

Throughout all communication, it is a good idea to be as clear as possible and make sure you understand what someone is conveying to you. Never assume that you know what the person means. If you have a question, ask it. Pay attention to the subtle unwritten and unspoken clues often present in communication; you ignore this subtext at your peril. There is a tendency to read written communication as more negative than what is meant. Before pressing send, read your message again to be sure it is conveying the intended tone. While communicating in the virtual world, there are many things to keep in mind. Being thoughtful in your communication choices will go a long way toward building understanding and good working relationships.

Setting Expectations and Achieving Transparency

One of the major differences between working in an office and working from home is your level of visibility. In an office or any other physical location where you are required to “punch in” (either formally or by virtue of being seen arriving on time), your absence can be quite conspicuous. When you are at meetings or visiting clients, a dark office or an empty chair at your cubicle clearly indicates that you’re not present. If someone is looking for you, oftentimes the people who sit near you can tell your visitor that you are in another meeting. On your return, those same people can tell you who dropped by your desk.

Now consider the remote workforce. If colleagues and clients don’t get email responses from you or are unable to see you online through various instant messaging programs, it could mean that you are in meetings or visiting clients. Or, it could mean that you are on an extended lunch break. Perhaps you’re simply busy with projects and are ignoring communications from others for the time being. In a worst-case scenario, something tragic could have happened, and it could take a long time for anyone to realize you aren’t around. Add different time zones into the mix, and you can see that setting

expectations about your schedule and providing transparency about your whereabouts is an important part of succeeding in the remote workforce.



I start an ongoing conversation about expectations with my direct reports from our first meeting, premised on the idea that what I expect from them is what I should model for them. My reports—and my colleagues—can expect me to respond to their calls or emails within 24 hours during the week, but only for emergencies on weekends. They can also expect that I will value their time: I look at my calendar every morning, and when I notice that two meetings may overlap, I reach out to shift one of them proactively so that I can be fully present in every interaction. This gives me credibility when I address consistent lateness to meetings with my employees.

I am careful not to assume that my remote coworkers have the same availability I do. Just because I do something a certain way doesn't mean I have a right to expect it from someone else, so I learn whether colleagues are available on weekends before depending on them to help me with something urgent.

—Melody Young

The beauty of working from home is that in many cases, you have the opportunity to organize your own hours. That said, your coworkers should have a rough idea of your work schedule. Once you set your schedule, stick to those hours as much as possible so your colleagues and clients can plan accordingly. You could list your normal working hours in your email signature, on your web page,

or in other locations where you have a digital work profile. When you will not be sticking to your regular schedule, use the out-of-office reply function to let those who email you know that they shouldn't expect an immediate reply.

Similarly, update your status in relevant messenger programs so colleagues and clients looking for you online know that you are not in the office. Instant messaging programs are very popular for colleagues to quickly and informally contact each other. Many of these programs allow you to display your status, showing whether you are online and available, offline, or online but unavailable. The challenge is remembering to update your status. For example, if your Skype status doesn't change for days, then it will soon become meaningless. Everyone will contact you at all times, because they assume that the "unavailable" setting is not actually true. The same goes for profile updates: If you don't maintain them, they too will lose their power. Make sure that you date your updates so that even if a message is left on display for too long, at least those reading it will be able to make appropriate assumptions about your true availability.

Setting expectations shouldn't be limited to your work schedule. Also make known how and when you will respond to people. There are some workers whose job duties, typing speed, or personal preferences allow them to reply to all emails and messages within 24 hours. However, there are those on the other end of the spectrum who cannot realistically respond to emails until certain days of the week or who much prefer to save responses for meetings. Either approach could work, but only as long as the people you interact with know what to expect. Many companies will have a formal or informal expectation regarding email response time, and that can be sufficient.

Instituting regular meetings can also help you to develop a high level of transparency and trust in those around you. This may not be an option for all remote workers, but where possible, having regular team and individual meetings can be another way to display your consistency. You can take this a step further. If you use a shared calendar program, those with access to your calendar will be able to see when your meetings are and identify patterns

of when you are unavailable. Some programs also allow you to set your normal working hours on your calendar so others will receive a notification if they send you an invitation for a time outside of those hours. This can be particularly useful when dealing with people in different time zones who might want to talk with you during what is their morning, not realizing that you might not even be awake at that time.

As an employee in charge of your own schedule, you generally know what you'll be doing each day and what part of the day you'll be working. No one else will, however, unless you tell them. Help your coworkers by being transparent about when you are available and when you are not. Creating habits and patterns in the way you work allows others to learn what they can expect from you and when they can expect it. This builds trust, which is critical in the virtual environment where people can't see what others are doing.

Maintaining Professionalism



I follow the advice of Hall of Fame football player Deion Sanders: Look good, play good. Sure, I could get away with working in my pajamas all day, but I just don't feel like a professional when I'm not dressed as one. Instead, I wear clothes that put me in the right mindset and make me feel like I'm going to the office. This helps me do better work and signals to my teammates that I take their work seriously.

—Brian Sabel

The ability to choose whether to work in your office, in a local café, or just outside on your patio is a great part of working remotely. But the freedom to work anywhere comes with a new set of risks concerning the image that you project, as it can be very