



# A practical guide to successful homeworking: by BT's veteran homeworkers

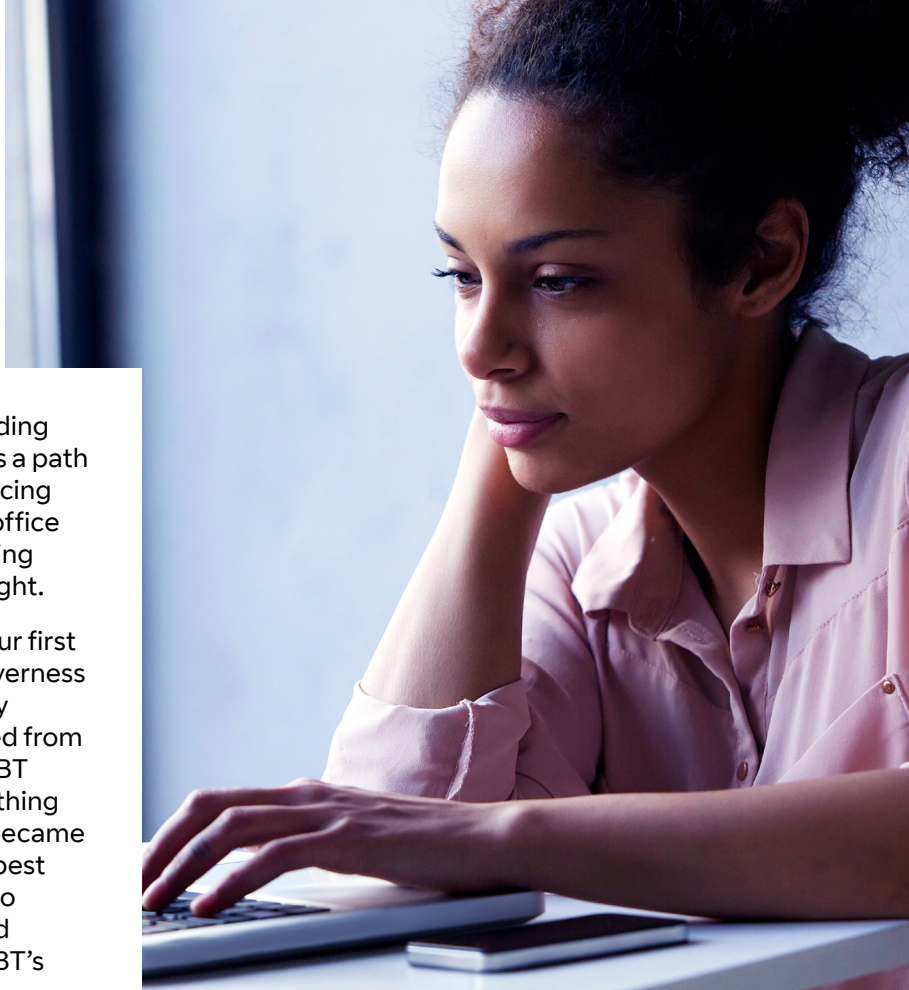
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# Contents

Introduction	3
Practical homeworking hints and tips	
1. Build a workspace that suits you and your environment	4
2. Establish a routine, set goals and know when to switch off	6
3. Keep healthy and don't feel guilty for taking breaks	9
4. Connect with colleagues, have virtual coffees, and recreate 'watercooler' moments	11
5. Make remote working less remote by using technologies effectively	12
The future homeworking legacy	13





Homeworking isn't new. But many of us are finding ourselves being new at it. As COVID-19 sweeps a path across the globe many more of us are experiencing long term homeworking for the first time. We office dwellers are also rapidly discovering that working from home isn't as easy as we might have thought.

BT isn't a newbie to this homeworking thing. Our first homeworking trials were back in 1992 (the "Inverness Experiment" with directory enquiry agents). By 2000, a significant part of our workforce worked from home. I spent much of the 1990s interviewing BT homeworkers and making sure they had everything they needed to work effectively... but I never became a homeworker myself. I'm also not the world's best homeworker, so I thought I'd turn to people who have decades of experience for advice, tips and suggestions for doing it successfully – namely BT's veteran homeworkers.

### These are their top five tips:

#### 1. Build a workspace that suits you and your environment

- Create an environment that works for you and the space you have (but be mindful of security)
- Get dressed (even if you have fabulous 'day pyjamas')
- Get a good chair
- Pack things up at the end of the day.

#### 2. Establish a routine, set goals and know when to switch off

- Routine is everything – but everyone is different
- Motivate yourself by focussing on what's important to you and your role
- Plan your time
- Switch off at the end of the day
- Negotiate boundaries with your family (when you can)
- Recognise that priorities and deadlines may have to change as work and home collide and distractions increase.

#### 3. Keep healthy and don't feel guilty for taking breaks

- Don't be open all hours – let others know when you are busy, free, or unavailable
- Schedule meetings sensibly
- Keep on moving
- Beware of the fridge... and the coffee pot.

#### 4. Connect with colleagues, have virtual coffees, and recreate 'watercooler' moments

- Create connection
- Open a virtual watercooler.

#### 5. Make remote working less remote by using technologies effectively

- Video conferencing creates a better sense of connection
- Keep the conversation going with chat and social media
- Get a good wireless, noise cancelling headset.

# Practical homeworking hints and tips

## 1. Build a workspace that suits you and your environment

It's been said that work is a state of mind, rather than a place – but it's clear that establishing a 'workspace' that works for you and your household environment is vital.

Create an environment that works for you and the space you have – but be mindful of security:

- “If you are able to work in a separate room then it can help other members of the family if you have a door open / door closed policy. When open they can come in and ask questions etc. much as colleagues do when dropping by your desk, but when closed it signals you don't want to be disturbed / are on a call etc.”
  - “I find that having a large external screen with a separate keyboard and mouse means I work more efficiently and reduces the chance of RSI (Repetitive Strain Injuries).”
  - “Don't work in bed, you risk serious RSI.”
  - “Provided you have a decent Wi-Fi signal, you can work outside in the nice conditions. Be somewhere shady so you don't get screen glare and sit at a table, not with the laptop on your lap. If you don't have that luxury; just open the window.”
  - “Have a clear desk policy – clears your mind.”
  - “Be aware of who might be able to see or hear you in your environment, especially if you are handling secure data or customer information. Remember conversations carry, so be careful of what you say as you would in any other public environment like a train.”
- “A little music helps tremendously with focus when I'm not on a call and need to get into 'the zone'. But generally not contemporary vocal music. It tends to be distracting – your brain wants to sing along.”
  - “Do not turn the TV on! Radio works for me, turned down low as the noise helps me. If you are coming from a busy office the lack of noise will be off-putting.”



*“Choose a bright, sunny spot in your room to work from. Sunlight has a fantastic feel-good factor.”*





Get dressed (even if you have fabulous ‘day pyjamas’):

- “Get dressed – not necessarily normal work clothes, but not pyjamas. It just helps make that distinction between a day off and working.”
- “It’s so important for me to do the same routine as if I was leaving the house (minus the makeup and tidy hair). Definitely gets me in the mind-set for work.”
- “Do not log on until you have finished your ablutions – no toothbrush in hand etc.”
- “My top tip: comfy slippers!”

*“Dress for work. Even putting on your ID card can help switch you into work mode.”*

The single most important tip (which came up time and time again) is... get a good chair:

- “Being the grandfather of Remote Access, putting in the BTRA PSTN 0800 service, early SmartCard Key2Connect, the first AVAYA Teleworker VPN platform, moving it to Nortel before going over to MS with SSTP VPN and DA – I’d say THE most important thing is a good chair.”
- “Sitting at the dining table on a dining chair all day will wreck your back really quickly. No, seriously, get a good chair.”

Once you’re finished for the day, think of the rest of the family and pack things up:

- “If you have to set up your office in a family or communal space (living room, dining room etc.) take time to dismantle it every night and reclaim that space for its true purpose. It might feel inconvenient to you, but the people you live with will appreciate it.”

## 2. Establish a routine, set goals and know when to switch off.

We're creatures of habit. Changing these habits requires discipline. This is difficult because disruption of our normal routines can knock us for six. The office and the '9 to 5' have always given us clear boundaries, so we know when we're working and when we're not. Those boundaries can easily erode when our office and our home are the same place. Rethinking our routines – even if they mirror our old ones – and establishing when we're 'at work' is important. It's clear that it doesn't matter where we work, but how we work.

Routine is everything – but everyone is different:

- “Have a routine. I used to start whenever necessary and finished whenever. Now I ensure I'm dressed and at my desk before 8am. I have set times for breaks and lunch, of course I manage this around work calls etc. as you would in an office. I finish around 5pm. I do work flexibly but these are the basic rules I stick by.”
- “Take advantage of the flexibility of working at home. Don't feel uncomfortable with moving the start and finish times if it allows you get domestic things done that help you be more productive for work. You've no commute so there is less dead time at the start and end of the day.”
- “It is very easy to end up having a late lunch or missing it altogether because you don't have the subliminal clue of the office noise as people leave nor the empty office to prompt you. Put a lunch hour into your diary with a 15 minute reminder and don't cancel it when it pops up.”

Motivate yourself by focussing on what's important to you and your role:

- “It certainly helps having a role with personal responsibilities, as there are specific objectives to meet in set timescales, helps to focus. I also like a 'to do' list for this very reason too.”
- “Be disciplined with your priorities and deliverables, set milestones and agree objectives and key results (OKRs).”



*“The most important tip is to understand what motivates and recharges you. For example: if you need people, then make sure you have people you can check in with. If you are motivated by deliverables, set yourself goals everyday.”*

### Plan your time:

- “The diary often dictates what we do when. From a homeworking perspective I’ve always found it useful to ‘time-box’ my diary – allocating specific time to tasks and set the objective that ‘today isn’t successful unless I get this done.’”
- “Don’t be tempted to fill your day with back-to-back audio or video calls. Just because meetings are easy to schedule, doesn’t mean you should be at all of them. There’s nothing worse than sitting there thinking ‘why am I here?’, ‘what are we trying to achieve?’ and where there is no agenda or leader.”
- “Split your day into different types of task. Start with tough concentration work and put one-to-ones and discussions later when your discipline may be wavering, and the conversation will keep you focussed.”
- “I’ve recently tried ‘The Pomodoro Technique’ – essentially a time management technique that helps you break your day into ‘chunks’. For example, try splitting your day into 8 sections where you work for 25 minutes and then break for 5. I’ve found this helps me concentrate on the task at hand and helps with any mental blocks.”
- “Don’t get too disheartened if (when) days don’t go to plan and you feel you’ve not done enough. Stop when it’s time to stop!”
- “Be realistic – you’re not going to be able to work at full capacity over the coming few weeks and months. It’s important we recognise that and accept it early so we can plan consistently and (relatively) accurately. Make sure you bake in enough time during your week for desk research, for resetting, or for child or family care.”

*“Walk to work and walk home. Even if it’s round the garden, or round the block, a walk home especially helps you think you’ve finished for the day.”*

### Switch off at the end of the day:

- “For me, homeworking is like drinking at a wedding; you start way too early, and don’t know when to stop. Before you know it, you’re straight to bed having mistakenly peed in the wardrobe (OK, that last bit is where the analogy gets stretched too far). But the general point is right – with no physical distinction between home and work, you need to set a start / stop routine.”
- “I’ve always found that work is just over there and I may as well go back to it to finish that task... no surprise to me that we measured a 20% higher productivity output from our BT homeworkers compared to their office counterparts! That comes with a risk, though, and you do need to find a way to resist. My tip for that was if there were some ‘loose ends’ remaining I’d leave the laptop on standby with the option to go back to it; or if I felt my day was done I would specifically switch the laptop off and close it – subconsciously that seemed to do the trick.”
- “Finish the day by writing tasks / actions / thoughts to deal with the next day. If you work late, do something you enjoy before going to sleep, read, listen to music etc. I find this means I sleep better as it allows my mind to shut down from work before bed.”
- “Neither my laptop nor my work mobile are allowed in the lounge! Keep them in the room / corner that you’ve dedicated to working from home.”



Negotiate boundaries with your family (when you can):

- “If others are in the house make it clear you are working and set ground rules.”
- “I normally prefer to leave my office door open, but kids and conference calls don’t mix so I’m closing myself in more!”

*“At the end of the day tell the whole house ‘I’m home’ like you just came back from office.”*

- “My kids (college students now) understand that when I’m working, I’m not generally available except for true urgencies. If they pop their heads in with a question, I’ll ask them to jot it down and I’ll come chat with them when I can take a break. That’s worked well for us even when they were much younger. I haven’t been as successful with the cats, they barge in whenever they like. But at least they usually find a quiet spot and curl up for a nap!”

Recognise that priorities and deadlines may have to change as work and home collide and distractions increase.

As Professor Robert Kelly infamously found out when his toddlers gate-crashed a live BBC interview from his home office, separating out home and work life isn’t always that straightforward. Maybe it’s just time to relax about children, cats and dogs invading our workplace.

- “The current need to homework is not the same as the usual experience. One wouldn’t normally have one’s partner and children at home as well. If you are on conference calls explain your situation so that the audience can understand what is going on around you. You may have to work in an open environment with the rest of the family. Don’t forget the mute button.”
- “It’s a good point about the current not being the norm. As I’ve worked from home a lot over the years, I’m finding it hard to adjust my own mindset and say to people ‘sorry, just can’t do that call at that time.’”
- “Guest appearances on video conferences are okay! Everyone’s juggling a full-to-the-brim household, and now the kids are off school, it’s only going to become more chaotic! If you and your family happen to crop up on webcam, introduce them – we all know each other and our loved ones anyway, so let’s put names to faces.”





### 3. Keep healthy and don't feel guilty for taking breaks.

'Out of sight, out of mind' as the old saying goes. When you're working from home, there's often a subconscious pressure to be seen to be working... all hours. One big message from our BT veterans is not be chained to your laptop all day and make every effort to work healthily, take breaks and keep moving.

Don't be open all hours – let others know when you are busy, free, or unavailable:

- “Don't feel obliged to be 'available' at all times – I use the statuses on Skype to go 'busy' or 'do not disturb' as necessary – especially if I'm deep in creating a document or debugging something.”
- “Just because you're not in an office doesn't mean you have to act like you are – it's OK to put a wash on, nip out, or play with the cat. More than often these are good reasons to step away from your desk for 10 minutes.”
- “I am a big fan of switching off. I get times where I can't see the wood for the trees and just mentally need to switch off for an hour or so. I either go for a run, watch some telly, or play a computer game just to escape, then bolt the hour on later or the next day.”
- “If you are ill – do remember you can sign off sick. It doesn't do you any good struggling on (and work quality will almost always suffer).”

Schedule meetings sensibly:

- “Try to plan and pace calls to avoid bunching, or buses all coming at once. It's very easy to end up with large blocks of time that chain you to the desk / headset!”

*“Schedule calls to start at five past or 15 past and end at five to. This will help to reduce overload on any conferencing systems and give you a chance to move around and grab a coffee between calls.”*





#### Beware of the fridge... and the coffee pot:

- “Be disciplined with food. If you are like me, with your office next to the kitchen, it is very easy to snack on tasty treats. I work to have bigger (but balanced) meals for breakfast and lunch. This reduces the chance of me snacking.”
- “Do little chores or a few stretches / exercises when the kettle is boiling.”
- “Don’t drink too much coffee! I’ve had days where cup number nine goes sailing down at 5:30pm and then you lie awake wondering why you cannot switch off.”

*“Make your lunch before you start work if possible, or at least know what you’re going to have – it’s easy to eat junk food if you don’t and you’re trying to grab something between calls. Same with a drink – have a water bottle at hand.”*

#### Keep on moving:

- “Move, move, move! It is far too easy to be very sedentary and this is bad for physical and mental wellbeing. Build in time to go outside, run, walk, cycle – it does not matter. Just get out and move. I also find daily stretching helps prevent back issues.”
- “My office is in the basement and the coffee pot is upstairs (systems administrators / programmers run on caffeine) so it forces me to get up periodically. I also have a sit / stand desk which is helpful as well.”
- “I have been walking my dogs before or on lunch so I have fresh air and they sleep!”
- “Follow good DSE (display screen equipment) posture. Your back will thank you.”
- “Eat lunch away from your desk, do not look at your work phone or personal phone for 30 mins at least.”
- “Have a jug of cold water in the fridge and keep it topped up. Also buy some healthy snacks that you can pick at!”



#### 4. Connect with colleagues, have virtual coffees, and recreate “watercooler” moments.

We are social creatures – that’s why offices survive. When you work from home, the social connections that we take for granted in the real world have to be re-established virtually. That can take a bit of conscious effort.

Create connection:

- “Check in regularly – just see how people are and if they’re okay. Give them a ring or drop them a note just to see. We’ve got to look out for each other at the minute. And don’t forget your seniors and our MDs are human beings, too – let’s make sure they’re okay and not be scared of checking in.”
- “It’s important to keep connected and taking a few minutes to say ‘hello’, or ask how someone is, can make a big difference.”
- “Stand ups become more and more imperative – make them daily and sync with your teams as often as you can. It’s about keeping working together, collaborating, but also mitigating any risk if someone gets sick. Stay close and stay on top of each other’s work.”



Open a virtual watercooler:

- “There are no watercooler chats – everything needs to be scheduled. Your diary will fill up quickly with convenient 30 min blocks. Take control and block out time for one-to-one catch-ups.”
- “We’ve implemented ‘virtual desk beers’. If we can’t go to the pub, we’ll bring the pub to us. It’s an excuse to put your computer down at the end of the day, grab a beer and chat like normal in a much more relaxed way. Extend your invite out, and make it a celebration of the week. It’s worked really well for us so far, as it’s given us a bit of time to properly talk to each other and about each other.”

*“What has worked really well is having an informal coffee break style call every day to have a general chat. Maybe work related, maybe not. Is very good for maintaining a team bond when you are not sitting together.”*



*“Instant messenger is a Godsend. It’s helpful to chat with others to keep your sanity and for those ‘watercooler’ type chats.”*

## 5. Make remote working less remote by using technologies effectively.

Use the tools available to make remote working less remote. However, because there are a bewildering number of technologies out there, you also need to agree how, when and where to communicate. Too many platforms can mean that collaboration can get fragmented and confusing. Creating ‘common ground’ for collaboration – i.e. tools that are both accessible to everyone and appropriate for the task – is essential.

Video conferencing creates a better sense of connection:

Video has always been part and parcel of the homeworking package and was even included in the first trials we ran in the 90s, even though the video units were the size of a small cupboard.

- “Use video if you can – it adds personal interaction to a day that would otherwise be just on the phone.”
- “I’ve found some of my customer meetings via Teams and video more productive than the face-to-face equivalents!”
- “Don’t use every tool out there because it gets impossible to manage – Yammer and Teams and Workplace and WebEx and Skype and Zoom and <insert choice here>. Try, at least within a team, to agree a main platform and backup, and be familiar with both. Some tools work better between organisations, countries etc. than others.”

...although not everyone likes it, so please don’t pressure everyone to turn on their cameras. Be respectful that some people working from home may not have a convenient and neutral background for calls, or they may not want to share video for privacy reasons (which is why audio conferencing is also important):

- “I don’t use video conferencing. It’s better to have a good audio call than a mediocre video call.”
- “You have to make sure you are prepared for a video conference – bad hair days take a lot of taming, and I have to do my make-up, so my camera usually stays switched off.”

Keep the conversation going using chat and social media:

- “Have dedicated WhatsApp, Workplace, or Teams chats for your team to share any inane stuff that might crop up – be it a funny tweet, a terrible cat meme, a news article you’ve found that’s interesting, or to share what cocktail you’re hiding in your mug at your desk. We’d have these conversations like normal in the office – there’s no reason we can’t keep having them even though we’re remote.”

Get a good wireless, noise cancelling headset:

- “Wireless headsets really help and I make a point of walking around during those calls where there is no document sharing. Take the call outside, in the fresh air, whenever possible.”
- “Spend a bit of money on a decent wireless headset. This is vital if you are not alone at home and need background noise to ‘disappear’. Noise cancelling headsets are worth every penny, believe me!”





# The future homeworking legacy

We're in the midst of a big global experiment in remote, virtualised digital working. The results will be fascinating, but one thing's for sure: the way we work is likely to change forever.

Post-pandemic, we may view offices and collaboration in a different way. So far, we've discovered virtual meetings work better when everyone is remote. What happens when we return to a mixture of remote and co-located? Will we all want to be in offices all the time in the future? Will the climate change challenges we're currently facing force us to rethink how we use face-to-face in the future? Will we be forced to rethink the value of face-to-face?

The answers to those questions lie in the years ahead (and my crystal ball is broken). Whilst we have no choice but to work from home, I hope these insights help you to do it more successfully... and maybe continuing to do it when this crisis is a distant memory.

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