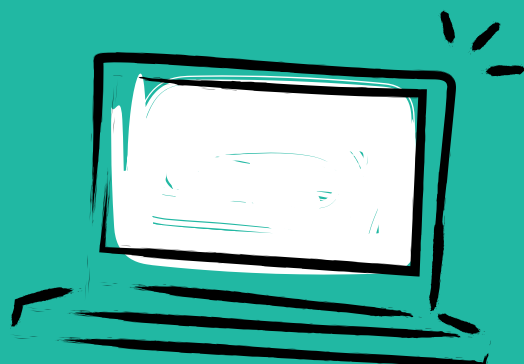# THE REMOTE WORK GUIDE

## TIPS, HACKS AND TOOLS FOR MAKING THE MOST OF WFH

Companies are making—or have made—the large-scale shift to remote work, leaving many leaders and technology professionals asking themselves the same question: How do I work from home effectively?

This guide will provide you with the insights and resources you need to succeed in your role as you begin (or continue) your WFH journey.

# HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE, COLLABORATIVE REMOTE WORKER

The first time I started working from home was an eye-opener. I felt kind of isolated and adrift. A lot of my direction at work came from the "drive-by" meetings that happen in corridors and the break room, and without that, I didn't always know what I should be doing or thinking. I also sometimes had difficulty getting motivated—I mean, there's a TV and an Xbox right there!

Now, with almost 20 years of remote work under my belt, I've gotten better about dealing with the isolation (and avoiding temptation) so I can work effectively. Here are some principles that have helped me survive and thrive as a remote worker.

## 1. SET BOUNDARIES

Working from home may sound great to some people, like a 24/7 semi-vacation with a refrigerator always within arm's reach. In practice? Not so much—at least not if you want to get any work done at all. When you work from home, you are literally sleeping at the office, so it's important from the onset to set some boundaries.

This starts with having a dedicated working space. In that space, you're at work; outside it, you're at home. This creates structure in your mind, but also sets expectations so your partner, kids and even the dog understand when you're "at work," too.

Don't have a dedicated space? Get creative! I have a friend who needed to spend a month working from home but didn't have an extra room for a home office, so she took a corner of their dining table and used blue painter's tape to outline a bit of the table and the surrounding floor. Her rule for her kids was, "When mom is in the box, she's at work."

## 2. OVER-COMMUNICATE, THEN COMMUNICATE SOME MORE

I'm fortunate to work for a company that's spread across the globe, so we tend to be Slack-first in communicating with each other already. It doesn't function quite the same as those drive-by break room "meetings," but it's close. People talk a lot about apps like Slack as a distraction or time-waster, but when you have a large portion of your workforce working remotely, getting in the habit of using Slack

for casual communication is a pro, not a con. We use it in lieu of email for most internal conversations, because it "feels" more like regular office chatter and less formal.

While we do schedule plenty of video meetings that include remote people, we're also just as likely to ping someone in Slack and say, "Hey, got a sec to talk?" and then use Zoom or Slack's built-in video chat to hash something out. It's akin to walking up to someone's desk in an office and saying, "Hey, can we grab a room and chat for a minute?"

You should also over-communicate if you're going to be in a long planning meeting for most of the day, taking a lunch break at an irregular time, or are going to be starting work later than normal on a certain day. People can't physically see you working, so don't assume they know if you're going to be offline or heads down for a bit. Just tell them.

And Slack doesn't have to be all work talk! Think about all of the side conversations you have at the office with coworkers throughout the day about food, new favorite shows, sports and true crime podcasts. They may seem trivial, but they can improve morale and build common ground with coworkers. If you're working from home and just let those side conversations die, remote work can feel even more isolating than it already is.

### 3. FOCUS AND LEARN

One of the biggest advantages working from home gives you that you can't get from the office is peace and quiet. If we're being honest, a lot of time (and focus) in the office is burned on distracting snack breaks, loud desk neighbors and all the this-could-have-been-an-email meetings that pop up throughout the day. But at home, you can reclaim some of that time and devote it to learning.

For example, when I take a break, I like to schedule an hour a day to watch conference session recordings or skill up on a training platform, which helps me keep up with what's happening in my field. Or I'll sit down and write an article (like this one) to share my experience and expertise with others, knowing I'm less likely to be pulled out of a "writing groove" than I would at the office.

When you find yourself getting drawn into Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or whatever your "poison" is, stop yourself and remind yourself that you own your time as a remote worker. Make a list of productive learning you could spend time on instead, and if you're not plugging away on a project, start working through that list.

### 4. STAY ENGAGED

As an always-remote employee, I sometimes feel like I don't know much about what else is going on in the company. For example, I'm a big DevOps guy, but I realized that I don't even know what toolchains my company's own DevOps team uses. So I made the effort to pose the question to other employees and got responses back that helped me gain institutional knowledge.

Like using Slack to collaborate, engaging with your coworkers and the business as a whole by asking questions is something you may have to force yourself to do at first, but once it becomes a habit, you can evangelize it across the company. If everyone is on the same page, the "community" of your company won't really suffer regardless how many people are working remotely.

**Developing your remote "muscle"**

These days, I truly enjoy being a remote worker, and I think most companies should make an effort to let as many people as possible work remotely, at least on occasion.

Just like a strong disaster recovery plan, a good remote-working plan coupled with a remote-accessible culture can be a critical competitive advantage for a business. Unexpectedly lose power at the office? Go remote. Snowed in? Go remote. There are a lot of common, innocuous situations where remote-working capabilities can save the day, or at least significantly reduce negative impact.

And even if you never end up working remote, having the "muscle" to be able to do it effectively in a pickle is never a bad thing.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Don Jones' broad IT experience comes from 20 years in the business, with a strong focus on Microsoft server technologies. He's the author of more than 45 technology books, including titles on administration and software development, and writes monthly columns for the industry's leading periodicals. He's an in-demand speaker at technical conferences and symposia worldwide, and is widely recognized as one of the top trainers in the Microsoft sector.

# 10 MUST-HAVE TOOLS FOR REMOTE WORK

Working remotely can make teamwork, communication and focused deep work more difficult. It gets even more tricky if you're working from home for the first time, or if you work in a particularly collaboration-heavy or cognitively demanding role.

For high-impact technology roles, having the right tools to be able to work seamlessly while remote is a huge priority. As someone who has worked from home for three years, these are some of my favorite tools for making the transition to remote work easy:

### 1. SLACK

Slack is essential for excellent team collaboration. You can have 1:1 conversations with coworkers and "pin" important messages. You can also collaborate with your team and other teams quickly. You can send files to each other and be notified immediately. You can use it on your machine or on a mobile device without a jarringly different UX between the two.

Additionally, there are a variety of Slack bots you can download to automate tasks, simplify your workflow and boost morale. While you'll need to be careful of time-wasting, Slack can help replace some of the social aspects of work that you lose when you work remotely.

(As a helpful tip, if you decide to put Slack or other collaboration tools on a personal machine, make sure your hard drive is encrypted. You don't want someone stealing your laptop and getting access to company discussions and private information.)

### 2. GOOGLE DRIVE/DROPBOX

This is a no-brainer; I couldn't live without these. Many attachments are too big for email, which isn't the best way to organize files in the first place. Using Google Drive and Dropbox, you can easily send files or collaborate on projects.

I prefer Dropbox for sending files remotely and Google Drive for real-time collaboration. To make things easy, I create a folder like this:

/projects

Then, within each project folder I structure it like this:

/Spreadsheets

/Docs

/Shared (General things to pass to other teams)

With these integrated tools, you can manage permissions and share safely with external colleagues. It feels like you're sharing a part of your hard drive with your coworkers, which is how it should be.

### 3. GITHUB

GitHub is a great way to share code repositories publicly, but with a Pro account, you can also use it to share private code. Many companies use it in this way to enable collaboration on their engineering teams and eliminate knowledge silos. Just remember to enable two-factor authentication if you're passing your organization's source code on GitHub.

You can also share lighter snippets of code (which are called Gists) with coworkers if you just need to hammer out an issue or share knowledge quickly.

### 4. ZOOM

Working remotely means you'll have less face-to-face contact with your coworkers. Facial expressions, tone and mood are essential parts of communication, so having video calls wherever possible (instead of simply phone calls) is something your team should prioritize. Zoom is a great tool to facilitate the face-to-face interactions while remote.

Keep in mind that if a portion of your team works remotely and portion in-office, you'll need to put in extra effort to ensure a high-quality experience for those who are remote. Don't ignore those "not in the room" or treat them as less important participants in the group conversation. Ask them questions, and give them the time to unmute themselves and provide input.

### 5. RESCUETIME

RescueTime is an application that monitors your activity on your computer and breaks down how much time you spend on each task. For example, you can see how much time you spend on "productive" applications and websites versus how much time you spend on social media. (Don't worry if social media management is part of your job; you can reclassify different websites based on your needs.)

Just the same as you'd keep a budget to avoid wasteful spending, using a time-monitoring application can help you self-monitor and build better habits to avoid the temptation of time-wasting apps.
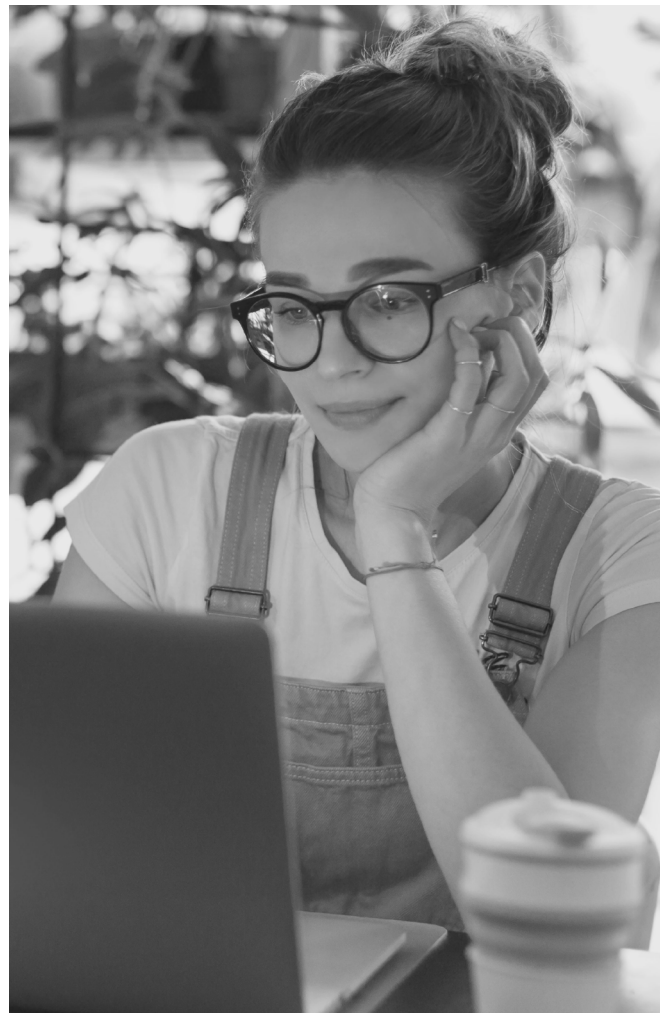


### 6. TOMIGHTY

The Pomodoro technique—25 minutes of heads-down work with 5-minute breaks in between—is a simple, effective way of staying focused. This timer app shows you what interval you're currently in, and you can adjust the length of the "work" or "break" periods according to how you work best.

### 7. CODEPEN

Let's say you have a design idea you want to share with your team, but don't want to spend the time to put it on a web server or have a coworker set one up. With CodePen, you drop in some HTML, JavaScript or CSS and send it in a link. The person you send it to can view and edit your app and then simply send the link back. This can be helpful to show a concept or UI idea without a ton of overhead.

## 8. TODOIST

Most people need a way to organize priorities and what they need to do for the day to get anything done. Todoist is an excellent solution for that; it's a simple way to prioritize tasks for the day.

With Todoist, you can create tasks and organize them by project (which you can manage on your own or share with teammates), and set reminders for due dates. You can change the priority tags of the tasks as the project evolves, and keep track of your progress over time. The app also integrates with your email and calendar applications.

## 9. WORLD TIME BUDDY

If you're working remotely with other remote teams, time zones can be a struggle when you're trying to do the time conversion math in your head. World Time Buddy makes it easy to do time zone conversions when scheduling a phone call or meeting.

## 10. SYNERGY

Synergy is an excellent application for a more fully realized home office. If you have multiple computers running, you can use the same mouse and keyboard on all of them within your office. This is particularly useful for testers who want to move over to a test machine to run jobs, then go back to their workstation smoothly.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeremy Morgan is a tech blogger, speaker and author who loves technology. He has been a developer for nearly two decades and has worked with a variety of companies—from the Fortune 100 to shoestring startups. He has spent the last several years as a DevOps consultant, helping organizations move code faster through automated pipelines.

Jeremy is currently a Pluralsight author, empowering technologists to keep their skills sharp. In his free time, he loves to push the limits of his home lab.

# REMOTE LEARNING: STAYING SHARP WHILE YOU'RE ON THE BENCH

Every so often, we hit times in our careers when life doesn't go the way we want. It could be a sudden change in employment status, an unexpected illness or injury, or even something as unforeseen as what we're experiencing now in early 2020, with large organizations mandating that teams work remote to combat the spread of COVID-19.

Half a decade ago, I hit my own "speed bump" to my professional development when I found myself in a hospital, largely paralyzed, from a rare neurological condition called Guillain-Barre Syndrome (also called GBS). While I obviously would have preferred not to have been "benched" by this condition in the first place, it was a reality I had to deal with and make the most of quickly.

Luckily, I was able to make the most of it by using remote learning to stay relevant, passionate and valuable to my employer, both while I was on leave and as I rejoined the workforce (on a remote part-time basis and then later going back to the office full-time). Many of the points I'll talk about below are a direct result from my time trying to stay connected with the development world, continuing to grow my skills and working to rejoin the workforce.

With that, let's talk about how to effectively learn and grow while working remotely on a short-term or long-term basis.

## THE REALITY OF BEING REMOTE

Remote work is becoming more sought after and accepted as a practice within the technology industry, but it comes with pros and cons.

Remote workers can be more productive, spend less time in traffic, are less likely to spread illnesses, have less impact on the environment and feel more fulfilled, but they can also find it harder to communicate, engage in conversations about new technologies, ask for help with problems or bounce ideas off teammates. Anything related to communication or collaboration takes more energy to initiate and coordinate, which makes them less likely to occur.

How does this relate to remote learning? By replacing the inherently social structures of a physical office, team stand-ups and in-person collaboration with tools like Slack and email, knowledge sharing and learning new things becomes harder because sources of new information are harder to reach. If you aren't careful, remote work can quickly become ubiquitous with isolation and knowledge silos—and your skills can become irrelevant, outdated or unpolished.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING AND TECH SKILL DEVELOPMENT WHILE REMOTE

Thankfully, there are some solutions to these problems. Here are some of the ways I stayed engaged and improved my circumstances by taking an active approach to remote learning:

### 1. Engaging on social media

The development community on Twitter is fantastic. I can take a random technical question and throw it out on Twitter and get a number of responses and library links within a few hours. Additionally, by following fellow technologists, I learn of libraries and trends that I'm not personally familiar with.

Getting started is pretty easy: Pick a few prominent developers in your community and follow them. Authors and conference speakers tend to have the most active Twitter accounts. From there, you can see who they're following and follow related people until you have a steady stream of technical information coming your way.

As with any social media platform, you'll need to be careful that Twitter doesn't become a time sink; I

recommend creating an account that is only oriented towards technical content, or creating a dedicated Twitter List of technologists, to help keep you focused.

*2. Listening to podcasts and audiobooks*

Many people enjoy listening to podcasts while developing or commuting. If you're remote, you're less likely to be driving places, but you can still listen to podcasts as you're getting started in the morning or taking a break for lunch.

I listen to audiobooks from Audible on leadership, business, communication, statistics and other skills that help me beyond purely being a programmer. I often listen to topics that are different from other topics that I'm reading about in order to add some diversity to my learning.

*3. Watching online courses and conference talks*

Just because you're working remotely doesn't mean you can't watch conference videos or other learning content. In fact, the quiet environment makes it ideal for watching dedicated learning videos without outside distractions. As someone who has spent an extended time in the hospital and out of the workforce, I can tell you that online videos help you stay connected and inspired even while separated.

Many conferences will publish their videos to YouTube, Pluralsight or other platforms, and a growing number of companies are now utilizing online learning platforms to give their employees access to additional learning materials. At several points in my career, I've made explicit arrangements with my manager allowing me to watch one hour of online video content every week. This adds up over time and helps keep you connected, aware and enthusiastic about technology.

*4. Finding your community*

You may not think of connection as a significant factor, but in my experience being part of a larger community is absolutely essential to us as people—and particularly to software engineers. I've found that I do my best work when I have someone to bounce ideas off of, get second opinions and have someone available to challenge my assumptions and thought processes.

In short, having a community to remain connected with helps keep you passionate, challenges your assumptions, and gives you the benefit of everyone else's continued learning and growth. As mentioned before, you may find this on Twitter, but you can also start a channel on your company Slack with like-minded people who want to learn, or find a developer community on Reddit or other forums.

*5. Reading books and blogs*

Used programming books can be amazing. Buy a few related to topics you're interested in, then keep them around for a rainy day. Read a chapter over lunch, or even just a couple paragraphs while your code is building or tests are running. Books can teach you new ways of doing things, help you learn things over time at a greater depth, and serve as a reference point when you are stuck.

If you'd prefer to keep it online, blogging communities like dev.to host an amazing community of writers who seek to explore all manner of technologies in depth, and the site allows you to easily write content yourself.

**USING REMOTE LEARNING TO IMPACT YOUR FUTURE**

Unplanned remote work or forced downtime can be frustrating, demoralizing and isolating. But I've found it to be one of the best opportunities to turn lemons into lemonade, from a professional development standpoint. While recovering from my own illness, I gained new skills and a greater confidence that eventually led me to seek out leadership, public speaking and mentorship opportunities I may not have otherwise.

If your remote work situation takes place under less-than-ideal circumstances, I hope you can find some usefulness in the tools I've shared in order to make the most of your time at home.

(And in the name of practicing what I just preached: If you have other ways you've found effective in helping you learn and grow, I'd love to hear them. You can reach out to me on Twitter at @Integerman or via my site at KillAllDefects.com.)

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Matt Eland is committed to helping people achieve greater things. After more than three decades of coding, Matt put away his mechanical keyboard and made teaching his primary job as he looks to help others grow.

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