



10 Tips # Mindful self-organization when working from home

Since the TU Dresden switched to emergency operation on March 21, most of the university's employees have been working from home – under different conditions and faced with different challenges. For many people, the sudden switch to remote working is an organizational balancing act between professional activities, privacy and childcare.

We have compiled 10 tips for when you are working from home with a focus on how to maintain your workflow through self-organization and what could help you to reconcile work and family life. First of all: Working from home requires self-discipline and careful self-management and should be well planned.

#1 Separate work zones from private zones

Even if the cozy bed invites you to stay and work from there, resist the temptation and start your everyday work life organized. Separating work and private life from one another in your own premises is particularly important when you are working from home. Define so-called "work zones" and make them the only places where work e-mails are checked, teleconferences are held or research work is carried out. This can be a private study, a kitchen table or the couch in the living room. Chose places where you feel comfortable and where you can work in a concentrated and undisturbed manner. If you establish several of these "work zones", you remain more flexible, mentally and physically. Try to make the most of your individual spatial possibilities. If possible, work only in these zones and reserve the rest of your home environment for leisure activities and family. This makes it easier to close the door at the end of the working day and to switch off your thoughts and worries.

#2 Work clothes vs. leisure clothes – Get ready for work

Just as our posture affects our mind and thinking, so does our clothing. Show outer attitude by starting the day freshly showered and well-dressed. This is a sign of self-respect and helps to get into the right work mode and boost productivity. Also, you are then well prepared for spontaneous video conferences, too. On the contrary, if you dress rather casually and prefer the beloved jogging look, it might be just too tempting to switch into the relaxation mode and the leisure role.



#3 Tidy work area

There are, of course, large individual differences in the need for order in the workplace – while some people need a completely empty desk, others cannot be productive without the creative chaos of stacking papers and books around the workspace. However, structure and clarity on the outside help you to adopt an inner attitude. This will support you with tackling your tasks in a focused and structured manner. This applies even more when you are working from home, since different areas of life overlap in a confined space and the resulting confusion and disorder might distract you just too easily. Try to keep the workplace and its surroundings free of everything that has nothing to do with your immediate task. Create storage space outside your field of vision for all books, papers and documents that you do not currently need. Also, create a storage system in which you can file tasks that you have processed and those that still need to be processed. At the end of the working day, put away your documents and prepare your desk so that it invites you to sit down the next morning and get straight down to work. Tidying up in combination with creating a work plan for the next day can be a nice ritual at the end of your workday.

#4 Define your working hours and availability

Sometimes when working from home, you feel as you have to be accessible anytime, anywhere. In principle, the Working Hours Act (*Arbeitszeitgesetz*) also applies to the workplace at home and excludes your availability in your free time. In order to structure your day-to-day work, it is advisable to define your working hours also considering your personal biorhythm.

Find out when you are most productive and take this into account in your planning. Coordinate your telephone and electronic availability with your superiors and colleagues, respecting existing core working hours and agreed regulations. Clearly defined working hours help you to work with a clear focus, support your family to avoid unnecessary disruptions and increase your own planning reliability.

#5 Structure your tasks – Set daily goals

Knowing exactly which tasks are due today and in what order they have to be completed helps you to get to work in a focused and motivated manner and to be able to say exactly what you have achieved at the end of the working day. It is therefore important to divide larger tasks into smaller work packages and to derive concrete weekly and daily plans from them. The following two methods are helpful for doing this: setting SMART



targets/goals and the Eisenhowermatrix for prioritizing tasks. When you set goals for a working week or a working day, check that they are **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ppropriate (i.e. achievable), **R**elevant and **T**imed (i.e. have a clear deadline). If they meet these five criteria, your goals have good chances to be achieved.

You can use the Eisenhower method to set priorities for a variety of tasks and decide when to do what, to what extent and with what quality standards. This method combines the two dimensions of urgency and importance and distinguishes four categories into which all tasks can be classified: A) Do urgent and important tasks first and do them yourself! B) Schedule important but not (yet) urgent tasks, do not lose sight of them, take a long-term approach and do them yourself! C) Delegate or even refuse urgent but not important tasks if possible, do them at marginal times and without claiming to be perfect! D) Try to eliminate as far as possible those tasks, which are neither important nor urgent. Or shift them to your unproductive marginal times during the day!

You can apply the 5-Steps-Daily-Planning method to make your to-do lists more efficient. Proceed as follows: 1. Write down all the tasks to be done. 2. Estimate the length for each task and write it down. 3. Allocate only 60 % of your time, leave the rest as buffer time. 4. Put your tasks into a priority list and process them in that order. 5. Evaluate your to do list at the end of your work day and check what you have done and what you have to shift to the next day.

#6 Minimize disruptive factors and establish "deep work" phases

Design your environment in such a way that undisturbed, productive working hours are possible. So-called "digital detox" phases will support this: store your smartphone out of sight of your workplace, even if only for a few hours, and deactivate the push notifications of your apps. After all, the distraction of WhatsApp and Co. is only too welcome when the desire to work is taking a break. The pausing sensory overload and accessibility also have a positive effect on your stress level.

Instead, use motivating music, fixed times of availability and establish deep work phases to achieve the daily goals. Dedicate yourself to the set tasks in time spans between 60 and 90 minutes. Depending on the task and your own rhythm of concentration, the time periods can be individually designed. In addition, it is extremely efficient to book these times firmly in your schedule and to communicate them to your environment, colleagues and family.



#7 Take breaks – and do so consciously!

Regular breaks keep productivity and focus high! After intensive work phases, take a 10–15 minute break. Based on the BRAC principle (Basic Rest Activity Cycles), the human brain goes through different performance phases, attention and concentration decrease after 90 to 100 minutes. Then it is time to take a break.

Especially when working from home, some people tend to work through the day and avoid breaks. Neither your productivity nor your concentration benefits from this – exhaustion and carelessness are the consequences. Your exhausted brain areas need a break. Use the break for a collegial chat, a short meditation, breathing and physical exercise, ideally at an open window, on the balcony or in the courtyard. Free apps and YouTube videos as well as the [TUD's free online sports courses](#) will support you.

#8 Establish rituals

Rituals give structure to everyday life, help to establish habits and thus strengthen a feeling of security and additionally have a motivating effect. Especially when working from home you find less structure in terms of clear working hours and places and a feeling of loss of control might quickly spread. Then, small recurring rituals are helpful to create moments of pause and mark transitions in the course of the day. You can celebrate rituals all by yourself, such as having your morning cup of coffee on the balcony or open window or sharing rituals with others, like making a phone call to friends after work. It is important that the rituals are meaningful and pleasant for you and that they are linked to a specific moment in the course of the day: the beginning of your writing time, the first break in the morning, the end of working hours, the transition to leisure time at the end of the working day, etc.

#9 Working from home and childcare – a piece of cake?

Not at all! The double burden is certainly challenging and the balancing act of reconciling the needs of all those involved – sometimes stressful and exhausting. Proven support structures in this exceptional situation are: transparent communication, empathy and a good sense of humor. But what exactly does this mean?

Communicate transparently: Are there work zones? Where are they located? What is taboo and what is allowed? Plan your daily (or weekly) schedule together as a family,



define working hours, responsibilities, take joint breaks and play times into account, take turns in childcare (if possible). Write your family arrangements down – accessible to everyone.

Be sensitive – towards yourself and your family! Pay attention to your needs and question them: What do you need to work in a focused manner and what does your child need to feel good? How can you reconcile both, where to compromise or achieve a win-win situation? Create common breaks: a football match in the yard, a reading session in the cuddly corner or somersaults in the hallway ... give yourself and your child time and attention. And at the end of the day – take stock. What went well? What did not work? What has to be changed? Moreover, is there anything new you could try out?

And if your daily structures and plans should turn out differently than planned, keep calm, get involved, react according to the situation and take it with humor. Colleagues and superiors might find themselves in comparable situations and are familiar with the challenges.

And last but not least: Acknowledge your achievements and focus on what went well! Don't put yourself under too much pressure – your to-do lists can also be completed the next day. And your inner critic may take a break for now.

#10 IT Security and working from home

Another sensitive point when working from home is the question of information security and data protection. Even if you answer your e-mails and edit documents from your home desk – a workplace remains a workplace – and must therefore comply with certain security regulations. Thus, it is necessary to follow the recommendations of the Directorate (*Sachgebiet*) Information Security for Home Office in connection with Covid-19 of March 12, 2020. These recommend, for example, the use of business end devices, the encrypted storage of sensitive data on TUD resources (such as Cloudstore) and the use of a VPN connection to access the TUD network.

Last but not least: Stay at home but stay in touch – maintaining contacts when working from home!

When you work from home for several weeks, usually you forego a large proportion of direct social contacts, both professional and private ones. The resulting lack of exchange and feedback can gradually undermine your motivation and productivity. Consciously counteract the necessary restriction of your direct social contacts by using telephone and virtual possibilities to stay in touch with colleagues and supervisors as well as friends and family members.

In addition to the classic phone call, video conferencing software, chat services and eLearning tools now offer a wide range of options for integrating conversation and exchange formats into the remote working situation. For example, with its [Online Writing Week](#), the GA offers a framework for networking with other writing peers. Find out about the possibilities the TU Dresden offers you to organize your own virtual exchange formats within the framework of your work at the TU Dresden on the [ZIH website](#).

With all the various possibilities to make your remote working time as pleasant and productive as possible – see your work, time and organization management above all as a learning process, in which you can try out different methods and approaches and perhaps even fail once in a while. In the long run, however, you will learn a lot about yourself and your work habits!

Stay healthy and take care! We are at your disposal for advice!