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# Working at Home

by Chris Fievoli



Chris Fievoli, BMath, FSA, FClA, is the resident actuary at the Canadian Institute of Actuaries. He is a member of the Society of Actuaries Board of Directors, and serves as the Board partner for the Management and Personal Development Section. He can be reached at [Chris.Fievoli@actuaries.ca](mailto:Chris.Fievoli@actuaries.ca).

A few years ago, there was an episode of *The Simpsons* in which Homer imagined what it would be like if he could work at home. Of course, like most of Homer's other ideas, this one wasn't quite grounded in reality. His vision of working at home included sitting under the sun, in his backyard, sipping lemonade.

Here are some suggestions for a realistic work-at-home arrangement, based on my own experience doing it for several months now.

## CAN I DO IT?

I will be perfectly honest—this will not be feasible for everyone. If you supervise a large number of staff members, then your physical presence in the office will probably be required on a daily basis. However, there still may be opportunities to work at home on a temporary basis, and some of the suggestions here may come in handy.

Actuarial jobs are quite varied, so it's impossible to try and address each situation individually. To assess whether your current role could function from a remote location, try the following exercise. Look at a typical work week, and estimate the amount of time spent working within the following categories:

1. Working completely independently
2. Working with others through e-mail or over the phone
3. Working face-to-face with others offsite
4. Working face-to-face with others onsite

If you work for a large enough company, you may be surprised at how much time you spend in the second category. It has become commonplace to conduct business simply by picking up the phone or sending an e-mail message—even if the recipient is in the same building. If you are in consulting, you may be spending a lot of time at your clients' places of business, in which case the location of your "base of operations" may not be important.

All in all, if you spend a significant amount of time working in the first three categories, then working at home or some other location could be a practical option.

## LOSING THE FACE TO FACE

But what about that fourth category? Odds are that you spend at least some of your time working directly with others. How do you replicate that if you are working offsite?

This is where the management of your work-at-home arrangement becomes crucial. Your challenge will be not only for you to work effectively, but for others to work effectively without your physical presence.

One key tactic will be to ensure your availability to others. Co-workers will not be able to drop by your office for a quick question, so you need to ensure that you are accessible over the phone or via e-mail. It will be important to respond to messages promptly. If you plan on being absent or unavailable for a period of time, let your key contacts know that ahead of time. You don't want the old credo of "out of sight, out of mind" to start applying in your situation. If you normally let messages pile up and then answer them en masse, that would be a good habit to break.

The main piece of advice here is to "create the illusion". If you make it seem like you are in the office when you aren't, then you can conduct business with your co-workers with minimal disruption.

## LIVING WITHOUT MEETINGS

Some of you may consider it to be a blessing in disguise to no longer have to attend meetings, but more often than not, important business gets conducted in this setting. By being offsite, though, you need not do away with meeting attendance altogether. Conference facilities are plentiful, and most companies are equipped with speaker phone systems that allow people to attend meetings over the



phone. Software packages like Webex or Microsoft Live Meeting allow participants to not only hear what's being discussed, but also follow along with a presentation. Video conferencing is also available, but in my opinion, the added benefit often doesn't justify the extra expense and effort.

Admittedly, there are certain elements of face-to-face meetings that can't be replicated. Whether we realize it or not, we often react to facial expressions, body language or the general "energy" of the room. Discussions can easily drift into oblivion if there isn't adequate engagement by everyone in attendance. In order to compensate for this, you will need to ensure that your conference calls are conducted with extra diligence. A few suggestions for making this happen:

- Make sure each meeting has an agenda—timed, if possible—and stick to it. We have all seen conference calls fall into silence or go off on a tangent, so this will serve as a reminder to stay on topic.
- Each meeting should have a chair—take that role yourself, if possible. That way, you can stimulate conversation (or cut it off) as need be.
- Try to elicit responses from everyone. You won't be able to see if someone is sitting there with their arms folded and scowling. By specifically asking everyone their opinion, you can ensure that they speak their mind, and you can get a better read on the mood of the room.

That being said, it's important to ensure that you do spend some time in the office on a regular, periodic basis. How often this happens will depend on the arrangements you make, and your proximity to the office. In my situation—where my employer is 350 miles away—the visits are once per month. If you plan on working in the same vicinity, then you may want to consider a day (or partial day) every one or two weeks. In any case, it will be valuable to let people know when you will be around for face-to-face discussion, so they can plan around that. In addition, make sure your time in the office is planned well, so you can make the most of your time.

## EMBRACE TECHNOLOGY

The great thing about technology is that it makes it a lot easier to work from a remote location. If you have a laptop, a cell phone and a wireless connection, you can function virtually anywhere. If you plan on working at home, do some research and take full advantage of what's available. Voice over internet technology can allow you to have telephone access with a fixed, portable phone number through your internet connection, which will help you in "creating the illusion" as described above.

The downside is that you may have to serve as your own IT department. If you are comfortable with solving technological problems, then this may not be a concern. If you are reluctant to take on that role, it may be worth your effort to arrange for onsite support—preferably same day. Your computer will be your main connection to the outside world, and living without it for a couple of days (or even a few hours) will not be acceptable. Don't forget to consider the company-provided services you may take for granted, such as automatic backup of your documents on a public shared drive. You may have to initiate that process yourself, so look for tools that make it easy to do.

## HOME IS STILL HOME

Working at home may be a great way to achieve the perfect home/life balance. It may also be a good way to destroy it if you don't manage it carefully.

Travelling to a physical place of work has the psychological advantage of letting you know when you're "on the clock". When you leave at the end of the day, you know that your work day is done, and personal interests can now take priority. If you

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are working at home, that divide won't be present. If you are off-hours, and can resist the temptation to check in on things at work (or at least jump in and jump out quickly), then you can probably maintain that balance. If not, then you run the risk of always being on the job—and your family probably won't appreciate that.

Set some boundaries. Having a dedicated workspace makes a lot of sense. As soon as you step into your home office, that will be a signal to you—and others—that this is time committed to work. Create your own “hours” during which you are “off” except for emergencies. Try turning the computer off at those times to avoid the temptation to check email and get drawn back into work issues.

Of course, being at home offers a number of temptations. In that case, try to keep your self-imposed interruptions to a minimum. If you would normally take five minutes to head down to the cafeteria for a coffee, try to take the same amount of time for any breaks while working at home. If you want to throw a load of laundry in the washer, that probably works. If you want to cut the lawn, that's another story.

Your family will need to make adjustments as well. If you have children, give some extra thought to the arrangement. If they are at home during the day, don't expect that you will be able to tend to their needs and still do your job. They may not understand that you are actually at work, and that will cause problems.

Obviously, if your kids are older, they will have an easier time with the concept, and they will just need to be reminded to keep the interruptions—and the noise—to a minimum. Work out some signals so they know when you are on the phone, or in the middle of something that requires your full attention. You will of course have more flexibility during your day, but don't let others take undue advantage of that. You will have to maintain appropriate boundaries.

And, finally, if you find the fridge is in too close a proximity, you may want to consider a more disciplined exercise program, unless you want to go back to that Simpsons example. ...

## SELLING THE BOSS

The only way Homer could get to work at home was to force his weight to be over 300 pounds. Some of you may be thinking that, in your situation, it will take something equally outlandish to get your boss to buy into you working at home. That will be the case sometimes. There's no guarantee that your employer will agree with the arrangement, no matter how much sense it makes to you. But if you think there is a possibility, you might want to consider the following strategies to make your case:

- **Try a test run.** There is no harm in working at home on a trial basis. If it works, then you will be able to demonstrate that it can be effective. If it doesn't, then at least you'll know.
- **Take advantage of the extra time.** Your work day starts as early as you want it to start. If you are normally commuting to work, then you may end up with a couple of extra hours in your day. If you can demonstrate an ability to work more efficiently, or meet deadlines more consistently, then that can be characterized as a win-win.
- **Look for the pluses.** Your boss may initially view this as a net reduction in productivity, and be reluctant to agree. Your challenge will be to find instances where it actually works better. Again, this will depend on your circumstances, but you should be able demonstrate some advantages.

## IN CLOSING

Ultimately, it's up to you to assess whether working at home would be appropriate for you. In some cases, it just won't fly. But if you see the potential, then you will need to be part salesperson (to your employer) and part disciplinarian (to yourself). If you can develop a strategy for making it happen, then give it a go. You may find it's the ideal arrangement you've been looking for. ●