



Time Management

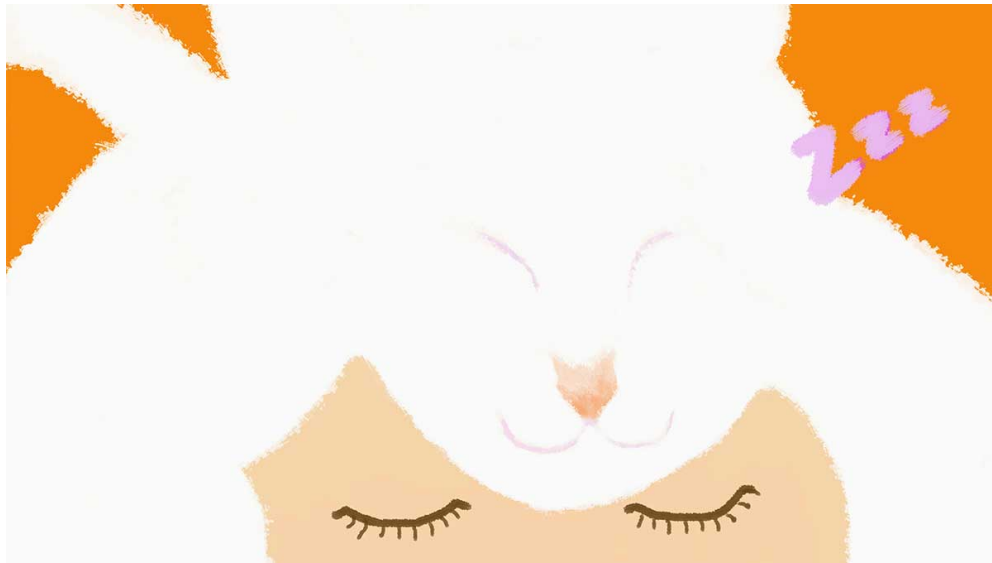
How to Work Remotely Without Losing Motivation

by Alison Buckholtz

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Telecommuters might feel guilty or ungrateful admitting it, but let's be honest: We often miss the office. Even the too-talkative, too-messy, or too-cutthroat colleagues you willed yourself to ignore when they sat near you can seem endearing when you're toiling away to the ticktock of your kitchen clock.

I've been telecommuting for almost 15 years. Sometimes it's been across oceans and time zones (we are a military family), and sometimes it's been across town (the office was short on space; I was a slave to my children's schedules; the whole operation was virtual). At this point in my career as a freelance writer-editor and consultant, I've worked for multinational

corporations, international development banks, associations, and nonprofits. I've identified one constant across this long-distance livelihood: No matter how satisfying the to-do list — or how much of an introvert you think you are — telecommuting leaves you craving company.

Here's my advice. I don't always follow it, but I'm happier when I do.

Use the time you save on commuting to read a good book. Most people read on the subway — I did, when I desked it in a downtown Washington, DC office for 10 years. Now that I'm based at home, I give myself half an hour at 8 AM and 5 PM to pick up my paperback. Whatever I absorb usually worms its way into my work, bringing a fresh perspective to the day's writing. Right now I'm halfway through *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, by Stephen Greenblatt. Its story of a bibliomaniac who unearths an ancient poem, cracking open the cultural door to the Renaissance, has inspired me with a creative way to write about a risk capital project that's due later this week. Really.

Get out of the house at least once a day. Just as General Stanley McChrystal recommends that you make your bed as soon as you wake up — so that no matter how crappy your day is, you've achieved at least one thing — getting out of the house forces a feeling of accomplishment. Walk around the neighborhood, go to the post office or dry cleaner, deliver a stack of old magazines to a hospital waiting room. Make up an errand if you have to. There's one caveat: Resist the urge to waste \$5 at Starbucks, because it will become a habit. You can dictate how long you'll be away from your work based on deadlines, but even as little as 10 minutes meeting some tangible non-work-related goal can anchor you. You don't have to make your bed unless doing it will keep you from crawling back in.

Don't make a work-together "date" just because the other person is also a remote employee. Remember the roommate from hell? The one you were randomly paired with in college based on nothing but a shared birth year? (If you didn't have one, you can borrow mine, who was

obsessed with sheetrock knives.) Meeting up with other work-from-homers to “keep each other company” is like that. If you don’t already like the person typing away across the tiny cafe table, you’re not going to bond just because both of you are fleeing daytime doldrums. Eventually, the sound of their fingers hitting the keys will make you want to grab the nearest fork and stab it through their hand. You will long to leave, but you paid too much for that stupid cappuccino.

Make someone else happy. I used to have a picture tacked up on my wall: A cartoon turtle falling from a ceiling, presumably to its death, as it says, “Wheeee, I’m flying!” The caption seemed to be urging the born pessimists among us to look on the bright side of every situation (though it’s not clear why the turtle was on the ceiling in the first place). I try to remember this during the most desperate time of the day, usually around 2 PM. My eyes are desert-dry and stinging from staring at the computer screen; my tush is numb from not moving for hours. I’m on the verge of looking up old boyfriends on Facebook or binging on the year-old, rock-hard brownies at the bottom of the freezer. So here’s what I do instead: I call my 98-year-old grandmother. Because I know it will make her happy. As I hang up the phone, a pinprick of light pokes through my mood. I squeeze Refresh into both eyes, close Facebook (again), and get back to work.

Repeat “That’s what the money is for!” My favorite scene in *Mad Men* is when Peggy complains about not being appreciated for her sparkling copy, and Don, her boss, replies, “That’s what the money is for!” Yes, being appreciated is nice, but the point of work is to get paid. It’s an inarguable fact. Working from home means that no colleague will see how long it took you to rewrite someone else’s incoherent report, will hear how suavely you navigated the stormy conference call, or will understand the depth of the research you conducted so a client could grasp a technical concept as easily as an expert. No one will appreciate you, but someone sure will be glad to get your finished work in hand. And you’ll get a paycheck delivered to the same home where you’re still unshowered and wearing pajamas.

Exercise. My treadmill is the best “work-life balance” investment I’ve ever made. Weather be damned; I’m on it every day. I’m not talking about exercise for weight loss, though that might be a great side benefit. I’m talking about exercise for sanity and productivity — making an effort so taxing that it wipes your mind clean. You can then repopulate your brain with problems and hassles that, with a new perspective, might be solved in a fresh way. This is exercise that allows you to think of nothing except what you are doing at that very moment, that has you sweating through your shirt, that leaves you exhausted and euphoric. The exhaustion won’t last, but the euphoria will, and it will see you through the rest of your solitary workday.

When all else fails, remember Maverick. I know a Navy pilot — let’s call him Maverick — who deployed to an aircraft carrier for eight months during the Iraq War. If you’ve never seen anyone land a plane on a carrier in the dead of night, be assured that it’s terrifying. But flying missions in war, even landing in darkness, was a pleasure for Maverick compared to the abuse he suffered under a power-hungry boss. Once, when the boss summoned Maverick to his stateroom at 5 AM to scream about some perceived misdeed, the boss ended the meeting by throwing his beige, 1960s-era rotary phone at Maverick’s head. (It missed.) Everything about this story comforts me when I’m hunched over my laptop feeling sorry for myself: I’m not landing a jet on an aircraft carrier at night, during a war. I’m not working at 5 AM. I’m not ducking a phone wielded by a madman whose judgment it would be treasonous to question.

Speaking of phones, I need to go call my grandmother.



Alison Buckholtz is a writer and editor living in the Washington, DC area. She is the author of the memoir *Standing By: The Making of an American Military Family in a Time of War*.