COVID-19 PANDEMIC 2020

WORK FROM HOME BEST PRACTICES

WHITE PAPER | MAY 2020
Mindr is a workforce development initiative, supporting companies across industries to attract, engage and retain women and parents. Our programming has helped to harness the power of women and parents at Facebook, Microsoft, Google, Amazon, NASA, the United Nations, Ares Management Corporation, American Express, Vox Media, Frankfurt Kurnit Klein & Selz and elsewhere. We are experts in building a sense of community in the workplace and creating an infrastructure for every employee’s success.

This White Paper was prepared by Eleanor Moriearty, who leads on research and public policy at Mindr, with contributions from Annie Cunningham, Britt Doolittle, Beatrice Fihn, Chris Jansen, Erika London, Sarah Lux-Lee, Tashia Millstein, Carolyn Moore and Lauren Smith Brody.
Mindr has always been about creating strong communities, within and beyond the workplace.

Until the unprecedented events of 2020 took place, we often gathered people in a physical space in order to achieve this. We launched women's and parents' initiatives for businesses in New York and astronauts in Houston. We partnered with the United Nations to bring 600 new parents and their babies to UNHQ for the first baby-friendly event in its history. We helped business leaders connect with their strategic partners over their shared experiences as women and parents.

Now, as the world goes virtual for some time, community is more important than ever.

We're taking everything we've learned in the physical space and applying it to sustain and strengthen workplace communities from a distance. We're already so inspired by the deep conversations, hands-on workshops and virtual community-building events we've had the honor to facilitate so far, giving professionals a way to connect, collaborate, commiserate and create together, while apart.

We hope this White Paper helps you to prepare yourselves and your organizations for working from home during this unusual transition. We'd love to connect with you, to find out how you're faring, and how we can help.

Sarah Lux-Lee, Founder & CEO, Mindr
sarah@mindrglobal.com
The first half of 2020 has brought unprecedented disruption and change to the corporate world. With more employees working from home than ever before, companies, individuals, and families have had to adapt quickly to new ways of working, communicating and compartmentalizing between work and home.

As companies set up remote work policies (perhaps for the first time), individuals, families, managers and teams are being asked to upskill rapidly in communication, efficiency, and flexibility. This is a critical time to ‘get it right’ when it comes to empowering employees, creating innovative politics, and leading with empathy.

Through research findings and insights from industry leaders, this White Paper serves to provide insight into remote work best practices. The intent of this paper is for organizations and people managers to use it as a resource when designing new policies and company-wide programming, and for individuals to use it in creating work-from-home arrangements that work for them.

While it can be difficult to see silver linings in a crisis, moving to remote work can be a time of growth, innovation, and empowerment for a company and its employees. According to Harvard Business School, companies with work-from-anywhere policies can “boost employee productivity, reduce turnover, and lower organizational costs.” What’s more, in the event of any future disruption, a distributed, adaptable workforce will be better equipped to continue operations than one that is limited to a small number of physical locations or ways of working.

It is important to remember that the virtual workplace is new for almost all of us. In 2017-18, only about 25% of workers in the United States worked at home at least occasionally, and only 15% had days on which they worked at home all day, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. There will inevitably be a ramping up stage and growing pains. But establishing best practices, building community and opening lines of communication will enable your organization not only to adapt to this new working environment, but to thrive in it.
Creating a Sense of Normalcy at an Abnormal Time

When things are changing every day, establishing routines wherever possible can provide comfort and allow for productivity. Specifically:

- First and foremost, acknowledge that working from home, especially with kids, is not the norm. Working from home during a pandemic is unlikely to feel like other instances of working from home.

- Create a schedule and a to-do list of items to be repeated daily or weekly, so that you’re not constantly reinventing the wheel. Once a week (or more often, if that’s right for you), review whether your schedule is working for you, or requires tweaking.

- To avoid overly blurring the boundaries between work and home, start and end your workday with routines. For example, turning off the news, pouring a second cup of coffee and sitting down at your predetermined “work space” may signal the beginning of a workday, while physically closing your laptop and taking the dog for a walk may signal the end of a workday.

- Communication is key. When we’re not physically proximate, it’s more important than ever to schedule check-ins with managers, direct reports and your team to discuss the new norm and figure out what is working and what needs work.

- Dress for productivity. Even if you dress more casually while at home, you will likely feel more ready to tackle the day if you’ve brushed your hair and changed out of pajamas into something that feels more work-ready. (And always consider whether you might have to jump on a video conference unexpectedly!)

"Working from home during a pandemic is unlikely to feel like other instances of working from home."
FIVE TIPS FOR WORKING FROM HOME, FROM A LAW FIRM PARTNER WITH CHILDREN

Britt Doolittle is a partner at K&L Gates, LLP, a full-service international law firm, where she specializes in corporate law, such as mergers and acquisitions, commercial contracting, and private equity transactions. Britt lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, with her husband, her spirited 3-year-old daughter, and her happy-go-lucky 10-month-old son.

1. **Life is now a team sport.** Find the right rhythm that works for you and any other adults living in your home (like a spouse or roommate). You may need to take turns “taking one for the team” from time to time. For me, that means grouping my calls together in two windows during the day (typically, mid-morning and while my kids nap) so that I can engage with my clients and colleagues with minimal interruption.

2. **Delegation is critical.** Delegating has never been so important for me as it is now that I’m working from home full time. My firm’s support staff and administrative team are essential, and the associates who aren’t wrangling kids throughout the day help me keep the ball moving on client work while I’m managing meltdowns or bedtime. Identify the tasks you can delegate to others and do it — it can free up your time and serve as a way for others to learn new skills and take on additional responsibility.

3. **Use to-do lists.** As a lawyer, I’m used to tracking my time in six-minute increments, but without the structure of an office environment, it can be easy to let precious time slip away during the day. To keep myself organized and on track, I keep three running to-do lists: (a) what I need to accomplish that day, (b) what I need to accomplish that week, and (c) what I want to accomplish, time permitting. These lists help me to prioritize during my working windows and better estimate turnaround times for my clients and colleagues.
Find the quiet time(s). Like most working parents, I work around nap/sleep schedules to squeeze in some really productive hours. I wake up early each morning and aim to work at least two hours before my kids start stirring. This starts my day with some momentum and allows me to spend some uninterrupted time with my family during breakfast and morning routines (which rarely happens under normal circumstances).

Give yourself some grace. When you’re working from home with a partner, roommate, kids, and/or pets, nothing is going to be perfect. Don’t sweat the hiccups that come along with this “new normal” — whether it’s a toddler interrupting a videoconference, the kids having a bit more screen time while you work to get a document out, or not finding the time to shower for a day (or two!). There are silver linings in this mess — for me, I’m going to see my son take his first steps! I also get to have a dance party with my daughter every morning. These times are stressful, but there are a lot of things to be grateful for as the world slows down a bit.

UNBLURRING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN WORK AND HOME

Mentally and physically separating work responsibilities and home responsibilities while working from home is challenging, regardless of one’s living and family situation. Ways to compartmentalize work life and home life may include the following:

- Set up a designated work space, even if this means repurposing an area such as a dining room table during work hours, and then converting it back at the end of the day.

- Try to stick to a predetermined work schedule. You may wish to share your schedule with a friend or coworker for added accountability.

- During breaks, empower yourself and your team to embrace things that would not normally be possible during the work day, such as spending quality time with kids, engaging in self care, FaceTiming with a friend, or watching an episode of TV on a lunch break. This can reduce stress, minimize distractions from multitasking while working, and lift morale during a challenging time.
Tashia Millstein, LMSW, is a social worker and psychotherapist working at an outpatient mental health clinic in New York City. Tashia also sees private clients as part of a group practice. She is licensed in New York State and holds a graduate degree in social work from New York University.

**Set boundaries.** It is important to set boundaries in all facets of your life - work, home, family, friends. Over-communicate your needs both at work and home: be especially clear with your colleagues about when you can realistically be available, and implement cues, verbal or visual, to help your children know when you are “at work” and when you are free. Setting boundaries may also include setting limits on social media and how much news you consume. Let friends and family know, as well, when you have reached your limit and need to talk about something other than the pandemic.

**Be realistic.** Throw perfectionism out the door! Avoid burn out by setting realistic expectations and being kind to yourself if you can’t meet them. Remember that “doing your best” will look different during the pandemic. Be ready to be flexible, to have things not workout as planned, and to sometimes make mistakes. Practice kindness, compassion, and empathy with yourself. Give yourself credit for showing up and doing the best that you can under unprecedented circumstances.

**Make time for yourself.** We have lost much of the personal time that was part of our daily lives – commutes, time alone at home, at the gym, or out shopping. With everyone staying at home, it can be hard to find time (or space) to be alone, but it is important to carve out time just for yourself. This could be a long shower, a walk alone while observing social distancing, or time watching your favorite show. When you can, schedule your alone time in advance.
Do something that makes you happy. Now, more than ever, we need to find moments of joy throughout our day. Whether it’s during your alone time or with your family, incorporate activities into your routine that you genuinely enjoy. This can be hobbies, games, or learning something new. The key is that you are doing it just for the joy of it and not for the outcome. Don’t feel pressured into doing things just to prove you’re doing something “productive” with your time.

Prioritize healthy choices. The loss of structure and routine, combined with increased stress and anxiety, can lead to poor choices that can be damaging in the long run. Sleep, nutrition, and exercise all impact our overall mental and physical health. Therefore, it is important to make sure you are getting enough sleep (but not too much sleep), eating healthy and at regular intervals, and engaging in physical activity on a daily basis. This does not mean that you can’t occasionally indulge in your favorite comfort foods or that you need to get into the best shape of your life. Adding more pressure and anxiety is not the goal, but you can still be intentional about how you’re treating yourself and your body.

SIMPLE AT-HOME EXERCISES TO INCORPORATE MOVEMENT

Squats (while waiting for the microwave)

Knee push-ups (have your toddler count them out)

High knee running in place (while watching Netflix)

Lunges (while tidying up items in different rooms)

Side-lying hip abductions (while on a call)

Bicycle crunches (while listening to a podcast)

Jumping jacks and jumping squats (with your kids)

Tricep dips (while on the phone with a friend)

Basic yoga routine (when you need some Zen)
WORKING FROM HOME WITH KIDS

Adjusting to working from home during a crisis is a major challenge. Doing it with kids at home, during extensive school and daycare closures, is another beast altogether.

A 2018 survey by Welch's analyzing the schedules of 2,000 American mothers found that being a mom is equivalent to working 2.5 full time jobs. During this pandemic, parents are adding even more work to the mix, as they take on responsibility for children's care, entertainment and schooling, often in the same physical space in which they're managing heavy remote workloads for jobs outside the home.

Here are some recommendations for parents who are now juggling even more responsibilities:

- Find your community. Establish ways to connect with other colleagues and peers with children who are going through the same challenges, whether that is by setting up a Slack group, holding a happy hour on Zoom, or another way of connecting that works for you.

- Acknowledge that your work hours may have to change. Getting focused work done before kids wake up, or after they're asleep, may take some of the pressure off of the time spent multitasking between work and care. (Sleep is important too, and trading sleep-ins with a partner or roommate, if you have one, can help to mitigate the impacts of working during usual sleep hours.) If possible, consider re-distributing working hours so you are working less hours more days a week.

- In discussions with your supervisor, frame your adjusted schedule like a business plan, stating all the factors that you have taken into consideration and your plan for overcoming challenges and meeting deadlines.

"Establish ways to connect with other colleagues and peers with children who are going through the same challenges."
• Directly communicate your new schedule with managers and team members, and remind them that childcare status has drastically changed due to school closures and shelter-in-place policies. Be open to feedback on what is working, and which new arrangements may need tweaking.

• Consider giving older kids more responsibilities around the house, which may include helping out with younger siblings. It may also be possible to multitask by finding fun ways to engage even very young children in household chores such as meal preparation (count the chopped vegetables, or point out their shapes), laundry (sort clean items by size or color before folding), and other tasks.

• Family schedules take planning. Each night, compare schedules for meetings, online school, remote play dates, household responsibilities, and so on, and strategize for the next day with your family. If you know there are times you cannot be interrupted (such as during a call with a client or manager), be sure this goes on the family schedule and clearly communicate expectations ahead of time.

• If dividing household activities with a partner, consider the amount of “cognitive labor” each one is doing (anticipating needs, making decisions, monitoring progress), rather than just the physical labor usually associated with household work.

### Activity Ideas to Encourage Independent Play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infants</th>
<th>Toddlers</th>
<th>Preschoolers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity mats</td>
<td>Legos, Duplos, blocks or Magna Tiles</td>
<td>Obstacle course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tissue box stuffed with fabric squares or construction paper</td>
<td>Play-Doh (buy or make at home)</td>
<td>Draw favorite scenes from books, TV shows or movies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fill bathtub a few inches and add floating toys</td>
<td>Painting, coloring, tracing and practicing scissor skills</td>
<td>Make bracelets or necklaces out of yarn, home materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ziplog bags filled with differently textured objects to squeeze and touch</td>
<td>Playing along to music on pots, pans and other items</td>
<td>Write letters to friends, family or local essential workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helping with chores</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do a reentry tour. Working under extraordinary circumstances, your colleagues might be too distracted to welcome you back properly from parental leave. Take the initiative to schedule one-on-one catch-ups with your immediate team and anyone who's been covering for you in your first two days back. Also, think of the people whom you would see at the proverbial water cooler under normal circumstances, and make a point of saying hello over email or Slack or even with a quick call (no pressure) if they have time. A personal touch has never counted more than it does now.

Get personal. Even the most inflexible workplaces have had to adapt to our new at-home realities while you have been out on leave. Don't be afraid to mention your family right at the top of a call or a Zoom, particularly if you think your baby might cry or need attention. Always better to just call out the possibility from the start than to feel like you have to apologize later. Our personal lives, our precious families and our mental health have never been more visible, and that's a strength, not a weakness.

Work in bursts, using best practices of efficiency. Those 90-minute increments add up, and can be just as productive in total as your previous traditional workday. Caring for a newborn, whether you realize it or not, has made you hyper efficient at pivoting between tasks and getting things done quickly and creatively. Two efficiency tips: 1) Eat a frog for breakfast. That means, do the hardest thing first, that way the weight of worrying about it isn't distracting you all day. 2) If you are interrupted with a task that takes less than 5 minutes, just go ahead and do it right now so you don't have to add to your list.
4 Make your output as predictable as possible. With a baby in your arms, you might be able to receive and read quite a bit coming into your inbox, but for deliverables that require free hands and brain space too, wall off two regular periods of time each day as your "output bursts." Communicate this plan to your team so that they understand that while you are working as full-time as possible, they will hear back on emails and projects at these specific times, easing your worry load, and making your work dependable and predictable.

5 Assess childcare equitably. If you have a partner who has been working from home but not on leave, you have likely shouldered most of the childcare. That will need to shift equitably as your paid work rolls back into the daily equation. Make a plan together for how you can take shifts, share wake-ups, and support each other’s workload and personal time. If you are a single parent or your partner is an essential worker, do not hide these circumstances from your employer. You might have access to paid leave, mental health benefits, or special essential-worker childcare centers, or you might want to consider having a childcare provider (family or non) live with you after a quarantine period.
MANAGING TEAMS FROM HOME

A manager not only leads on daily operations and deliverables, they must set the tone and provide leadership through the unexpected.

The following are strategies for leading a team with purpose and empathy when employees are working remotely:

- Even if client correspondence still needs to happen during normal business hours, consider making clear that internal work can be done on more flexible timing, especially in light of childcare obligations during school and childcare closures.

- This is a perfect time to discuss which work should be prioritized and de-prioritized, and to shift the daily tasks of team members if necessary.

- Extensive communication, which can be important at a time like this, is not the same as micromanaging. While lots of communication can ensure the team is on the same page, micromanaging can drive a team apart.

- Explore ways to keep the team connected, whether via a virtual happy hour or virtual "brown bag lunch" meetings. Providing opportunities for socialization will help to keep the team connected and calm, and the lines of communication open.

- Keep the team focused on achievable tasks, whether they are long term or short term, to prevent the feeling of being overwhelmed by the major changes taking place.

"Providing opportunities for socialization will help to keep the team connected and calm, and the lines of communication open."

- Encourage team members to begin using time management and tracking tools that work best for them.

- Be sure to continue acknowledging achievements and celebrate progress out of the office, whether by email or over a video conference or call with the team.
Beatrice Fihn is the Executive Director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). Together with Hiroshima survivor Setsuko Thurlow, she accepted the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for ICAN.

1. Remember your humanity and forget the rest. This is the moment when we need to put people over profit, productivity and all of that. We all need to prioritize our families and health over anything else, so we need to lower expectations on colleagues and employees at work and make sure our teams take care of themselves first. Everyone is suffering right now, but if you can, prioritize paying people. They will remember it when this is over.

2. Communicate often, clearly and honestly, even when you don’t know what’s going to happen. Be transparent and clear with decisions and developments, it will build confidence and trust even when difficult decisions are being taken.

3. Be open and honest with the challenges that you are facing and how you’re feeling. These are extraordinary times, and no one has experience with handling this kind of situation. So it is ok if you struggle even as a leader. Be honest and open about it. It will allow everyone else to feel that it’s OK to not be OK right now.

4. Check in with your colleagues regularly. Zoom, Skype and FaceTime are all good options. It’s helpful to see your colleagues’ faces (and their kids, pets, partners and home decor), even if it’s just a short chat.

5. Adjust to keep moving forward. We don’t know how long we will be in this situation, so while we may need to lower expectations on the pace of work and immediate results, we need to find ways to keep our work moving forward. Think creatively and explore new ideas on how to continue the work.
ERGONOMICS

Small adjustments to where and how you work within your home can have major positive impacts on efficiency and mood:

- Create an at home standing desk for improved ergonomics. Consider investing in an ergonomic keyboard and/or mouse, and a second monitor. If you have a lot of calls and video conferences at home, consider using a wireless headset to ensure clear audio.

- Take breaks throughout the day to stretch or walk around if possible. If you have kids, consider breaks they can also take part in as an activity, like yoga or dancing.

- Try to get out of your home at least once a day, while following local guidelines regarding social distancing. This may be to exercise before/after work or simply to take a 15-minute break to get some fresh air. Getting outside often helps to recharge and improve focus.

- Add movement you might not normally be able to do in the office. Transition where you work, put a pillow on your seat, put your feet up to increase circulation, or walk around your home while you’re on a call.

TECHNOLOGY

New technologies can help with keeping work on track. Minimize the potential headaches of adapting to new forms of communication:

- Find tools that can work for the majority of tasks the team is doing, rather than many different tools for different tasks.

- Make sure the team is well acquainted with each chosen technology, through internal training and trial runs. Even if this involves an initial investment of time, it’ll pay off in productivity gains.

- It is normal to experience slower Wifi as more and more people are taking up bandwidth at home. If the home Wifi connection is slow, consider getting a “mesh Wifi” system to strengthen your connection, like Google Wifi or Amazon Eero, an Ethernet cable, or a mobile hotspot, depending on your mobile phone data plan.

- Working from home does not mean work should be any less securely protected. Think about what privacy and security protocols make sense for the data and other information handled by your team during this time.
Chris Jansen is a media executive at Google, currently working with News publishing partners. Chris began his career in broadcasting, delivering news on-air for several radio stations in his home state of Arizona. Prior to joining Google eight years ago, Chris was an adjunct professor at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, NY teaching Communications and Broadcasting.

Create a task force of employees to lead on community-building initiatives. There are undoubtedly people in your organization who are passionate about keeping everyone connected. Tap into them! Empower them to define, launch and maintain a strategy.

Hold virtual "water cooler" or "standup" meetings during the work week. Separate these out by time zone for different offices, if necessary. Set the expectation that these are optional gatherings for small talk. Don’t force interaction, and expect that some colleagues may never join. Everyone is different.

Create dual-purpose learning and community-building opportunities. For example, once every couple of weeks, hold an "all hands" virtual meeting and bring a guest speaker on a relevant topic to provide value to the group.

Provide opportunities for team members to connect over their shared interests. For example, create a shared calendar of virtual events that colleagues may want to engage in together. Topics could be development-oriented, like leadership training or skills-building opportunities, or purely social, like family activities or a book club.

Help people engage. In team videoconferences and calls, find ways to encourage active participation by team members, across levels of seniority. In addition to ensuring that all good ideas have an opportunity to be aired, this will help to maintain an active sense of collegiality and teamwork even when colleagues are not physically proximate.
REFERENCES


