SUCCESSFUL REMOTE WORKING

SUCCINCTLY

BY LORENZO BARBIERI

Syncfusion®

Successful Remote Working Succinctly

By

Lorenzo Barbieri

Foreword by Daniel Jebaraj

Syncfusion®
Deliver innovation with ease®

Table of Contents

The Story behind the *Succinctly* Series of Books

Daniel Jebaraj, Vice President
Syncfusion, Inc.

Staying on the cutting edge

As many of you may know, Syncfusion is a provider of software components for the Microsoft platform. This puts us in the exciting but challenging position of always being on the cutting edge.

Whenever platforms or tools are shipping out of Microsoft, which seems to be about every other week these days, we have to educate ourselves, quickly.

Information is plentiful but harder to digest

In reality, this translates into a lot of book orders, blog searches, and Twitter scans.

While more information is becoming available on the Internet and more and more books are being published, even on topics that are relatively new, one aspect that continues to inhibit us is the inability to find concise technology overview books.

We are usually faced with two options: read several 500+ page books or scour the web for relevant blog posts and other articles. Just as everyone else who has a job to do and customers to serve, we find this quite frustrating.

The *Succinctly* series

This frustration translated into a deep desire to produce a series of concise technical books that would be targeted at developers working on the Microsoft platform.

We firmly believe, given the background knowledge such developers have, that most topics can be translated into books that are between 50 and 100 pages.

This is exactly what we resolved to accomplish with the *Succinctly* series. Isn't everything wonderful born out of a deep desire to change things for the better?

The best authors, the best content

Each author was carefully chosen from a pool of talented experts who shared our vision. The book you now hold in your hands, and the others available in this series, are a result of the authors' tireless work. You will find original content that is guaranteed to get you up and running in about the time it takes to drink a few cups of coffee.

Free forever

Syncfusion will be working to produce books on several topics. The books will always be free. Any updates we publish will also be free.

Free? What is the catch?

There is no catch here. Syncfusion has a vested interest in this effort.

As a component vendor, our unique claim has always been that we offer deeper and broader frameworks than anyone else on the market. Developer education greatly helps us market and sell against competing vendors who promise to "enable AJAX support with one click," or "turn the moon to cheese!"

Let us know what you think

If you have any topics of interest, thoughts, or feedback, please feel free to send them to us at succinctly-series@syncfusion.com.

We sincerely hope you enjoy reading this book and that it helps you better understand the topic of study. Thank you for reading.

Please follow us on Twitter and "Like" us on Facebook to help us spread the word about the *Succinctly* series!

About the Author

As a Cloud Solution Architect working for Microsoft, increasing partners' ROI on cloud investments with the right architecture is one of my objectives. Improving people's public speaking skills is one of my personal goals. Living a full life with my family and friends is what drives me every day.

I was a successful remote worker before the pandemic; now I'm struggling a little bit in these difficult times, like many millions of people.

During various lockdowns, being forced to stay at home 24 hours a day with my wife and my young child required some adaptation, a dedicated room, and a lot of support from my various managers and colleagues.

However, I strongly believe that hybrid workplaces will still be the future of work in many professions, especially when we could freely decide when to work from home, from a co-working space, from a bar, or from the office, depending on the job that should be done, our mood, and other people's schedules.

I'm specialized in application innovation through cloud architectures, Azure, Visual Studio, GitHub, and DevOps. I like to talk to people and communities about technology, food, and funny things.

I'm a speaker, trainer, professional storyteller, and public speaking coach. I've helped many students, developers, other professionals, and many colleagues improve their stage presence to deliver exceptional presentations.

I work for Microsoft to help partners and independent software vendors, but also developers, communities, and customers, supporting software development on Microsoft and OSS technologies.

I've been a Microsoft Certified Trainer since 2000, and was formerly a Microsoft MVP for DevOps and virtual machines. I speak at conferences in Italy, Europe, United States, and virtually around the world.

During the pandemic, I decided to go through the Prosci Change Management certification to be able to cope with all the changes I was facing. Then I decided to write this book.

Let's connect!

Feel free to connect with me on LinkedIn or send me an email and tell me what you think about this book and what can I improve, and send me your feedback.

- LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/geniodelmale
- Email: geniodelmale@outlook.com

Note: In Italian, <u>Genio del Male</u> means "<u>Evil Genius.</u>" Please, don't judge me by my nickname—I don't want to conquer the world or anything like that! If you wonder why I use it as my nickname, it's a long story. Someday I'll decide to post about it! I can only tell you that my friends gave it to me many years ago.

Chapter 1 Introduction

I proposed this book in the summer of 2020, while I was writing *Beyond Public Speaking for Geeks Succinctly*.

At the beginning of 2020, the world changed, due to a pandemic disease that impacted all sectors, required social distancing, and forced a lot of companies to adopt remote working for most of their workforce.

Working from home during a pandemic is hard

Most people started working from home in 2020 because they were forced to, and they had to deal with children staying at home all day, since most schools were closed or teaching virtual lessons. In other cases, different family members were suddenly home together—fighting for network bandwidth, room availability for meetings, and quiet time. Not an ideal way to work and live.

Figure 1: A mom working from home near her daughter. Photo by Charles Deluvio on Unsplash.

"Real" remote working

Remote working can be a wonderful experience; it is changing our way of living, and many people around the world (including the author) were doing it years before the pandemic, and will continue to do it afterwards.

One of the greatest benefits of remote working is that most people are able to choose what to do, where to do it, and when to do it; their work allows for independence, and is measured by objectives, and not by hours worked.

When children are home, and assuming there's another caretaker, a remote worker could go to a café, a co-working space, or to the office, or they could simply decide to spend time with their children and work later in the day.

Note: Working from home is a special case of remote working, but it's not the only one. You can remote-work from a bar, a coworking space, a hotel room, or a public library, for example.

Benefits and drawbacks of working remotely

There are many benefits of working remotely, including:

- Less commute time
- More time to be productive, with higher productivity (that in many cases can exhaust people if not handled correctly)
- More time with family, or to be used for sports and other hobbies
- Better work-life balance—if you can effectively manage personal and work time
- Ability to hire new talent without needing to relocate
- Fewer restrictions on dress code for most workers
- Ability to work from everywhere in the country, or in some cases in the world.
- Money savings (for companies, and sometimes also for employees)
- Less sickness (not only Covid-19, but also the normal flu or other communicable diseases)
- Potential for people with disabilities to perform better in an environment that is under their control

There are also many drawbacks: some specific to working from home, and some related to all remote workers.

Drawbacks of working remotely include:

- Missing networking opportunities, especially for younger or new people
- Less innovation due to limited networking and increased silos inside companies
- Less (self) motivation
- Solitude, apathy, burn-out, and depression
- Not having a dedicated space, or having to rent one, full-time or temporarily
- Not having the right furniture, hardware, or lighting

- Connection costs and network performance, especially when using mobile connections or working from places with free Wi-Fi
- Virtual meeting proliferation—even worse than with physical meetings
- Virtual harassment, body shaming, discrimination, mansplaining and other problematic behaviors

Specific drawbacks of working from home include:

- No clear separation between work and personal time, which can lead to the risk of working 24/7
- Distractions caused by children or housemates
- Bandwidth limitations due to multiple virtual meetings at the same time (work or school-related) and other network heavy applications, like streaming and gaming
- Distractions or inability to work due to noisy neighbors

We'll see how to work around most of these issues in the next chapters.

Note: A decade of advancements makes remote work possible for a great number of companies and employees. Companies now have better infrastructures to allow remote access or are storing data in the cloud, which allows access from anywhere.

Note: There are many other advantages and drawbacks that are more related to society in general. For example, when too many people are working from home, most restaurants and bars near city centers or office locations will suffer. On the other side, people working remotely can provide a boost for other parts of the city, or to the countryside; instead of commuting to the big centers, they can spend more money nearby. Only time will tell what the impacts on society at large will be.

People are tired of remote working

As you'll probably remember, at the beginning of 2021, LinkedIn and other social networks were full of posts about people wanting to come back to offices. That lead to the proliferation of a lot of *fake* polls that used the topic of remote working to artificially increase engagement for the poster using reactions, instead of traditional polls.

I'm curious.. 🤭

Where do you prefer to
work?

👍 Office

❤️ Home

👏 A mix of both

Figure 2: A fake "poll" that used reactions to increase engagement using the hot topic of working from home.

Those polls had a peak of success because people were tired of being forced to work from home, especially if they didn't have the right environment.

As I've already said, working remotely (especially from home) during a pandemic is difficult, and it's not the same as it was before the pandemic—and it's (probably) not the same as it will be after the pandemic.

📝 *Note: During 2020 and 2021, I saw many people craving to come back to offices or to in-person meetings with customers. Then, when they were forced to return to the office, or when they started traveling extensively, after a few days they were missing*

the good parts of working remotely. For most workers, the future will be a mixture of both worlds.

James Whittaker • 1st

stealth mode

1mo • 🌐

• • •

My return to work "trip" report:

Day 1: Excitement! Novelty! Showering! Wearing pants! Holy s**t feels like the first day of school when I was 6. Commute not as bad as I remember. Amazing interactions and brainstorming at a whiteboard! Drinks after work! Selfies with colleagues! At the end of the day, tired, satisfied and happy.

Day 2: I have to do this AGAIN? Novelty gone. Slept through alarm. Coffee here nowhere near as good as at home. I wonder what my dog is doing, I hope she doesn't raid the cat litter box. I do not trust this toilet. There is no place here to take a good nap.

Day 3: I "suddenly" remember the pandemic. I'm working from home.

Day 4: The walls of this house never looked so good.

👍 ❤️ 🌿 420 • 31 comments

Figure 3: James Whittaker post on LinkedIn about going back to work. James is one of my favorite speakers, a brilliant author, and a former colleague I've always admired.

During 2021 there were also many articles about big and small companies announcing that they will reduce remote working possibilities after the pandemic (while most of the time they were only announcing the reopening of physical offices), so people waited anxiously to return to the "previous normal." Most of these articles backfired, and many companies had to reverse their policies or clarify their communication around the topic.

What kind of remote work will be covered in this book?

Working remotely isn't for everybody. Not every profession could be done remotely. Not every task could be done remotely.

Before the pandemic, there were many jobs that people thought were impossible to do remotely—then the pandemic changed everything, and people found new ways to do what seemed impossible in many cases.

In this book we'll mostly talk about jobs that can be done using a computer, a phone, an internet connection, or something similar.

Of course, some techniques described in this book also apply to other kinds of remote jobs, but the focus will be on information-technology-enabled jobs. I'll start by discussing one of the most important things that should be immediately put in place when enabling people to work remotely: security.

What about remote learning?

Remote learning is a "special kind" of remote working because it involves using the same equipment (computer, internet connection, webcam, and so on) used by remote workers. Chapter 2 and Chapter 6, which discuss this topic, will be perfect companions for students, too.

Information security

In theory, security for remote workers is much better now, compared to many years ago. VPN systems are usually more transparent and faster; cloud storage and applications have better security and can be accessed from anywhere; and authentication is usually less intrusive, using MFA (Multi-Factor Authentication) techniques and devices. Passwordless authentication systems are becoming available to improve security while easing the life of remote workers.

But security is still a nightmare for companies and, sometimes, employees. BYOD (bring your own devices) policies and corporate devices running outside the corporate perimeter can be targets for attacks that could go undetected for months.

During 2020 and 2021, due to the rise of the number of people working from home, cyberattacks surged, and many companies suffered as a result. Since nobody was prepared for the disruption caused by the pandemic, organizations needed to enable people to work from home, sometimes with their own devices, using new tools to collaborate remotely. It's clear that in some cases security was traded for speed, and criminals proliferated.

Note: One main cause of security problems is the mixed use of devices (company owned or personal devices) with both personal and work applications. Android Work Profile and Apple User Enrollment can solve many of the security problems by physically separating personal data and apps from corporate ones, but sometimes the user experience is frustrating for advanced users.

Note: Another source of problems arises from letting housemates use work devices for their own activities, like surfing the internet and gaming. The problem is even worse when those activities are performed using the work account and not a guest or limited account. If you cannot use a different account, you can mitigate the problem using a browser's profile settings, and creating a new profile for the other

users. The security problem is not solved, but at least the password manager, browsing history, and other sensitive information are not immediately accessible.

Always assume you've been breached

If you're responsible for keeping corporate devices secure, the best way to do it is to always assume that you've been breached already, and that devices are not secure by default. This is one of the pillars of the zero trust security model, and is a big change from previous security architectures where corporate devices inside the company's firewall were considered secure by default.

In the past, many corporate devices relied on domain accounts, VPNs, smart cards, security policies, and similar technologies to trust a device and a user, and, once trusted, give that device and user unlimited access to corporate resources.

With zero trust in mind, every resource access should be reviewed and evaluated, and sometimes, additional proof like two-factor authentication and other mechanisms should be used. Corporate and "bring your own" devices should have mandatory security systems in place before being able to connect to company resources, and if the device is in an unknown state, it's better to deny access.

Educate your users

Some attacks rely on security vulnerabilities, but most attacks involve the active participation of the user, like phishing emails that turn users to malicious websites, and ransomware attacks where personal and corporate data are encrypted, and a ransom has to be paid to regain access.

It's important to educate your users. So often the malicious attacks that survive malware protection can be mitigated by savvy users.

You can direct your users to security guides from Apple, Google, Microsoft, and many other security-related websites from hardware and software manufacturers.

Test your users

Like in normal education, sometimes it's good to test what a "student" has learned during the course.

For security issues, you can send test emails mimicking real issues and capturing users' responses. It can seem unethical, but in many cases, it is the only way to understand how many employees can recognize a threat, and how many will still do the wrong thing after security training.

Work is not a place, it is an activity

When I began working remotely most of the time, I stopped saying "Tomorrow I'll go to work"; I started saying "Tomorrow I'll work from …" followed by "the customer site," "the office," "home," "the hotel room," and so on.

The language you use changes the reality you live.

How remote work will evolve

I don't know what will happen when the pandemic ends—if most people will come to the office permanently, or if they'll work from home permanently. Even big companies changed ideas many times about remote work policies, limiting and then increasing employees' ability to do it. Other companies are doing the opposite—first allowing remote work, and then requiring employees to return to their offices.

The future will probably be like the past for most people who were used to working from home (or working remotely in general) before the pandemic: do BOTH. Go to the office or to a customer site; when necessary, work remotely.

You can call it hybrid work, flexible work, blended work, or whatever—the reality is that a lot of people would like to have the benefits of both models. There are situations where meeting people face to face can dramatically improve interactions and results, but there are also the needs of mothers, fathers, and people who hate commuting.

We need better remote offices; we need to adapt our work style to the challenges of a mixed environment; we need better managers; and we need ways to solve typical problems. We also need to prepare new generations for all the implications of remote working. Schools and universities should innovate their curriculum to prepare the future generation of (remote) workers.

In the next chapters, we'll dive deeper into many of these topics!

Chapter 2 Remote Office Setup and Tools

You can work remotely basically everywhere, but to be productive, you need some useful equipment. In this chapter, we'll see many options, from a basic configuration to a full remote office.

The basics

Of course, you can work some days from the kitchen table, or from other rooms, but if remote working is something you're doing all day, for a lot of time, you need a dedicated space—ranging from an office in your house, to a dedicated remote office, to a coworking space.

Some hotels offer rooms as "virtual offices" during the day in the low-season, and that can be an interesting choice for important meetings that cannot be interrupted by crying babies or noisy neighbors with leaf blowers.

In every case, in your dedicated room or in every kind of office, you need a comfortable chair, a good desk, and good lighting, possibly from the side (not in front of or behind the monitor).

Note: Some companies have policies in place to fund such furniture, but that also depends on the tax regulations of a given country.

Note: In some countries, working remotely for a company is regulated by law, and the worker should sign a special agreement with the company saying that all the regulations for work safety are respected, including physical ergonomics and other rules.

Laptop or desktop computer and good connectivity

It doesn't matter if it's a company device or a personal device (BYOD)—it should be silent, powerful enough to do the job, and the keyboard, mouse (optional), and monitor should be placed ergonomically.

If you're using a laptop, try to use a laptop stand that allows you to put the monitor in a higher position while keeping the keyboard accessible, or, even better, use an external keyboard.

You can find some tips to improve the ergonomics of your remote workplace here.
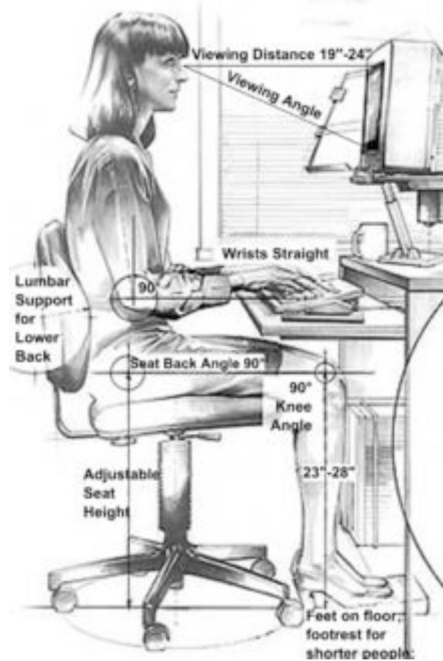
Figure 4: An ergonomic position in front of a PC. Source: Yamavu, Wikipedia.

We don't need to talk about good connectivity, considering that modern work requires higher amounts of bandwidth every day, and that (if working from home) bandwidth should probably be shared with other people working or studying from home (or chilling on the sofa while streaming movies).

Headphones (with microphone)

I'm a little bit rude on this point, but people shouldn't be allowed to join meetings if they have poor audio. Most people can tolerate bad video (or no video at all), but they can't stand bad audio with noise, reverberations, Larsen effects, and so on.

If you're using your laptop's integrated speakers and microphone, the effect will be poor in most situations. The simple way to solve most audio problems is by using dedicated headphones (even better if wired) with a built-in microphone. This way, you don't rely on software echo-cancellation features; your computer has more power to handle other tasks; and as a side effect, people in the room with you only hear your voice and not all the other participants in your video calls.

I own many kinds of headphones: wired, wireless (with and without noise cancellation), over-the-ear, and earbuds. Depending on the length of the meeting, and the kind of involvement that's required from me, I choose the best headphone for the task.

For example, I'll use noise-cancelling headphones only for short meetings (one or two hours maximum), because for longer meetings I suffer with the noise cancellation (I can feel some pressure on my eardrum when I'm using those, which can be stressful in the long run).

For meetings lasting all day, I tend to use light wired headphones, so I don't feel tired after a while (less stress on my neck), and I'm not cut off during important parts of the meeting because of an empty battery.

We'll see in a following section that we can avoid using headphones if we have a dedicated room with good sound isolation and a good microphone.

Webcam

A webcam is needed in most video calls. You can use the integrated webcam of your laptop, or you can buy one (that's the only option if you have a desktop computer).

The most important thing about the webcam is its positioning. You should be able to look at the webcam directly, in a natural position, so people on the other side of the "line" will feel your eye contact.

If you're using your integrated laptop camera, try to position your laptop higher than the normal position, so the webcam doesn't show the inside of your nose.

Note: An external keyboard can make the positioning of your laptop more ergonomic for your body. Using an external keyboard is mandatory if you've put your laptop on a stand or a box for a better view from the built-in webcam. If you start typing when your laptop is not firmly on the desk, it will start bouncing all around, and the video will be terrible to see.

Many people keep the webcam off when they aren't in a good mood. I've seen that turning on the webcam during meetings and sessions improves results, especially when you have to speak a lot.

If you're not in a good mood, work for it. Try to relax before the call or the session; try to have some quality time in advance so you can give your best during the session. If a call or a session is crucial, reserve the right amount of time before it to prepare physically and mentally.

Note: Knowing that many people have the webcam on the top of their monitor, much conferencing software displays meeting attendees on the top of the screen, so when you look at them, you look nearer the webcam, giving the impression of eye contact.

Figure 5: A good session, messed up by the speaker not looking at the audience all the time.

Always check how you look on camera before the call or the session.
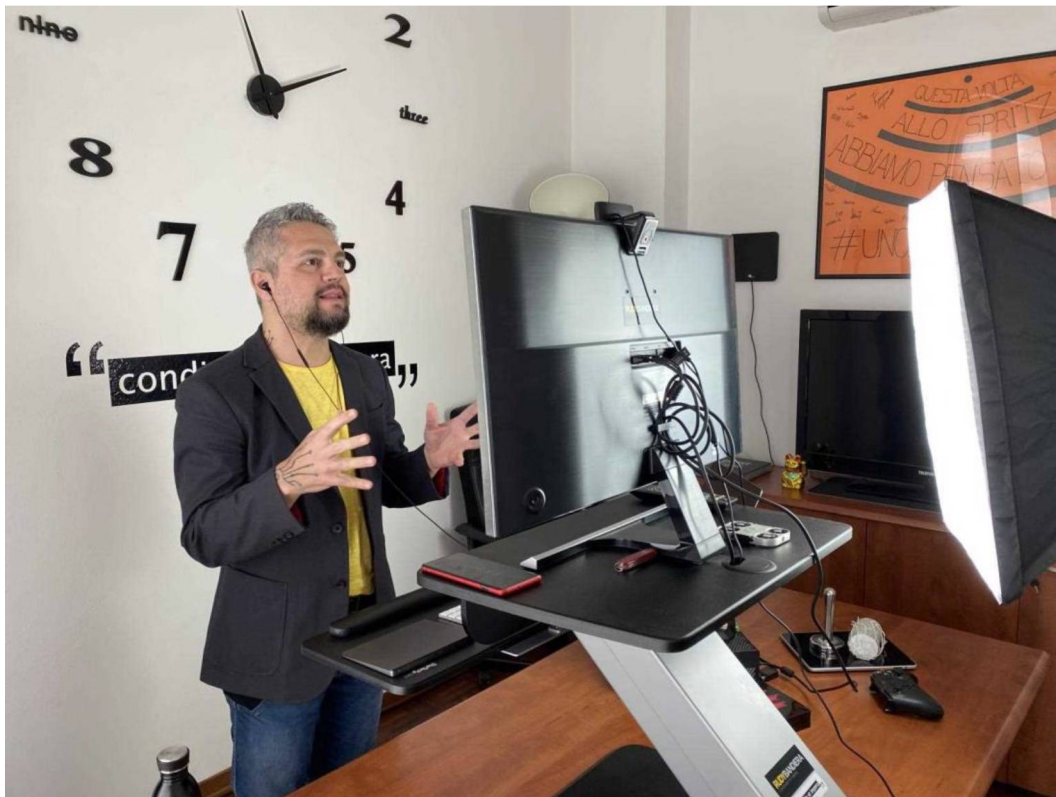
Figure 6: Look at how Rudy Bandiera (famous Italian influencer) is looking directly in the camera when recording a video.

Equipment that enhances productivity and well-being

If you plan to work remotely for a long time, go beyond the basic setup, and buy some extra hardware to maximize your productivity and improve your well-being.

Multiple monitors

I started using a second monitor with my laptop, and then I bought another one. Now, working with only one monitor feels very unproductive for me.

If you have limited space, try to go for a widescreen external monitor, and use your laptop monitor only for secondary tasks. Beware of ultra-widescreen monitors because you'll keep turning your head to view all the content.

My current setup is a widescreen 34" monitor in front of me, the laptop 13" monitor under it (I reversed the Surface Book 2 monitor so the built-in keyboard is behind it), an external keyboard so I can move it in a more natural position, and a third 27" full-HD monitor on the side, turned 90 degrees, so I can use it to host messaging and mail applications or other non-essential applications.

When I don't need to concentrate, I'll keep many apps running on the screens. If I need to concentrate, I minimize all the windows apart from the applications that I'm actively using at that moment.

When presenting, I use the laptop monitor to project the slides, and I use the lower part of the widescreen monitor to show the software that I'm using, and eventually, the attendees with the camera on. That way I can look at my laptop's webcam and see the slides at the bottom, and the meeting at the top of the webcam.

Better audio

Good audio is enough when you use it for calls or when you do sessions from time to time. If you're doing sessions all the time, if you have a podcast or YouTube channel, if you're streaming on Twitch, or if you plan to create a lot of audio and video content, you should go for more expensive solutions, like:

- Soundproofing (with foam wedges) to avoid echo
- A high-quality microphone
- A voice processor, to filter unwanted sounds from the microphone
- (Optional) A high-quality audio interface, PCIe, or USB, if the onboard audio interface of your PC is not good
- A good set of speakers, instead of headphones

If you want to know more about all of those elements, you can take a look at my post from March 2020.

Figure 7: An example of a professional audio setup, from my colleague Fardau.

Printer and scanner

Someday we'll live in a paperless world, but until then, it's useful to have a printer and a scanner available from time to time. I prefer ink-jet all-in-ones, since I'm not using those all the time, but you can go to more expensive solutions if you need better quality or speed.

Docking station

If you're working on your laptop, having a docking station is essential when you have multiple monitors, an external webcam and microphone, a wired network connection, a USB printer/scanner, and so on.

Of course, when we are forced to work from home all the time, it's not a problem to keep everything connected—but if you're working remotely only part of the week, or if you're traveling a lot, connecting and disconnecting all the cables is time-consuming.

You can go for a dedicated docking station, or you can buy "generic" USB-C or Thunderbolt ones. For a better experience, be sure that the docking station is also charging your device.

A good chair and a standing desk

After using normal chairs for years, I invested in a "good" chair, and my life improved: my back pain was reduced and my posture during sessions and calls improved—all thanks to a chair.

I also bought a standing desk with a motor so I can use it both when standing and when sitting. I enjoy changing positions during the day, considering the types of activities that I'm doing.

📝 *Note: One good side effect of having a standing desk is that on the floor you can use a walking pad, perhaps while attending calls or trainings.*

Figure 8: The perfect companions for a virtual meeting: standing desk, walking pad, and a cat! (Featuring Stefano Magni)

Additional lights for video calls and presentations

Good lighting is essential when doing calls or sessions, but also to ease your eyes.

Look at the picture from Rudy Bandiera in Figure 6. He's using a professional light, but you can also use cheaper lights, like white paper lanterns, webcam ring lights, LED strips, LED panels, or many other solutions (like the photo in Figure 8, where Stefano is using two ring lights: one for background lightning, and one directed onto the PC).

The right solution depends on the room and on the position of the webcam(s). In general, your lights shouldn't cast a lot of shadows, which will look awful on screen.

A good background, a "fake" background, or a green screen

It's important to have a good background for your video calls or sessions. It should be interesting enough, but it shouldn't distract people.

A bookshelf with a good selection of books, a nice picture, a wall-mounted whiteboard (see the following section), or your company logo—there are many options for a good background. Most conferencing apps offer the ability to blur backgrounds or to use a virtual background. These options are interesting for normal calls, but I prefer to avoid them for important calls and sessions.

Another option is to use a fake background with a support kit, which you can position behind your chair to produce a good result on a low budget. The same system can be used to mount a green screen, if the conferencing software allows it.

The results are much better than virtual backgrounds, in terms of artifacts. In this case you should pay attention to the way you dress, because some colors and fabrics can be mistaken for the green screen—and part of you will become the background.

If your conferencing software doesn't support a green screen, another option is to use a virtual webcam that applies the green-screen effect. You can then use the virtual webcam in the software instead of the real one.

Figure 9: Video flow when a virtual webcam is used.

A virtual webcam is software that creates a virtual device on your system that can be used by all the applications. The virtual webcam can be configured to process the video stream from a physical webcam by adding some effects, images, and so on. Green screen (also known as chroma-key) is one of the possible effects, but you can also use a virtual webcam to add a fixed logo to your video stream, or to combine two physical webcams using picture-in-picture techniques, for example.

OBS (Open Broadcaster Studio, which we'll discuss later in this chapter) also offers a powerful virtual webcam for Windows and Mac.

Figure 10: A great solution when you have a small room—green screen mounted on a chair.

Source: Amazon.

Physical whiteboard

There are many software whiteboards, and most of them have great collaboration features. What I've seen is that with virtual meetings, the feeling of writing on a physical whiteboard is better for brainstorming and communication.

Of course, the whiteboard should be visible to the webcam (I'm using a second webcam mounted on a tripod), and you should avoid covering the whiteboard when you're not using it.

Figure 11: Handwriting in a virtual meeting enhances communication and the flow of ideas. Photo by ThisisEngineering RAEng on Unsplash

If you don't have space for a wall-mounted whiteboard, you can go for a small, portable one, or a bigger one mounted on a support.

Figure 12: Two examples of portable whiteboards. Source: Amazon

The portable ones are good for lists and quick notes but will fill up quickly, so they're not ideal for flowcharts or extended brainstorming.

(Graphics) Tablet with a pen

Some people prefer to write on a digital whiteboard, but they don't like to use the mouse, touchpad, or even the touchscreen, because those items are not ergonomic enough for writing.

You can use a touchscreen with pen support, but most of the time the screen is upright, and it's not easy writing that way. On some devices you can use the device in a flat position, but most times this requires you to change its position, or orientation.

Figure 13: The Surface Studio Laptop is an example of a device that can be used with a pen, where the screen can go from upright to full-flat position without changing device position and screen orientation. You only need an external keyboard and webcam in your setup. Image courtesy of Microsoft News Center.

You can buy a graphics tablet and "feel the pen" while having all the capabilities of a software whiteboard. You can also use a tablet, joined in the same meeting, and use its pen (or pencil, if you have an iPad).
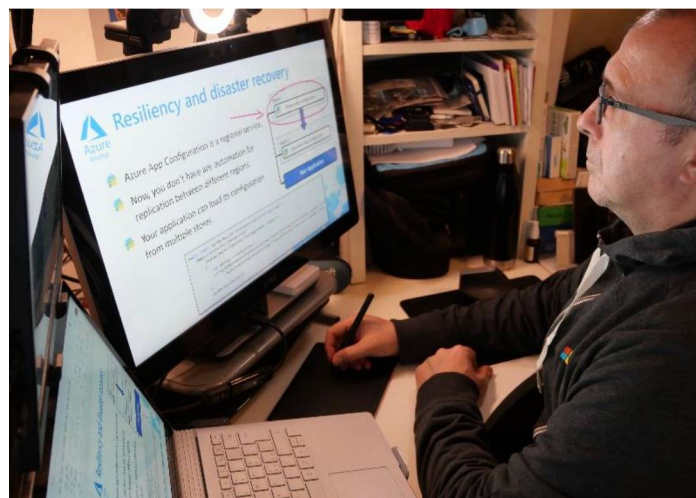
Figure 14: Azure Technical Trainer Massimo Bonanni drawing on a slide using a graphics tablet, while presenting on camera.

Using a pen is also great when presenting in PowerPoint (or other tools) because you can create a slide with part of the content and "draw over it" to show the interactions of different parts in a way that is more natural than using animation.

> *Note: Drawing on a graphics tablet is not as easy as it seems. There are many articles with tips on improving it, like this one by Malcolm Monteith.*

"Busy" lights

In the next chapters, we'll discuss techniques for working at home or in other places where other people are around. In this section, we'll talk about equipment that you can use to improve your experience.

A "busy" light can be a good solution to show people that you're online when the door is closed, like in radio and TV studios. There are many commercial solutions available for the most common communication platforms, and you can also create one yourself using one of the tutorials that you can find online.

Figure 15: Do-it-yourself busy light. Source: "DIY: Building a busy light to show your Microsoft Teams presence" by Elio Struyf

External programmable controller or keyboard

If presenting online (live or recorded) is an important part of your working day, it can be useful to have a dedicated tool that you can use to send commands to the software; for example, to mute or unmute the microphone, play jingles, switch between showing slides and your image from the webcam, or change the active webcam when you have multiple ones.

There are many dedicated devices available, like the Elgato Stream Deck:

Figure 16: Elgato Stream Deck: a dedicated programmable device. Source: Amazon

You can also make one yourself, like this one created by my friend Valter Minute:

Figure 17: A DIY keypad to control applications. Source: Github

If you prefer a DIY solution, but you don't want to build the hardware, you can buy an external numeric keypad and follow this tutorial to configure it.

Webcam cover

Some tools allow you to remotely enable a webcam during a meeting. I don't like them, so I use a webcam cover when I don't want to take the risk. Even a piece of black tape can do the trick.

Challenges of working outside of a dedicated place

A dedicated workplace could be your office, your home office, or another place that you set up correctly. There are four main problems when working outside of your dedicated place. The first one is being able to find good connectivity, which is essential for most remote workers.

I've invested in a mobile hotspot, so I can use it when working from bars, hotels, conferences, or when working for customers and partners that have strict network policies in place and no guest access.

The second problem is power supply. If you're working outside a dedicated place, your laptop, phone, or other devices can run out of battery power. Some years ago, for my laptop I bought a big power bank like this one:

Figure 18: BatPower ProE ES9: a high-capacity power bank. Source: Amazon.

The third problem is finding a good environment that's not too noisy, with a large enough table, a comfortable chair, and good lighting. For the noise, you can temporarily use noise-suppressing headphones or some kind of earplugs. For the lightning, many LED panels or LED rings are good portable solutions that can help when the lightning is not enough.

The fourth problem with working outside of a dedicated space is about connecting to other equipment, which we'll discuss in the next section.

"Batman's utility belt"

Remote workers that travel to meet customers or partners, or that speak at conferences, need to have their own version of "Batman's utility belt," with all the adapters that they need when they're outside. You should never rely on other people to be able to connect your PC, do your work, or present your ideas.

 Note: If your devices are using batteries, keep a set of those with you, or use devices that charge from a USB cable.
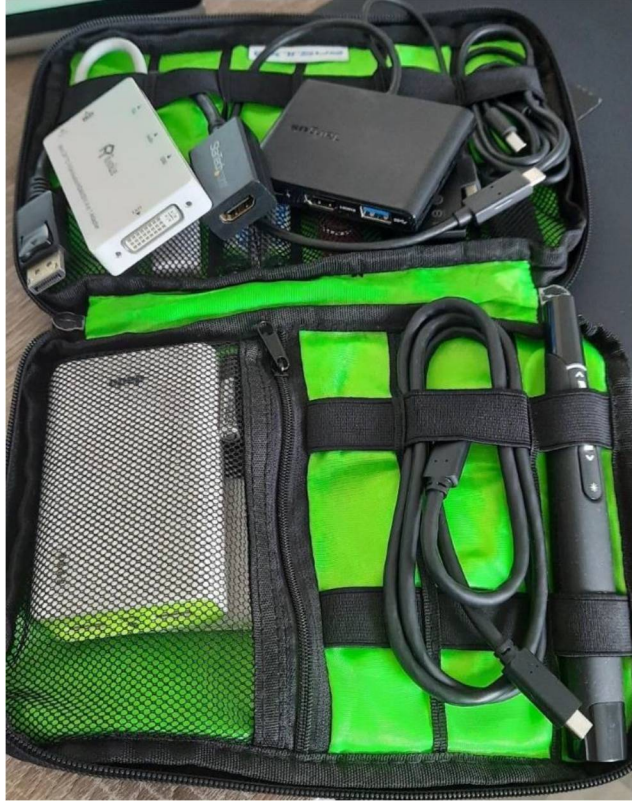
Figure 19: Travel kit used by my colleague Marcello. He can always connect to projectors or external monitors, everywhere.
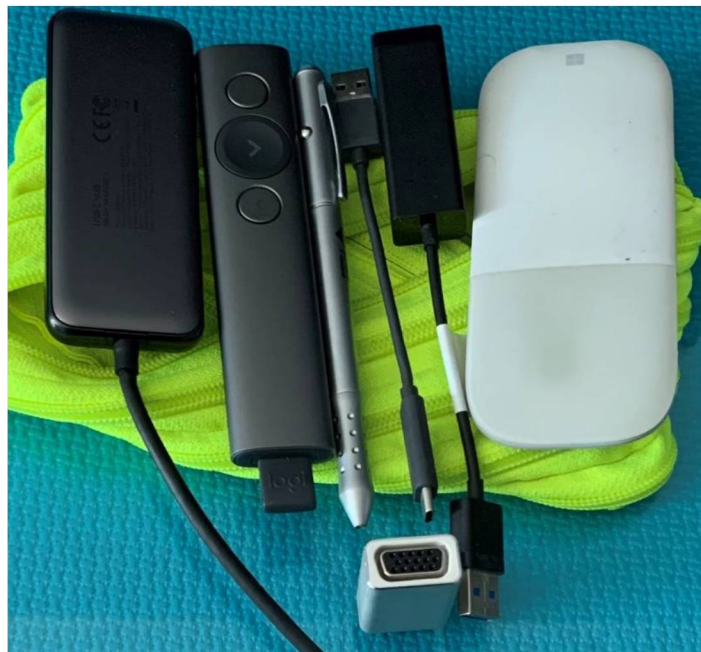
Figure 20: My travel kit, with USB-C adapter (USB-C, 2xUSB-A, microSD, HDMI), a remote for PowerPoint, an Ethernet adapter, an HDMI to VGA adapter, and a slim mouse.

Know your software tools!

Having the best hardware is useless if you don't know how to use the software that you need, especially some little-known features and tricks.

Mail, calendar, and tasks

Let's start with the basics. Everybody needs to know how to use mail, calendar, and tasks. There are plenty of resources for every tool that you can use. We'll only consider some specific aspects.

Check mail only at specific times

I have disabled mail notifications both on my PC and on my phone, and I only check email at specific times of the day, which I schedule on the calendar. Of course, there are days that I'll check email in other moments, but my productivity is negatively impacted when I spend too much time working on other's people priorities.

State your mail rules in your signature

I send mails at strange times during the day, and sometimes during the night. I created this mail signature, borrowing from many different colleagues, so other people know that I'm not putting pressure on them, unless I say something different in the subject line:

We work flexibly at Microsoft. Email rules that I use:

- If you receive an email from me outside of your normal business hours, I'm sending it at that time because it suits me. I am not expecting you to read or reply for two working days unless I request otherwise in the subject.

- I'm only checking emails twice a day because I care about my productivity.

- If you need an answer from me, please include me in the To line.

Thank you for your understanding.

Note: I use the exact same signature both on PC and on the phone. Sometimes, even when I'm at the PC with email closed, I will answer quick emails using the phone while waiting for long tasks to complete.

Leave empty spaces between meetings and add an option to attend the meeting online automatically

Many calendar apps have the option to shorten meetings by default, to leave empty spaces to recharge, and for a bio break. Use it!

Always add the option to follow the meeting online, even if most colleagues are in the office. This will give people the flexibility to attend the meeting without affecting other commitments during the day. If it's mandatory to be present in person, state it in the meeting and explain why it's required.

Figure 21: Options to shorten appointments automatically

Schedule tasks in the calendar

A lot of people, author included, struggle with managing tasks. One simple trick is reviewing your list of tasks (once per day or during the week) and scheduling the tasks that you want to do in the calendar for the following days. Scheduling specific hours to work on a task, instead of just having a deadline and a reminder, is a better way to deal with it.

Chapter 3 is completely dedicated to the vast topic of managing time while working remotely.

Web conferencing and communication

When working remotely, you'll probably have more web conferencing and communication tools on your PC and phone than any other kind of app. All of them have their own strengths and weaknesses. In this section, we'll see what's important to know to get the most from them.

Allow people to enter before the host, or have multiple hosts

Some tools allow all the people from one organization to enter a meeting when the host is absent. Others have the ability to let people enter by themselves even when part of different organizations. Some tools automatically make all the people from one organization be meeting hosts, enabling them to let other people enter the meeting.

If you're scheduling the meeting, know how to work with those options so the meeting can start on time, even if you're not there at the beginning.

Choose AV sources

All the tools let you define your audio and video sources before joining the meeting. Know how to use those options: check your camera stream, check the quality of your audio, and be sure to be muted or unmuted so you don't disturb other people when joining, especially if the meeting has already started.

Muting and unmuting

Know how to mute and unmute yourself, even temporarily, with a keypress, an external controller, or active headphones. "We can't hear you," "You're muted," and so on, are phrases we hear way too often. The phrase is now so common, you can find it on coffee mugs, like this one made by Accompanied.

Figure 22: If you're tired of saying this phrase, you can use a mug and raise it when needed. Source: [Amazon](#)

Know how to mute other noisy participants if you're the meeting host. Remember to unmute the participant that was currently speaking if you decide to mute all.

Webcam on and off, multiple webcams

Know how to turn the webcam on and off, and how to change the active one if you have more than one connected at the same time. If you're not sure how to turn it off, use a [webcam cover](#).

Sharing content

Know the difference between sharing:

- **Full screen**: You can use it when presenting multiple applications, at the risk of oversharing sensitive information.

- **Application**: Keep in mind that sometimes when an application opens a pop-up window, that window could possibly be treated like a different app (not being shared)—so check if people are seeing it.
- **Presentation**: Some tools allow sharing a presentation directly from the tool, without the need to share the screen or a dedicated application.

I normally share a secondary desktop, with all the notifications disabled.

In Chapter 7, we'll see how to handle most of the screen sharing problems.

Sharing audio or video

You'll need to enable sharing audio, since it's disabled by default in most programs.

When sharing a video, you should take into account bandwidth limitations and prepare for other options, like uploading the video in advance if the conferencing software allows it, or sharing a link to the video (although you lose control of what people are seeing).

If the video is essential for your meeting, you should consider sharing it in advance and asking people to look at it.

In Chapter 7 we'll look also at audio problems.

Chat, public, and private

Know how to use the chat, especially the chat embedded in a meeting. Know the difference between public and private chat, and as a rule of thumb, avoid offensive content and comments about the person speaking.

Note: Consider using a different chat program if you need to send sarcastic comments to someone. Beware if the other people have the webcam turned on. I've sent many funny remarks to people that had the camera on, just to make them smile during a meeting.

Subtitles

Most modern tools allow you to add subtitles to meetings and to receive a transcript of the meeting, at least in English. Enable subtitles by default. Sometimes people don't like talking about their accessibility issues, whether those issues are temporary or permanent.

Note: You can also add a fixed message in your meetings asking people to privately share with you their accessibility needs, if different from the subtitles. In case of privacy issues, you can create an anonymous form online using many

different tools (check your company policies) and share the link in the meeting invitation.

Remote presentation tools and video editing software

If you plan to record presentations or videos, or if you need advanced features for your live meetings and sessions, you should probably use advanced video tools. Being able to add effects to your videos, add subtitles, or add text and other content (jingles and music) can dramatically change the quality of a video, but is completely out of scope for this book.

One of the most-used tools for live streaming and video recording is, known as OBS. You can find a good selection of other free (and paid) video editing tools in this article by Alexis Mera Damen.

Hide notifications and other presentation settings

Both MacOS and Windows allow you to hide notifications automatically when presenting. The feature is called **Do Not Disturb** on MacOS and **Focus assist** on Windows.
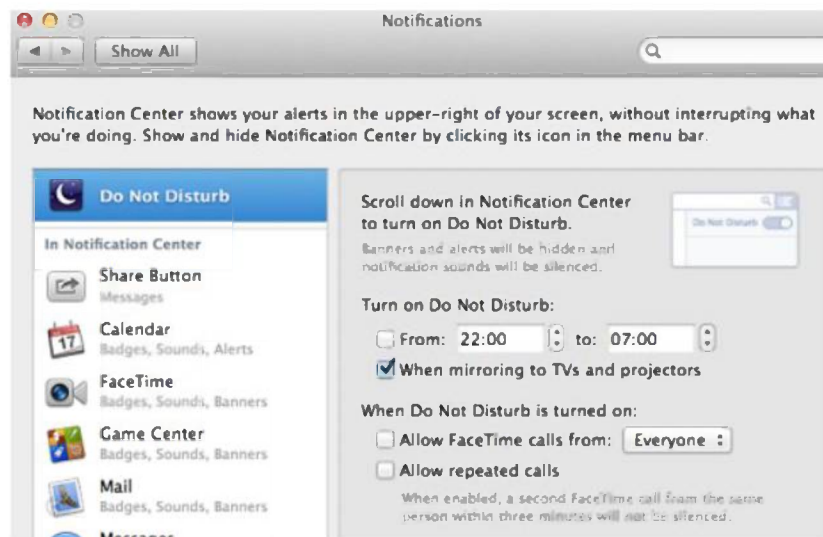
Figure 23: Configure Do Not Disturb on a Mac
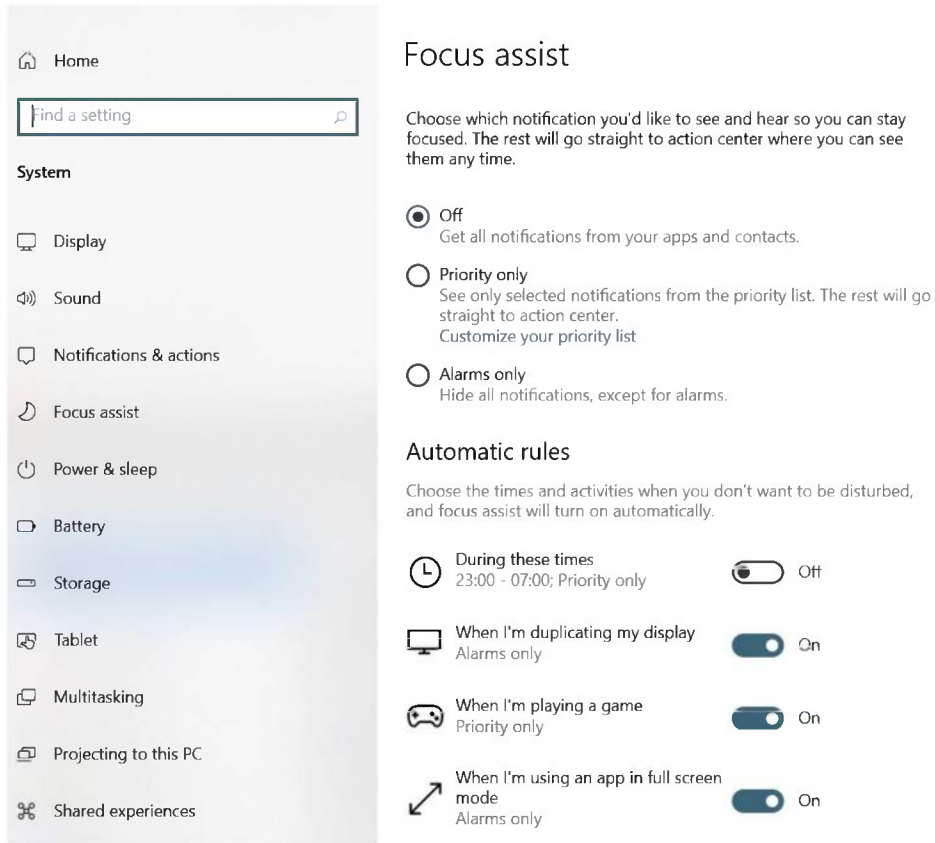
Figure 24: Configure Focus Assist on Windows

One little-known feature of Windows is the ability to configure presentation settings, so you can turn off the screen saver, use a specific background (perhaps with a company logo instead of your family's picture), and set a specific volume.
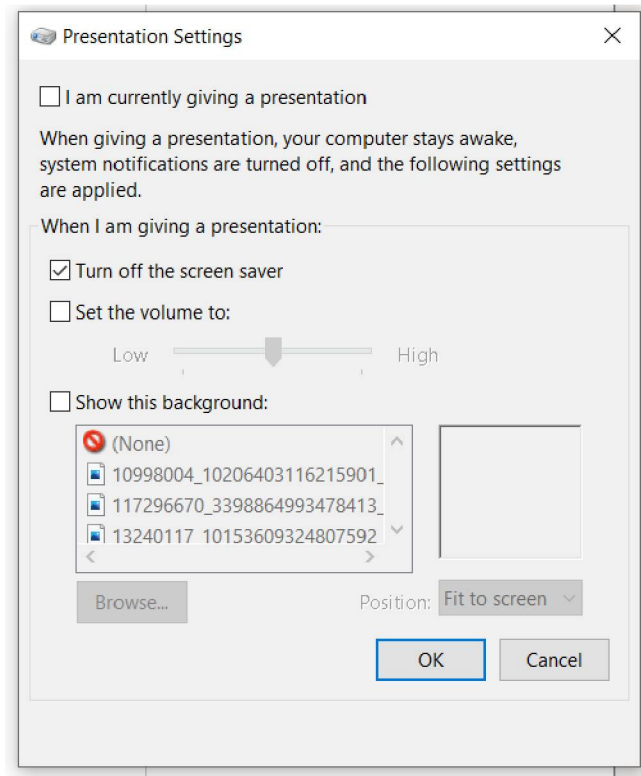
Figure 25: Presentation Settings in Windows

It would be great if, when presenting, the system could automatically hide all the desktop icons, but at the moment you can do it by right-clicking on the desktop and disabling **Show desktop icons**:
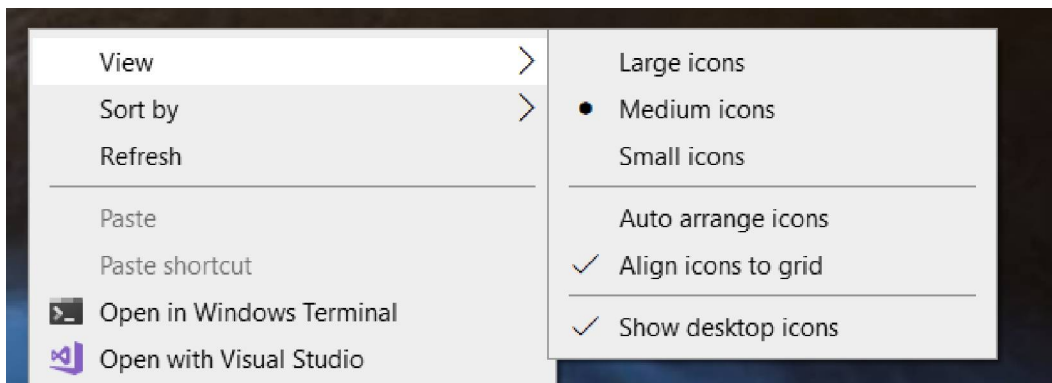
Figure 26: An easy way to hide all desktop icons when presenting on Windows

Document sharing and signing

There are many options to share documents with other people, such as DropBox, OneDrive, Box, and Google Drive. Some companies mandate the use of specifically approved tools; other companies don't have specific policies. In every case, know the software that you're using, especially for document protection, privacy, security, sharing, and so on.

If you need to sign documents frequently, there are many options that are legally valid and that don't require you to print or scan a document. Check if your company already has a contract with such companies that you can use.

Other tools: whiteboards, polls, and ZoomIt

If you cannot use a physical whiteboard, you can use a software-based one. They're more powerful than their counterparts in the real world, they have undo/redo functions, ink to text, virtual sticky notes, and many other features. Be sure to know how to use them, and how to share the results with other people. If you feel awkward writing with a mouse, you can use a (graphic) tablet with a pen.

Sometimes when interacting with multiple people in a meeting, a well-designed poll can be quicker to assess the sentiment of the participants. There are many sites and plug-ins that allow you to gather information, formally or using gamification techniques.

ZoomIt (on Windows, there are many other options for Mac) is my favorite software to zoom and quickly draw something on the screen; it's useful during remote meetings.

Do you remember the old Apple saying: "There's an app for that"? Well, you can probably find many other kinds of apps and sites that can be useful for a remote worker. If you have a need or a problem, try to search for it—someone has probably created a niche business that can help you.

Chapter 3 Managing Time

Time is "the only thing you can't buy," said Warren Buffet in a famous roundtable with Bill Gates. The trickiest thing for new remote workers is managing time and being effective in doing things without burning out—and without working 24-7.

Note: This chapter is not a substitute for a book or a course about time management. There are many different methodologies, and different people benefit from different styles. In this chapter, we'll see some topics related both to managing time and remote working.

Manage expectations with others

When you're working remotely, you should set clear expectations with your manager and with all the people that are working with you, inside and outside your company.

Since you're working remotely (even more so when working from home), you'll have some periods during the day when you cannot be present, or when it's problematic for you to participate in meetings. Block those moments on your calendar and agree with your colleagues or other relevant people to avoid those times and to always use alternative time slots when your presence is needed. Of course, there will be exceptions, but you'll solve many issues just by blocking the appropriate times.

I had a colleague that was working at home with a newborn, and sometimes she couldn't participate in meetings because the baby was sleeping next to her. She could listen to the meeting; she could work on the PC; she could do a lot of stuff—but she couldn't talk in those moments. We knew it, and we set up meetings with her at appropriate times when she had help from the family, or when the baby was at kindergarten.

Set clear expectations about when people can reach out to you, which tool you prefer for different kinds of communication, and many other things. You should also set rules at home, if working from there. We'll look at that in Chapter 6.

Work toward objectives instead of tasks

There's a big difference between being busy and being productive. Busy people like to clear tasks; productive people like to reach objectives.

Of course, objectives should be prioritized so that you focus on the most important and urgent ones first. One of the best-known tools for prioritizing objectives (and related tasks) is by using the Covey's Matrix.

Concentrating only on urgent tasks first, without matching them with your priorities and objectives, is one quick way to destroy your productivity—when you've finished with all the urgent tasks, you don't have enough time for important ones, or perhaps you're too tired.

Working on important tasks, regardless of their urgency, can be also negative. Prioritizing tasks both on importance (first) and urgency (second), will give you enough context to plan your time more efficiently.

Note: There is another related technique called "eat the frog first," which says you should do first the things that you need to do, but that you don't like to do. In that way when you've finished, you're left with better things to do. It's important to correctly prioritize your tasks to know which "frog" to eat first.

Stop wasting your time responding to interruptions

If you start tracking your time, you'll quickly find that between one quarter and one third of your work hours are spent responding to interruptions: emails, calls, messages, and "quick questions."

You can regain your time (up to four or five hours a week) by adopting some small habits:

- Close your email program, or completely disable email notifications if you've established regular times to check email. Consider if you still want to be notified of upcoming appointments (like in Outlook, if you turn it off completely, you will not be notified of upcoming meetings).
- Set your phone to "do not disturb" or disable all the unnecessary notifications.
- Set specific times in your calendar to check email and to go through notifications.
- Stop interrupting people with quick questions all the time. If you find that you need constant communication with someone, schedule regular meetings with them. Interrupt people (and allow them to interrupt you) only for emergencies.
- Adopt asynchronous communication methods when possible. In the next chapter, we'll discuss how to choose the right tools for this.

Delegation

Delegation isn't a topic that's relevant only for managers. Delegation is an important tool even for employees, especially when working remotely.

Of course, you can't delegate your work to somebody else every time, but there are many activities that other people can do better than you—and you can return them a favor by doing some activities that they dislike or cannot do.

Sometimes a colleague that's physically in the office can do something for you, so you don't have to go there. Colleagues will be more inclined to help you if you start helping others in advance, if you're always proactive with others, and if you help them solve their problems.

Being an effective remote worker requires a lot of soft skills—and the ability to delegate is one of them.

Virtual meetings' duration

When planning for a conference call, virtual session, or video course, please keep in mind that people's attention when attending remotely is lower and shorter. Try to reduce meeting and session duration by removing less important topics.

If you need to present something and have less time than expected, you can use the **Pareto principle**.

Note: The Pareto principle, also known as the 80/20 rule, says that most of the time, 80 percent of the effects come from 20 percent of the causes. As an example, most salespersons agree that 80 percent of sales come from 20 percent of the customers.

You can apply the Pareto Principle to your content, even recursively. If you have a course that lasts six hours, thought to be delivered in one day with all the breaks, you can convey 80 percent of the value with a 75-minute presentation—if you select the right materials, slides, and stories from the original course.

If you have only 15 minutes to deliver your message, by again selecting the right content, you can still deliver approximatively 64 percent of the value (80 percent of 80 percent). And so on.

Tip: The difficult part is selecting the right content to be delivered in less time. Focus on VALUE. Always ask yourself: can I remove this part without sacrificing value? When in doubt, remove it.

Virtual meeting fatigue

Another reason to reduce the duration for a virtual session is so-called meeting fatigue, also known as "zoom fatigue," where *Zoom* is used as a generic word, instead of the brand Zoom (like you can use *Kleenex* to indicate a generic tissue). Meeting fatigue applies to Zoom, Teams, Skype, Hangouts, or whatever software you're using.

Meeting fatigue is driven by your perception that other people in the meeting aren't physically there; they're flat images on the screen, and their voices are coming all from the same point.

Part of your brain knows that you're having a conversation with multiple people, or that you're listening to a speaker, while other parts of your brain disagree. This kind of cognitive dissonance can be problematic after some hours.

Here you can find two articles if you want to understand more about the issue:

- [Zoom fatigue is taxing the brain](#)
- [You're tired because your lizard brain knows that Zoom meetings aren't natural](#)

📋 ***Note: To reduce meeting fatigue, some Microsoft engineers have developed new ways of showing meeting participants "all together," using AI techniques, such as segmentation of images, to separate participants from their surroundings and place them together in the same virtual environment.***

Figure 27: [Together Mode in Microsoft Teams](#)

Under-schedule your days, say no to useless meetings

I hear a lot of complaints about people working remotely spending all their time continuously meeting, working, meeting, and so on. Some of them burn out; some of them feel that they're not productive anymore; and some of them crave returning to the office.

My best advice is to keep time during each day (marked BUSY in the calendar) between appointments, and between focus times. You can use that time to handle unexpected tasks; you can take an extra break if needed; or you can finish a task that went too long. In any case, that extra time will save you from stress, and you won't fall behind your schedule.

📋 ***Note: If you know that there are times during the day or week when you're more likely to be interrupted, (for example, your manager calls you after synching with their boss every Monday at noon), don't schedule important meetings or focus time during that timeframe.***

[Busy is the new stupid](#) is a great short video with Bill Gates that contains the phrases: "**You control your time**; sitting and thinking maybe is a much higher priority," and "It's not a proxy of your seriousness that you fill every minute in your schedule."

Warren Buffet's agenda was quite completely empty in the video—and not because nobody wants to work with him. Sometimes you have to say "no" to meeting requests that include you with no apparent reason.

📋 Note: I know a lot of people that send a "tentative" response, or they even don't send a response when they don't plan to attend. I use tentative when I want to participate in a meeting, but I'm not sure I can do it. It allows me to participate if my schedule changes.

I decline the meeting if I don't think it's relevant for me. If the sender thinks that my presence is important, they'll call me back when they receive a decline. Perhaps the next time the meeting will have a clear agenda, or a clear description that will show how it's supposed to be important for me.

No, I don't usually decline meetings with my manager, or with other important managers or customers. I care about my career more than a single meeting slot. 😊

Plan and take breaks between meetings

If you have a full day of meetings, try to shorten their duration (even automatically if you're the sender of the meeting) and reserve the empty space in your calendar for breaks. "Research Proves Your Brain Needs Breaks" is a great paper that shows the results of a study where participants did a series of virtual meetings back-to-back, and then a series of virtual meetings with a ten-minute break between the various sessions.

The results are impressive. Doing meetings back-to-back increases your stress level, but with just a ten-minute break, your stress level due to virtual meetings will remain constant, but not increase.

📋 Note: Speaking of stress, do you know how "stress eating" is when someone eats even when full? "Stress working" is when you work when you need a break.

Effective breaks

When you start taking regular breaks, you can feel guilty, but research is on your side. You should see breaks as an important part of your productive workday—but not all breaks are the same!

There are a lot of people that spend their breaks staying at the computer, "doomscrolling" on social media, eating unhealthy foods, or doing other negative things. These are not breaks because they won't regenerate you.

Step away from the computer, and instead: walk, do some exercises, read something, meditate, do some home duties that don't require brainpower, play with your children, call someone you haven't heard from in a long time, listen to music, socialize with other people without talking about rumors and other negative topics, eat quality food, or do some gardening. You get the idea.

Note: Are you sure that the meeting you're scheduling is really needed? And when the meeting is approaching, are you sure is it still relevant? Could it be done with an email or a chat? In that case, simply do what's best for you and for other attendees and cancel the meeting, write an email, or start a chat. Canceling an unnecessary meeting is even better than taking a break after it!

Understanding energy levels and sleep cycles

Our energy levels during the day are variable. They change in different times of the year; they change from person to person; they could also change due to stress and other factors. Each person has their own basic preferences. Some people prefer to start early in the day, and then they need to recharge at lunch. Some people prefer to start later and have a short lunch, but then they need more energy during the afternoon.

When working at the office, these preferences are often overridden by the conventional working hours, but when working remotely, people can adapt their schedule to better align to their energy levels during the day.

Even sleep cycles impact energy and productivity. The number of hours a person sleeps is important, but even more important is getting some rest when needed by the body. People working remotely have better chances to adapt their schedule to their sleep cycles if they plan their calendar accordingly.

The burden of working too much from home during the pandemic was in part related to the fact that a lot of people didn't listen to their body, didn't adopt healthy sleep cycles, and didn't adapt their schedule to their energy levels when possible.

Wrong definition of success can lead to anxiety

Most people work overtime, never delegate, and jump from one activity to another because they want to be "successful." People are developing various forms of anxiety due to a misguided definition of success. Even young people suffer from this kind of anxiety.

Instead of focusing on the individual metrics of success, like money, work level, power, number of followers, or fame, people should think about success as the impact on the life of others, instead of a comparison against them.

Note: At the beginning of my career, I always worked to be promoted, earn more money, and so on. I liked my job, but I was always busy comparing my results with the results of other people I knew.

Some years ago, I met a CEO of a company who was clearly more successful than me in many of those individual metrics (money, power, car). We started chatting, and he was happy because he could spend 30 minutes to 1 hour per day, during the workdays, but sometimes even during the weekends, with his child.

I usually spend much more time during the day with my child. I take him to school; I get him back when I can; I organize my time so I can spend some quality time with him during the day, and I do some work when he's sleeping.

My child helped me change my definition of success—from individual metrics to the impact on my life, and on my family.

Working too much can kill you!

A [study by the World Health Organization and the International Labor Organization](#) confirmed that long working hours are responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people a year. The study says that **working 55 hours (or more) a week is responsible for one third of all the work-related burden of disease**, due to higher risk of stroke or ischemic heart disease, compared to a typical working week of 35–40 hours.

Note: The study was completed before COVID-19, and is not related to working in the office or working remotely. Since most remote workers tend to work long hours, especially from home, this should be taken into great consideration for their health.

Use all the tips in this chapter to effectively manage your time, be more productive, take more breaks, and try to work fewer hours—not more. Deadlines shouldn't have a literal meaning!

Chapter 4 How to Stay Engaged and Collaborate with Others

Being a remote worker can be difficult, especially if all your colleagues are in the same office together. In this chapter, we'll see how to work around the distance and keep engagement and effective collaboration.

Use the right tools

Have you ever heard the phrase "that meeting could have been an email"? It's so common that there is also a meme about it:

Figure 28: "Survived another meeting" meme. Source.

Chat, Teams, Slack channels, emails, virtual meetings, physical meetings—there are many different tools that we can use to collaborate with others.

Real-time communication is synchronous: people meet in person, in virtual meetings, have phone calls, and so on. It's the fastest way to collaborate, but it has a strong tax on people's productivity.

Asynchronous communication can use text, recorded audio, and video messages. If people read/view and respond on their own schedule, they can be more focused and productive. If they're forced to respond immediately, productivity is often impacted like in synchronous communication.

Synchronous

Real-time communication, in-person, phone, or video meetings

Asynchronous

The same media of near-synch, but people will read/view and respond on their own schedule

Near-synchronous

Immediate response to chat, channels, audio messages, and emails
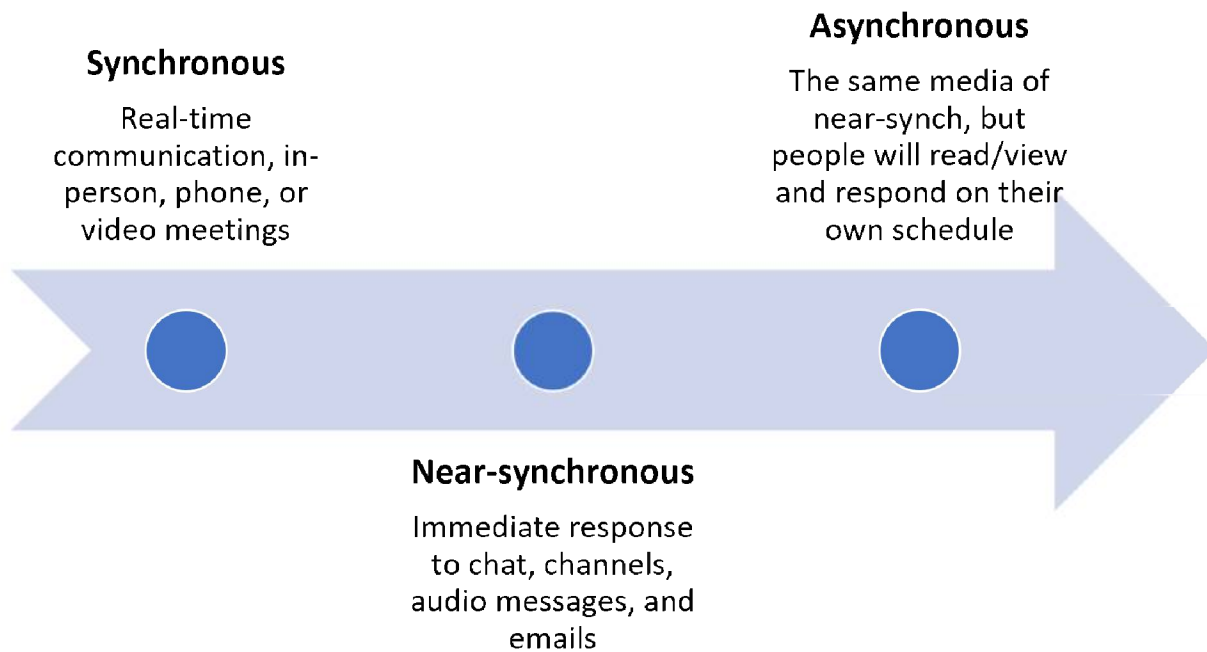
Figure 29: Different levels of synchronicity in communications.

To improve productivity, try to rely on asynchronous communication, have a clear netiquette, and reduce meeting duration.

Note: When inviting someone to a meeting, explain why you are inviting them by including them in the meeting agenda or by sending them a personal message. Even a message that asks someone to be there because you need a double-checker can be useful to prioritize their attendance.

And remember, there will always be meetings that can't be replaced by emails or other forms of async communication:

- Meetings that are used to create more connections between the team, with new colleagues or with managers and employees.
- Hot topics that could easily become crucial conversations.
- Urgent decisions, perhaps with incomplete data. If a topic is urgent and complex, and you must make guesses or take shortcuts, it's better to have a (virtual) meeting, instead of a long (and time-consuming) email thread.

Shared documents or repositories

Microsoft Office, Google Docs, OneDrive, Dropbox, GitHub, GitLab: there are a great selection of tools that enable working on shared documents or repositories of all sorts. Sometimes a shared document updated by multiple people with clear goals and a clear accountability (enforced by the tool) is much better than a long meeting.

People can work at their own pace, in their time zone, or when kids are sleeping. They can leave comments, open issues and solve them, and approve other people's changes.

If possible, always use a shared document instead of a document sent back and forth using emails with poor tracking. It's a recipe for a disaster!

Note: Sometimes having multiple people asynchronously updating documents can result in an infinite loop of changes. In that case, it's good to schedule a meeting all together to finish the document and move on. The meeting can be recurrent if the team has many documents floating around every week or every month.

Chat etiquette: Get to the point!

I know too many colleagues and customers that send "hello" to a chat, and then wait for me to answer. I hate that!

Please, don't waste my time with just a "Hello." Go ahead and tell me how can I help you, or let me know if it's just a greeting. In the first case, being able to see why you need me gives me the time to find an answer, or allows me to prepare one, asynchronously. In the other case, knowing that it's just a greeting will not put pressure on me, and I can respond whenever I've time.

Write short emails

One simple rule with emails is to keep them short. Laura Bergells, a public speaking coach with over 14.500 LinkedIn followers, says: "If it's over 150 words, it's not an email. It's a phone call."

Of course, there are status reports and other kinds of emails that should be longer, but you should mark them as such, and you should begin them with the calls to action for those involved, so you don't force everyone to read all the email to find information and actions that are relevant for them.

Webcam etiquette

We discussed webcams in Chapter 2, including how to protect them from unwanted webcam usage. We'll see how to solve problems using the webcam in Chapter 7. In the next section, we'll discuss some unspoken rules about using the webcam.

Don't force people to turn on the webcam

The first rule is to be polite and don't force people to use the webcam. You don't know what's happening behind them, or where they're connecting from. The best way to suggest to other people to turn on their webcam is by turning on yours. That's a moral suasion that tells your interlocutors that you'd like to see them, without asking directly.

Of course, if you have a good relationship with the other person, you can tell them that you'd like to see them, but I normally don't like the feeling of being forced to turn it on when I don't want to.

Don't multitask with the camera on

If you're in a good place, it's always better to turn it on, but when you do, don't multitask! It's very rude and unprofessional.

Note: Multitasking is never a good idea. In most cases it hurts your productivity. If you do it in front of the camera, it is even worse.

Switch the camera on and off to simulate body language

You should turn the camera on when you are presenting essential points or opening a conversation or asking for feedback. You can turn it off when you're doing complex tasks, like demos, and want the focus to be on the result, not on you.

You can also turn it off if you're not supposed to talk, and another colleague is presenting, so you don't distract others.

Use "presenter mode" when showing important data

People are impressed when I display slides with data and I use Teams presenter mode, so my picture appears integrated in the slides I'm presenting, and not on the side or at the top.

You can change your position live while presenting, from right to left, and also change the size of your image.
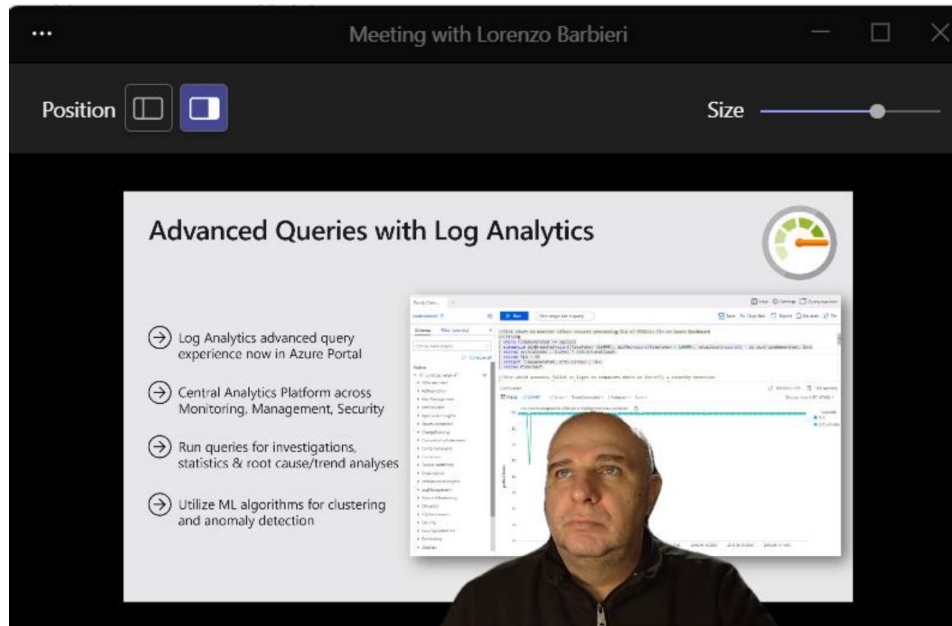
Figure 30: Teams standout presenter mode preview screen. The author was presenting a slide and looking at the title, "forcing" remote attendees to do the same.

Of course, you should prepare a slide deck that has *space* for the presenter. Then you can live inside the presentation and use your body language by pointing your eyes or your finger to the content you want to highlight. If you practice, it can be a powerful tool.

Being more effective with people during virtual meetings

Use names to interact with people, especially if they're distracted

Calling people by name is a powerful tool, especially if people are multitasking in front of the camera or if they've turned off their camera and you don't know if they're ready.

The strategy I use is to call their name, summarize the point I was making, and then ask the question. People have time to listen again after you've called their name and before being asked the question.

> *Note: During virtual classes I have a sheet with the names of the attendees with spaces to summarize their responses to my questions. Imagine after a two-day course being able to say, "Jessica, as you said yesterday morning, it's important to*

…", and then you can continue by mentioning other people, using their names. You'll make a powerful impression!

Have an advocate in the room when remotely speaking to a large room

Find a trusted person that will be physically present and instruct them in advance. Have them sitting near the PC that is projecting and near the phone or the speakers and microphone. Instruct them to repeat questions and ask them to draw your attention when needed. They'll be your eyes and ears in the room, and your participation will be much more successful.

Whiteboard!

We already discussed using whiteboards or (graphics) tablets during meetings. Whiteboarding is great for discussions, brainstorming, or summarizing a discussion. Use it!

Call to action

Always have a call to action at the end of a meeting, especially virtual meetings. You can do it while still connected, or you can use a follow-up email as a reminder for the call to action agreed upon during the meeting.

If your meetings don't have specific calls to action, think about why you scheduled the meetings and if they were necessary.

Socialize virtually, one to one, or with multiple people

Find ways to socialize virtually, with team members, other colleagues, and other people in your field or industry. One-to-one meetings, informal group meetings, virtual coffees, and virtual aperitifs are all good options—you should decide which is better for you to attend, both for your social needs and for your work-life balance.

If you decide to skip informal group meetings because of bad timing, or other family or personal reasons, talk with your colleagues so that they know that you care about them, but that you cannot attend those kinds of meetings. And find other ways to connect with them regularly.

Working together on a common task can be a good idea to socialize with a team member that is too shy to have other informal interactions.

Chapter 5 Managing Remote Workers

Being a manager of people who are working remotely requires a different level of empathy, a great ability to delegate, and a different way to control the effectiveness of work being done.

Care about people more than the business

Business will come if you take care of your people. Of course, you must care about the business, but try first to understand what's driving your employees, what's blocking them, and what they cannot tell you.

> *Note: Of course, this chapter applies also to managers having employees working in the same office, but for those who are managing people working remotely, this is even more relevant.*

Focus on the essentials of the work

People working remotely need to have even clearer priorities, and normally they don't like to spend too much time on unnecessary activities, or activities that don't align with their own and their team's priorities.

Help employees prioritize meetings that they must attend and meetings that they could decline to ease meeting fatigue. Assign clear responsibilities to people with different seniorities and instruct newbies on who can help them with specific problems or on specific topics. You can also encourage newbies to have a period of job shadowing with senior team members, or with senior people in the company with a similar role. When you empower people on specific topics, they'll help you drive the business even further.

> *Note: Empowering people, assigning clear responsibilities, and taking care of how they feel is the opposite of micromanagement, a bad management style where managers closely control every move of their employees. Micromanagement denotes a lack of trust and freedom on how to interpret the job.*

Social events that are currently very fashionable, like virtual coffees or virtual happy hours, are important, but only if all the fundamentals of a good team are already in place.

Set boundaries between work and personal life

A manager should lead by example, even when talking about work-life balance. How can people believe that they can have a balanced work and life if their managers are burning the midnight oil every day, if they call them at every hour, if they expect immediate answers to emails sent 24 hours a day?

The manager should show that a work-life balance can be achieved, and they should protect an employee's time off. Of course, sometimes people should go the extra mile, but that shouldn't be the norm for all days; otherwise, employee burnout will be just around the corner.

Manage by objectives, not by hours at the computer

This paragraph is closely tied to the previous one. Don't judge people's performance on how many hours they spend at the computer. Manage them by objectives, clearly prioritize the objective with them, try to unblock or understand when something is going down a dead road, and work with employee to find another way to solve the issue.

Instead of focusing on "knowing if they're working," focus on their results, and help them reduce stress and hours worked, with great benefit to their productivity.

Of course, there are situations when people are not working correctly and seriously, and you should work to solve those problems directly with those people to understand the root causes.

Implementing a diffused surveillance system on company devices will lower people's morale, collaboration, and trust. Even Great Place to Work, an organization that has a list of the best places to work, says that the benefits of a trust culture are much higher than a culture of strict control.

Please don't do like in the following comic:
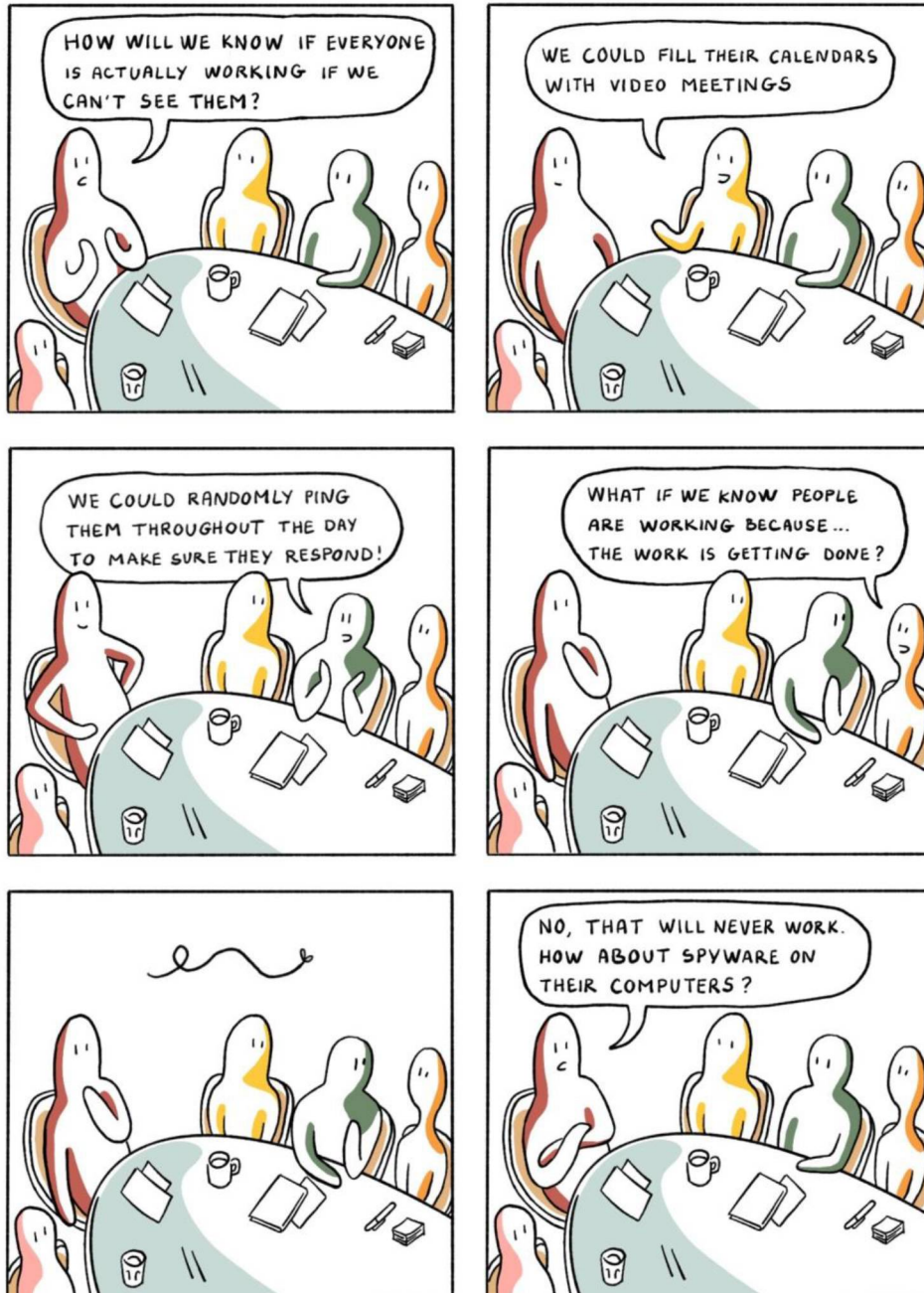
Figure 31: How to Know If Your Remote Employees Are Really Working (or not?). Source: blog.doist.com

Know your people

A good manager should have contact with a remote team member at least once a week, apart from business-related calls. A contact can be a short one-to-one, an email with some context, a message, or chitchat during a more structured meeting—something that allows the manager to feel the pulse of the person.

Knowing how to read behind body language or the tone of voice is essential, but so is knowing the habits of the people regarding team dynamics. Some people attend every meeting, formal and informal, while others only attend important ones.

If someone that attended every meeting is missing, try to understand what happened. Perhaps it's just an overlapping meeting, but sometimes there are other causes that need to be understood.

For people who only attend important meetings, you should have regular, probably short, one-to-one meetings to keep checking how things are going, not only from the business side, but with them personally. Don't force people to attend every meeting, and make sure to mark mandatory meetings as such in the invitation.

Foster employee connections

Employees need to feel connected to have good morale, and managers should do all they can to enable it. "In Hybrid Work, Managers Keep Teams Connected" is a great paper about how managers can bond a team together to have happy and engaged people and better results.

To keep a good connection even when working remotely, people should feel that their work is important and recognized; that they aren't wasting time with activities that aren't a priority; that they can trust the company culture; and that they have a good work-life balance. Their manager is essential to all those topics, and numbers are starting to show that a good level of connection can be stabilized after an abrupt change.

Another part of feeling connected is knowing what's happening in the company or in the team, even when it's just a rumor. A good manager should be transparent enough to share what could happen, even if it's not certain, or at least share that it is something that's still undefined or unclear. Remote people will feel more connected to the company when these kinds of discussions, typically done in front of the water cooler or coffee machine, happen during online staff meetings.

Speaking of company culture, this Fast Company article by Ayekin Tank will show you how having solid company values, caring about your employees, and supporting them even remotely will be the norm when some of the people work onsite and some of them work remotely.

Note: It's also important to connect people in your team to other teams in the company, especially when the various teams need to work together, but they have

different objectives. It's important to know what drives other departments in the company to be able to find common objectives.

Have regular and ad hoc meetings

Try to have regular staff meetings (every two weeks or monthly) and one-to-one meetings (weekly or every two weeks) to check not only the business, but also how your people feel about what's happening around them.

During staff meetings, try to leave twenty or thirty minutes in every meeting to a different team member to present something about their work, new stuff they learned recently, their interests, or their culture. Be sure to rotate to a different team member each time. If that can't be done during a staff meeting, you can still plan special recurring meetings dedicated to better understanding the team, one team member at a time.

Try to always respect the meeting agenda (you sent it for a reason) and give everyone the chance to talk if requested.

Note: Even a short 30-minute, one-to-one meeting every week or two can make the difference. It can seem redundant, but it allows you to drive forward topics that will normally be underestimated.

Sometimes problems arise, and you can't wait for the next scheduled team meeting in two weeks. Try to understand how people feel in the team, perhaps by talking with one or two influential team members. If you sense that the situation is going downhill, you can send an email saying that you're taking care of it, or, if you have something to discuss, schedule a specific meeting to solve the problem, or at least to ask people how they feel and discuss possible solutions.

Your people should feel that your door is always open, even virtually, with a call, a chat, or an email. Try to avoid false hope. If you're busy and you say, "I'll call you back later," you should do it. People in the office can see when you're no longer busy, but people working remotely will feel left behind if you don't keep your promise.

Note: If part of the team that you're managing is remote and part of the team is in the same office, try to join the meeting from a conference room, or stay at home that day. Most of the time, people in a meeting try to treat the manager in a special way, especially by making sure that their point is taken and well understood by the manager.

In many meetings where the manager is in the same room, most people tend to focus on targeting the manager and not the whole audience, which can cause a bad experience for remote participants.

If the manager is not in the same physical room, people in the room together are

forced to give remote participants the same level of engagement that is normally reserved for people being present. Lead by example.

Inform people who missed important meetings

Recording a two-hour staff meeting and asking people to watch it is not effective, nor respectful of their time. If the meeting is important, and some people from your team couldn't attend, ask someone to take notes, or do it yourself if you aren't the main speaker, and share the notes afterwards. Meeting tools are evolving to provide meeting transcripts that you can then edit and shorten, leaving only the meaningful parts.

Take small problems lightly

The way you treat people when there are small problems working remotely has big impacts on their perception about you, the company, and their ability to continue working remotely. Does a child come on screen during a call? Smile, say hello to the child, and then continue with the meeting. Is the dog barking, or the cat walking on the keyboard? Laugh about it, tell a joke, and then continue talking about business.

From a direct manager to a dotted-line manager

Moving from a linear model, where you directly manage people, to a matrix model, were you're responsible for part of the work of other people without being their direct manager, is a great challenge. Being a remote dotted-line manager is even more challenging.

Note: Dotted-line managers can assign you tasks or drive initiatives that include you without being your direct (also called solid-line) manager. More information about dotted-line reporting can be found in the Indeed article "Dotted-Line Reporting: Definition and Tips."

Here are some considerations for dotted-line managers:

- During reorgs, many managers who used to be direct managers and became dotted-line managers have a difficult time adapting to the new role. Most of them will search for a more traditional managing role. Being a dotted-line manager requires a greater variety of skills than a traditional manager.
- Managing a community of people who have different managers but the same objective is more difficult than managing a team. The role of a dotted-line manager is more strategic because you can't order your people to do something; you aren't their direct manager. If people know that you can anticipate business directions, including understanding before others which are the important topics of the next months or of the next semester, and you can steer your community in that direction, people will follow you without the need of direct power.
- If you demonstrate that you have business acumen and that you can also "talk their language," your people will respect you—not because you're their manager, but because they can trust you.

- Since you're not their direct manager, you have the opportunity to better understand their needs if you show them that you're open to talking, that you can coach or mentor them when needed, that you can share with them your vision, and that you can listen to theirs.
- If you know what drives your people, you can better assign activities to them because you'll probably find the right people for the right task; they'll like the task, and if the task is difficult and no one else wants to do it, they'll probably obtain more visibility inside the organization when they complete it.

Remote recruiting and onboarding

Hiring people remotely is not a new thing. Multinational companies with cross-border teams have been doing it for years, but at some point, the whole team should meet and interact with each other.

During the pandemic, a lot of hiring became remote, but in most cases the offered jobs will be remote until the offices reopen, and then people will need to move back to the office again.

There are some differences if employees will work remotely after the pandemic, or if it's only a temporary situation.

Recruiting for a temporary remote position

In the case of hiring someone for a temporary remote position, the job post and the selection is nearly the same as hiring for a permanent position. The only difference is that the interviews are remote only, with the webcam turned on, and they will probably be one-to-one meetings since it's difficult to organize virtual one-to-many or many-to-many sessions, which are possible in person.

HR (human resources) departments should work on better filtering of candidates, and managers should focus on reading body language using a screen. But in the end, the process is very similar to the traditional one.

Recruiting for a permanent remote position

Hiring people for a permanent remote position could be a completely different experience. First, the job post should advertise that the position is remote, and it should probably be posted on a remote-jobs dedicated search site in addition to regular ones (Monster, LinkedIn).

Second, it's likely that people from different regions or countries will apply with different cultures, and sometimes even different time zones if the job allows that. HR should be prepared to do a set of screenings before passing the candidates to the hiring manager.

A lot of companies are now offering remote positions to attract the best talent. If a company is known to be remote-friendly, more people will consider applying for a position. Your company should work to establish a brand that is remote-friendly, with dedicated posts on social media that describe how (part of) the company is handling remote work, remote employees' interviews on the company's career website, dedicated perks for remote workers, and so on.

You can find more information about the topic in this Vervoe article by Hugo Britt.

Use LinkedIn to find the right people

Sometimes HR or the recruiting agencies cannot find a good set of candidates for a remote position. A good manager with a strong network on LinkedIn can step in and start promoting the position, searching for a good candidate, with the help of other remote colleagues that can attest to how well they're working remotely in the team.

Remote onboarding

In the Microsoft white paper that we saw before, there's a section with data about remote onboarding during the pandemic. More than 25,000 Microsoft employees were onboarded remotely during the pandemic. They were surveyed after 90 days, and their responses were compared to interviews from previous onboarding cycles were people received the typical in-person welcome.

The result was that managers were crucial to the onboarding experience (new hires relied 20% more on managers), more than peers (new hires reliance on peers decreased 15%), especially when managers set clear goals, offered guidance on how to approach the work, and made team priorities clear.

Managers should be empowered by their companies to be support heroes for new hires. Managers should give new hires enough time to understand the job, internal procedures, and team dynamics, as well as data and insight about the kind of work that the new employee should do, to help them set the right priorities and goals.

Note: If you cannot help your new hire regularly, let them work with other people on the team by asking a colleague to be their virtual buddy from the beginning and to have regular meetings to improve onboarding without the pressure of a formal process.

Invest in the new hire immediately

Retaining a remote new hire can be difficult because competition is growing, and they're not yet connected with the team and the company. Investing in their future immediately will strengthen their retention and can be done relatively easily by letting them attend virtual trainings of various nature, internally and externally.

If you see that they feel anxious about other people's perceptions of their contributions to the team, you can also help them identify and work on quick wins: small projects, aligned to their best qualities, that can be closed in short time to help them gain recognition.

Multicultural environments

Working in a multicultural environment (as is the case for many remote teams) can be challenging without specific training for the manager and the employees. A good book that can help in understanding all the implications of a multicultural environment is *The Culture Map by Erin Meyer*.

Regular sharing of activities from different team members about their culture, traditions, and heritage can be beneficial to the whole team, and can be done during regular or dedicated staff meetings.

Note: Sometimes different cultures can clash on some topics (such as geopolitics, human rights, diversity and inclusion, and personal values). It's important to work on that, if possible, because some fractures are difficult to fix if not immediately discussed.

In other cases, the issues might be well beyond the team capacity to adapt and find a solution. In those, the manager should work with their managers and HR to find a solution, which can involve moving people around or splitting the team geographically.

Gifts and other benefits

In many companies, remote managers have a budget for small gifts that can be used to improve team morale. Being able to send a small physical gift or even a greeting card when people have birthdays, on a work anniversary, when they get sick, or for other special occasions can make them feel more appreciated and part of a well-functioning team. Even being able to expense a dinner can make a huge impact on people's morale.

Chapter 6 Working from Home with Fewer Problems

You're taking your work home, not vice versa. It could be a life choice, or something forced by the pandemic. In either case, you should find the right compromises with all the people living with you, including children, family, and housemates.

Have an alternative place for important meetings and tasks

If working from home is a life choice, you should plan for an alternative when staying at home is not feasible. If the schools are closed for vacation and your children are home, do you have that important meeting in the morning? Do you have renovation work at home?

You could go to the office if you live not so far away. You could go to a coworking space, if you know one, but you have to reserve your place days in advance.

You could go to a public library if you don't have to be on a call all the time. You could go to a hotel; most of them allow you to book a room for the day, with room service, or you can book a conference room for a lower price. You could go to a friend's office if they can book a room for you.

There are many other places where you can go, but there will be times when you can't stay at home and need to go somewhere else. Plan for it!

Have a clear set of rules, schedule times for kids and house duties

If your kids are used to spending time with you during the day, they'll search for you. If your housemates need your help, they'll search for you. Sometimes working from home can be difficult if you don't define a clear set of rules.

You should set explicit boundaries, and find ways to signal that you're busy and cannot be interrupted, perhaps with a sign on the door, or a light outside of it. Tell your kids and housemates to respect the sign, and that you'll spend time with them later—and then do as you promised.

Always schedule time with them, especially during full days of work, and then enjoy that time dedicated to them. You'll be more productive and focused if you know that you'll spend time with them when planned.

Don't be afraid of interruptions

It could happen that children or other housemates interrupt you during conference calls or, even worse, live events. Of course, you should remember to lock your door, turn on the "red light" if available, or stick a poster with "do not disturb" on the door, but, if you have problems at home—crying children, a partner needing help—you can apologize, solve the problem, and come back.

Sometimes it's the express courier delivering the package you were expecting another day; sometimes it's the postman with bills and fines. People will understand the situation, especially if your office is still closed, or if the situation mandates that you stay at home.

If the situation is recurring, you should go to your "safe place" that you planned for in one of the previous sections.

Note: Once during a full-day virtual course, I heard my wife calling me because the house was under a small storm, and she needed help with our child and all the things in the garden she was trying to recover. A fifteen-minute break saved both the family and the course.

There is another category of housemates that cannot understand signs, red lights, schedules, and everything else: your pets! When you're interrupted by them, you should behave exactly as you would with small children.

Figure 32: Even a Scottish MP was photobombed by his cat during a virtual meeting (source: Global News). If you want to see the cat's face, you can take a look on Twitter.

Sync your schedule with other people

Multiple people doing calls in the same room are a recipe for a disaster. Even someone cleaning the room nearby can be really disturbing. There are activities that can be postponed and other activities that are fixed. Try to sync with all the involved people, have a common schedule for "do not disturb" time, understand their needs, and explain yours. Sometimes the only solution is the alternative place that you defined at the beginning of the chapter, if available.

Note: I did some calls in my parked car away from home while waiting for neighbors to chop wood. If you know their noisy hours, you can at least try to adapt your schedule. Working from home sometimes requires compromises.

Beware of digital assistants

Amazon Alexa, Apple Siri, Google Assistant, and their hardware counterparts are part of many families around the globe. You probably have at least one of them in your home office or in a nearby room.

Many companies are starting to mandate the removal of them, or at least turning off the microphone of digital assistants during important meetings because of the possibility of eavesdropping. Check with your company to see if you're required to do so.

If your digital assistant also has a webcam, consider using the built-in switch to cover it, or even better, use a webcam cover as explained in Chapter 2.

Declutter your desktop to avoid sharing unwanted content

We discussed in Chapter 2 hiding desktop icons, changing the wallpaper, and so on. Another trick is to close all the applications that are not needed during the presentation, so when you're switching between open apps, you won't show unwanted content.

If you're recording or taking a picture of your physical desktop, remember to remove all the sticky notes with passwords and other sensitive information. YouTube is full of videos showing usernames and passwords stickied on the border of the monitor.

Note: This might seem to be an unnecessary tip. How can you possibly share information online without knowing? It's easier than you think, especially in this

Create routines

For some people, having a routine is easy also when working from home. You wake up, prepare yourself, prepare the child (or the children), and you get them to school. For other people, waking up can be very difficult. And when they wake up, they need some time to be productive. Some need time to be able to speak with somebody else.

There are people that wake up very early, do their meditation, exercises, journaling, and then start working, or wake up the family and start their morning routine. I know people that forget to eat when they're working from home, and others that eat at every break.

The end of the working day can be problematic for some people, while others have easy reminders that work is over, with people demanding their attention.

In any case, it's important to have defined routines, to dress normally, and leave the pajamas behind, even when you're lonely at home and you have no video calls. Eat normally, get some rest, and have a clear separation between work and personal time.

Schedule time be outside

Staying at home all the time is nerve-racking; therefore, many people like to schedule time to eat outside (even when restaurants are closed, I order take away and eat in a park, or in the car if necessary). Doing regular exercises, or simply walking, is essential for your wellbeing. I tend to do some mentorship sessions, virtual coffees, and other informal meetings while walking around the neighborhood.

Don't replace commute time with work time

The time that you've gained is an important resource for you. During the pandemic, a lot of people felt exhausted because they worked many more hours during the day, just because they started working early and stopped late, since they didn't have to commute.

Use that extra time for you, for your family, for your exercises, for your personal development, for a side project, or for talking with a friend or relative. Don't walk into the trap of working more. You can do it for a few days, even for weeks—but in the end you'll pay the price.

Have a meeting-free day once a week

Try to reserve at least one day per week without meetings. You can do it if you plan for it in advance. You can use that day to do focused activities that you cannot do on normal days. You can also schedule longer breaks during that day and take it easy to recharge and be more productive afterward.

Ask for help

Many companies provide anonymous support for employees in difficult times. If that support is not available, there are many other ways to get help: from dedicated phone numbers, professionals, and friends.

Even if work is going well, and your health is good, you can feel strange. That sense of emptiness is called languishing. You're not burned out or depressed, but you don't feel good either. Being able to name your feelings is important. The next time that people ask how you are, you can tell them that you're languishing. Or you can say "it's complicated," and it's okay, because our times are complicated.

If you feel that you're not okay, even if you still have energy and you're doing your job every day, try to reserve some time only for you. Focus on your objectives, starting from the small ones so you can easily "score some points." And don't hesitate to ask for help!

If you think people are exaggerating those feelings, you're lucky you don't feel them too—because many people suffered during those days of forced work from home and lockdown, with many implications:

- Introverts probably joked about their feelings and habits at the beginning of lockdown, but then they struggled more than extroverts. This lesson should be taken into account when planning to work from home constantly.
- Many people felt alone and admitted to crying for the first time in years. Don't be afraid to ask colleagues to spend some time with you, even virtually, or seek other kinds of help.

A lot of people avoid professional help when talking about mental health; there's a huge stigma associated with it. There is a great TED talk called "There's no shame in taking care of your mental health" that you should listen to.

Chapter 7 Tips & Tricks for All Remote Workers

Some of the tricks from Chapter 6 are also valid for people working remotely from a hub, a coworking space, or a personal office. In this chapter, we'll see other tricks that apply to all types of remote workers.

Always assume positive intent

Working remotely forced a lot of people to use email, chat, and other tools that completely hide the emotional part of communication. In most cases, especially if people are tired, working too hard, or having other problems, they tend to overreact to messages because of the lack of emotional context.

When you receive a message (in any form) from your manager, colleagues, and even family members and friends, always assume positive intent. You can then check if your assumptions are real. If the discussion takes a turn for the worse, always follow up directly with the other person, using a video call, so you can also check their body language.

Work on your personal brand!

The first suggestion for every remote worker is to start or to keep working on your personal brand. Being remote decreases your visibility in the company, and sometimes in the market. Work on your personal brand by maintaining your promises, helping colleagues, sharing information, creating content, being active on important projects, actively engaging your connections, mentoring or coaching other people, and finding new mentors or coaches.

Everything you do to be more integrated and known is an active part of your personal brand.

But what exactly is a personal brand? I've included two paragraphs from my previous book, *Beyond Public Speaking for Geeks Succinctly*, about the topic. Look at that source if you want to go deeper on the topic of "personal branding for geeks." The sixth chapter is entirely dedicated to improving your brand.

What is a personal brand?

I like this definition from David McNally and Karl Speak found in Wikipedia:

> "Your brand is a perception or emotion, maintained by somebody other than you, that describes the total experience of having a relationship with you."

You can work on your personal brand, but you can't completely control it because it depends entirely on the impressions you give to others.

Note: Even if you work for a company, you have your own personal brand, sometimes associated with the company's, sometimes completely disconnected. You must always work on your personal brand, because it's not good for your image or career just to be identified with your company's name.

Amazon's Jeff Bezos defined (personal) brand as "what other people say about you when you're not in the room."

Don't limit it to thinking that personal brand is only your reputation. Having a good brand helps you in your job, but sometimes in your personal life as well in ways that you cannot imagine when you start working on it. Everything is easier when your good reputation precedes you.

Note: I can remember dozens of times when I was introduced to a new customer and they said, "I know him, he's Genio Del Male" (my blog/Twitter alias, which in Italian means evil genius; see the About the Author page at the beginning of the book). Most of the time, it is easier for me to convince my customers because of my brand. Of course, you should keep working on your brand because it can also become a memory of an ancient past. I have a lot of colleagues who worked with me as evangelists for Microsoft and were well known in the market, and now people barely remember them. On the other hand, others are still relevant today because they continued to work on their brands, or their brands were so strong that they lived on years after they changed jobs.

Having a strong personal brand can also be seen as having insurance for your future, especially in these troubled times. Nobody can assure you that your personal brand will make a difference, but not having it will for sure make one, in a negative way, since nobody will know you, and it will be more difficult to emerge from among the crowd.

Everybody has a personal brand

Most people confuse a personal brand and personal branding. We already defined what a personal brand is. Your personal brand exists even if you don't do anything about it.

Personal branding is the process and the strategy used to increase the value and the perception of a personal brand.

Invest in yourself

We've already said multiple times that working remotely most days of the week can be dangerous for your career, at least in some companies. Apart from working on your personal brand, you should work hard on yourself.

Investing in your growth is always good advice, but when working remotely you have to go the extra mile because you'll lose some of your network, and so you should invest in your learning, in cultivating your relations, in finding different interests, and so on.

Find a mentor, a coach, and eyes and ears in the office

If you go to the office at least two days per week, you'll probably have your sources; you'll be updated on what happens between various persons, at least at a high level. You'll have enough chats at the watercooler or the coffee machine and enough business lunches to understand what's happening.

But if you are working remotely full time, if you are always on the road, or if you're alone at the customer site, you need someone that keeps you informed about the trends, the facts, the relationships, everything that happens in the company (or in your department, or on your floor), so you can make your decisions having the side information that you'd normally miss being away.

Having a mentor and a coach is also good advice, even for people working in the office all the time—but for a remote worker, the help a mentor can give is essential. You need a mentor because they can guide you in difficult waters, sometimes better than your manager, and because they're normally not directly involved in the problems of your team.

They can ask you the right questions, and then ask other questions, and then ask yet other questions, so you can deeply explore your problems and opportunities, and find the answers you need.

Sometimes your mentor or your coach can also help you by sharing what's happening in the company. It's important to spend some time of the mentorship or the coaching call chitchatting about different topics not related to the call.

If you want to understand the differences between the two roles better, you can read a short Business Trends article by Shubhomita Bose on the topic.

Have regular meetings with your manager's peers and their manager

Your manager should schedule regular one-to-one meetings with you (if your manager isn't doing it, you should demand regular connections), but you shouldn't forget about your manager's peers and their managers.

They'll have an important role on your career; being visible and engaged is important for your growth and for your future opportunities. Those meetings can be quarterly, or even yearly meetings (depending on the type of connection that you have).

You can ask and discuss many different things, like their views on the team, feedback from their direct reports about your work, how they perceive your impact, what's missing and what you're doing right, and so on.

And you shouldn't forget the personal side of the meeting! Being in the office gives you the opportunity for small talk on many occasions; when you're working remotely, try to include some chitchat in your structured meetings.

Care about people more than business

We already talked about this in Chapter 5, from a manager's point of view, but the same goes for the remote worker. If you only talk with your colleagues about business, you'll be excluded from side talks; you'll miss an important part of what's happening in the team.

Try to participate in informal team meetings from time to time. Schedule chats with colleagues. Ask for feedback, even for normal activities. Ask for their views, and if you have the confidence, try to talk with them about your personal views and issues, and be open to listen to theirs.

Technical issues

We discussed technical things in Chapter 2. In this section, we'll see some ways to overcome typical technical issues that arise when working remotely.

Bandwidth issues

Apart from finding a better network provider, if you're at home or in your personal office, sometimes you don't have many options. You should use what's available and try to optimize your environment—if it's possible—and for a lot of people, this is a dream.

Bandwidth issues are problematic for calls, virtual presentations, uploads, and downloads. All recent browsers and tools support interrupted downloads and uploads; you only need a lot of patience. For calls and virtual presentations, you can start turning off your video. People will tolerate that you're not on the webcam, but they won't like faulty audio, and neither will you.

You can also turn off other people's video that eats a lot of bandwidth and CPU power. One option that I use a lot is to call on the phone to join the audio part of the conference, leaving all the bandwidth for the content. If you plan to talk a lot, remember to insert your participant ID when joining. Most conferencing software will focus on your webcam or avatar when you speak, but if you join anonymously, the software cannot put the focus on you, and people won't immediately understand who's talking, especially in crowded events.

> *Note: If you're already in the call and audio quality is bad, you can dial in on the phone from the tool options or directly from the participants list if you're the organizer. In any case, you can share your phone number with an organizer and ask to be called back.*

Problems sharing the screen

Sometimes your PC displays the screensharing artifacts from the conferencing tool, but the screen is not shared at all. Always ask if people can see your screen. I know that's a cliché, but it's better than talking for minutes before someone tells you that they haven't seen anything. In that case, the typical IT solution of "stop sharing and share again" will probably work.

Another typical problem if you're sharing with software that you've never used is the order of the monitors, in the case of a multi-monitor setup. Different software displays the monitors using different numbers, so if you're used to sharing "screen 1" in one software, that could become "screen 3" in another. Pay attention to the screen that you're sharing.

Note: During an important online conference, I shared the PowerPoint designer and not the projected presentation because of different screen numbering, breaking one of the rules of a good presentation.

Most conferencing software allows you to share documents and videos in advance, instead of sharing the screen. That helps a lot with bandwidth problems, because the content will be shared to every participant from a central location, and not from your PC connected from the middle of nowhere.

Echo and other audio problems

If you have audio problems that are not related to bandwidth, you can first check if another participant has audio enabled, and ask them to mute, or (if possible and not seen as rude) mute them directly.

Most audio problems can be temporarily fixed by a good pair of headphones, so you can isolate audio in different directions. Even if you have the great audio setup that we discussed in Chapter 2, you can still have audio problems. Keep a pair of headphones with a microphone with you; they can save your presentation!

Do you look sunburned on camera?

If you look sunburned during a meeting, your webcam is probably having problems with white balance. If there are settings that you can check, look at them. Put a white paper in front of the camera to help it rebalance the colors.

Conclusion

One last thing: keep a positive mindset and enjoy all the benefits of remote working. Being a remote worker can be frustrating sometimes, but it's worth it!

I started by taking some days away from the office to prepare events and presentations. Then I moved to a more structured remote working environment. Then when remote working was offered as an option, I signed all the documents required by Italian law and by our contract, and spent three years before the pandemic working mostly from home.

I had good days, bad days, and days that I needed to go to the office to meet someone not because of business, but because I was feeling alone. I had days when I went to the office because the bandwidth at home was shockingly low, days that I was extremely happy to work from home because I was extremely productive and present with the family at the same time, days when I was looking outside the windows and it was snowing really hard, and I was at the PC still in my pajamas.

I had days when I worked from the lakeside, and days that I finished early at a customer's site. I went to the sea and worked three hours from a terrace, then I had a wonderful dinner, and I came back home.

What gives me hope for the future is the ability to start the "real remote work" again after the pandemic, being able to do what's now restricted or limited. Remember, remote working during a pandemic is a restriction; remote working when you choose to do so is something that will change your life. You won't live your office life in the same way once you've successfully worked remotely.

Keep a positive mindset, even when your child is crying during a call. The benefits of remote working, if you embrace it, are much greater than all the downsides!

I wish you a successful remote (or hybrid) work life for the future!