



# Working Remotely

## Resources for a Virtual Workforce

Working outside the office presents a special set of challenges, especially for those new to the arrangement. Your GuidanceResources Employee Assistance Programme understands this and is available to help you to be happier and more productive during work and free time. This resource guide explains how the EAP can assist you and offers practical guidance on being a vital part of your organisation even while working remotely.

### Resources Available Through Your ComPsych® GuidanceResources Programme

Your GuidanceResources programme has been designed to give you and your colleagues simple, fast, direct access to confidential services 24 hours a day, seven days a week by phone, online or via our mobile site. To help you better understand how your Employee Assistance Programme works, below is an overview of typical services offered by an EAP.

#### Confidential Counselling

Life can be stressful. The EAP offers relief with short-term counselling services for employees and their dependents to help them handle concerns constructively, before they become issues. They can call anytime about marital, relationship and family problems; stress, anxiety and depression; grief and loss; job pressures or substance abuse. Their call will be answered by our highly trained GuidanceConsultants<sup>SM</sup>, clinicians who will listen to their concerns and guide them to the resources they need.

#### Work-Life Solutions

Too much to do, and too little time to get it all done? Work-life specialists at ComPsych do the research and provide qualified referrals and customised resources for child and elder care, moving, pet care, University planning, home repair, buying a car, planning an event, selling a house and more.

#### Legal Support

With GuidanceResources, your employees have a lawyer on call. They can speak with an expert about divorce, custody, adoption, real estate, debt and bankruptcy, landlord/tenant issues, civil and criminal actions and other legal issues. If they require representation, they can be referred to a qualified lawyer for a free 30-minute consultation and will be given a 25 percent reduction in customary legal fees thereafter.

#### Financial Information

Everyone has financial questions. With GuidanceResources, your employees can get answers about budgeting, debt management, tax issues and other money concerns from on-staff CPAs, Certified Financial Planners® and other financial experts, simply by calling the toll-free number.

#### GuidanceResources® Online

Guidanceresources.com and the mobile app, GuidanceNow<sup>SM</sup>, allow anytime, anywhere access to expert information on thousands of topics, including relationships, work, school, children, wellness, legal, financial and free time. They can search for qualified child and elder care, lawyers and financial planners, as well as ask questions, take self-assessments and more.

*GuidanceResources benefits are strictly confidential. To view the ComPsych HIPAA privacy notice, please go to [www.guidanceresources.com/privacy](http://www.guidanceresources.com/privacy). If you have questions regarding your company's programme, please contact your internal benefits manager or ComPsych account manager.*

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## How the GuidanceResources Programme Can Help

### Work-Life Balance

- Moving and relocation resources
- Support groups and community resources
- Child or elder care arrangements
- Finding pet sitters or groomers
- Education and professional training resources

### Legal Concerns

- Landlord-tenant issues
- Divorce and separation
- Wills and estate planning
- Criminal and civil issues
- Bankruptcy filing

### Financial Issues

- Credit card debt and liability
- Identity theft
- Retirement planning
- Income tax questions
- Budgeting help
- Insurance issues

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# Resources for Employees

## HelpSheets

- Tips for the Virtual Employee
- How can I maintain relationships with my co-workers while working remotely?
- How can I stay focused while working remotely?
- Cost-effective Home Office Ideas

## Flyers

- Creating an Effective Daily Work Routine
- Tips for Video Conferencing
- Setting Up Your Workspace

## Tips for the Virtual Employee

The case for being a virtual employee is a pretty easy one to make. The short commute, the lenient dress code, the flexibility and the comfortable office culture only begin to address the benefits of working from home. But while there is plenty of upside, there's also considerable downside to working outside the office. In a recent survey, 61 percent of managers of virtual employees reported having misinterpreted co-workers through email, according to the Mobile Work Exchange, a public-private partnership that supports telework efforts. Another 32 percent rated the lack of face-to-face contact as the No. 1 telework communication challenge. But communication issues are only the start, according to virtual employees. Among the other top worries:

- Feelings of isolation
- Concerns about missed career opportunities
- Lack of trust by managers and co-workers
- Declining self-motivation

The thing to keep in mind is that these issues are easily surmountable with a little effort. Here are some tips for staying on top while staying at home to work:

**Get off to a good start.** As much as possible, ensure that you have access to the communication tools, software and bandwidth needed to get the job done. Nothing halts workflow or creates frustration faster than lacking the proper tools.

**Over-communicate to avoid misunderstandings.** Without daily personal interaction, it can be difficult to establish a rapport with co-workers and managers. This can lead to several issues, including:

- Misinterpretation of questions or facts
- An escalation of emotions, especially frustration and anger
- Inbox overflow

Email and online chat are great tools, but they can lead to misunderstandings. Reach out to your colleagues often and talk with them one-on-one or in a group as much as possible. Encourage them to do the same with you. Verbal clues to meaning and personality are much more apparent in conversation than in written communication.

**Create your own watercooler.** Feeling isolated and the lack of rapport with and trust in colleagues are some chief complaints of virtual employees. You can blame much of this on the absence of an office canteen or water cooler. Casual workday interactions can be vital to team-building, problem-solving and well-being. To give yourself these same opportunities, try to create virtual canteens. Skype, team chat rooms and group teleconferencing services can be good substitutes. Be sure when gathering in these spaces that the atmosphere is casual enough to allow for the free flow of information, whether the chat is about sports, the latest TV shows or the work at hand.

**Make the extra effort.** No matter how happy you are working off site, you need to meet managers and colleagues face-to-face from time to time. Take advantage of project kickoffs, year-end report-outs, office parties and similar events to be in the office and to network with colleagues, managers and supervisors. Some other career development tips:

- Make sure you understand the larger organisational picture and how your part is aligned with overall strategy
- Be your own advocate: Let others know what you've been working on and what successes you've had so you don't fall into the out-of-site, out-of-mind trap.
- Find a mentor who can tout your efforts and keep your name in the mix for new challenges
- Look for learning opportunities to advance your skills
- Join a professional organisation to widen your network

**Build a rhythm.** Offices function on monthly, quarterly or annual cycles, allowing employees to gage the pace of their work and to set meaningful deadlines. Create the same rhythm for yourself, scheduling online and face-to-face meetings, deadlines and updates with managers at regular intervals.

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## How can I maintain relationships with my co-workers while working remotely?

It can be difficult to maintain long-distance relationships with your co-workers if you work from home or a remote office. It is crucial to regularly keep in touch with your team members to ensure that you are always on the same page when it comes to projects, assignments and other work-related goals.

In addition, having positive relationships in the workplace helps to facilitate a sense of camaraderie and makes working with one another a pleasant experience. Consider the following information to learn how to maintain relationships with your co-workers while working remotely.

### Consider Time Differences

Remember to be considerate of your co-workers who work in different time zones. Working even an hour ahead or behind your co-workers can affect your daily communication with them. Always keep their schedules in mind by avoiding calling during their lunch hours or when they usually take breaks. Try not to send them requests or assignments right at the end of their work day, unless absolutely necessary. They will likely try their best to be mindful of your work hours as well, so make sure this consideration is mutual.

### Email

Email is the communication tool you are likely to use most frequently while working remotely. Email is a great way to communicate extensive information to your co-workers that they may not have time to listen to on the phone or will have to reference later. Try to be as clear as possible in your writing in order to avoid any miscommunication. Remember to always double-check that you are sending your email to the correct person, and that all attachments you intend to send (if any) are, in fact, attached. Always be pleasant in your email communication and include a greeting at the top. Do not hesitate to ask how their day is going if appropriate, as this can add a nice touch to an email.

### Instant Messaging

Instant messaging is a great, informal way to stay in touch with your co-workers. Many companies offer an instant messaging service specifically for their employees to use. This is great for quick and simple questions for your team members, or to just ask them how their day is going. Remember that although it is your priority is to get work done, it is OK to check-in with your co-workers every now and then about how their work day is going or about recent events that have been happening in the office. This can keep you in the loop about what is going on and also help you create a positive and enjoyable relationship with your co-workers.

### Phone

Sometimes, it can be difficult to brainstorm ideas and solutions to problems with your team members via written communication. It may be helpful to schedule regular calls during the week for this purpose, in order to freely discuss these things without having to type excessively or send multiple emails back and forth. In addition, some concepts are difficult to explain in writing and may be best verbally communicated to your team members. Phone calls are also much quicker than waiting to receive emails from one another, as long as the other person is free at the time you call. Check their calendar first, if possible, to ensure that they are.

### Meet-ups or Video Calls

If your home or remote office is not very far from the main office, try to meet up with your co-workers every once in a while. Initiate a monthly or bi-monthly outing with them and encourage them to think of ideas for future outings. The outing can be food or beverage-related or can include activities.

If you work very far from your co-workers, consider scheduling video call meetings with them instead of just teleconferencing. This way, everyone has a chance to actually see one another during the discussion. Face-to-face meetings or calls can help you form new relationships with your co-workers or rekindle past relationships you may have had if you previously worked in the same office.

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## How can I stay focused while working remotely?

Working from a remote location can be challenging, whether you are working from a global office, a client's office or just from your home. An unfamiliar work environment comes with its own set of obstacles and distractions. Consider the following information to learn how to stay focused in this new work environment.

### Write Down Daily Goals

To combat any distractions brought on by the new work environment, create lists of what you want to achieve every day. Make each list at the end of the work day for the next day's tasks. Writing down what you want to accomplish for the day gives you a sense of direction. During the day, as you complete each task, cross it off. This system can help you to stay focused and motivated in order to eventually cross off all the tasks by the end of the work day.

### Ergonomic Exercises

Your new workspace may take some time to get used to. For example, the chair, desk, keyboard or wrist pad may feel different from the ones you normally use in your regular office. As a result, your body may feel tense. Incorporate ergonomic exercises into your day, if possible and appropriate. Some ergonomic exercises can include shoulder rolls, wrist rolls, hand stretches and hand grips (squeezing a stress ball or hand grip). These simple exercises can get your blood flowing and keep your body relaxed. If your body is relieved of tension, you will be more likely to focus well.

### Personalise Your Work Environment

If you have to work remotely for many days or weeks, personalise your workspace if possible. Put up a photo of your family or friends, add some small art pieces or keep a favourite mug on your desk. Having something familiar to look at throughout the day will be calming and also give you motivation to continue working hard.

### Stay in Touch with Co-workers

In your usual work environment, working in proximity of your co-workers can keep you focused. This is because you are all likely working toward the same or similar goals under the same circumstances. Seeing them hard at work can be reassuring and help you stay on task.

Unfortunately, since you cannot be around your co-workers while working remotely, it is important to keep in touch with them via email, instant message or phone. Of course, you should not contact them excessively, but it may be a good idea to check in with the ones whom you work closely with at certain points during the day or week. Not only will this keep you all updated on one another's progress on mutual projects, but it will also remind you that you are not working alone and help you stay focused.

### Stick to Your Regular Routine

Although it may be difficult in a new environment, try to stick to your regular work routine if possible. This means starting and finishing work at the same times, as well as taking your regular lunch break. It also means doing the same activities that you normally do. For example, if you usually enjoy going for a walk outside for part of your lunch, continue doing so while working remotely. Similarly, if you like to have snacks at certain times during the day, continue doing this as well. Sticking to your usual routine will create a sense of stability, keeping you focused on what is most important: the work.

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## Cost-effective Home Office Ideas

Different people work better under different conditions. In order to determine where to place your home office, consider the conditions you work best under. Do you prefer natural lighting? Do you like to work somewhere quiet with minimal distraction? Do you prefer working somewhere with a lot of activity?

By asking yourself these questions, you will be able to decide on the most ideal spot for your home office. It is OK if you prefer to work in a common area like on the couch, patio or dining room table, but make sure you have a space that is solely dedicated to your professional work, records and supplies, even if it is just in a corner in the kitchen.

- Desks come in all shapes and sizes. Look for cheap desks online, at garage sales or second-hand stores. If the price of the desk is a bargain, but the colour is not your favourite, consider painting it. In fact, you may want to consider building your own desk to suit your needs. If you do not have a lot of room, try building a desk and shelves directly into the wall, but consult your local hardware store for the right tools, equipment and wood before building.
- Office chairs can be expensive and bulky. Instead, look for a nice folding chair and a seat pillow for extra support and colour. You may also want to browse second-hand stores for used chairs. Before purchasing a chair, measure the dimensions of your desk to ensure the chair will fit, and do not forget to consider the chairs you already own.
- Recycle mugs, cups, cans or jars to hold pens, pencils and other office supplies. If you like, you can decorate them with wrapping paper, paint or stickers. Other cost-effective storage ideas include shoeboxes, hatboxes, baskets, ottomans and fabric bins.
- File cabinets are expensive and take up a lot of space. To optimise your space, be as paperless as possible. There are many sites which allow you to store your files in cloud storage. You may consider purchasing an external hard-drive in order to keep hard copies of your files in case your computer crashes.
- If you have a small space but a lot of electronics, consider buying a power strip so you can plug your computer, phone and printer into one outlet. To save money on your electricity bill, unplug the power strip and your electronics when they are not being used. To keep cords neat and tidy, use rubber bands.

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## Creating an Effective Daily Work Routine

Whether in the office or working from home, creating and following a daily work routine can help you stay focused and organised. Consider integrating the following information into your daily schedule:

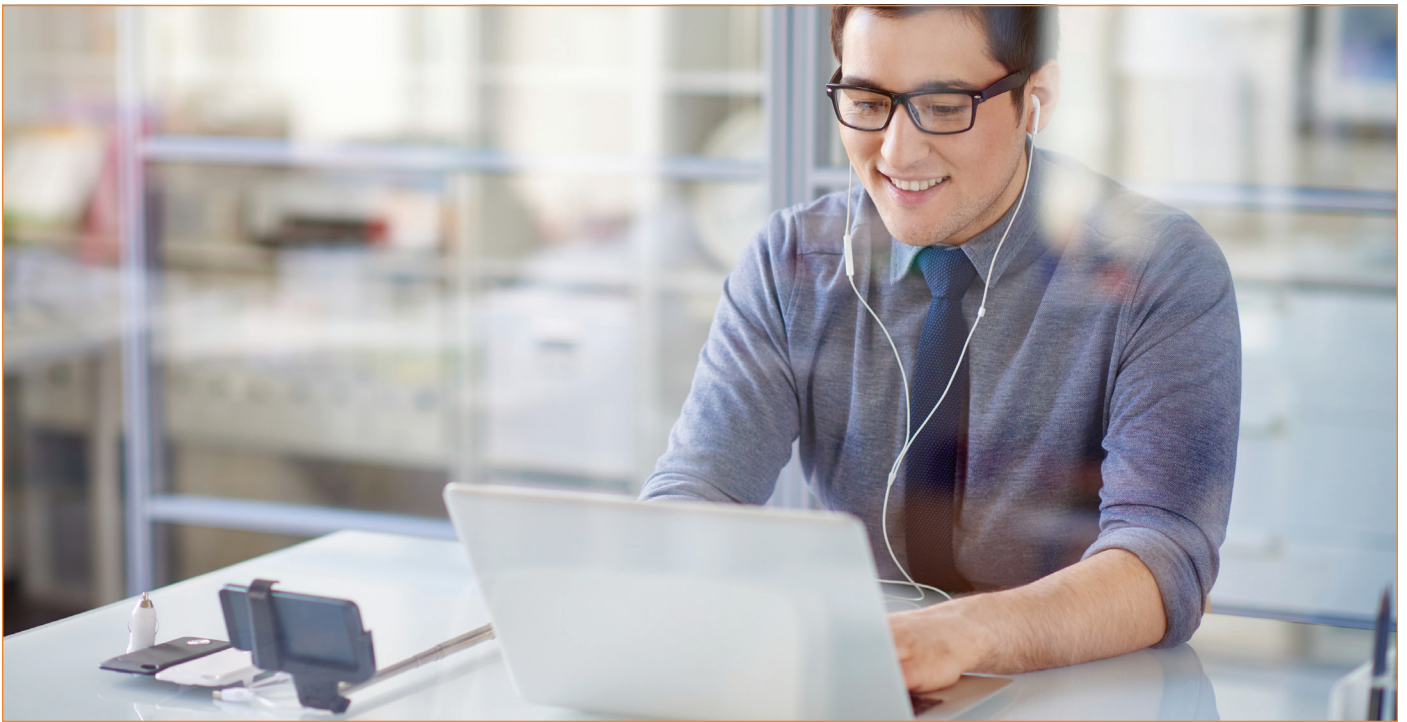
**Get your sleep.** Most adults need seven to eight hours of sleep every night.

**Have breakfast.** Studies show that eating breakfast can improve concentration and performance.

**Prioritise tasks.** Check your email every morning to determine which emails are most pressing, which can be taken care of quickly and which are not pressing. Approaching your email this way can lessen stress and help you work more efficiently.

**Drink water.** Keep a water bottle on your desk to stay hydrated throughout the day. For every 100 milligrams of caffeine you have (the amount present in two cups of black tea or one cup of coffee) you should have a cup of water.

**Move.** Set aside a few minutes throughout your day to get up and stretch your legs. Taking a break from your desk allows your mind to refresh and regain focus.



## Tips for Video Conferencing

Regardless of who is conferencing, it is important to keep in mind that this is a visual form of communication and there are factors to incorporate:

- **Eye contact.** Traditional telephone conversations give no eye contact cues. Video conferencing sometimes give incorrect impressions that the user is inattentive or disinterested if they are not making eye contact with the system's camera. It is a good idea to remind users where the camera is and where to look when speaking.
- **Appearance.** Because there is only one camera, users must remember to dress appropriately to present an acceptable appearance on-screen. Also, with large groups in one location, it is difficult for everyone to be seen at one time.
- **Preparation.** It is good to plan ahead a video conferencing call. This way people who want to be included can be there at the time of connection, images or other items they wish to share are available, and there is more time to focus on the conversation than getting what is needed.
- **Avoid Interruptions.** If working from home, make sure family, friends and housekeepers know you will be on a call so there will be no interruptions. Keep pets somewhere safe and quiet, so they don't interrupt you either. Also, if possible, use a dedicated room shut off from the rest of your home to ensure privacy.



## Setting Up Your Workspace

Situate yourself in a dedicated space with some privacy when working at home. If you are set up on the dining room table or other area where the family can interfere, it will be difficult to keep on task. Make sure your family members respect your work area as a place of business.

Here are some other tips for staying focused:

- **Organise your workspace.** Make sure you have easy access to your computer, phone, files, reference materials and other office supplies in a place that's both comfortable and conducive to work.
- **Stick to a routine.** Even though you may be tempted to skip the shower and live in your pajamas, don't. Dress appropriately and start at a regular time each day. Sticking to a routine will keep you on track and productive.
- **Remember to take breaks.** Sometimes being at home is more stressful because you find yourself working from the time you get up until the time you go to bed. Schedule your work as you would if you were at the office. Take a lunch break. At the end of the day, do something that switches you off the work clock.
- **Limit your distractions.** While many people telecommute because they feel they can spend more time with their children or spouse, work comes first. Let them know that you should not be disrupted while working.