

Virtual Working

Working from home,
the highs and lows of
working in isolation



Written by Julie Farmer
myPA Virtual Services
www.mypavirtualseervices.com
Tel: 01367 246003
7 April 2020

Virtual Working

Working from home. The highs and
lows of working in isolation



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
COMMUNICATION SKILLS	3
Mediums and Barriers	5
CREATE A COMMUNICATION ROAD MAP	6
To Conclude Communications	6
LISTENING.....	6
Three kinds of listening.....	6
PLANNING AND ORGANISATION	7
Consistency	7
Time Management.....	8
Prioritising.....	8
Planning.....	9
Pro-Active Versus Re-Active.....	9
Organising	9
Working With Others	9
Delegation	10
Interruptions	10
Top 15 Time Management Problems In Organisations	10
Types of work.....	10
Your Environment.....	12
VIRTUAL WORKING.....	12
Advantages	12
Disadvantages.....	12
Recommendations	13
Tools.....	13
Conclusion	14

Virtual Working

Working from home. The highs and lows of working in isolation



INTRODUCTION

Remote working, working from home, working virtually have all become aspirations that many individuals aspire to achieve. This way of working can be rewarding as long as you understand that there are some advantages, some disadvantages and at times annoyances that will just niggle at you.

To ensure that your virtual work is successful, rewarding and most importantly productive, you need to make some adjustments to your mental outlook, your idea of what work is and the distinction between work and home.

In this paper, we are going to take a look at:

- Communication
- Listening
- Planning and Organising
- Time Management

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Working from home starts with excellent communications. Communication with yourself, your surroundings, your home and those with whom you share your home. Yes, that even means the dog or cat.

What do we mean by communication? What is communication? In its broadest sense, communication is **getting someone to do or act in a way you want them to**. This communication can be in writing, verbally or visual.

However, communication is the one area of our lives that is so easy to get wrong, with some devastating results. Let's take a closer look at the communication.

Within one single communicate, there are six individual modalities that we must go through to ensure that, that communicate is appropriate to the audience we are targeting.

So, let's think about a pink elephant.

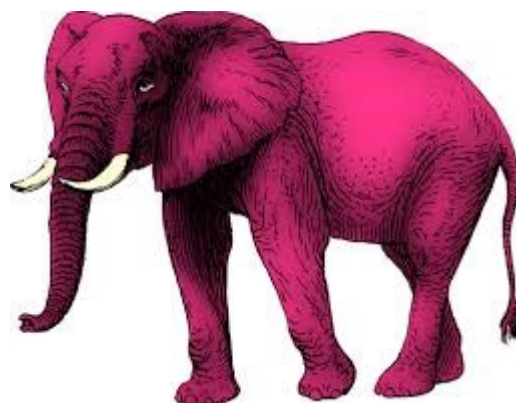


Image is taken from Google

Virtual Working

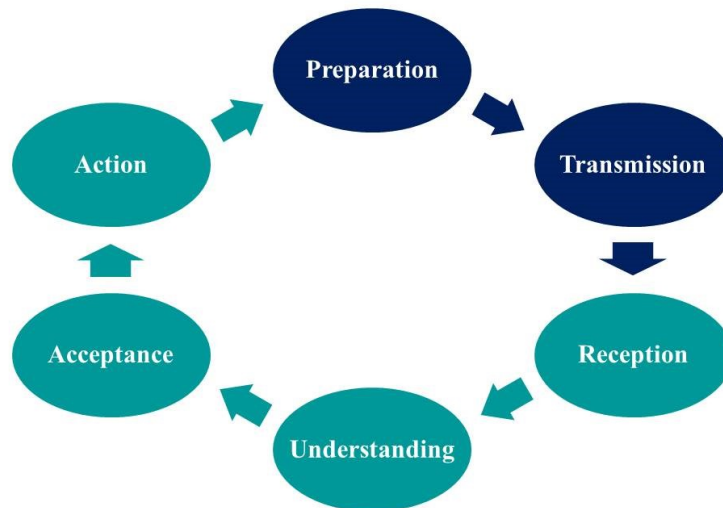
Working from home. The highs and lows of working in isolation



For me to communicate this image of a pink elephant; I had to use two of the modalities in what we call 'The Communication Wheel'.

1. **Preparation** I had to make the decision of what it was I wanted you to think. I selected the topic of a pink elephant.
2. **Transmission** For me to ask you to think of a pink elephant, I had to get you thinking of a Pink Elephant. As we are not a race of telepaths, I had to decide what kind of method communicate I was going to use, to get you to think of the Pink Elephant. In this instance, I used the written word to say 'Let's think about a pink elephant'. I then used imagery to show you a picture of a Pink Elephant.

So far, I have used two of the modalities of communication, written and visual. If you were in front of me, I might have used a verbal instruction to think of the Pink Elephant.



This is when communication gets interesting because I no longer have any control over what happens next with my message of 'Let's think of a Pink Elephant', I have just given you. This moves us nicely onto the next four modalities of communication which belong to you the reader:

3. **Reception** Did you read or see what I asked to you do? Was I writing and using words that you understood? Did you know the language I used? Could you see the picture I placed within this document?
4. **Understanding** – Did you understand that I asked you to think of a Pink Elephant? This naturally presupposes that you know what the colour pink is and what an Elephant is! Was my instruction explicit enough for you to understand my request? I wanted you to think of something; I also wanted you to assign a colour to that object.

I will assume, in this example, that you know what the colour pink is and what an elephant looks like. Did you accept my request?

Virtual Working

Working from home. The highs and lows of working in isolation



5. **Acceptance**

Did you say to yourself; someone is asking me to think of something, that something is pink and in the form of an elephant?

Then what did you do? Did you accept my request, my communicate to think of a Pink Elephant, did you take action?

6. **Action**

Did the image of a pink elephant pop into your head? If you thought of a Pink Elephant than you took Action. If on the other hand, you didn't think of the Pink Elephant, then my communicate to you was ineffective, and I used the wrong words or image to get you to think of the Pink Elephant.

This is communication. The art of getting thoughts from your head to someone else, to do something. This thought process generally takes milliseconds, if you know or think you know what you are being asked to do.

When you are asking someone to do something for you, you have control over two aspects of that wheel the PREPARATION and TRANSMISSION after that the control of a communicate is out of your hands. A communicate can fail at any one of the above six steps. If my request was to think of a 'Red Leaping Camolopen'. What would happen then? A Camolopen is a word that you have never seen before, and as such, something that would have no idea how to visualise. Therefore, my communicate would have failed.

Being a virtual worker, communication is one of the most important tools you have. It is the one tool you **MUST** master. It doesn't matter if you are working virtually as part of a team, if you are a one-man-band, or work as a distant contactor. Communication with your team, your customers, or contracting team, you need to ensure that your communications are direct, to the point, and there are no areas of misunderstanding.

MEDIUMS AND BARRIERS

There are natural barriers to all forms of communication. For example, if the person you are talking to uses a lot of anacronyms, or 'business/industry jargon' and you have no idea what they are talking about or what they are asking you do.

Face to face communication also has issues, especially when you take personalities, confidence and credibility into account.

Telephone calls can be misunderstood if the person on the other end of the telephone is only half listening to what you are saying.

Emails can be very sort and to the point, but the reader could take offence if you haven't put in the necessities like Dear Julie and go directly to 'Get this job done asap'. This email could be seen as yelling at the reader and instructing them to do something right now and you as then sender don't care about them or their feelings.

Virtual Working

Working from home. The highs and lows of working in isolation



CREATE A COMMUNICATION ROAD MAP

Once you have mastered your Communications, you could then set up a road map or stand of how you communicate to your colleagues, clients and line manager. This list is just a suggestion but find the that best suits you and your working environment.

- Text – for a quick question and one-word style answer
- Group Chats – team cohesion
- Voice for something more complicated
- Email – General issues that don't necessarily need an answer right away
- Video Chats – when you need face to face time (makes teams feel less isolated, keeps face to face interactions, keeps teams connected and motivated).

TO CONCLUDE COMMUNICATIONS

To conclude, when you are working remotely, from home, or virtually bear in mind that your communications to your team, clients' needs to be clear, you need to pay attention to what words and images you are using and what it is you are trying to communicate to the person receiving your communique.

It is easy to half-listen; briefly read a request and think you understand what is being asked of you and then go off at a tangent and get it completely wrong.

Communication is also vitally important to that inner voice you have. That little voice that controls your thoughts, your actions, and how you feel about yourself. There is not much point in telling the world you are 'the best thing going' if that little voice keeps repeating back to you "Yeah right, whom are you trying to kid!". Take time in answering, writing or devising your communications. Sit back and ask yourself what it is I am trying to get across to people? Does this letter, article, blog, email, tweet, text, image say precisely what it is you are trying to say?

Does your body language, your attire portray the image you want to express? Just think of walking into a bank, how comfortable would you be dealing with your financial matters to someone dressed in ripped jeans, dyed hair, nose ring, torn t-shirt and a cigarette hanging out of his or her mouth?

LISTENING

THREE KINDS OF LISTENING

Listening is just as important as getting the correct message across to an audience, even if that audience is an audience of one (A conversation). If I asked you name how many types of listening there are, how would you do?

Most people will name two. However, there are three types of listening I want you to pay attention to:

1. **Passive Listening** This is half listening to what is being said to you. I am sure you have practised this before, think of a time when your partner has asked you to do or say something, and you didn't do it. Not because you were mean, but because you just didn't remember. Listen out for the words 'You never listen to me?' Passive Listening has its place when you are at home, and the

Virtual Working

Working from home. The highs and lows of working in isolation



kids are in the garden playing. You are listening out for any issues that may occur. However, in the workplace, this isn't as effective, especially if you have been given a detailed task to complete.

2. **Reflective Listening** This is a brilliant tool for Virtual working. Reflective Listening is listening to a list of tasks that you have been asked to complete and then repeating it back to the person who has given you the task but in your own words.

For example:

The contract for the window cleaner is on the cabinet, next to my telephone on the right of my desk. Can you please collect it and post it back to the company and get the windows cleaned as soon as possible?

You want me to post the contract back to the window cleaners and get the windows done asap.

Here you are accepting what has been said and using your own words to repeat back what has been reported to avoid any confusion.

3. **Active Listening** This is when you are paying complete and utter attention to what is being said. Nothing else matters the world could be falling around you, and you don't take any notice.

When working virtually, you should engage your active listening skills. Nothing else should be happening; you are not putting the kettle on, emptying the dishwasher or eating your lunch. You are listening to your work colleague, client or employer.

As an aside, Active listening for 1 hour takes as much energy as a 3-hour A level maths exam. Next time you attend a meeting with a minute take, bare that in mind!

PLANNING AND ORGANISATION

CONSISTENCY

Consistency has to be the by-word for Virtual Workers. This is about maintaining your personal standards of performance or behaviour when working away from the office and the watchful eye of your line manager or client.

Consistency is bringing in a standard of performance to your workload and ensuring that you keep to that standard all week/month or through the entire project. We all know someone who turns up at work on:

- Monday - Determined to fly through their workload
- Tuesday - Just as determined but slightly slower than yesterday
- Wednesday - Longer coffee breaks creep in, but the workload is steady
- Thursday - Workload is done, but no passion/enthusiasm, speed is slower
- Friday - No work completed as the output for the week is good enough

Your aim for being consistent should be that when you start work on a Monday at 9 am full of enthusiasm and that enthusiasm is still there at 5 pm on a Friday. A

Virtual Working

Working from home. The highs and lows of working in isolation



virtual worker is judged on **outcomes**, not the number of hours sat in front of a computer. The boss is not discreetly watching you. They are making judgements from your finished pieces of work.

Consistency comes from continuous improvement – looking for ways in which tasks can be achieved more effectively and efficiently. Challenging the processes and norms the way the team or organisation operates. This way improvement across all areas helps strengthen the team working and output, which in turn protects future development and employment.

TIME MANAGEMENT

Of all the resources we have at our disposal, time is the one which is often the one that we say we do not have enough of. "I just run out of time", "it will take too long to achieve that task" and "there are not enough hours in the day to do everything I have to do". The perceived lack of time is not the sole view of senior managers as it is for junior staff.

One constant in our working day is time. It never changes, although it appears to slow down or speed up depending on our enjoyment of a task or not. Another common reaction to the lack of time is it is others who are responsible for us not having enough or adversely affecting how we manage our own time.

Everyone has responsibility for managing not only their time but the time others require to get a task done. Setting deadlines that place others in an impossible position is not good time management – its abdication or simply put 'passing the buck'.

Everyone has a responsibility to maintain standards and meet targets or personal work objectives. Excellent organisational skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills are fundamentally essential to time management. It is in these areas the problems often lay, but we often simply blame poor time management on an individual's inability to get the job done quickly enough.

Speed is not always an option, but working efficiently as well as effectively is what it is really about. If you find you run out of time, you may need to look at the tasks you are doing:

- Is the current task important in the grand scale of the jobs at hand?
- Can the task be delegated to someone else?
- Is the task important right now?
- Has your boss, line manager, client forgotten the other task you have been requested to do for them?
- Are you planning your time effectively? Are you working SMART or just working?
- Do you need to re-prioritise?

PRIORITISING

Setting priorities is about deciding what must be done, not what should be done as well as what will have the most significant impact – whether this is positive or negative. Knowing how long your primary tasks take and how it may affect others in the chain is essential.

Virtual Working

Working from home. The highs and lows of working in isolation



Knowing which task is essential, not just for you but for your boss, your client or your business is vital. There is no point planning a Christmas Dinner for the team in March when the VAT is due in three days!

Everyone is in a chain of supply of some kind. Whether this is information or physical activities – and each person in that chain plays a part in the achievement of outputs. If someone at the start of the process takes too long, the loss of time is multiplied by the time it gets to the last person.

PLANNING

This is essential but often overlooked because we believe if we dive straight into a task, we will finish it quicker. In fact, poor planning usually results in tasks being done again or corrected because they are completed incorrectly. This is where we lose much of our time by rushing and not preparing properly. We must challenge the process and be sure it will deliver what is required. Just working more quickly is not the answer.

PRO-ACTIVE VERSUS RE-ACTIVE

Some tasks cannot be planned if they are emergent in their nature. An example of this could be reception or telephone answering. They do not know what the task is until the phone rings. What they can do is have good working practices and processes in place to deal with most types of calls. We all have some 'downtime' in which we can identify what can be done in readiness for the next peak in a workflow.

If you can plan 60% of your day and leave the remain 40% of your time for unexpected calls or clients, you are doing well.

ORGANISING

Not everyone has a tidy approach to working. Often people with messy desks, for instance, know exactly what they are doing, while those who have neat and tidy desks are regarded as more organised. However, your working environment should be conducive to your working methodology, if you are able to work with a messy desk, that is fine, but if you can't and get to distracted, organise your office, yourself and then get on with the day's work.

Being organised is about how an individual meets deadlines and targets and how they make decisions about what is important or urgent. One useful thing is to break down large tasks into 'chunks' each with a realistic target.

Sometimes when we do this, we will identify specific areas of a process that will provide the biggest challenge.

WORKING WITH OTHERS

We all work with others, or at least our work is affected by or affects others. To be a good time, managers is about working with other people and building relationships that complement each other's needs. Before we request Action from another person by a specific deadline, we must ask ourselves whether it is reasonable, and we have presented our output correctly. It is not their responsibility to correct our mistakes.

Virtual Working

Working from home. The highs and lows of working in isolation



DELEGATION

Delegation is not the sole domain of managers passing tasks downwards, although the most common form of delegation. We can all delegate, whether sideways to a colleague or upwards to a boss if we need help in getting a lot of priority work completed on time. When under pressure the question, we must ask ourselves is 'who can help?'

Good time managers use others when the occasion arises. It may only be to check out some information, make a phone call, deliver some work, share a task or provide advice and guidance. It does not necessarily mean we pass a complete task to another person, though this is an option. We must remember that if the task is ours, we can only pass on the authority to do it but retain the responsibility. Otherwise, this would be abdication.

INTERRUPTIONS

Interruptions are inevitable but can be managed with assertive behaviour, even from our close colleagues and friends. Excellent interpersonal skills will help and most often, people will understand if approached firmly and politely.

We must learn to say 'no' and/or not take on the responsibility of someone else's decision making. The boss that places too many tasks on an individual must be the one to decide what must be done and in what order. Every job has a penalty if not completed. You may only have authority for certain levels of work.

TOP 15 TIME MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS IN ORGANISATIONS

1. Telephone interruptions
2. People dropping by
3. Poor information exchange between departments
4. Problems with computers and other technical equipment
5. Change of priorities caused by others
6. Lack of organisation planning
7. Poor Listening of others
8. Inappropriate organisational structure
9. Moving goalposts
10. Putting things right
11. Indecision
12. Badly chaired and organised meetings
13. Distractions in the workplace
14. Over bureaucratic procedures
15. Unnecessary checking of others work

TYPES OF WORK

It is interesting to note that there are different types of work that are done on anyone day. When working from home, know what kind of work you are doing could help you to prioritise, plan, become pro-active, organised and help you delegate to others and manage interruptions.

Virtual Working

Working from home. The highs and lows of working in isolation



- **Core Work** - Core work involves not only individual but also a shared responsibility for meeting a business objective and carrying it out to an agreed standard. These tasks are important to fulfilling an individual's primary work objectives.
- **Reactive Work** - Reactive work is those that although related to an individual's role often occur with little, or no notice and generated from outside the person's immediate control. They are tasks that others request or instigate and have timescales based on their needs. These tasks also include those of standing in for colleagues or dealing with enquiries and problems.
- **Improvement Work** - Improvement work is that which helps to improve the process of work or develops staff. Such tasks can involve the reviewing of work processes, on the job training, coaching, and making specific changes to the way things are done. These tasks can fall outside of the job holder's primary duties.
- **Incidental Work** - Incidental work is where the job holder's involvement is regarded as necessary but in fact, serves no real benefit to them helping others solve their problems, attending meetings for no apparent reason and spending time discussing issues that do not concern them. Work can be sub-divided into types Urgent and Important and both need to be fully considered when organising and prioritising.
- **Urgent Work** - This is work which must be completed by a specific time frame, whether a time of day or date. It can also be tasks that need to be auctioned at a required speed depending on its place in a chain of events or process of work.
- **Important Work** - This is based on the seriousness of the consequences or implications for others if it is not done. Maybe a task that enables someone else to achieve theirs or one that has a financial implication.

Most people like to do a 'To Do List' to either guide them through a busy period or simply to martial their thoughts and get some sense of order before tackling the day's business.

Unfortunately, this may only be a linear list in a random order, and often we select those tasks we want to do first before those we should do next.

A Priority Grid could help to segregate tasks into groups and give a more holistic view of what needs to be done and in what order.

High Importance / Low Urgency	High Importance / High Urgency
Low Importance / Low Urgency	Low Importance / High Urgency

Virtual Working

Working from home. The highs and lows of working in isolation



YOUR ENVIRONMENT

Where you work is just as important as how you work. If you have an extra room in the house that can easily be turned into an office that is fantastic. Not many people have extra space, so find a location that is suitable for the family. Where you won't be disturbed and an area in the house that you can close the door and say that 'Works is done for the day'.

There is nothing worse than setting up an office on the dining room table and having to remove the office every time you want to eat as a family. Keep your work area as work and your home area as home, if at all possible.

A home office needs just as much space as you have in a regular office so be kind to yourself, you will, on average spend 8 hours at 'work' it needs to be conducive to produce your best work.

Be kind to yourself when setting up the office, try not to hide in the corner or take conference calls sitting on the stairs as there is nowhere else to sit. Don't have your computer camera facing your bed. It's great that you are working, but we don't need to see your bedroom or your unmade bed. People will be looking past you, and at the environment, you are living and working in!

VIRTUAL WORKING

There are advantages to working Virtually. There is the flexibility of deciding when you want to work and who with. It can be considered convenient, especially if you have a disability or other personal commitments. You are in control of your day, your space. You won't waste time sitting in a car, on a bus or tube and can be extremely productive and focused, especially if you are able to set your schedule.

ADVANTAGES

- Flexible
- Convenient
- Control of your day
- Control of your space
- No commuting to work
- Focused and extremely productive
- Setting your schedule – time Management
- Dressing for work reality in jeans and t-shirt
- As much time off as you want
- Being your own boss

DISADVANTAGES

But there are more disadvantages as well, and these should never be forgotten or deemed to be inconsequential. The problems can sometimes be more of a mental block but just as, if not more important when working on your own.

- You are always at work and could find that you never leave your house, that can result in you become lonely and becoming disconnected from work.
- You no longer have a place of rest, your home is now the workplace which can be very stressful
- Distractions are increased with daily living and family just popping by

Virtual Working

Working from home. The highs and lows of working in isolation



- There is the Isolation, lack of social connection, a self-imposed 'solitary confinement.'
- No praise for the work you have done. Even when you have done an excellent job, you are now judged by the results you turn in and not the effort you are putting in.
- You need to become Self-disciplined and a master of every office facility from the IT department to the cleaner
- You can get bored with the task you are doing and do something more interesting, like the ironing.
- Lack of collaboration and when you are stuck, you are stuck, there is no one there to help, and you can suffer burnout or
- Proper tools for the job
- Left out of discussions and feeling ignored
- Lack of collaboration can result in a lack of solution thinking
- Inconsistent, chaotic work pattern – starting work at 3 pm and finishing at midnight
- Poor Communication

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Don't work in your bedroom. The bedroom is for sleep and resting your brain. It should not be your office.
- Create A schedule and stick to it. If you work 9-5 make sure you work 9-5. Then turn off the computer or telephone
- Ensure your communication strategy is effective
- Every now and then join a co-working space, so that you have the interaction with others and can meet people
- Get out of the house, take an hour's exercise. Do something so that you are not staring at those four walls – always
- Schedule group chats with staff or co-workers or even clients
- Take breaks from the computer, just as you would at work, step away from the computer and rest your eyes, have a glass of water to refresh your brain. Take a lunch break
- Do some exercise, 10-star jumps, push-ups. Anything to get the blood pumping and your mind off your workload
- Currently network online, when possible network in person, meet other businesses. Networking isn't just about promoting your business; it's about you are meeting other businesspeople.
- Manage your distractions.

TOOLS

Digital Clutter – Make sure you have one or two tools for the work you are doing, you don't want to get into the position of managing your tools and not your job.

- Asana – Project Management
- Zoom - Teleconference
- Skype – Teleconference
- Buffer – Social Media
- Hootsuite – Social Media
- What's App – Social Media and team building

Virtual Working

Working from home. The highs and lows of working in isolation



CONCLUSION

Working as a virtual worker as a PA Trainer and Publisher is one of the best jobs I have ever had. I like to control my hours, my schedule, and with whom I work.

It has given me the confidence to push my business forward, to ensure that I am self-sufficient and that I am the master of my own destiny. I have created systems that I use and stick by that have worked for me and continue to work for me.

You can do it, just have faith that you know what you are doing, that you will find your way and that at the end of the day, work is work. Home is home and life does not mean that work is all-encompassing. Be kind to yourself when you work virtually and at home. You are doing your best, and if you can say

honestly that you have worked to the best of your ability, that you couldn't have done anything differently that you have been a successful virtual worker. Julie Farmer

