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VIRTUALLY THERE:

Tips to Stay Productive and Engaged While Working Remotely

According to recent statistics, 43% of the population works from home at least occasionally,* if not regularly. That number is undoubtedly going to grow exponentially. Working from home can be productive and rewarding, and reduce commuting, which can free up more time for family commitments or personal activities. At the same time, working from home can present its own unique challenges. Being mindful of best practices when you are working virtually can help set you up for success.



FOCUS

Distractions at work are nothing new; a chatty colleague or a busy office environment can reduce our ability to focus. Those distractions greatly increase with work-from-home arrangements when unfolded laundry is in a heap, or snacks or family members are around. To help you remain focused when working from home, consider these tips:

Create a specific workspace.

Whenever possible, carve out space that is dedicated as your work area, and try and keep it clutter-free.

Remove distractions from your office.

Handle distractions such as piles of mail, projects you haven't gotten to, or other excuses to focus elsewhere. Get them out of your line of sight so they won't call your attention away.

Plan your day.

Give your day some structure so you are clear on what you need to do and when you need to do it. Calendars and to-do lists can keep you on task and prevent wandering.

Don't multitask.

It's realistic to expect that you will respond to an occasional personal email or make a necessary online purchase. But multitasking decreases focus and can make you less efficient. Try to minimize random online browsing, and place limits on the other activities you might need to do so you can use your work time wisely.

Keep to a regular schedule.

Begin and end your day at specific times so you can maintain some structure and get into a routine.



Distractions greatly increase with work-from-home arrangements.





COMMUNICATION

Communicating well from home can take some intentionality. When you work remotely, you lose the benefit of impromptu conversations and the ability to read nonverbal signs. You can communicate well from a distance, but it takes greater intentionality. To enhance your virtual communication, consider the following:

Use multiple modalities.

Lean in to email, text, or video calls to help you increase the efficiency and effectiveness of work-from-home communication. This might require you to have an explicit conversation with your manager and colleagues about their communication preferences. Once you have that discussion, you'll know how best to reach them.

Communicate for connection and not just tasks.

Remember to build rapport with your colleagues by talking about appropriate personal issues so you can increase trust and enhance communication. Be willing to share something about yourself with them, and be interested in what's important to them or what interests they have.

Be cognizant of time zones.

If you are dealing with colleagues across the globe, make sure you are calling them or scheduling meetings during their regular business hours, or consider rotating meeting times to be mindful of those across time zones. This is especially important if you and your colleagues are initiating calls from a home office.

Overcommunicate

Share and ask more. Share how you are feeling. You can't read nonverbal signs when working remotely unless you are using a webcam. This means you might need to be more explicit about sharing your emotions and asking others what they are feeling. On virtual calls, you may need to draw out quieter attendees, and in on-on-one calls, it is helpful to gently ask what someone is thinking if you can't "read" them through the phone line.

Tune in to tone, word choice, and other verbal cues.

Words and tone become more critical when working virtually—so pay more attention to what you are hearing. Listen actively and be more aware of how your words are coming across to others.



“ When you work remotely, communicating well takes greater intentionality. ”



TECHNOLOGY

Technology is a critical enabler of remote working arrangements. Put technology to use effectively by taking some steps to ensure things run smoothly:

Set up and test all connections and devices in advance.

Set up all connections such as webcams, printers, or headphones before you need them. This way you can ensure everything functions properly before you log on or dial in.

Turn off distracting technology.

Shut off distracting technology so you don't receive text messages or notifications that can pull your attention away from the task at hand or the conversation you are having.

Notify your meeting attendees if you intend to use webcams.

Use video chat whenever possible to create connection and help nonverbal communication. Make sure your attendees are comfortable with this technology and know you plan on using it.

Tap into collaborative technology.

Apps like Teams or Yammer provide opportunities to collaborate online. Explore what technology is available to you and what your colleagues are comfortable trying.

Leverage online communities to share and support each other.

Get engaged with others across your organization by accessing company community sites to share and receive critical information. Jump into conversations by providing your thoughts or a supportive endorsement for your colleagues' contributions.



“ It's critical to use technology effectively while working remotely. ”



BALANCE

One of the biggest challenges of working from home is keeping a balance between your home life and your work life. When there is less of clear delineation between work tasks and home responsibilities, it can be hard to figure out what to prioritize. To keep balance when working from home, consider the following:

Establish a proper beginning and end to your day.

Be specific about the times you are starting and ending your day. This will help you avoid work drifting into personal time. To protect your personal time, create rules for yourself about when you will, and will not, respond to work-related emails and texts.

Take frequent breaks.

Go for a quick walk, or do a few minutes of exercise or meditation to allow you to remain calm, healthy, and focused.

Plan nutritious meals and snacks.

Avoid grazing on fast-but-unhealthy snacks that you might have greater access to at home. Plan proper meals and nutritious snacks to keep you energized and healthy throughout the day.

Keep human connection alive.

Avoid isolation by remaining connected to others through phone calls and visits to family members who may be home with you or by running to get a quick cup of coffee. You'll gain conversation and movement and may feel a little refreshed to tackle whatever else is in front of you.

Remember to frequently stretch, stand up, and move around.

Get up from your desk, at least on the hour, so you can stretch, move around, and maintain physical strength. Set a timer to remind yourself to make this a priority.



It's important to maintain balance between home life and work life when working from home.





CONNECTION

Working from home can sometimes make you feel isolated or lonely. You can do things to keep connections alive while working remotely:

Connect with others on a personal level.

Reach out to others, not just to get things done, but to connect on a personal level.

Schedule frequent check-ins.

Make sure you schedule check-ins with your boss, team members, or others so you can hear their voices, share how your day is going, or ask them for guidance or advice.

Consciously build rapport.

Spend time at the outset of meetings building rapport through ice breakers or the kind of chitchat you might typically engage in if you were together in the office.

Leverage collaborative technology.

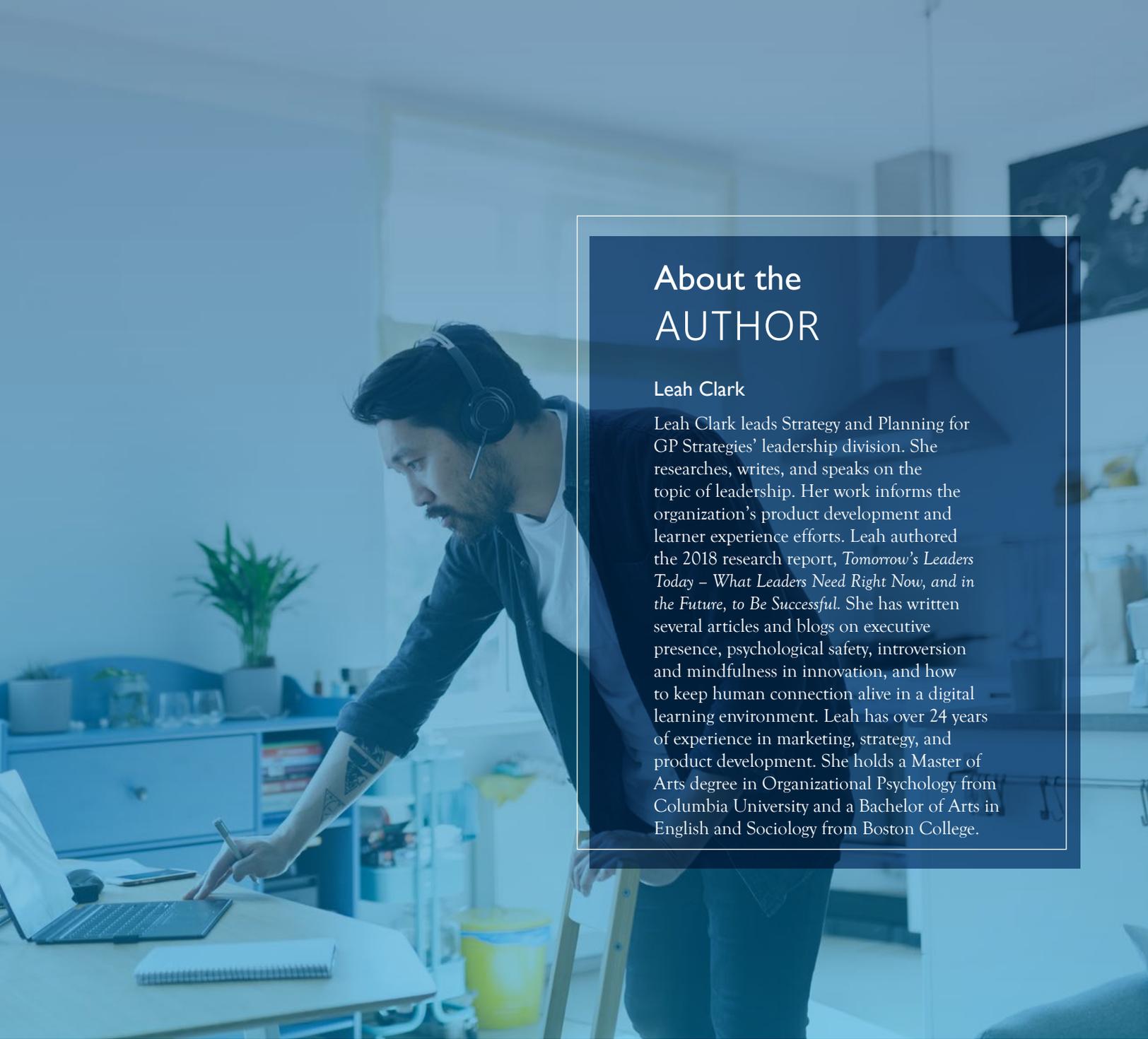
Tap into technology that allows you to chat, share how you are feeling, or generally increase interaction with others.

Don't underestimate the power of an emoji or a meme.

Use appropriate emojis, memes, or photos to make someone smile, communicate a thought, or let others know you are thinking about them and are connected across the technology. We can always find new ways to express how we are feeling, even if we are not together.



“ Avoid feeling isolated or lonely by maintaining connections with colleagues. ”



About the AUTHOR

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Leah Clark leads Strategy and Planning for GP Strategies' leadership division. She researches, writes, and speaks on the topic of leadership. Her work informs the organization's product development and learner experience efforts. Leah authored the 2018 research report, *Tomorrow's Leaders Today – What Leaders Need Right Now, and in the Future, to Be Successful*. She has written several articles and blogs on executive presence, psychological safety, introversion and mindfulness in innovation, and how to keep human connection alive in a digital learning environment. Leah has over 24 years of experience in marketing, strategy, and product development. She holds a Master of Arts degree in Organizational Psychology from Columbia University and a Bachelor of Arts in English and Sociology from Boston College.

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