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# THE REMOTE LAWYER'S SURVIVAL GUIDE

By KRISTI J. PAULSON



**T**he world can change in a matter of minutes—we knew that. But of course none of us thought that in 2020 the entire world would change completely in a couple of weeks. The practice of law as we have always known it was suddenly turned upside down. As lawyers, we went from being members of a center-stage, crowd-adoring, face-to-face profession to a situation in which we suddenly found ourselves retreating into our homes, sheltered away. Everyone became a remote worker overnight.

Lawyers embrace challenges. We moved into home offices. We connected and had a lot of meetings, seminars, and zoom happy hours. There was no home office envy or drama. We were all in this together. After all, isn't it fun to work from home in your PJs?

And then the world found out: Working remote is not so easy. It is not sitting at home in your pajamas, listening to your favorite music, sipping on cups of coffee, and effortlessly bringing home the bacon at the same time. The novelty quickly wears off. Restlessness sets in. Conversations seem harder. You find yourself talking to the dog and swear he talks back.

You order from Amazon just so you can chat with the delivery person. You fear you are becoming a hermit.

The concept of working remotely is hardly new. Some of us have been doing this for decades. However, being surrounded by the entire community also working remotely is new. And it changes everything. We are in uncharted territory and right now there are all kinds of unknowns, risks, and fears on the horizon about what the future holds.

For many, the workplace as they have known it will be forever changed. We have discovered technology and connectivity, and our culture can support remote working. The courts are embracing technology. Clients are adapting. And, with uncertainty looming, it is likely that more and more professionals will continue working remotely either full-time or part-time.

Remote work can be wonderful. It can also be filled with all kinds of unique challenges and requirements. Having done this for over two decades, I am going to share my thoughts and suggestions in this Remote Worker's Survival Guide.

## **Survival Tip #1: Get up. Get dressed. Get out.**

It is easy to feel like every day is a Saturday when you work out of your home or work remotely. Flexible schedules and the ability to work from virtually anywhere are perks of remote work. You can work from home in your pajamas and bunny slippers. Does it get much better than this?

Working remote does not mean that clothing is optional. While I will admit I love working in my PJs as much as the

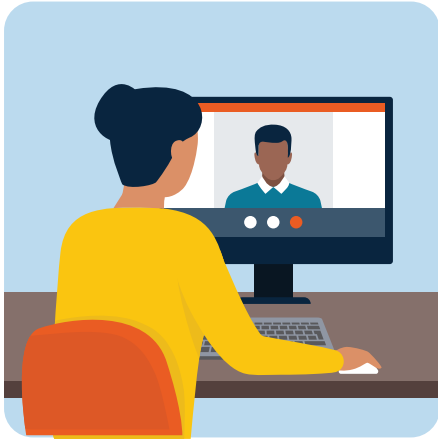
next person, there is a point where comfy goes too far. Granted, no one knows if you are wearing a suit while working remotely and, more importantly, no one cares. But it is easy to take comfortable way too far. Trust me.

You need discipline and routine. Always get dressed. 'Dress for success' doesn't have to mean wearing a suit and a tie or a dress. But wash-and-wear does come in more styles than just lounge pants. You can find work clothes that are comfortable and easy to clean, yet still professional-looking.

Pretend you have somewhere to be—or actually force yourself to go out, even if it is to buy a cup of coffee. Having a get-ready routine signals you are beginning your workday. It also allows you to signal the end of the day by putting your PJs back on. Each day needs an opening and a closing. Don't rob yourself of that by wearing your pajamas all day.

Taking care of your appearance is a sign of respect to yourself. It will make you feel more respected and professional.





**Survival Tip #2:**  
**Remote work is real work**

Remote working does not mean *not* working. You have clients, you have a workload, and people are depending on you. You are still assessed on how you deliver. Remote work just means you have more flexibility and are able to squeeze in walking the dog or an hour of tutoring at the school in the middle of writing a legal brief.

I have worked remotely for almost two decades, most of that working out a home office. For the most part, I love it. I am productive. I am happy. I am empowered. I don't dislike working in an office and I sometimes miss the social aspects of an office. But I have a work area and a zone that allows me to be productive from home. Working remotely can bring wonderful things to your life if you can train it and maintain it.

It's not for everyone. For some, it is highly productive, liberating, and allows for a wonderful work-life balance. For others, it means uncertainty as well as worries about practical and social aspects of their work life. Some people need the structure of an office. Some people need the social aspect of an office. Some people need to get out of the house. Some people lack focus. Some people lack discipline.

Of course, as lawyers we are never totally free to set our own agenda, as things like meetings, court hearings, and clients can dictate our schedule to a great extent. But most remote workers will get the extra flexibility to accommodate work routines to their lifestyles and personalities.

If you speak to remote workers, you will hear about many work routines, though seldom are they 9:00-5:00. When my kids were young, I would often start my workday at 4 or 5 a.m. and by the time they woke up, I essentially had almost a half day completed. Many people find the quiet hours of the late evening to be productive hours. These varied schedules do not mean that remote workers are not

working a full day. Remote workers simply have to find hours that suit them best.

It is very easy for family and friends to assume that working remotely or working from home means—hey, you're home all the time! This can be one of the most challenging aspects of working remotely: explaining to people that, although you are home, you are not available for a random chat or a long walk. Yes, you can be a bit more flexible, but if you allow others to take advantage of that flexibility, your productivity suffers. If your productivity suffers, your bottom line reflects that.

Nobody has working remotely figured out 100 percent. What really matters is to find a system that works for you and for your company. You need to embrace the fact you are a remote worker. You need to believe, and you need to show the world, a remote worker is a real worker.



**Survival Tip #3:**  
**Resist the shiny objects**

You need to learn to resist the shiny objects in your life. When you are at home, there is no social distance that stands between you and your television set, or the washer and dryer, or that really good novel you started reading last night. It happens all the time, you sit down to work on a major project, and suddenly a load of laundry is calling your name, or the dog needs a walk, or a meal needs to be prepared. And, without a doubt, the minute you get on a conference call, the children will suddenly need you and be calling for you loudly.

There is that newfound freedom of owning your day. Nothing stops you from running errands, taking a class, gardening all day, or working out in the middle of the day. It becomes easy to justify doing those things during the day, promising yourself you will work late or get up early. That plan works well until you factor in the procrastination.

All remote workers procrastinate. Then again, all workers do. There may

be no way to avoid it, but there are techniques that can make it productive when you work remotely. There is really nothing wrong with taking a power nap, walking the dog in the middle of the day, or sitting outside in the sun journaling your thoughts. The guilt we feel as remote workers for doing such things is really self-imposed and not justified. Remote life does offer flexibility and the opportunity for balance and autonomy. By focusing your procrastination, you can rebuild instead of draining yourself.



**Survival Tip #4:**  
**It is okay if you have kids and the dog is your legal assistant**

Lawyers are robots devoid of families, pets, spouses, homes, and anything else that might make them real. Showing a personal side of yourself might be perceived as weakness. If you work from a home office, you are less successful than someone who has a downtown office.

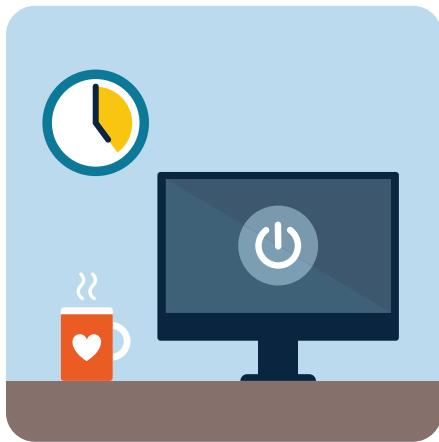
I remember thinking these very things when I started working remotely. I was so very wrong.

Embrace your kids and pets if you are lucky enough to have them in your life. Having children and attempting to have a remote practice or a home office often presents challenges and uphill battles. Many people discovered this when distance learning set into the home at the same time remote working became the norm. Kids have a knack for appearing at inopportune times. Dogs like to bark during Zoom calls. There is no place a cat would rather be than on your desk and swishing its tail in front of your camera. It's very easy to want to make excuses for them or try to keep them completely out of the picture. The question is why?

A huge advantage to remote work is that you do get to spend more time with your family. And for your own sake as much as anyone's, you really need to do that. It is easy to work through the entire day and into the night. You need to take

breaks and enjoy the moments with your family. Make it a point to not check email or be thinking about a case when you are with them. Treasure the exercise you get walking the dog. It isn't really a break if you are not present in it. Allow your mind to reset and refocus. Breaks with a purpose can make you more productive in the long run.

Set your expectations and then communicate with others. Create a system that signifies a need to not be disturbed and only use that when you really mean it. For example, I have signs that are placed on the door signifying I am on a call or video conference and, absent the house burning down, I do not want to be disturbed. Let your clients, your colleagues, and others know when you are available and how to contact you. Unless you are a 911 operator, there is nothing wrong with stepping away from your desk and taking a break or letting a call or two go to voicemail. You need a balanced work life. And it is acceptable to be both a remote worker and a human being.



**Survival Tip #5:**  
**It's always 5:00 somewhere**

'It must be great to set your own schedule' is something I hear a lot. Usually from someone who assumes that means I get up really late, work in my pajamas, and knock off shortly after lunch. The fact of the matter is, there seldom is a typical 8 to 5 day when you work remotely.

Indeed, you can start your day when you want. The bigger problem can be stopping. When you work remotely, the workday may never end. It can be hard to know when to stop. No one is going to tell you. There is always that temptation to check for messages, look at your emails, work on that case a little more. I mean...what is a full remote day?

For remote workers, it can be difficult to disconnect from your computer, your office, and work. Contrary to assumptions, it becomes easy to overwork rather

than underwork. As lawyers, we often love what we do, and it is easy to keep doing what we love. This is a global age and different people are online at different times. You will get calls, messages, requests, and emails at all hours of the day.

You need to step away from your job and your workspace each and every day. All of the other aspects of your life need to be as important as work. Set boundaries. It is important to focus on work and get it done in a timely matter. This doesn't mean you need to be online 24/7 and respond to everyone within seconds. To make a clean break between work and home, you need to learn to close your workday. And, when your day ends, make sure it really does end.



**Survival Tip #6:**  
**Don't forget to make rain**

It is easy to feel like an island when you are a remote worker. There are no co-workers with offices lining the hall where you can just drop in to chat or discuss a case. Lunch in your kitchen is not the same as lunch in a bustling restaurant. Walking down the stairs to your home office is not the same as a skyway filled with people. It's hard to network and make friends when you sit in front of a computer all day.

Rainmaking and networking will always be essential to business and business development. A remote worker needs to establish connections, take time to network, and follow up with those contacts. Indeed, social media can make it much easier to network. But you need to work those channels and connections with purpose to make them meaningful. Equally as important: You need to ignore all of those social media posts, forums, and groups that, interesting as they may be, do nothing for your business and only take up your time. Time is one of the most valuable assets a remote worker has, so use it wisely.



**Survival Tip #7:**  
**Have a life outside of the law**

As lawyers, much of our lives and our identity are made up of being a lawyer. The demands on our time are great and we tend to measure our success by billable hours at the end of the year or our legal accomplishments. It can be hard to justify setting aside personal time.

Having an activity or hobby to offset work can greatly help one's mindset. It doesn't really matter what you do—do what you enjoy. Run marathons. Quilt. Sew. Draw. Read. Work out. Doing something you love and want to do helps you to relax. A relaxed mind can be a creative and productive work mind.

Remote work also allows for more opportunities to embrace your community. Remote workers enjoy a flexibility that is rare. Embrace that gift and give back or learn about your community. Enjoy the opportunity to participate in local events. There is no place for guilt in enjoying work flexibility. The key is to make time for something you enjoy and take the time to enjoy it.

Life holds no guarantees. What purpose is there in waiting for tomorrow, or a year from now, or until you retire, to enjoy yourself? What a shame it will be if you are robbed of an opportunity to enjoy your life because you waited. ▲

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