

The Ups and Downs of Working from Home

By Mary Mitchell

When I began my business in Philadelphia, I had a posh address and a staff of seven. Not that I really could afford the overhead, but outside perceptions demanded such accoutrements. Without them, you had no substance, no staying power and thus no magnetism for important assignments.

Things are different today. Major companies such as Merck, Lexis-Nexis and KPMG are advocating and supporting home offices for their key employees and managers. Consumers have demonstrated that one's ability to provide a service does not depend on bricks and mortar.

Your Image, Even When Alone, Remains a Key

Still, perceptions are important. Professional is as professional does. While home-based workers needn't don business suits every day, they simply won't feel as professional and thus, be perceived that way, wearing slippers and flannel pajamas, unshowered and unshampooed.

A company in the Pacific Northwest proved conclusively that how we are dressed directly affects job performance. Once dressed for work, you can consider and deal with the interpersonal relationships that surround anyone who works from home.

Familial Concerns

First, there's your family. Although I have been consulting and training for a decade, written a syndicated newspaper column for as long, and published four books with two more appearing soon, my siblings don't believe I work.

More specifically, they refuse to accept the fact that I have a real job. Here's how that looks in daily life: I am at home and thus am accessible and available at all times. I've learned the hard way that getting defensive and emotional only fuels the perception of the silly little dilettante doing a bit of something creative to feel validated.

Instead, I took a few positive and concrete steps. First, I eliminated a home telephone line from my office. Next, I told the family that if they wanted to reach me during work hours, the work line was their best bet.

It's important to provide this information in a voice as unemotional as though you are saying, "It's raining outside."

Setting 'Office' Hours

As for work hours, I'd like to tell you that I established a real schedule. The truth is that I often can be found before dawn and after dark at my computer, should the opportunity and the motivation prevail.

However, I turn off the telephone ringer at 6 p.m. and back on again at 9 a.m. During that time, a reliable voicemail service picks up messages. In short, I trained my family, and myself.

Resolving Conflicts

Part of that training process includes Conflict Resolution 101. In short, as unemotionally (sounding) as possible, acknowledge their momentary piques and objections and then state the reality of your situation.

That sounds like, “I know you want me to take you to the mall, sweetie, and you know that this is the middle of my workday. Let’s work out a good time for us both, OK?”

Again, the key to success is the “it’s raining outside” tone of voice. The very minute anybody gets you on the defensive, you’ll be into apologies and breaking your own rules. Nobody will win – not you, not your family, and certainly not your clients.

Getting Help

Feeling like a competent professional often is easier in a skyscraper. When you’re at home, your behavior dictates how you end up feeling about yourself – not the other way around.

Don’t hesitate to hire some childcare help, even while you are at home. It’s worth the investment in family harmony. That person stands a solid chance at helping your offspring perceive you as a working professional.

Houseguests, too, deserve to be told your work arrangements. Do this well in advance, so they don’t assume a Tuesday while the kids are at school means you are as free as a bird to play. That is, unless you schedule in that free time.

A Sound Body Leads to a Sound Mind

Finally, take good care of yourself. For one thing, you’ll need to exercise more to compensate for the decreased mobility. Getting oxygen to the brain and other important parts factors significantly in effective relationships – it helps one play with a full deck, so to speak.

For another, how you feel about yourself will contribute significantly to being flexible and thus able to serve your clients and family well. Don’t expect to perform well if you are stressed out and feeling deprived.

Sometimes it takes more discipline to schedule being good to ourselves than to work harder and longer. Perhaps it is possible to pay someone to do the latter; only we can accomplish the former.