

What to Do When Everybody Returns to the Office—but You Remain Remote; If you're the only remote member of a mostly in-office team, you'll need some strategies to stay in the loop and maintain your productivity—and visibility

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FULL TEXT

As offices reopen, many organizations are planning for a hybrid workplace. Some employees will work from home; others will head back to the office; still others will combine the two.

For those lucky enough to choose, it could be a pretty nice arrangement. You get a work life that fits your personal life, rather than the usual other way around.

Except: What if most of your colleagues are returning to the office and you're one of the handful (or perhaps the only one) staying home?

Being the lone remote member of a mostly in-office team isn't just a recipe for FOMO—that is, fear of missing out. It can also be an obstacle to your productivity and professional advancement, not to mention the pleasure you get from work. That's why it's essential to plan ahead, to protect both your professional effectiveness and your ability to work remotely.

How to do that? Here's my advice:

Schedule more time with your boss

Face it: The biggest problem isn't just that your colleagues are in the office. It's that your boss is. Since your colleagues will have plenty of informal opportunities to get feedback (and stay visible) on their days in the office, you need to compensate by ensuring you have plenty of boss interaction as well.

The best way to do that is with a standing weekly one-on-one with your manager, ideally lasting at least 45 minutes. If your boss is reluctant, suggest that you do these weekly meetings on a trial basis for a month or so. Use your weekly meetings to provide regular updates on your projects, and to get your manager's advice or assistance with any bottlenecks—the kinds of things your colleagues can talk about more casually throughout the day. Out of sight, out of mind is a cliché. It's also often true.

Discuss promotions

It's too early to predict how the split into a hybrid workplace will affect the relative career paths of the mostly remote vs. the mostly office-based workers, but don't wait to find out. Be blunt and ask your boss how your remote status will affect your place on the team, and what objective, well-defined goals you will have to achieve to move up.

Be the first to respond

You should adjust your communications tool kit to ensure that you remain a responsive, dependable team member. Here's a trick that will make you the first person to reply to the boss's emails: Set up a mail rule to forward any email from your boss to your mobile phone's email-to-text address, so you get a text message notification as soon as an email arrives. That greater online availability will mitigate any perception that you're less responsive when you're at home—by showing you can be more responsive than the colleague sitting just down the

hall from the boss. (Here's a list of the email-to-text addresses for most U.S. mobile carriers.)

Engage your colleagues

Strong collegial relationships are at least as important as impressing the boss, especially if you work on team-based projects where the rest of your colleagues work face-to-face. It's your responsibility to ensure that your remote status is an asset rather than a liability for the team.

You can be the first person to post your game plan for the day on the team Slack channel (because you're at your desk when everyone else is getting dressed or commuting); you can send an email summarizing how you solved a late-afternoon client crisis (when everybody else was on the way home); or take on the job of organizing the gift basket for a colleague's new baby. These are all ways of signaling that you're online, engaged and available, even if you're not in the next cubicle.

You can use your flexible schedule to take on these little tasks and guest appearances, and still have a lot more discretionary time than the colleagues whose days are consumed by meetings or workplace distractions.

It's especially important to connect with colleagues you may not know well, or have lost touch with over the course of the pandemic. Reach out on social media, in addition to setting up a rotation of one-on-ones with them, and use these sessions to ask questions about what is going on at the office or to offer your concrete assistance on projects.

In other words, go above and beyond from home—becoming the super collaborator they want to call first, and showing them you don't have to come into the office for them to know they have your support.



Enlarge this image.

If you're working remotely all the time, you need to ensure you have plenty of boss interaction—just like your in-office colleagues. PHOTO: Margeaux Walter for The Wall Street Journal; Image: iStockphoto/Getty Images

Encourage remote-friendly meetings

There will inevitably be moments when you feel the pain of being the one remote team member. Make a plan for minimizing that pain. For example, if you often find yourself the only person dialing into meetings, look for ways to level the playing field—ideally by encouraging your organization to adopt some remote-friendly meeting practices. The best-case scenario is a policy that if one person is Zooming in, everybody will do the call from their desks. If that won't fly, see if you can recruit a conference-call buddy, someone in the room who will keep an eye on the chat window, fill in any gaps if you're missing context or couldn't hear something, and work to include you in the conversation.

Exploit your remote advantage

If you only think in terms of mitigating the disadvantages of being the lone remote employee, then your boss and your colleagues will inevitably view your off-site status as an obstacle to deal with. But your remote work arrangement can also be a tremendous asset, which your colleagues can learn to appreciate if they see you turning your off-site status into a benefit for the whole team.

The biggest gains can come from taking on the kind of focused, deep work that is hard to do when you're in the

office. As much as possible, offer to take on the relatively solitary tasks that benefit from that kind of quiet reflection: You can be the team's go-to for long-form documents, deep data dives or complex research.

Build a brain trust

Being a remote worker makes it easier to avoid groupthink. It also can inspire you to build a wider brain trust than what's available in the office. Identify the colleagues, friends and family members who can be useful to your own work, and set up regular remote co-working dates, a Slack channel or recurring phone calls so that you can help each other out. This works especially well if you create an eclectic circle of fellow remote workers who can support one another, and offer more expertise and experience than you would find at the office.

Take advantage of your time zone

If you're in a different time zone or like to work earlier (or later) than your colleagues, put those scheduling differences to work for the whole team. Volunteer to provide feedback, undertake document edits or ferret out key information after the rest of the team has clocked out (or before they punch in). By working off hours, you will extend your team's productive day and ensure your colleagues don't have to wait for the next draft or bit of information they need—because you've turned it around while they are still regenerating. And making early morning (or late night) appearances can buy you the freedom to use chunks of the traditional workday for personal priorities, exercise or errands.

Impressing the boss, engaging your colleagues and taking advantage of the unique benefits of remote work can all add up to an arrangement in which your remote status makes you an exceptionally valuable employee. Yes, you may still have twinges about missing out on group lunches or office gossip. But you'll be building a niche and reputation for delivering great results outside the structure that contains the rest of the team.

You'll know you've succeeded when nobody wants you back at the office.

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Share Your Thoughts

What tips do you have for remote workers whose colleagues are mostly in the office? Join the conversation below.

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