

Coaching Yourself to Thrive in WFH Mode

Working from home can feel like you're soaking up rays on the beach or languishing in some forgotten outpost on the dark side of the moon. Here's a way to overcome the pitfalls of both.



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Plenty has been written about the challenges of working from home during this pandemic time we are in. Some of the strategies I've seen offered include having a designated WFH space in your home that is also not where you sleep, getting enough sunshine, using video conferencing more than usual if you're feeling isolated, and to give yourself a couple of breaks during the day to recharge, especially after a marathon virtual meeting. These are all very sound though somewhat generic ways of dealing with the drawbacks of working from home, especially if this is a new experience for someone. The reality is that we each can experience different challenges when trying to be productive in WFH mode based on the tendencies we have adopted due to nurture and nature.

Pros and Cons of Working from Home

For example, working from home can be especially tough for those who are accustomed to having and needing a higher amount of social interaction during their workday. But working from home can also be detrimental for those who desire much less socializing at work. Working from home for these might initially feel like a paradise. They can get lost in spend analyses and category planning for hours on end with few interruptions, except for perhaps the family dog that has now become accustomed to being let outside every hour on the hour (my personal WFH challenge). Yet, while the Excel power user may be quite comfy and content basking away on

their WFH desert island, they might also stop engaging as much with their stakeholders and so lose some of their influence. Apart from how much workplace socialization an individual needs, for many, working from home also means that their workday never officially ends. So much for the work-life balance so many companies had been touting to gain an edge in a tight labor market!

I want to encourage you to dig a little deeper into the challenges working from home has meant for you, personally, and to suggest a way you can start coaching yourself to perform at your peak despite those challenges.

The Three Legs of Self-Determination

There is a human performance concept I learned about in my organizational leadership graduate studies that you might find useful in addressing the negative realities working from home could be causing for you. It is called Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Proponents of this extensively researched construct say that we humans have three main intrinsic motivations: **Competence** - the need to be really good at what we do and in control of the outcome of our work, **Autonomy** - the need for some latitude to exercise our competence in a largely self-directed manner, and **Relatedness** - the need for social interaction so that we feel connected to others and part of something larger than ourselves. Drawing energy and movement from these three motivations in relatively equal amounts is the ideal.

The problem is that many of us do not find all three motivations to be equally important for a variety of reasons. In fact, we can greatly favor just one or two of them while greatly diminishing our use of the others. In this sense, these three intrinsic motivations are like three legs of a stool with each being a different length. Someone's Competence leg, for instance, might be 24 inches long, while their Autonomy leg is only 16 inches long, while their Relatedness leg is a whopping 30 inches long. If we were talking about a real stool here, it would be completely useless to us to stand on when changing a lightbulb. It might be good for firewood once the sun goes down, but not much else.

Teetering on a Wobbly Stool of Motivations

Being unbalanced in one's intrinsic motivations can make their personal experience of working from home very much like trying to change a light bulb while teetering on a lopsided stool. The downside, of course, is that while they may be quite competent at their job function under "normal" circumstances, they could find it especially hard to stay focused and engaged if, for instance, Relatedness is a major source of motivation for them. Further, their feelings of isolation due to not getting enough Relatedness fuel would obviously be compounded if they are also much less motivated by having a high degree of Autonomy. For this person, working from home would probably feel more like working alone on the dark side of the Moon instead of in their kitchen just a few miles away from the mothership. Come in, Ground Control!! And for the task-oriented isolationist we discussed earlier, while their over-developed Competence and Autonomy legs are a real asset to both themselves and their employer, their underdeveloped Relatedness leg can topple their effectiveness just as easily. By being so distanced from the physical and

operational structures that previously helped them to stay engaged with their internal customers, a strategic sourcing professional who is low in Relatedness, for instance, would be at an even greater risk of missing out on opportunities to influence and support new sourcing and other value-creation initiatives.

Coach Yourself to Expand and Balance Your Motivational Drivers

Here's where the self-coaching comes in. What if there were a magic seat you could attach to those three maladjusted "legs" of intrinsic motivation that would cause them over time to become more balanced, eventually making that wobbly stool quite useful for indeed?

There is such a magic seat. Behavioral scientists call it Integration. Integration is the process of acknowledging and proactively dealing with the negative realities we experience so that we can begin hitting on all cylinders and eventually thrive like never before. These negative realities might include feelings of loss due to not receiving enough of one of our preferred intrinsic motivations or feelings of overwhelm when thrust into a situation that requires us to access an intrinsic motivation that has for the most part gone dormant.

Integrating our negative realities is not a quick fix. It requires self-awareness, self-acceptance, time, and experimenting with new behaviors that might feel a little awkward. But it is definitely worth the effort for those who wish to increase their influence, performance, and leadership abilities. Here are a few questions that might help you begin the process of identifying and integrating the negative realities you could be experiencing while working from home:

Questions to Help You Integrate Your Motivations and Excel in WFH Mode

1. **What do I miss most about working in the office** instead of at home and how is that affecting my performance, enthusiasm, self-esteem, optimism, and enjoyment? **Which of these things do I care about most** and need to accept as a loss, grieve it, and move on? **Who can I reach out to for support** that might identify with how I'm feeling?
2. **Who do I miss socializing with at work**, or could go to for advice when in a jam and how can I reconnect with them? **Who needs me** to reach out to them who might need the same support?
3. **What stakeholders have I not been interfacing with as much** as I did when working in the office? **How can I connect with them more**, beginning today?

4. **How is working from home causing my family to make sacrifices? How do I want to address this with them** in a way that shows I understand and care?
5. **What boundaries do I need to set** with my boss, team, peers, and stakeholders to regain some of the work-life balance I've lost? **How can I do this in a way that affirms my commitment** to giving them my full attention and best work when supporting them?

Final Thought

Whether working in a cubicle, a corner office, or in the family room, using all three of our intrinsic motivations can be challenging for any of us on any given day. Working from home just exacerbates these challenges but this can also be a blessing if we allow it to be. I hope you will use your WFH time to begin figuring out which one or two of the SDT motivations typically gives you the most movement and satisfaction. Then, think about how you can start meeting these needs proactively if your access to that motivation is diminished in WFH mode. And finally, take the time to deeply consider how you can start tapping into your less prominent motivations much more, so that your fulfillment, effectiveness, and career are not left a little lopsided.

Further Reading

Two books you might consult if you are interested in reading more about Self-Determination Theory and integrating intrinsic motivations into your character include Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness (2017) by Dr. Richard Ryan and Dr. Edward Deci; and People Fuel (2019) by Dr. John Townsend.

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