2020 by alt concepts inc. This book was written by Glenn Fleishman and edited by Joe Kissell.

Many people have been asked or required to work from home for the first time at their job—or career. This book offers hard-won advice from long-time remote workers about how to make it work for you.

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What's New in Version 1.3

The previous version of this book looked forward and speculated about how people might continue to work from home over time. Months further into the spread of the virus and the responses of different U.S. states and other countries led me to revise the book to reflect what will

likely be gradual shifts in 2020 and potentially far into 2021. The future of office-based work appears like it will mix full-time telecommuting and some amount of reduced staffing in offices, potentially alternating days or weeks.

A few places in particular were beefed up:

- I dug in with more detail on virtual, physical, and hybrid backdrops as well as face and background detail blurring in Be a Videoconferencing Pro.

- As summer approaches in the northern hemisphere, I added a suggestion about air conditioning in Think About the Air. Worried AC contributes to global warming? Read the sidebar Am I Killing the Earth While Cooling Myself?

- With more people having on-camera goofs, I expanded Don't Forget When You're on Camera and offer more tips on blocking your webcam when you're not intended to stream video.

- As part of mental hygiene, getting outside, and new government rules and suggestions about masks, consider that you could Buy a Cloth Mask If You Don't Feel Handy.

Since the previous edition, I also wrote the book *Take Control of Zoom*, a detailed how-to guide for one of the most popular videoconferencing tools now in use for work and social purposes. I've added insights garnered from researching that book into this revision.

What Was New in Version 1.2

The section on using a virtual private network (VPN) was expanded to offer more specific advice for major operating systems on configuration and connections; see Enable a Virtual Private Network.

I also added a detailed new section on backing up files, something you may have not needed to manage previously, because your company handled that; see Set Up File Backups.

Introduction

The coronavirus epidemic upended work routines for hundreds of millions of people who routinely went into an office, classroom, coffeeshop, co-working space, or other facility.

This displacement has lasted weeks to months depending on the part of the world you're in, and things aren't going to go back to what we used to call normal, even as offices and schools reopen across 2020.

Through 2020 and likely well into 2021, you may work entirely at home or in a mix with part of the time in an office and part in your home. Some companies have even said they will never return workers to offices; [others are in no hurry](#).

If you used to spend most of your work time out of the house and were accustomed to something like an office for structure, socialization, focus, and resources, it's been a bit shift already. This book is here to help you continue to navigate these changes in the short and long haul.

We authors of Take Control titles have racked up hundreds of years of home-office experience across our collective careers, and wanted to offer some advice that we hope aids you as you settle into a longer-term reality of working from home. I also solicited tips from folks who regularly or always work at home to provide more insight.

Working from home can be a challenge—and it can be an opportunity. No one style or set of advice works for everyone. If you have an employer or manager who can roll with the punches, you can find a style that lets you be efficient, calm, and productive while reassuring them about the quantity and quality of work you perform.

This isn't necessarily going to be easy. We're all in it together. Let's get through this and find a new way forward.

Third Places Were Lost; Will They Return?

A "third place" is somewhere that's not home and not work. Third places aren't new, as coffeehouse, restaurant, sport, and social club culture has existed around the world for centuries. But in the modern era, people found it harder to find third places.

Starbucks and other cafés, Barnes & Noble and strongly independent bookstores, expanded-service public libraries, co-working space (which are sort of a second-and-a-half space), and other alternatives emerged.

As I wrote earlier versions of this book, the novel coronavirus caused businesses like those to choose to shutter and governments to ask or demand they close—temporarily. The question remains months into the pandemic whether third places will evaporate for a long period of time. Will we only run into a takeout coffeeshop or pick stuff up in a drive-thru or at the curbside? Will we never sit down inside a place other than first and second ones again to work or relax?

I am an optimist, as this book will reveal, and I think we will regain a robust third space. But I'm also a realist: a home may be your first *and* third space well into 2021, if not longer, for most of us.

Stake Out Your Space

Before you can work effectively at home, you should figure out where you will carry out your job. It might be a separate room, if you have one; a defined area in space other people use; or a temporary space you set up and break down each working day.

Tip: If you already defined a space, make sure it's still meeting your needs. If not, it's a good time to take stock and re-evaluate what needs to change or what new items would make it better.

It might be tempting to work ad hoc, balancing a laptop on your knees on a couch or working at a dining room table or kitchen counter (**Figure 1**). But making a space for yourself that you can comfortably spend hours at each day will help you define your work structure.

Figure 1: A convenient and comfortable place to work helps with focus and productivity. (Source: Auckland Museum.)

While you may not want be able to shop in person to equip your space, having a small amount of furniture or hardware delivered could help, or you could repurpose items you have.

You may also find yourself working alongside family or housemates who already work at home or are doing so for the interim. Look for tips on that in Work Alongside Others at Home, later in this chapter.

Define and Equip Your Workspace

Start with an area in which you can work. Since you may be working from home every day or regularly for an extended period of time, you should think about the extent to which you can transform a space, including purchasing furniture.

You may wind up with two-week, four-week, and multiple-month setups, too. You start with an initial plan and try it out. If it doesn't fit, modify it for a longer stretch. If it continues, tweak or change out what you'd committed to. Don't let inertia hold you back in finding a more ideal way to work over longer periods.

Mark Out a Space

Where is the most sensible place in your home to work? Ostensibly, you're reading this book because you don't have a home office already set up or your previous situation has to change.

If you're lucky enough to have a room that you can repurpose—does anyone really have a "spare" room?—that's a great place to start. If not, consider partitioning a room in temporary or less temporary ways.

Close the Door

If you live with other people, a room with a door is obviously ideal, even if it requires rejiggering stuff in a room that has another purpose. A separate room, however small, lets you keep work and non-work apart, and signals to other people that you're working when you're in there. It also provides at least some aural separation.

Stephen Foskett, an IT expert, suggests that if you have a family that you close the door whenever you're working—when the door is closed, you're "not at home."

Consider Non-Traditional Space

Do you have a closet you're not using? Hear me out! We live in odd times. I'm not suggesting a coat closet in which you have to step outside to turn around. (Or the old joke: "I had to step outside to change my mind.")

Rather, some people have unexpectedly large walk-in closets or other quirky spaces in their houses used for storage that they don't consider a "room." In rentals when I was younger, some had odd non-room spaces that I and roommates repurposed, sometimes as bedrooms.

Check for ventilation. You need to make sure you get proper airflow. Is there an air intake vent or a window you can open? (Good.) Does the space have a tight-fitting door or is it effectively entirely sealed? (Very bad.) In the latter case, you could leave the door open and hang a drape to ensure you can breathe.

Partition a Room

If you live alone or lack that precious commodity of a room to work in, I recommend defining an area. Anything you can do to prevent endless, continuous work for yourself and to set an "at-work" space if you have roommates, a partner, or a family will improve your working life.

Rosemary Orchard, author of *Take Control of Shortcuts*, doesn't have an extra room to use for her office, so she suggests rearranging furniture. A bookcase currently along the wall could be pulled out into the room alongside your desk to make a room divider—just make sure to secure it so it can't tip over!

No bookcase? Try stringing up a curtain or sheet hung from the ceiling or across coat racks. Anything that provides a visual barrier can help create a psychological one.

Soundproof Your Space

Whether you're in a room with a door, a converted in-between space, or a space shared with others, you can reduce transmitted noise with a few steps. This will help with concentration and reduce noise on calls and with videoconferencing.

Fortunately, a few small and inexpensive changes and additions can help squelch sound:

✦ **Plug holes.** Small holes between rooms can transmit a lot of noise! You may not have known those gaps existed until now.

✦ **Get a rug or a finished carpet fragment.** Floor coverings dampen sound very effectively.

✦ **Hang moving blankets.** These heavy blankets, typically quilted from random fragments, are intended to buffer items in trucks when you move. They also are dense and when hung can turn down the volume. You may want to cover them with nicer hangings, however! They're very cheap, but take care when purchasing new: some products have buyers warning of an intense smell.

✦ **Use acoustic foam.** Get the feeling that you're about to record the next big hit by mounting eggshell acoustic foam, available cheaply. It's more visually prominent, but can deaden sound in your space and block it from outside. It helps a lot when recording audio for podcasts or simply talking on the phone.

Set Up Your Workspace Ergonomically

Ergonomics in a workspace involves making sure all your tools fit you, rather than you contorting yourself to fit your tools. A few easy steps you can take as you configure your new working area:

• **Work at eye level:** Make sure your monitor or monitors are at eye level or slightly below. You should not crane your neck up or have to crouch or crook your neck down.

- **Place your monitor at a comfortable viewing distance:** This is typically 20 to 40 inches from eye to screen. You shouldn't have to squint or move your head forward or back to read and work.

- **Set adequate lighting:** It might be time to move or buy a desk or floor lamp that illuminates your space well. Avoid glare and usually eschew overhead lighting.

- **Make your text the right size:** Modern operating systems let you increase or decrease interface element sizes. Don't use the default if they don't work for you. Here's how to change the size in [Android](#), [iPhone and iPad (iOS/iPadOS)](#), [macOS](#) (which requires making changes in many places), and [Windows 7](#) and [Windows 10](#).

- **Put the keyboard at the right height and angle:** Ergonomists have studied the best angles and positions for your wrists and fingers relative to a keyboard for decades. The best current advice for most people is a position where your arms are close in to your body and your elbows are at 90°.

> **Tip:** If you're using a laptop without an external monitor, it's effectively impossible to get the eye line and keyboard in the right places. Add an external keyboard and mouse.

Sit in a Proper Chair

Those who haven't worked at home much or regularly may lack a chair designed for long periods of sitting. Office chairs can cost as little as tens of dollars from IKEA—which offers home delivery and a great return policy—and low-end office stores (**Figure 2**). The quality and comfort varies enormously. One of my favorite office chairs used to run just $50 at IKEA, and I employed versions of them for years (until I gave up on sitting while working).

Figure 2: The [IKEA Flintan]($79.99) ($79.99) has a height adjustment, allows a sitter to lean back, and has weight-locked casters.

You can also drop hundreds to more than a thousand dollars on chairs with fancier breathable fabrics, more adjustments, and ergonomic or comfort features. But what you primarily want from a chair is simple enough. Aim for being able to have or adjust the following:

- **Feet flat on the floor:** A chair should be adjustable in height (up and down) and seat (forward and back tilt) to let you sit without compressing your thighs while your feet are on the ground.

- **Lumbar support:** Many of us—maybe all of us—need some lower-back support. Some chairs include this or have clever adjustments. You can also add an inexpensive foam pillow, designed for just this purpose. Sometimes, they're sculpted. Many makers offer them.

- **Arms don't impinge:** Avoid a chair where the arms impinge on you when you type. Some chairs, even cheaper ones, let you adjust the arms up and down or remove them altogether. You'll be using them only at rest.

- **Back angle:** Typically only fancier chairs let you adjust the angle of the seat back separate from the seat bottom, like a car seat. Depending on your body and comfort, this might be a must-have feature. Other chairs may lack an adjustment, but have a sprung back that lets you lean back and remain in place.

Some people find that an office-style chair with adjustments doesn't work well for them, while they are comfortable in a more standard home chair (like a dining room chair), sometimes with the addition of a lumbar pillow or seat padding. (When sitting at a dining room table, I use a "tactile cushion," which raises the seat and cushions me.)

For any kind of chair, you may want to add a footstool, which can come in fixed and adjustable varieties. You may have found the perfect chair, but your feet don't reach the ground relative to your desk or other working surface. A footstool bridges that gap.

Finally, if you work while seated at home, you might lose yourself and remain planted for hours at a time, as opposed to in an office where you have regular needs or excuses to stand. Set a timer so that every hour you stand, stretch, and look into the distance.

> **Tip:** The University of Missouri rounded up a great list of apps that can help you remember to stand and move.

A chair doesn't work for everyone, though. Some people want to stretch their legs all the time.

Stand in the Place Where You Work

You may prefer, as many people do (myself included), to stand during the working day. You may have a standing desk or an adjustable setup in your current work space and want to replicate that at home.

> **Note:** Julio Ojeda-Zapata, a technology journalist in St. Paul, Minnesota, provided the advice in this section.

A standing desk gives you the option to work on your computer in an upright stance, which many find to be invigorating and creativity-boosting. If nothing else, it gets you up off your chair, which is bound to make your back hurt after hour upon hour of toil.

Standing desks are available in all shapes and sizes, and with a wide range of prices. Standalone models may feature a motor or use springs and counterweights that let them be raised and lowered at the push of

a button or a flip of a lever. The motorized versions assume you will want to change positions throughout a day or at least regularly, and cost a pretty penny. (If you're like me, once you find the right position you may never adjust it again, and you may feel silly—as I do—for spending the extra money.)

You want something simpler and more affordable at home—especially if you don't see it as a permanent arrangement. In this scenario, don't get rid of your existing, fixed work surface, but adapt it with an adjustable rig you place atop it.

Ergotron has a line of consumer-focused converters that turn fixed desks into height-adjustable workspaces (**Figure 3**). These models are less expensive than the company's corporate-grade converters, but are high-quality products. These rise and lower mechanically in a jiffy.

Figure 3: Ergotron's WorkFit-TS Compact Desk Converter ($299) is one of several multi-tier adjustable platforms the company sells.

Vari, another well-regarded desk-converter seller, doesn't have a low-cost home line—but its office-class VariDesk Pro Plus 30 is affordable at $295. The company's ultracompact, highly portable VariDesk Laptop 30 stand is $175. Both models adjust via levers on either side.

For something a bit different (and more affordable), consider Ready-desk's wood converters. The [Readydesk 2](#) ($149.99) is a bookshelf-like apparatus with height-adjustable surfaces for a keyboard and a notebook or display.

The space-saving [Allstand](#) ($49.99) is a laptop stand with an angled mode for use with a tablet, sketchpad or cookbook.

> **Pad Your Feet**
>
> Don't forget your lower appendages! If you stand all day, you need a mat on which you stand, also called an *anti-fatigue pad*. It's a health and safety requirement in factories, and it's something you should do, too. There are many models available, some in the $100 range. Check reviews at places like [New York Magazine](#), [the Spruce Eats](#), and [Wirecutter](#).

Think About the Air

Your perfect workspace—or just an adequate one—shouldn't be just about the surfaces and ergonomics. It should also be one where you're physically comfortably.

Consider the temperature of the area you're setting up. Is it warm or cool enough for you? Does air blow from a vent or air conditioner on you, and if so, is that annoying?

You may also want to add a fan for increased air circulation, open a window if the outside temperature is appropriate or you really need fresh air, or close things up and put a purifier in place.

During wildfires in and near my state in 2018, I added a [Coway AP-1512HH Mighty](#) ($230) to our house. While its HEPA filter won't capture viruses, it does significantly reduce small particles in the air, which can cause respiratory irritation.

Working from home in the middle of the day might necessitate the addition of an air conditioner. If you can arrange to work in a single room or a closed-off space, you can purchase a low-BTU in-window unit for 100 to 300 square feet that can cost well under $200.

Also consider portable air conditioner models that let you drop a hose through a window vent. They cost a bit more, in the $300 to $500 range, but you can move them around as needed between work and non-work time to different parts of your home. They don't require tricky or sometimes impossible window installation.

Am I Killing the Earth While Cooling Myself?

Since we're all worried about contributing to global climate change—or should be—does adding air conditioning make good social sense? Plus it'll up your electricity bill. I'd argue that particularly right now, there's a case for zone-based AC.

Your carbon and utility footprint was dramatically reduced when you stopped going into an office every day, unless you walked to a very green building with solar panels on its roof and waterless toilets.

Employing energy-efficient AC units in specific rooms (through a window or portable option), can allow you to be comfortable and focused during peak heat. If you can't get work done, you're not helping yourself.

If you normally run a lot of electric fans to keep air moving, an AC can use the same or even less energy, especially if you keep its thermostat set no lower than 75°F (24°C).

Tip: If you believe you will be at home a lot more for a while to come and you're in an area in which solar power makes sense, you might try to reduce your utility consumption by finding one of many outfits that installs solar inexpensively. They charge a small fee over a long-term contract that's offset by power you generate and local and federal tax credits.

Configure and Add Hardware

The addition of a small amount of hardware can make your home working life much better. The three key areas to focus on are audio for calls and conferencing, noise-cancelling headphones for concentration, and additional displays for more productive work.

Add Audio Options for Calls and Meetings

Some people work in offices and rarely speak to another person during the working day—it's all digital and all text. Others rely on a lot of casual in-person communication, but haven't considered how much they're actually speaking with colleagues across an average day. Still others may be on audio calls constantly or in face-to-face meetings that will be repurposed into audio or video conferences.

In nearly every case, unless you already handle a lot of audio at home, you will need to upgrade your setup. You can test out the built-in mic and speaker in your computer, smartphone, or tablet, but even the best of these can produce only acceptable audio, and may have you straining to hear or be heard.

For the most comfort in use and in function, you can choose among four general options:

- **Headset:** A headset with over-the-head or in-ear speakers and a "boom" style mic in front of your mouth can be extremely inexpensive and dramatically improve the quality of any call you take or meeting in which you're involved. Headsets are the most comfortable option for spending hours a day talking. For video calling, a boom-mic headset also keeps your face visible.

- **Earbuds:** Earbuds can vary widely in quality, but you may already own a set, and as the path of least resistance and a technology you already know, it might be your best option. Earbuds can be very comfortable, but some people tire of them after a while. Remember that wireless earbuds must be charged more frequently when they're in near-constant use.

Use Your AirPods in Alternation

Rosemary Orchard has some smart advice for AirPods owners. If you spend most of the day on the phone, use one at a time and keep the other in the case—then when one starts to die on a call you can pop the other in, wait for a moment, and then take the low-battery one out and charge it.

- **External mic plus headphones or speaker:** A number of people already own an external mic for podcasting or other audio recording. Because these mics are higher quality than those in headsets, and you may already have them positioned or on a swing-arm for comfortable use, just set your software input on voice- and video-conference software to use the mic as an input. You may supplement the mic with headphones or earbuds. Headphones may look too bulky on videoconferences where everyone else has a headset. Other folks—including Take Control Books publisher Joe Kissell—rely on the built-in-speakers in their computer. Many voice apps have automatic echo cancellation, so there's no feedback.

- **Speakerphone:** You may have a memory of speakerphones offering calls full of static, people yelling to be heard, and generally unpleasant. However, we live in the future, and modern speaker-phone "pucks" contain multiple microphones to offer noise cancellation and improved quality. For video conferencing, a speaker-phone leaves your face and hands free.

> **Tip:** Chris Pepper, an IT manager who routinely engages in speakerphone calls in which he's one of several people, recommends the battery-powered Jabra Speak 410 ($130). While it might be overkill for your solo use, it offers maximum flexibility, and it's portable—you can repurpose it later in an office or on the road.

Cancel Noise for Focus and Conversations

The closest thing to magic for my money isn't an iPad (though it comes close). No, it's noise-canceling technology. The idea is simple: one or more microphones samples sound and produces a sort of anti-noise that combines with the original audio to dampen it.

I bought my first pair of noise-canceling headphones decades ago for then-frequent plane trips, and found that while they weren't perfect, they were a huge improvement over earplugs and reduced the most annoying frequencies while reducing all ambient noise. Noise-canceling earbuds and headphones are now commonplace, and good models can be found cheaply.

> **Note:** Wearable noise-canceling devices come in active versions, described above and require battery or USB power, or passive ones that rely on cushioning selected for acoustic muffling.

Suddenly working from home may expose you to sounds that become irritating or unbearable over time: the refrigerator's hum (and its lure), traffic and street noise that penetrate through windows, the tick of a clock somewhere. Noise-canceling headphones or earbuds are great at removing those sorts of sounds almost entirely.

They can also dull the sound of talking if you're in a place in which other people (like your family or roommates) have to also function or in which there's conversation you can hear from outside your home workspace.

Combined with music, they work even better. The music is effectively enhanced by the absence of background noise, and you can "step into" a concert hall, arena, or small chamber in a way that's often a shocking displacement when you first encounter it.

Many people prefer over-the-ear headphones for comfort when wearing for long periods, for the noise reduction they add due to the ear pads that surround your ears. A bonus of headphones is that they visibly communicate to others that you are in a working zone.

I am a fan of the low-cost [Sony ZX110NC Noise-Canceling Headphones](#) ($39.99), which have fairly small ear cups. They rely on a single AAA battery, and offer dozens of hours on a single charge of a rechargeable cell. They also fold compactly.

You can spend a lot more to get greater comfort and better cancellation, as well as additional features, like a mic and a way to pause noise cancelation by holding a hand over the outside of one speaker. Wirecutter [has its usual broad round-up](#), with options from $28 to $400.

For not much more money than the Sony, the noise-cancelling Anker Soundcore Life Q20 ($59.99) have full-size ear cups, Bluetooth, and a mic. Anker says you get 60 hours use from a single charge of the

internal batteries. The only substantive drawback is that they require a separately purchased third-party case for safe packing.

However, others find the ear constriction unpleasant and prefer in-ear earbuds. Options seem endless for wired and wireless battery-powered models. This includes Apple's updated AirPods Pro ($249).

There's a third option, too, which are earbuds that are held in place through an eyeglasses-like hanger on top, sometimes called "earhooks" (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4: These Deific Design IXP7 "earhooks" work for people who don't want headphones or earbuds.

Tip: Rosemary Orchard notes that if noise cancellation doesn't work for you (or doesn't work all the time), you might consider a white-noise app, which generates light static that some people find comforting and not distracting. She prefers Dark Noise.

Tip: Daniel Pourhadi, a smartphone software developer, offered up slightly different advice: "I like to have the TV on in the background, often a series I've seen many times before." He likes to remind people that we shouldn't feel constrained by broad advice as "everyone is different (some of us more than others)."

Have a Soundtrack for Your Work

Writer and photographer [Kirk McElhearn](), author of *[Take Control of macOS Media Apps]()*, says that music is important to him, helping him with motivation. He notes that it can put you in the mood to take on long tasks in an unfamiliar environment. Here's his advice:

"Whether it's your own music or playlists from a streaming service, you have a wide range of options to accompany you throughout the day. Maybe start with something mellow in the morning, when you're sitting in front of the computer, checking email, and planning your day as you sip your first cup of tea or coffee. Then, when you have a project that requires more attention, choose some music with a beat, something that can drive you onward.

"As you take breaks, you may want to tone things down, or even pause the music. But when you need inspiration, put on some of your favorite tunes to help you think. If you're not used to listening to music at work, you'd be surprised how effective it can be.

"But don't think you should play music all day long. While it can mask some of the ambient sounds that you're not used to hearing when you work, it can also numb you over time. Take some silent breaks; listen to the sounds around you. Some sounds may seem like noise, but if you're in a suburban or rural environment, you'll also have birds chirping that can remind you that you don't need to focus intensely for the entire day."

You may have a music library of your own that meets your needs, but you can also check out free, trial, and paid services like Spotify, Apple Music, and Pandora. If you have an Amazon Prime subscription, it includes access to [a 2-million song music library](). And Spotify Premium is included as part of [an AT&T Unlimited &More package]().

As with all advice in this book, your mileage will vary: some people cannot stand to hear music while working or can only tolerate it while performing certain tasks.

Extend Your View with Another Monitor

A laptop display or a single monitor on a desktop computer may seem good enough for a few minutes or hours here or there. But modern

software apps and the combination of programs and browser tabs you may to need to consult all at once benefit from multiple displays.

You also may be used to two (or more) monitors at work and want to replicate that setup at home.

First, check your equipment. Can you add a second display? Nearly any laptop or desktop computer purchased in the last several years has one or more plugs to add a monitor via HDMI, DisplayPort, or Thunderbolt 1 or 2. Many devices released since 2015 added USB-C or Thunderbolt 3, which work with multiple monitor standards. If you don't recognize ports, go to the manufacturer's web site to look up specifications.

> **Tip:** Some less-expensive laptops—such as Google Chromebooks—may be unable to add a second desktop on an external display, but will let you attach a larger or higher-resolution external monitor that mirrors (is identical to) the main laptop display. You can often get the main display to blank itself when you have the external monitor attached or close the lid on the laptop without putting it to sleep.

Second, can you free enough space in the area you've set up to work in to add the monitor and get it to the right height, as discussed earlier?

Third, is it worth it to drop the money? That may be the easiest question to answer, because you can consult your budget—or your workplace may be willing to underwrite part or all of it. Some high-quality displays are extremely inexpensive now.

> **Note:** One small business owner I spoke with about managing her company's transition for its developers to work from home said she immediately paid for a second monitor for any programmer who wanted one. "It is in everybody's interest for work-from-home to be comfortable and productive as possible," she said.

You can purchase a well-reviewed, bright 1080p monitor (1920 by 1080 pixels) for around $100. Look for a monitor with IPS (in-plane switching), which retains LED apparent brightness from many angles instead of at perfectly perpendicular viewing, for the maximum flexi-

bility in placement and angle for your purposes. A perfectly good 4K display (3840 by 2160 pixels) costs between about $250 and $400.

> **Get Cables, Too**
>
> Remember to check on cables before ordering: some monitors come with no cables or just one particular type, even if they support two or three connection protocols. If you have a USB-C or Thunderbolt 3 port, you may require a DisplayPort or HDMI adapter.
>
> Unfortunately, many cables and adapters are manufactured with very low quality. To find one that's reliable, I check product listings carefully for negatives cited in reviews, especially paying attention to compatibility issues. If possible, pick a well-established but affordable brand like Anker, Belkin, or Monoprice. Their cables may cost a few dollars more, but actually work—and keep working for years.

If cost, space, or other reasons prohibit a second display and you have an iPad, you may be able to use software to let your iPad act as another screen, Rosemary Orchard advises:

- **Sidecar in macOS 10.15:** If you're using 10.15 (Catalina) on a Mac and you have an iPad running iPadOS 13, you can use Sidecar, a free feature. [Apple has a lengthy FAQ](#) about using it.

- **Extend a Mac with an iPad:** [Luna Display](#) ($49.99) also turns your iPad into another screen, but works with versions of macOS and iOS/iPadOS starting about seven years ago and even older Macs and iPads.

- **Extend Mac or Windows with a tablet or Chromebook:** [Duet Display](#) ($9.99) lets you extend either desktop platform with an iPad, iPhone, Android device, or Chromebook. Support dates back several years for operating systems and devices. You can other features, like remote desktop access, [with a subscription](#).

Get the Right Glasses

As optometrists reopen for service, you might look into whether you have a current prescription for your glasses and contact lenses in your work-from-home setup. You may have noticed this more the longer you're in your new environment. It could save you from headaches and let you work a full day without pain.

Architectural photographer [Stephen Schafer](#) notes that some people need different glasses (or may need glasses for the first time) to view an external monitor when they're used to working from a laptop.

Schafer has a set of glasses with a reading prescription—as do I, as I'm far-sighted—but he notes that you should consult with an optometrist about distances. If you will work close to a laptop and far from an external display, one set of glasses might cause migraines or stress, while two optimized sets could create ease.

Upgrade Broadband and Wi-Fi Networks

For those used to working casually at home and otherwise using a residential network for personal reasons, you might find that you need more than you have for constant calls, file transfers, and videoconferencing. Writer Julio Ojeda-Zapata notes that now is a terrific time to scrutinize your online setup. This includes your choice of internet provider, how much you are paying for their services, and whether the internet gear in your home is up to date.

Julio has several suggestions to improve your network and throughput:

- **Do you have the right provider?** If you have more than one internet service provider in your area (sadly, not everyone does), compare what each has to offer. Home workers may find that a high-speed downstream connection that works great for HDTV video streaming is paired with a low upload speed that can't handle bidirectional video or file uploads and sync with work. You may be able to get your current provider to bump your plan up or you might need to switch.

- **Lose the cap:** Some ISPs impose a limit on how much data you can use each month, after which you are throttled to a lower speed, cut off, or pay overage fees. When stay-at-home and other orders went into effect in the United States, all major and most minor ISPs that have plans with caps and overage charges on residential and cellular wireless service removed them for at least 60 days. That may be extended and providers will choose different end points for re-implementing caps and overages when the crisis is seen to lessen.

- **Are you paying too much?** If a friend or colleague is paying less for the same service you have, don't be shy about asking for a price match. You'll probably get it. I called the fiber ISP I had subscribed to for years after fellow Take Control author [Jeff Carlson](#) told me he had just signed up—and paid $30 less per month. One call later, and I was saving almost $400 a year. I found AT&T wouldn't negotiate in late 2019 on my service; my family switched to T-Mobile for a better plan and saved another $400 a year. Companies may be particularly sympathetic to the home worker right now, and happy to help you as part of genuine corporate efforts to improve customers' lives.

Tip: Most carriers and ISPs have agreed to sign onto the FCC's voluntary Keep Americans Connected pledge. This requires them to not disconnect service or charge a late fee for failure to pay a bill on time, but you have to contact the company to let them know.

Tip: If you work in an essential industry and have to stay on the job, are a first responder, or work in healthcare, check with your ISP and cellular carrier. Some have offered to pick up a month or more of bills or reduce regular service charges with proof of work status.

- **Update your broadband gear.** Broadband providers typically equip their users with rental routers but are not always as interested in swapping out gear that goes out of date. If you are not sure, ask your provider to check. This is especially important if your broadband router is also a Wi-Fi router that provides wireless internet access within your home. Wi-Fi technology is continually evolving, so make sure your provider's gear is up to the job. Because this gear is typically shipped from a central office, you can receive it with minimal or no person-to-person interaction.

- **Time to update your Wi-Fi gear?** If you're making do with an old wireless router that doesn't provide good coverage everywhere, consider a mesh system, where each router acts as a wireless node that automatically finds all the others. Almost no configuration is needed and it can dramatically improve coverage and sometimes speed. Consult TechHive and Wirecutter for reviews. You might also consider upgrading an older 802.11n router to the newer 802.11ac flavor. These newer models are not very expensive and can increase the coverage and throughput across your network. (I wrote about this subject in *Take Control of Wi-Fi Networking and Security*.)

Set Boundaries and Preserve Professionalism

With the sudden imposition of remote work, coupled with the potential for partners, housemates, children, and parents to also be in isolation, you need to be able to set the same kind of boundaries that home workers have defined for decades.

If we learned anything from the best video of a few years ago, when a man Skyping in to the BBC to speak on important international issues had his young daughter dance in behind him—followed by a baby... followed by his partner...followed by their chaotic exit—it's that you need to figure out how to retain an air of professionalism, even if everything is in shambles around you (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5: An accidental toddler intrusion is inevitable. How you react is the key issue.

People generally understand if you're working from home, things can go wrong—especially at the moment, when so many people have never been regular telecommuters before.

In this chapter, consider how to set a working "mode," think about dealing with interruptions and family or housemate needs, and working alongside others who have already been working from home or are likewise thrust into that role with you.

And your employer or coworkers may want a certain level of formality and professionalism to provide clearer communication and for efficiency. You can make that happen, even when toddlers lurk nearby ready to photobomb.

Indicate You're at Work

When starting fresh with telecommuting, creating barriers between you and other people in the place you're working can be key. Make your expectations known:

- **Have a conversation:** Sit down with roommates or family members to talk about how you plan to work. This can help them understand what you need, and they may raise reasonable objections or have positive advice that improves your plan.

- **Set working hours:** Having a routine set of time that you're at work—hours that could even be posted—makes it easier for everyone around you to know when you're on or off the clock.

- **Use signage or signals:** An "at work" or "do not disturb" sign that you put on a door or near you makes your status clear. If you have a door, close it. Wearing headphones, especially noise-canceling ones—see Cancel Noise for Focus and Conversations—can also be an excellent signifier.

The author of *The Calculating Stars*, Mary Robinette Kowal, has a downloadable PDF containing a sign you can print out and attach to a laptop with a clothespin (**Figure 6**). The sign can be rotated to read "Writing," "Other Work," and "Goofing Off." It's a low-tech way to indicate clearly what your work status is.
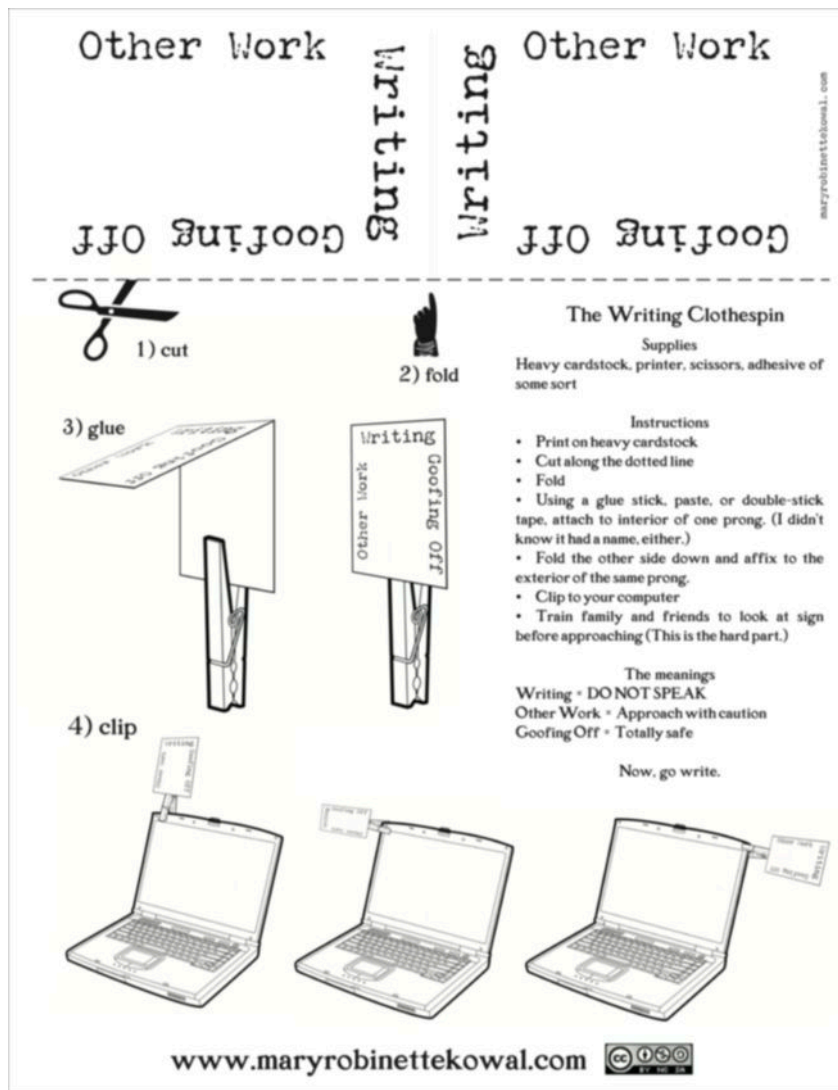
Figure 6: Kowal's sign is a great template to work from in creating your work indicator.

Jason Snell, the host and impresario of The Incomparable podcast network and creator of the Six Colors tech news site, switched a few years ago from a daily commute to full-time home-based entrepreneurship. He said his biggest suggestion was to "set rules":

"My family is aware what it means when the door to my office is open, when it's closed, and when it's closed and I've put a do-not-disturb on the door. Initially we had a lot of awkward social interactions about when I'm available to be interrupted, and it's taken some working out."

He notes that his wife texts him if she's at home and the door is closed. "If the door is open, she walks in but doesn't start talking, so I can finish what I'm doing. It takes time but it's very useful if you talk about what different signals mean and when you're interruptible."

Tip: Kerri Hicks, a university library web services manager, suggested that the kitchen can be a looming temptation for the new home worker. She advised, "With a fully stocked fridge and pantry, it can be tempting to run to the fridge for a snack at intervals that wouldn't be appropriate in an office. Avoid all-day grazing by prepping a snack or two in the morning, and scheduling them throughout the day."

You may also want to set up a check-in system with your office or coworkers that let them know when you "arrive" and "leave" the office, and when you're on break.

In some cases, that's as simple as setting an "away" status to "available" in a chat or group messaging program. In others, you might be asked or want to text or otherwise check in.

Some companies and workgroups like to do a quick check-in, often with a timer set, in which everyone is standing and they just do a fast go-round before starting the day. That might now migrate to video.

Note: You *should* take breaks (see Take Breaks) and also take full advantage of noting when you're not at work and keeping that time distinct (see Preserve Time Outside of Work). A lot of the time in a workplace, you give yourself or are offered downtime that you might think you don't deserve at home.

Consider Your Hours

Work hours in an office, regular or occasional work-from-home hours, and the new telecommuting regime can all be different. Every office and job will be different, but you should fight to retain a similar amount of work while home as you had the office—excluding your commute time, which I'll discuss in a later chapter in Preserve Time Outside of Work.

You may need to shift hours to better fit a new schedule at work or to sync up with others whose work times have now shifted. And you may feel the need to demonstrate your commitment to work by racking up hours. Setting and trying to enforce an expected schedule can be a dance with your office, but it's one you should have explicit conversations about, rather than being subject to unsaid ones.

Set a Business Standard

As a freelancer, I haven't needed to wear trousers for most of the last 25 years. However, in more practical terms, I like getting up, showering, and dressing in a way I would feel comfortable leaving the house.

I heard from many, many office workers and long-time freelancers alike that clothes can make the person—or profession! In fact, the most frequent advice I received was like this from technology journalist Dwight Silverman: "I think it's really important to *get dressed*. Wear pants, a shirt, socks and some kind of shoes. (Bedroom slippers if you don't wear shoes in the house.) Gets you in a more disciplined mindset than if you sit around in your PJs."

That doesn't, however, require wearing a three-piece suit (**Figure 7**).

Figure 7: Doonesbury from May 9, 1979—Garry Trudeau was always ahead of his time. Here, characters discuss the sartorial choices of a political advisor of President Jimmy Carter.

The flip side is, however, also valid, when you consider you mental health and general well-being:

- Do you need the comfort of being out of officewear to assuage your fears? Great, wear sweatpants.

- You don't need to wear pants or a skirt unless you're doing video conferencing where your entire body is visible (**Figure 8**).

Figure 8: If we re-examine this BBC guest's environment more carefully, we can see all the signs of a regular home worker trying to make a spare bedroom appear professional for video calls.

More generally, the more you can simulate your work experience at home, the better for preserving a routine and potentially meeting expectations. The last thing you need is for a boss to question your ability to function from home when you have no choice but to do so.

Watch Out for a News Obsession

When everything is bad and getting worse, it's easy to want to check the news constantly. But most news only lets you know how little impact you can have on changing a global situation.

Make sure you don't wind up consuming inordinate amounts of time you're expected to work by clicking the reload button or reading the endless feed of Twitter and Facebook.

Work Alongside Others at Home

For many people, the decision or requirement to work from home for a job normally handled at a place of business has an impact beyond themselves. You may have a spouse, partner, roommates, children, or extended family. Some or all of them may have already been working for home or at home during the day—as with young children, people on non-standard shifts/workdays, and retired people.

Adding yourself to the mix can be stressful on top of the health circumstances that have led to it.

Jeff Carlson, author of *Take Control of Your Digital Photos*, advises that you're going to have boundary scuffles and that's okay. "You may not be used to being around someone for so much time all week, and it's fine if you don't talk all day, or you check in once in a while.

"We work in the same upstairs office, our backs to each other—it's a small converted attic, and our desks face opposite walls—so we do a pretty good job of ignoring each other and doing our own work. We also chat on Slack or Messenger, even though we're four feet apart. And for me, headphones are a must."

Brittney Bush Bollay, an urban environmental advocate, and her partner work from home full time. She said they had to establish clear expectations about each person's need for space and time during the day to avoid disrupting each other's concentration and work flow.

A submariner friend of Simon Parnell, the host of the Essential Apple Podcast, passed on to him valuable undersea confined advice: set a rota for prime spaces if they can only be used effectively solo, letting each person have their time slot in it every day, multiple times a day, or multiple days of the week.

> **Tip:** Submariners, Antarctic researchers, and astronauts can teach us a lot about long stints in close quarters with a few people. Mark Kelly, an astronaut who spent nearly a year on the International Space Station, penned an essay for the New York Times on this topic.

Some additional tips:

- Consider the aural impact and the line of sight for distraction when setting up workspaces. Planning is great, but flexibility in making changes is key.

- If you can stagger some working hours with a flexible employer, you may be able to avoid conflicting needs in the same workspace.

- Figure out a protocol, especially with non-romantic cohabitants, about resolving differences ahead of time. "That's the way I do it!" or "I'm not making very much noise" will very quickly wear thin.

Cope with the Vagaries of Home Life

Home life will intrude on work, especially in homes with children off school. Dogs will bark, cats will jump on the keyboard while you're away and send "j12h3ldbn09 80983n4a;" to co-workers, and, yes, toddlers may burst through a door during important client meetings.

Businesses are going to have to cope with this as much as you do. Bosses that expect that you can lock the rest of the household away— some of whom will *also* be working from home—so that they don't interrupt your work day will be in a state of constant apoplexy.

As [Natalie Nagele noted on Twitter](#), "Managers: please give your folks permission to be unproductive. This isn't normal. The extra cognitive load is not easily pushed back."

Consider creating an out-of-office message sent to all recipients that helps set a tone for the unusual time and how you're managing your work schedule. Here's one from [Christopher Phin](#), the head of podcasts at a major media company (**Figure 9**).
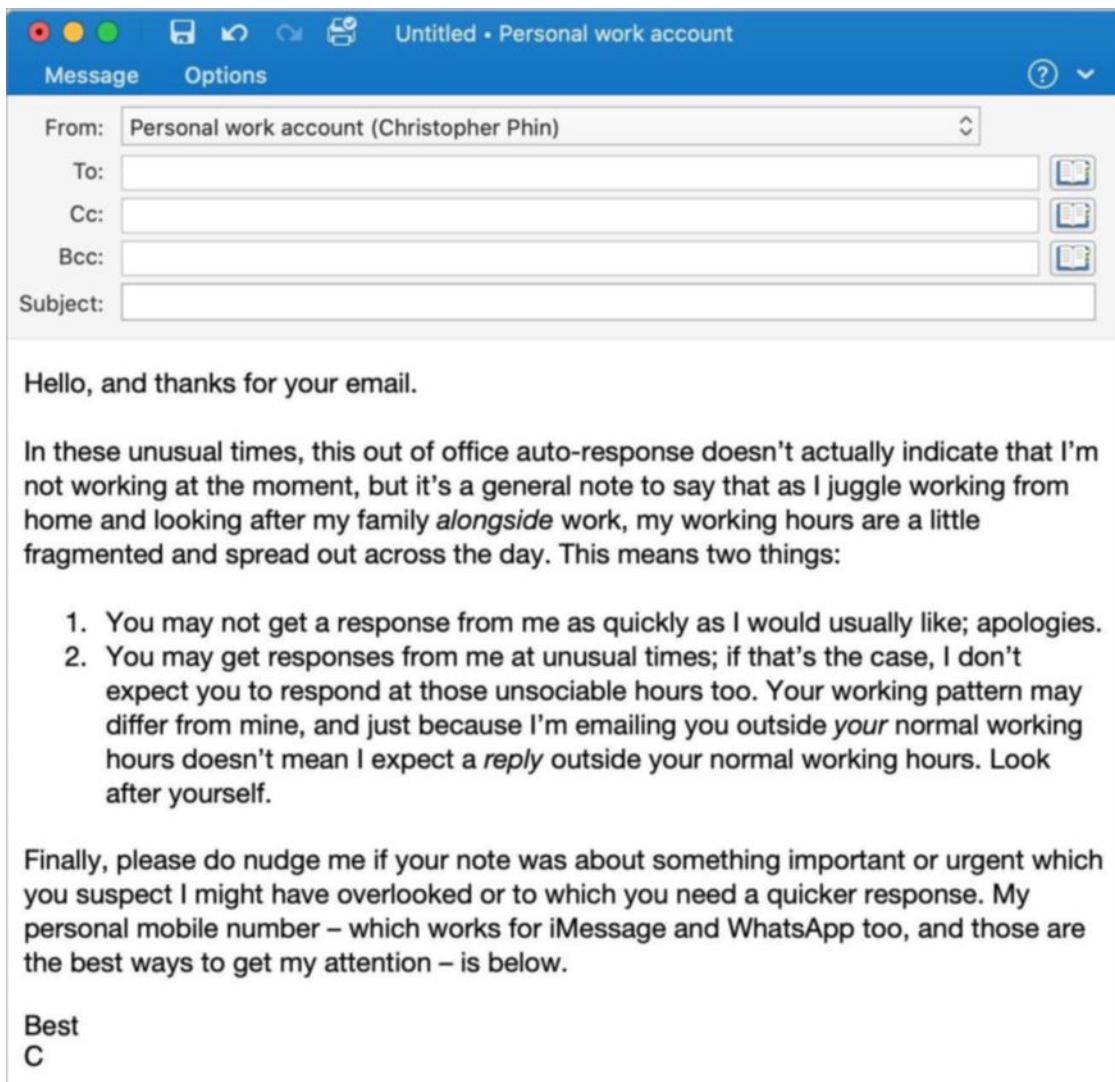
Figure 9: A polite out-of-office message gives your correspondents a good sense of how you're managing time right now.

Let's finish with a smart thought from Tiffany Baxendell Bridge, a technical account engineer: "When your co-worker's curious child comes to peek at the camera, be sure to smile and wave. Parents feel like they have to hide their kids when their childcare falls through, so be welcoming and watch the parents on your team exhale."

Learn Remote Tools

You may already be familiar with many software tools designed for collaborative work and communication for people who work side by side and far apart. However, you will likely rely on these far more than you have in the past, while some may be entirely new.

The primary tools you will likely need to start using or use more heavily are remote collaboration apps, typically web-based, for working on documents and spreadsheets; group communications apps for live conversations with searchable archives; and audio- and video-conference tools to create virtual one-on-one and group meetings.

But let's start with two important precursors: securing your connection and setting up backups.

Enable a Virtual Private Network

Larger companies typically require that remote workers connect via a VPN, which is a special encrypted tunnel between any computing device—a laptop, desktop, smartphone, or tablet—and a VPN server at the company's office, headquarters, or data center.

By encrypting all data passing to and from your devices, this prevents anyone else from snooping on the contents, even if they have access to your home network or any point between you and your company's VPN server.

> **Note:** Most websites and online services now rely on HTTPS or similar encrypted sessions for all traffic, which are in effect a limited-purpose VPN between your software (like a browser or email client) and a server. But not all sites and services are properly encrypted; the VPN solves this by wrapping everything up in a scrambled bow.

If you company doesn't have its own corporate VPN, you can get some of the security benefits by using a VPN service that encrypts data from

your device to a data center somewhere on the Internet. This often is the most vulnerable part. And many remote company resources you access will have their own encryption layered on top of that. For suggestions about VPNs to use or to suggest to a small company to subscribe to, see reviews at Wirecutter and at Macworld.

VPN connection software is built into every major operating system, though many VPN providers offer their own client software. In some cases it takes just a few clicks to configure your device.

If you've never used a VPN before, here's how to get started:

1. Install or configure the VPN client. This can take several forms:

   ‣ With a corporate VPN, you may need to download a special client or profile. Once installed, you can simply enable the VPN as below.

   ‣ With a VPN service subscription, you most likely will install an app, and the app will guide you through installing its profile or other configuration details to get set up.

   ‣ Some VPN services may need you to enter details for a VPN connection. These will provide step-by-step instructions for all supported operating systems.

2. Configure the VPN to either connect automatically whenever you're using the internet or use a virtual on/off switch. Here's where to find those options in various operations systems:

   ‣ **Android.** In Settings, tap Networking & Internet > Advanced > VPN. Select the VPN. Tap Connect. Tap the gear button to change the "Always-On VPN" setting.

   ‣ **iOS and iPadOS.** Once a VPN is installed, a VPN button appears at the main level of the Settings app. To change auto-connect options, tap General > VPN and tap the "i" info icon. Now you can set Connect on Demand on or off.

   ‣ **macOS.** If the service or your company uses the built-in client, go to System Preferences > Network, then select the VPN in the

left-hand interfaces list. You can click Connect in the main window. Check the "Show VPN status in menu bar" box to add a VPN 🔋 menu to your main menu bar. To change auto-connect settings, click Advanced.

‣ **Windows 10.** If the VPN connection uses the built-in Windows software, click the Network icon on the far right end of the taskbar, select the VPN connection, and click Connect. Go to the Networking Connections folder and double-click the VPN profile to configure auto-connect options.

> **Note:** Even companies that rely on VPNs may be overwhelmed if they suddenly have thousands or tens of thousands of workers requiring them, and it might take days to activate your account and configure sufficient capacity. They may allow or advise you to use a personal VPN in the meantime.

> **Tip:** You can also use a VPN to separate your business and non-business usage. Use the VPN when you're on company time; turn it off on personal time.

Set Up File Backups

For those who work routinely in an office, even a small one, backups are the problem of your IT department or employer. You may rarely be involved, except to report when you receive an error message that a routine backup is failing or when you need help restoring a file.

On our own, however, we may want to take extra measures to ensure we don't lose business files that are stored on company-owned computers or our own personal machines we're using for work purposes.

Cloud-Based Backups You May Already Use

You may already be in better shape than you realize, if you haven't considered this before. If you store your documents in a cloud service of any kind—Apple iCloud Drive, Box, Dropbox, Google Drive, Mi-

crosoft OneDrive, or others—those files are synced to central storage every time you modify them as fast as your broadband connection allows. Deleted files are also typically retained, usually up to 30 days, though you can often purchase longer-term deletion archives.

If you store any documents outside a cloud service and aren't working off shared drives or resources, or simply want suspenders (or braces) to go with the cloud-sync belt, you can add local and online backup.

Local Desktop Backup

Many people use a local or network drive on a home network to archive files from a desktop operating system automatically:

- With macOS, Time Machine is built-in, free, and works through directly connected drives or over a network. For more sophisticated needs, I recommend Econ Technologies ChronoSync ($49.99, perpetual license).

> **Tip:** For more advice on macOS backups, take a look at Joe Kissell's *Take Control of Backing Up Your Mac*.

- Windows users have many options, though Windows includes a basic backup app. PCWorld recommends the free tier of Aomei Backupper Standard 4 and for a paid option, Acronis True Image 2020 ($49.99 for annual subscription with additional features, $59.99 standalone).

Online Secure Backups

Many people are leery of online backups, even though they may rely on one or more cloud services, like those above and ones run by individual app developers, that offer effectively the same capability for a smaller set of files.

However, if you pick wisely, an online backup is more secure than one performed locally. A good online backup service lets you pick your own passphrase to lock encryption, and never stores that key on its servers. That makes it impossible for the company, a rogue employee, or a

cracker to access your backups even if they download all the server files that comprise your data.

While there are many services that offer online backups, I (and Take Control publisher Joe Kissell) can recommend just one without provisos or hedging. That's [Backblaze](#). It's been in operation for many years, and I've used it for all my family's computers and my business purposes for several years. The software is easy to set up and then forget about, as it runs silently in the background. It's available for macOS and Windows.

The cost per computer is $6 a month or $60 annually for unlimited storage. I have over 4 terabytes stored there. Backblaze retains older versions of documents and files you delete from your computer for 30 days, but you can pay $2 a month to extend that to a year.

> **Note:** We don't take money and we receive no referral fees for any recommendations in this book, but I want to particularly note that here, because we call out Backblaze so strongly based on our experience and technical evaluation.

Mobile Backups

For a mobile device, much of the data you create and modify will be stored in the cloud, either one of the major ones listed above or storage managed by the app makers. However, you can still back up data that's only kept locally, including app preferences and account passwords:

- Apple doesn't offer third-party backup of iPhones and iPads. You can use iCloud Backup (enabled via Settings > *account name* > iCloud > iCloud Backup) or directly connected via USB to a Mac using iTunes (macOS 10.14 Mojave or earlier) or by clicking the device's icon in the sidebar in the Finder (starting with macOS 10.15 Catalina).

- [Google offers backups in Android](#) that vary by who makes your phone and what carrier you use. Often, data is backed up to secured Google storage. However, Android also allows for third-party backups. Tom's Guide [provided a recent round-up of those](#).

Collaborate Online on Projects

Fortunately, we are well into a golden age of web-based tools for massive, remote, group collaboration. If your company has more than a handful of employees, you may already have standardized on one of the online suites.

However, current circumstances may find those tools inadequate to your needs or your working groups, and companies may give you more leeway than typical to set up short-term solutions that keep you working instead of bound to something that doesn't fit the bill.

The two main options for business software suites are G Suite from Google and Microsoft 365. Both include a word processor, spreadsheet, and presentation app; meeting and chat or group-discussion software; and other programs and services. Service is priced per user, per month.

Google effectively requires that you work in a browser for most features and tools, though for most document work you can download elements and function without an active internet connection.

> **Tip:** Although the G Suite apps aren't as powerful as the full Microsoft Office suite, they're entirely suitable for many collaboration needs, according to Adam Engst, the publisher of the long-running online publication TidBITS. He notes that TidBITS's online publication relies heavily on Google Docs for writing and editing all of its articles, and all of its freelancers and staff work remotely.

Microsoft lets you download apps or work in a browser, depending on the software. Both let you invite collaborators, control their access (such as directly editing, commenting or marking suggestions, and just viewing), and download or export documents in different formats for interchanging elsewhere.

Tip: For Mac, iPhone, and iPad-only workgroups, you can turn to iCloud for online collaboration with Pages, Numbers, and Keynote. These sync among macOS, iOS, and iPadOS versions, and can be used entirely via the web. Non-Apple users can participate via the icloud.com website, too, without having native software on a device.

Google and Microsoft just scrape the surface of what's out there: Trello, Asana, Airtable, Miro, Igloo, Happeo, monday.com, Hive, Quip, and many, many others. Your company may already have picked one, or you might be appointed or volunteer to find the right mix of feature and price for your workgroup or firm. Some have generous trials, as long as 30 days, which may be enough to figure out if one fits your needs or for the duration of everyone working away from the office.

Message in a Group

It's a very broad category, but group messaging includes any method by which three or more people communicate, often with a search and archive component. You may already use text messages, Apple iMessage (with the Messages app), or WhatsApp. However, these are more ephemeral and intended for more informal interaction.

Microsoft Teams and Slack are environments that create a persistent set of what are effectively chat rooms, called channels, in which invited participants can communicate. (You might enjoy my book on the latter product, *Take Control of Slack*.)

You can talk all together, start a private conversation with one or more people, and search past messages. Voice and video calling and screen sharing are also included.

The platforms can be extended with plugins and conduits that connect to other software, like Dropbox storage and Zoom videoconferencing. These integrations let you start a Zoom videoconference from within Slack, bring in Outlook calendars in Teams groups, or filter relevant tweets (about your company, say) to appear to everyone in a channel. (Teams also includes a bunch of other Microsoft apps and services.)

Tip: User-experience expert Dylan Wilbanks offered this advice for new work-from-homers about not being too dependent on text-based messaging: "Communication is crucial, and it's important to communicate well, because you'll be sending more emails and Slack messages while not being able to just walk over to someone's desk. Don't be afraid to make a phone call or get on a videoconference to help with creating clarity, especially in the beginning."

Your company may already have picked one of the above, and you may have to request access to have an account created. In some organizations, Slack or Teams is the main or only way that colleagues collaborate as well as the shared repository of files.

Tip: Microsoft Teams is part of its business subscription offerings. Ask your company to check whether Teams may be available but not yet in use.

If you don't have access to either system or your company doesn't use one, both Teams and Slack have generous free tiers of service that include most services you would need in the short run. This includes all text-based features and one-on-one voice and video calls; Teams additionally includes screen sharing. Total group storage of uploaded files is limited.

Paid tiers add options, including group voice and video calls (with screen sharing) and large limits on per-user or per-group file uploads.

Discord for Business Use? It's an Option

If you don't play online games and are older than 18, you may never have heard of Discord. It's a service that creates distinct online forums that anyone can sign up and create—and it's free. The service is optimized to tie into playing video games and talking about them.

However, free is a powerful option. As a temporary tool, Discord might fit the bill as it allows you to create text-based channels, as in Slack and Teams, as well as multi-party voice-based channels.

Communicate with Video

Videoconferencing was invented decades ago with expensive and funky equipment. Now, every laptop and most desktop computers come equipped with a camera, and many, many software packages let you communicate one-on-one or in a group conversation with people.

Start with making sure you're ready to talk to people who can see you and where you're at, and then let's dig into software options.

Set Up for Video

There's nothing more terrifying to those of us who *aren't* routinely videoconferencing than having to start using it! A few years ago, I had a contract job in which there were regular video meetings. I wound up making a number of changes in my work area to make it look tidy and professional and so I felt less embarrassed to be on camera—realizing that nobody else particularly cared about my space or appearance.

Here are a few tips that can help:

- **Use a computer:** While you can videoconference from a smart-phone or tablet, the results are often poor. The front-facing cameras on mobile devices have typically been lower quality and work worse in low-light conditions. Try to have a computer handy. However, if you need to use a smartphone or tablet, consider getting or rigging a small stand to hold it fixed in a horizontal position.

- **Add a physical backdrop:** Is your area too messy or busy, or full of your personal life? Set up a backdrop. I bought an inexpensive curtain rod, mounted it to the ceiling, and clip a cheap plain white or black photography backdrop to it; sometimes I use a green screen. Some backdrops are designed to velcro on to a chair to act like a peacock tail behind you. A simple piece of fabric or a solid-color blanket can work. You can get fancier—or weirder—and buy a backdrop of books on shelves or other decoration, also often very low cost (**Figure 10**). Bonus: This can double as a room divider!

Figure 10: [This backdrop from LYWYGG](#) is just $19.98 (stand not included), and makes you look like a CNN guest.

- **Change the lights:** Lighting may not be ideal. In fact, it probably isn't. At my workspace, my face is entirely blown out unless I tweak the placement of lights. Search on retailers for "selfie rings" and "studio ring lights." These are circles of LEDs designed to cast a glow on your face, either close up or at a little distance. Some clip on to a laptop top or monitor, others come with a small stand or a full adjustable tripod. You'll be ready for your close-up.

- **Consider a better webcam:** The camera installed in your computer is free to use—if one is built in—but you still might want to upgrade, as those built-in cameras can be of poor quality. You can spend from a few tens of dollars to a couple hundred for a camera that bumps up quality enormously. Some have a mic built in, too.

Don't Use Video (Wait, What?)

If you don't want to use video, I hope you're in a working environment where you can stand up for yourself. It might be entirely inappropriate in your home space or you may have avoided it up until now and prefer not to use it. You might also find video works for you or your household at certain times of day, or that only certain video calls fit your comfort level. Don't assume you have to be on video.

Be a Videoconferencing Pro

No matter which videoconferencing tool you use, these tips will help you be a great host or participant:

- **Do an A/V run-through.** Always check before starting a session that your camera and audio are set to the devices you want and are working. Audio and USB in particular sometimes decide abruptly not to work together. You might need time to restart a computer and have it finish that task.

- **The mute button is your friend.** Some videoconferencing software starts automatically with everyone muted; in others, it's an option; in still others, everyone's mic is live. In most calls of more than three people, everyone should mute their mic when not in use.

Tip: In the heavily used Zoom software's desktop apps, you can mute yourself and then press and hold the Space bar any time you want to unmute and speak. Zoom then resumes mute when you release.

Tip: A conference host may be able to initiate a session with everyone muted, control whether *anyone* but them can unmute, and manually mute any individual or click or tap to flip the mute for everyone. Learn those tools in the service you use if you host.

- **You can start and stop video.** Most videoconferencing tools let you control whether you're sending video at all, turning your spot in a call into an audio-only session, or suspend video during a call. Zoom, for instance, lets you click a Start Video button after the call begins, so you intentionally begin streaming.

Tip: With networks and services sometimes overwhelmed, you may advise as a host or a participant that some people or all participants who aren't speaking pause their video to reduce bandwidth requirements. This can improve video and audio quality.

- **Blur your background:** Several videoconferencing apps can blur the background, putting a sort of focus on your surroundings. .

- **Soften your face:** On the flip side, some services have an option to blur details on your face, so you can feel like an aging film star who demands vaseline on the lens for his close-up shots. It can make you look a little unnatural, but possibly might make you feel less self-conscious.

- **Add a virtual background:** Group video tools often also may let you choose a virtual background. Zoom and Skype, for example, can identify and cut you out of the background in real time, and drop in an image or (in Zoom) a looped video. These packages come with some images, or you can add your own. It can get ridiculous, but the more modest ones let you swap out your confines.

- **Mix a physical and virtual backdrop:** Zoom offers solid-color erasure. I hang a green screen behind me—really a soft solid light green blanket—and then use Zoom's Virtual Background to select that color (**Figure 11**). That allows the program to more crisply delineate me.

Figure 11: In Zoom, you can use a green-screen replacement (left) or let it cut you out from the background it detects (right). Note my head is less bullet-shaped at left and my hand doesn't lose fingers (bottom) with a green screen.

Don't Forget When You're on Camera

Some folks hide the video showing themselves as you look to others—and that can be dangerous. You might forget that other people can see you. This is doubly the case in software like Zoom, in which participants can opt (depending on the host's settings) to view only the host, only a shared screen, the currently active speaker, or a grid of all participants. Even if you're looking at just the person speaking, other people may still have you appearing on their screens!

And parts of you that you think might be out of view could be on camera, too. (**Figure 12**).

Figure 12: This NBC reporter didn't realize exactly where the frame on his self-positioned shot ended. Oh, pants!

Don't floss your teeth. Don't pick your nose. And don't be naked! You think I'm kidding? Let me quote from a New York Times "Work Friend" column: "I was recently talking to a group of professional women across a wide range of ages and geographic locations. Two had

firsthand accounts of witnessing someone appear fully or partially nude while dialing in to a work meeting because he or she was unaware the call featured video as well as audio. Don't assume that because you can't see someone, they can't see you."

A video circulated after that column ran of a large videoconference on an academic topic in which a participant walked with their laptop into the bathroom and—well, everybody screamed. They simply forgot *they* were broadcasting to everyone else.

If you want to be sure you're never broadcasting video unintentionally, cover your webcam lens:

- Some cameras come with a separate or attached cover or shutter. When not in use, slide, click, or push into place.

- An external camera can be unplugged.

- After-market lens covers and shutters abound, such as those from [C-Slide](#).

- A piece of tape is also a great privacy tool. I have a folded piece of tape placed over my iMac's camera that I remove when I set up for anything in which I know that I want to stream video. Otherwise, it remains in place.

Tip: Apple's laptops and computers with webcams have a green activity light that is wired via hardware so it's always lit when the camera is in use—a software hack can't override it, even. Train yourself to look for that signal.

Look at Videoconferencing Software

Videoconferencing software you're most likely to encounter include Apple FaceTime, Google Hangouts (business and free tiers). Microsoft Skype (business and free tiers), Microsoft Teams (paid tiers), Slack (paid tiers), and Zoom.

Zoom

The video-conferencing service [Zoom](#) has a very generous free tier, which may suffice for ad hoc or temporary use for many workgroups and small-to-medium size businesses. It also has very modest pricing for paid tiers. You can use a native Zoom app for video—apps are available for all major desktop and mobile platforms—or use a web app in a desktop browser without having to install a plugin.

> **Tip:** I found Zoom so useful, but sometimes frustrating to tap its power and use it efficiently, that I wrote a whole book about it. *Take Control of Zoom* is a detailed how-to guide that covers all major (and some minor) features.

Audio participants can use the app or use a regular call-in phone number, including at the free tier. The host can record the audio and video of a Zoom call directly within the app or via a cloud-recording option. The host can also grant recording permission to participants.

> **Note:** Zoom's usage has skyrocketed during the pandemic, and the company said it may have to limit the use of call-in numbers for free users because of scarcity. The phone system is very brittle, and adding a lot of numbers takes time.

The free tier can host up 100 participants, which seems like a lot, but I've been on Zoom calls with about 60 people, and it's surprisingly manageable. This include high-definition video. Meetings at the free tier with three or more people can't last more than 40 minutes, though you can immediately start another meeting and invite people to that.

The Pro paid tier is $14.99 per month for each host—there's no charge per-participant. The limit is still up to 100 people, but meetings can last up to 24 hours and more administrative controls are available. You also get a basic level of cloud recording, which can store about five hours of video or much more of just audio.

> **Tip:** Zoom offers an upgrade to unlimited meeting lengths for free-tier K–12 accounts during the pandemic. If your account wasn't already given this outbreak-related upgrade, contact the company.

Business and Enterprise tiers are $19.99 per month per host, with minimum numbers of subscriptions per account. These paid tiers can host up to 300 and 500 people in a session.

Apple FaceTime

Apple's FaceTime audio and video chat software works only on the company's hardware: Macs, iPhones, iPads, and iPod touch devices. It requires the FaceTime app, which is pre-installed on all Apple devices. FaceTime is free to use.

FaceTime can handle up 32 people in an audio or video chat if all participants updated their OS since January 2019. Previous versions allowed one-on-one video or up to nine people in an audio call.

Apple also offers Keynote Live for presentations, which can accept up to 100 people viewing a presentation at the same time via Keynote software or a browser (no software or account needed). Voiceover audio isn't offered; you have to deliver that separately.

Google Videoconferencing

Google has two separate products that are always rather confusingly described, as Google has been engaged in a transition of its services for a year or more:

- Google Hangouts is available as a consumer app for mobile operating systems and via a plugin for several browsers. It allows audio and video conferencing and screen sharing. Up to 25 people can participate in a single session.

- Google Meet, also broadly available, is part of its business G Suite offering. It allows from 100 to 250 people at once to conference over video, depending on the paid tier.

Microsoft Skype

Skype is a long-running piece of software that used to be entirely focused on consumers. Now it's morphed a bit into hybrid of personal and corporate use, though all flavors offer multi-person audio and videoconferencing and screen sharing. It's available as a native app on all major platforms and as a web plugin for Google Chrome and Microsoft Edge.

It's free and allows calls with up to 50 people using a mix of audio and video. You can use it with a Microsoft Live account or invite people without accounts.

Microsoft Teams

Teams include audio and video chat and screen sharing for up to 250 users with its paid tiers. Online events can handles 10,000 attendees.

Slack

While Slack is largely a group-communication app, it includes multi-person audio and video conferencing with screen-sharing and some whiteboard features in its paid tiers. (For more insight, see my book *Take Control of Slack*.)

Audio and video calls can have up to 15 people. The Slack native apps for all major platforms can be used as well as Google Chrome.

Pace Yourself

We're already months into a hard time, and it may seem no easier or more routine. Some aspect of what we're experiencing now will be in place for a long time—months at least, and maybe through 2021 in a more limited fashion, if not beyond.

It's important to your long-term well-being that you treat your current work-from-home situation as the beginning of marathon, not a sprint.

Temporarily Might Become Permanently

In some cases, as is already happening, your employer may close some or all of its offices even when it's safe to return to working in close proximity. That means the "temporarily" in this book's title could easily become "permanently."

For instance, Nationwide Insurance said in April 2020 that five of its offices would shut forever, and the 4,000 people working there would become full-time remote workers.

You might also decide that telecommuting is ideal for you, and switch jobs if your firm starts a plan to bring people back together.

Because that's the reality of the situation, try to keep tweaking your new working situation. Bosses and employers may have become more understanding—or less. We've seen the pressure of social media in forcing companies to change what were initially restrictive policies.

Weeks or months into working from home full-time, you may have settled into a new normal and feel somewhat productive, if not yet back to your old levels. Or you might find remote work freeing, and you're radically happier and more productive—and may be able to argue for a change for yourself when the global crisis winds down.

Pacing is key across all this, starting with how you manage your day and how you briefly stop working to stretch, eat, or zone out. Or even nap. Your regular work hours have likely turned out to not be ideal for the flow of home life, whether you're solo or surrounded by people. Have you tried changing hours? Can you still tweak your schedule?

And, vitally, set a line between work and non-work, especially if you regained time by losing a commute.

Structure Your Day

You can find a vast amount of advice in books and on websites about techniques for breaking your work day or projects into approachable pieces, offering you structure that might otherwise have been provided in a work environment. What's wonderful is that anything you learn at this stage will pay dividends in the future, no matter where you're physically performing your job.

Set Working Sprints

Many, many people swear by *sprints*, where you define a period of time and work intently or intensively—depending on the task and your personality—at which point you break.

One of the best-known variants on this is the Pomodoro Technique, named for the tomato (*pomodoro* in Italian) timer that its developer Francesco Cirillo cited in the early 1990s.

It's simple: Define a task. Set a timer for 25 minutes. When it goes off, note that (as simply as making a check on a piece of paper), and take a break of around five minutes. After three or four sprints, take a longer break. Do what you can to eliminate distractions during each sprint.

You can use other periods of the time for interruptive activities, like checking email and working across multiple windows and devices. Or you can turn those into sprints, too.

Sprints don't work for everyone! Some people like to get into a state of flow and carry out a task for hours on end, sometimes forgetting to eat and drink during that period. I know that laying out pages of a magazine or book can put me into that sort of mode, and many writers, artists, and programmers are generally familiar with that kind of productive fugue state. You don't have to fight it if it works for you.

Turn Off Distractions

You will want to disable distractions to focus during sprints or flows of work. Here are a number of ways to help with that:

- Use the "do not disturb" feature common in most operating systems. With this feature, nearly all notifications, pop-ups, bings, pings, and bleeps stop.

- Where feasible, stick to one app at a time to avoid context changes that can interrupt your thinking unless it's part of a workflow that you can use seamlessly and comfortably.

- Use the full-screen mode on a window so that it occupies the entire display. If that's not useful for formatting or puts too much white space in front of you, hide all apps except the one you're using.

- Install software on a desktop computer that can let you set a timer to block all social media or other categories of software or even turn off internet access entirely for a period of time. One of the earliest examples of such software is [Freedom](#), which is available for nearly every operating system and browser.

Several people suggested one change in particular all the time: disable automatic email retrieval, quit your mail app, or disable notifications.

Writer [Antony Johnston](#), whose graphic novel *The Coldest City* was turned into the movie *Atomic Blonde*, said: "Unless replying to emails is literally your job (e.g., customer support, etc.) then *do not* leave your email app open all the time. Open it only when you actually want to check and reply to mails; otherwise close it down. You'll immediately experience less distraction."

Co-Work Remotely

Even though you're apart from your co-workers, you can still have some quiet company. You can certainly use people who you *don't* work with, either, who are also now working from home.

App-developer strategic consultant [Aleen Simms](#) said that she works with a friend and colleague this way during normal work-from-home periods. They have the video on and microphones muted. They check in at regular intervals, synchronizing sprints and discussing what they're about to do. This provides accountability to someone else and is a well-liked tactic for people with ADHD.

Various videoconferencing apps can be used either one-on-one or to create a quiet virtual room of people. One person with a paid Zoom account can create an open "room" that people can enter and leave through the day (see [Communicate with Video](#)). It also lets you know at a glance if someone's available or busy if you need to consult with them.

Take Breaks

When you're working, you should be working *all the time*, right? That's what work is? Wrong, wrong, and, for good measure, wrong. While humans seem to be optimized for "occupation"—doing something, anything, for some of the day—we're also creatures who need rest, a break, and down time. Even a little helps a lot.

If you don't want to adopt the sprint approach, you can still set a timer so that at a regular interval or after a certain period of time from whenever you start it, you remember to stop what you're doing.

You have a million options for what to do, but home workers focused on a computer or mobile device in particular need to move around:

- Stand up, stretch, and walk around.

- It's safe to be outside with social distancing and a mask (where appropriate or required). Leave the house! Stand on a balcony, take a walk while remaining far from other people, breathe fresh air.

Buy a Cloth Mask If You Don't Feel Handy

When public-health authorities started heavily encouraging—and some governments even mandating—the use of cloth masks, there was a scramble to find or make them. This added to the cognitive load and stress of many people who don't feel capable of that. A bandana or scarf was and remains fine, as a cloth mask's purpose is to keep you from spreading virus particles if you're infected and symptomatic.

The tide of manufacturing has turned, however, and if you want a mask someone else has made, they are now wildly available, sometimes from unlikely companies. A friend's firm shifted from lanyards and custom dog collars to masks—as it was an essential activity that allowed them to keep their employees working.

She warns, however, that the "$10 for five masks" deals are in fact too good to be true. A well-made cloth mask with elastic straps that can be washed costs between about $7.50 and $15.

- Have solo dance parties.

- Engage in brief yoga, aikido, tai chi (and drink chai tea), or other body work, even if it's just a two-minute or five-minute stretch.

- Meditate.

- Read a few pages of something for pleasure.

- Make lunch or have a snack.

- Make coffee, tea, or another beverage.

Author Jeff Carlson said that his wife, who prior to this period only worked a day a week at home, found she moves substantially less than in the office. He relates, "If you work in an office with people, you're likely to be in motion more: going to other people's desks and meeting rooms, getting coffee in the break room, etc. When you're at home, those actions aren't available, so you may need to be mindful about moving around, even if you have to remind yourself to do it."

With a wireless headset, you might be able walk around while on conference calls or speaking with colleagues and clients. If you have a cat, you can devote time to playing with it (if it will be awake at the time you need, which of course it never will be). Own a dog? It's time for a walk.

[Tonya Engst](#), co-founder of TidBITS Publishing, reminds us that instead of eating from a food truck or grabbing sandwiches for lunch, we can prepare a meal. "Many people will still want to eat fast," she notes, "But think how much time you'll save by not commuting—then use that time to cook."

Perform More Strenuous Activity

Many people I spoke with brought up exercise as a way to keep oneself healthy, focused, and mentally agile during this time. Some people can continue to use outdoor solo regimes they relied upon before, like walking, running, and hiking. This could happen daily before work, as part of a mid-day lunch/work break, or, if you can shift hours—see below—as a longer stretch during a weekday.

Some of us may be living with other people, such as parents, children, or friends, while stages of isolation or quarantine are going on. Do those folks have exercise equipment you can use—or do they or you have an elliptical trainer, a stationery bike, or a rowing machine stowed in the garage or basement?

Given gyms may not re-open for a while, redirect your gym membership cost to purchasing home exercise equipment. The equipment you buy might cost as little as a few months of membership.

(Some gyms and trainers have shifted to group and one-on-one videoconferencing classes and training sessions that you may be able to take advantage of for a lower membership cost.)

Look also for deals on Craigslist and people giving away equipment on the various Buy Nothing and Freecycle mailing lists and social-media groups, taking care to observe social distancing and careful cleaning when you acquire gear.

Revel in Flexibility

Despite all the downside and stress, the upside is that you may be able to reshape your work to fit you better. You might be more productive, happier, and develop a better balance of work and personal time, even with—really, because of—an enforced change in your routine and greater flexibility that your employer really has to cope with.

Mix Business and Personal Activities

Didn't I say in an earlier chapter to set boundaries? Isn't that chapter named Set Boundaries and Preserve Professionalism? Yes, but that chapter and the upcoming section, Preserve Time Outside of Work, are

about defining a place and time to work and keeping your life protect-ed against employer demands.

The flip side is that with more and different time to chop up across a working day or period, you can sometimes kill two birds with one stone.

[Christopher Phin](#) offered this advice: "Do the things you can't do when you're in an office. That might be sticking a load of laundry on to save you the work later in the evening, or it might be taking an hour-long cycle at 9 A.M. and making up the time later."

Perhaps you want to buy a cut of meat that requires a long time to roast, because it's the only thing in the shop, it's affordable, and you can feed the whole family with it? You can set it going and leave it largely unattended with a timer (or perhaps multiple ones) as you work through the day and get to enjoy the smell.

Or perhaps you want to prepare an Instant Pot dish full of veggies for part of a lunch or evening repast. In a break, you could clean and process them, and stick them in the pot—or in the fridge to pull out and drop in later.

You don't have to feel as if you're shortchanging your work day when you move time around or use breaks. You can also try a bigger change in the time you work, as discussed next.

Shift Hours

If your workplace is amenable, you may try to split up your work or shift hours. You may have found by now that your old routine needs a spiff-up, and weeks in may be the time to ask for it if you haven't yet.

Some businesses thrive on live access to coworkers; others are task-based or driven by independent initiative. If you can work far better by starting work at 5 P.M. and working until 1 A.M.—by sleeping later with the support of your partner, family, nanny, or kids who can take care of their own morning—why not?

You might also be able to use an adjusted daily schedule to go for a long walk, a run, or a bike ride at a time that's ideal when working from home but otherwise infeasible.

Some people might thrive with "four 10s" (four 10-hour days a week) to mesh with other people's or home schedules. Others might want "three 13s," in which you do long 13-hour days, but work just six days in any 14-day period. (It's common in some professions, like nursing.)

You might also want to trade weekend days for weekdays, since the distinction between the two may be blurred right now. Figure out what might work best, and talk to your employer about whether it's possible.

Preserve Time Outside of Work

Two unique situations arise from suddenly becoming a remote worker. First, if you had a commute of more than a few minutes, the time you regain can be significant. I know many people who have a 90- or 120-minute round-trip commute every day—if all the buses, ferries, and trains run on time.

Some people do enjoy their commute: they bike or walk part of it, they like listening to podcasts or music or reading while en route, or they use some of the time to get a start on the day on email or other work so they feel less harried when they arrive at their place of business. They lose those benefits, and will have to adjust.

Other folks—I think most—have a commute longer than they want or they don't want a commute at all. The time returned is a gift. Don't let work turn that time into more work time, or erode all your time at home as "work time."

Dylan Wilbanks advises, "Use the extra time to do things you wouldn't be able to do with your commute. Make yourself breakfast. Make coffee or tea. Take a walk. Do yoga. Read a book. You have the time now."

Second, and partly as a consequence, your work might be even more likely to try to erode the space between work and non-work. With the

loss of a commute, your company or boss might decide that's time that you "owe back" to working hours.

Poppycock!

As I advise throughout the book, it's more important than ever to set boundaries with your employer, though I know that it can be fraught to fight back, especially when companies will be under extraordinary stress and layoffs may be common. Nonetheless, you have a right to your well being, even in complicated times.

They Might Not Be Able to Fire You, Anyway

Despite the massive job loss in the United States—a big hunk of which is just temporary—and various conditions around the world, many governments have provided direct salary supplements or loans to businesses that are predicated on them keeping a similar level of employment as before the money kicked in.

As a result, your employer may be barred from firing you without a strong cause for the interim, even if you live somewhere or have a contract that says you can be fired at will. Keep apprised of local laws, deals, and terms so you know your rights.

A boss may decide that in a two-worker household, each partner can lean on the other. Kimberly Holst, who works for her state government, recalled, "I once said I needed to go pick up and stay home with a sick kid. My boss wanted to know why my husband couldn't deal with it since he was home. I had to remind him that while he was at home— he was also at work."

Juggle Parenting

Having kids at home adds special challenges, and that's especially the case if you don't have childcare or activities lined up.

My kids—13 and 15—had their in-person schooling suspended in mid-March for at least two weeks, which ultimately was "the rest of the school year." Two months later, we've gone through at least three changes in district and state planning, plus a week of "spring break," as that was built into the instructional schedule.

Some parents of younger children are finding the task of "home school" a full-time job. Others are concerned their kids' schools are stressing children out by keeping them to an always-on-video, full school day plus homework schedule.

What you must recall, if you're taking care of children of any age during your working day, is that there has never been a time in history when adults were expected to both manage full-time school for kids and a full-time job. This is not something people plan for or that's happened before. We need to continue to work on solutions, rather than hold ourselves (or our children or have others hold us or our children) to unrealistic expectations.

Note: Some kids may thrive without the peer pressure, structure, and demands of physical school. Others may realize how much busy work they were given—or how great their teachers were. It's going to be different for each kid and each family.

Note: This chapter was drafted by Tonya Engst, the previously mentioned co-founder of TidBITS Publishing, and a long-time friend.

Set Boundaries for Kids

All the advice earlier, in Set Boundaries and Preserve Professionalism, applies doubly, if not exponentially, when you have kids at home. This is even more the case in a two-parent home if you work part-time, spend more of your time parenting, or earn less than your partner—the other parent's working time may be considered more "valuable."

If your kids are school age and it's during the time that school is normally in session, you and they may be facing the added stress of an indefinite time before they return to the classroom.

Your kids will need more and clearer visual reminders that you're at work than—one hopes—other adults would require. Signage will help, either in front of you on a table or on a closed door.

> **Tip:** With younger kids, you might ask them to draw a "working: do not disturb" sign for you, giving them a stake. An older kid might be willing to use a word processor or design app to create a fancier version. I've seen wonderful signs posted on social media and in articles as parents and kids adapt to this change.

Expect interruptions, especially from younger kids or children who may need your time and comfort during the best of times and who may be scared or out of sorts right now. But if you're working at home, you will have to figure out how to manage the interruptions without harming your ability to make a living, likely a critical part of keeping your family safe and healthy.

You will lose productivity in the process, and you should try to accept that upfront. Employers will be living in a dream world if they think that work will proceed as if you are in an office, and some may place demands on you or criticize you when the needs of your children who are also forced to be at home take temporary precedence.

Remember this: you are in the right, not your boss. While your employer has objectives and is likely also mildly freaking out about

keeping a work group, office, division, or business going, this is a unique time in modern society and we will all be making adjustments.

However, depending on the age and personality of your kids, you may also have to lay down the law quite firmly about what constitutes an appropriate interruption.

Shift and Preserve Work Hours

As noted earlier in Preserve Time Outside of Work and Shift Hours, you have to stake out and defend your personal time separate from work—both from your job and from your own inclinations. If you get time back from your commute, that's more time you can spend with your family, or more time you can spend just chilling, too.

With kids at home, especially night and day, it's going to be harder to get the work in you need, which may make it more difficult to stop working during odd moments.

Bring Kids in to Work

Every day may be Take Your Child to Work Day for a while, and it may help to conceive of whatever period that involves in the same way.

This advice doesn't work for every job. A nuclear engineer or corporate graphic designer may not have a place for their kid to step in to contribute to what you're doing. But you can help them feel as if they have a stake.

Note: It's delightful to see how many television performer and talk-show hosts have drafted their children as camera operators and into skits. Jimmy Fallon, Stephen Colbert, and Saturday Night Live have all made use of this family labor.

For workers with any creative component to their job, you may be able to set a younger kid, from 5 to 15, with a parallel activity that's similar to what you're doing. If you're creating a logo in Adobe Illustrator, they could be working with crayons, pens, colored pencils, or a drawing program on a similar task.

Older kids may have enough of their own activities, but they may also be able to help research a task, storyboard ideas, or otherwise contribute in a small way but just enough that they feel seen and useful during an uncertain time—and might actually offset some of lost productivity from being at home.

Put Your Kids to "Work"

While this book isn't about educating your kids at home suddenly, but working at home suddenly, I will pass on the plan my wife and I came up with, faced with our 13 and 15 year olds being home for four months of the school year. We set the expectation of four hours of "work," an hour of exercise, and an hour of being outside (but not around people) every weekday. (Over time this has played out OK. It's not perfect. But it's been a good ongoing starting point for discussion and structure.)

The kids can count all sorts of productive things as "work," which can include independent studying of academic subjects, practicing instruments, creative expression (drawing, composing, etc.), and "work" work—assisting with adult tasks around the house that involve learning about trades (like electrical or carpentry) or developing a business.

Likewise, you might be able to use your child as a sounding board of sorts. If you're preparing a presentation for work, writing an article or blog post, prepping for a meeting, or just trying to sort out how something sounds, even young children often are good with logic and narrative.

Trying to explain something complicated to someone not quite at your level of sophistication may resemble a bit too exactly talking to your boss. And some kids are brighter than their parents, as I can testify with my two at home.

A Writing Experience Led to a Boost in Confidence

Tonya recounts that her son Tristan wrote an article at age 8 for the publication she and her husband, Adam, co-founded. (Read Tonya's side of it in Take Your Child to Work Day, Macworld Expo Style and Tristan's article, How to Google Earth.)

They found this a fun family activity, which bolstered his confidence with writing, and allowed him to be a part of the family business. He had also read and commented on several Take Control manuscripts when the Engsts ran this book-publishing firm.

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About the Author

Glenn Fleishman never stops writing about technology and its implications. He's in his third decade of writing for publications as varied as *American History*, *Fast Company*, the *Economist*, *Wired*, *Smithsonian* magazine, Ars Technica, Atlas Obscura, the *New York Times*, *Macworld*, and TidBITS, among many others. In 2012, he won on Jeopardy—twice! His latest book is *Take Control of Zoom*.

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Shameless Plug

If you liked this book, you might enjoy some of the many other Take Control titles I've written, including *Take Control of Zoom* and *Take Control of Slack*.

About the Publisher

alt concepts inc., publisher of Take Control Books, is operated by Joe Kissell and Morgen Jahnke, who acquired the ebook series from TidBITS Publishing Inc.'s owners, Adam and Tonya Engst, in May 2017. Joe brings his decades of experience as author of more than 60 books on tech topics (including many popular Take Control titles) to his role as Publisher. Morgen's professional background is in development work for nonprofit organizations, and she employs those skills as Director of Marketing and Publicity. Joe and Morgen live in San Diego with their two children and their cat.

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