Ask Help Desk: How remote workers can separate work and home lives

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FULL TEXT

For the last several weeks, our Help Desk email inbox has been inundated with questions from readers like yourself hoping to make sense of the technology in your life. And once again, we're here to tackle everything from the mildly frustrating problems to the big issues facing the future.

This week, we'll be exploring questions surrounding tech in the workplace and the future of work. We know that technology has become an increasingly important part of every job in every industry, especially as the pandemic changed the way many of us work. And as part of our coverage, we've been exploring everything from the tech that's driving people's everyday jobs to the tech that's powering picket lines. Shameless self-plug, follow me for more on these and other work-related topics!

We'd like to invite you to keep your workplace questions, suggestions and frustrations coming. What's happening in your world? How is your workplace changing? And what areas are piquing your curiosity? You can reach us at yourhelpdesk@washpost.com and we'll do our best to answer your questions. With that, let's get going on your most pressing workplace questions.

Vanishing work boundaries: How do you turn off work when your "office" is just a few feet away from your personal living space? The ping of an incoming work message is crystal clear even when cooking dinner, brushing teeth, reading bedtime stories.

—Catherine, Seattle

I'd like to start off by pointing out that you are not alone in your experience, Catherine. For many workers, this is the first time they've had to work from home for such a long period of time and for some, it's the way they'll likely work for the foreseeable future.

That said, many people are finding the lines between work and home blurring. And that can be quite frustrating if you don't have the tools to manage it. I reached out to a couple of experts on the topic and they had some solid advice on how to navigate this space.

The main takeaway: You need to have a conversation with your team or manager about communication norms and expectations.

Nicholas Bloom, an economics professor at Stanford's Graduate School of Business who's been studying remote work, said a good way to go about this would be to set "exclusion hours," meaning hours in which calls, emails and meetings will not happen. Ideally, this would be set by your employer, but if not, the answer is simple, Bloom says: Just ask for it.

Employees have the upper hand in the job market right now, as employers struggle to hold onto their talent. So it's "not unreasonable" to tell your employer you are online and available from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. or that you pick up your kids from 3 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. but will work until 6:30 p.m., for example.

"If an employer doesn't respect that …then you have the choice to just say, 'If this doesn't stop, you're going to force me to look for another job,' " he said. "Most employers will come to their senses."

Prithwiraj Choudhury, a Harvard Business School associate professor focused on the future of work, said another

conversation you might want to have with your colleagues or manager is about what work employees need to do together, synchronously, what work can be done separately on a person's own schedule and how do those two pieces work together. Encouraging your team to embrace asynchronous work through Slack messages, emails and shared documents that don't need to be addressed immediately can have a lot of benefits, both for the worker and the employer, Choudhury said.

"People actually contribute more thoughtful ideas," he said. "If I can take my dog for a walk around the park, I can think about a question you asked and come up with a more thoughtful response."

Moral of the story: You're going to have to have a conversation with your teammates or manager. But once you agree to the norms, then you also have to be conscious about following them.

I personally have a little work nook in my apartment. When I'm done working, the laptop is closed, and I immediately go outside for a walk and return to a different part d my home. It may seem overly simplified but sometimes the process of disconnecting, getting some fresh air and relocating is enough for me to shift gears.

Return to work to return to Zoom: When I read, "Workers are putting on pants to return to the office only to be on Zoom all day," I felt sad for workers whose management is unaware of solutions to these problems, but I suppose that was the point of the article. What are the solutions that companies might employ to improve the in-office experience, and who provides them?

—Daniel Gallant, Ashburn, Va.

While it might be convenient to assume there's a suite of tech tools to solve every problem, sometimes the answer to a tech problem is not technical at all.

So what's the best way to improve the in-office experience? Choudhury suggests changing the question all together.

"My question is: Why should anyone go to the office, ever?" he said.

That's not to say the office doesn't serve a valuable purpose, rather it serves a specific one, Choudhury said. It should be used to develop deep connections and collaborate with the team. So if workers are not going to the office to collaborate in-person, why are they there at all?

Tech tools like Zoom, Google Docs, Slack, Asana and Trello can be super helpful when it comes to working collaboratively in a remote environment. They can even help people work on tasks together in-person. But if workers are spending all day communicating and collaborating solely with the digital tools versus any in-person contact, then they're not getting much value out of being at the office.

As Choudhury put it, think about the office as the new "off-site" meeting place, those locations at which companies used to schedule full days of collaboration outside office. Use the office for mentoring sessions, team meetings and other networking opportunities, he said. But requiring people to head to the office just because it's where they're supposed to be can actually be counterproductive, he said.

"We often never did our best work in the office," Choudhury said. "We were too distracted."

So the answer to this one may not be deploying all the tech tools, but rather considering what purpose the office serves and how it will best benefit your workers. Also, let's not forget that companies across industries are rethinking the future of work, often leaning toward more flexibility regarding when and where their employees work. And some argue that to be competitive, employers must be flexible.

Tablets for work: With increased concerns about security, workplaces are requiring that any work-related software be only used on computers that have the employer security software installed. In some cases, that limits tablet use to only those based on Windows 10 and newer Macs. That means that lower-priced and lighter tablets such as Kindles, iPads, and Android-based ones can't be used with standard work type of software. Solutions? Or give up on using tablets (other than high end ones) for work purposes? Or cart around a laptop?

—Kathryn Phillips, San Francisco

There are a few ways to think about the device you want to primarily use for work, Kathryn. But first, you should probably ask yourself a few questions: 1. Do I want my company to have access to what I'm doing on my personal device? (I recommend you read a piece my colleague Drew Harwell and I worked on about employee surveillance

software.) 2. What tasks does my job typically entail on a device and how much functionality and power does that need? 3. Is my company's software supported on the device I'd like to use?

Two analysts I spoke with told me that the trend still heavily veers toward laptops when it comes to business usage, for all the reasons you mentioned and more. They have more processing power, are often more compatible with company software, have more functionality and make it easier to multitask.

Mikako Kitagawa, tech analyst at market research firm Gartner, said a lot of the productivity apps available on tablets have less features. So you may be able to crunch numbers on a spreadsheet, but you may not be able to do more complex functions, for example. It's also harder to view several different windows at once, whereas on a laptop you might shrink a Web browser down to the corner of your screen so you can watch a video in the background while you type a text document.

That said, depending on your job, a tablet could come in handy in some cases. Graphic designers, for example, find them to be useful when they need to draw something on a digital device. But if you're planning to use a tablet for a less creative role, you might be cutting yourself short.

"They are good supplemental devices," Kitagawa told me. "We think of them as secondary devices for specific purposes."

Neha Mahajan, analyst at research firm International Data Corp., agreed, saying, "at the end of the day, laptops dominate" when it comes to workplace devices. But if you're dead set on using a tablet and the tablet's operating system supports your company's software, Mahajan recommends using more of a premium tablet like an iPad Pro or Microsoft's Surface Pro 7, as they give users more flexibility in what they can download. Granted, you're going to pay a bit more. Apple's starting price for the iPad Pro is about $799 for its 11-inch display. For a couple hundred dollars less, or about $600, you can get Microsoft's Surface Pro 7.

Mahajan said that during the pandemic, more people started using tablets for work. But it's unclear how much of that was driven by the lack of laptop availability as everyone started working and attending school from home.

Now, if you're a parent, you might want to get a tablet anyway, work aside. Kitagawa basically called the devices a godsend for helping to entertain your children.

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