

By Paul N. Frater and Lauren L. Sullivan

A short guide to working remotely

We were ecstatic when our supervisors allowed us to work remotely. Friends in graduate school, we hadn't worked in the same place in years. But our lives had taken a similar turn. Paul—a scientist at a state agency at the time—was living apart from his wife on weekdays. Every Friday he'd leave his office and drive 3 hours to spend the weekend at home, but with his wife pregnant with their first child, that situation would soon become untenable. Lauren, a newly married postdoc, lived in a different state than her husband and was growing weary of long-distance romance. Our work lives revolved around computer analyses and writing, so remote work was feasible. It seemed like an ideal solution.

Paul, an introvert, harbored fantasies of burying himself in computer tasks, free of the noise and distractions of offices. But when he started to work from home, he struggled to maintain focus and avoid getting sucked into house chores. As Wisconsin's bitter winter took hold, snow buried his office window, and he felt closed in. Three months into his new arrangement, he learned that Lauren, an extrovert, was also working from home. He found some relief in learning that she, too, was struggling with isolation.

We weren't about to give up on remote work, but we needed better ways to cope. The two of us began to email back and forth, sharing challenges we faced and methods we'd found helpful for staying productive.

After we got into the swing of things, we surveyed 16 other remote scientists to generate some tips for success.

SET REALISTIC GOALS. When you don't have a boss looking over your shoulder, you become your own taskmaster. Setting small, manageable daily tasks that contribute to your longer-term goals can help keep you on track. Make sure to hold yourself accountable, for instance by scheduling regular check-ins with a supervisor or colleague.

BE CONSISTENT. Wake up each morning, change out of your pajamas, and maintain a regular schedule. Act as if you have a job to go to—because, after all, you do.

REDUCE DISTRACTIONS. Do not let laundry, dishwashing, cleaning, and other chores consume your workday. You may also have to guard against social disruptions, as some people seem to think that if you work remotely, you can do whatever you want at any time of day.



“We weren’t about to give up on remote work, but we needed better ways to cope.”

and conferences. Schedule Skype calls with other scientists or communicate via Slack. Consider spending a few hours working in a social setting such as a coffee shop.

When we first started to work remotely, we suffered from feelings of entrapment and isolation. But now—3.5 years in for Paul and 2 years in for Lauren—we've learned how to manage our new arrangement so that we can be productive scientists and live in the same city as our loved ones. We're not planning on a lifetime of full-time remote work—in fact, Lauren's remote journey will be over when she starts a faculty position next month—but we have to say that remote working has its perks. For one thing, it's hard to complain about a 10-second commute. ■

Paul N. Frater is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Iceland, working in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Lauren L. Sullivan is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Minnesota, working in St. Louis, Missouri. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

CREATE A DISCRETE WORKSPACE. When you're working, be at work—both mentally and physically. It helps to have a separate office. If that's not possible, try to arrange your furniture in a way that distinguishes your work and nonwork space.

REWARD PRODUCTIVITY. If you are productive for an hour or two and accomplish a task, then treat yourself to a 15-minute break. Get a cup of coffee, take a walk, browse the internet, play with your dog, or do something else that you enjoy.

SEEK OUT HUMAN INTERACTION. Scientific discovery is collaborative, and it can be difficult to interact with colleagues while working from home. Get out and attend meetings

Science

A short guide to working remotely

Paul N. Frater and Lauren L. Sullivan

Science **362** (6419), 1206.

DOI: 10.1126/science.362.6419.1206

ARTICLE TOOLS

<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/362/6419/1206>

PERMISSIONS

<http://www.sciencemag.org/help/reprints-and-permissions>

Use of this article is subject to the [Terms of Service](#)

Science (print ISSN 0036-8075; online ISSN 1095-9203) is published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. 2017 © The Authors, some rights reserved; exclusive licensee American Association for the Advancement of Science. No claim to original U.S. Government Works. The title *Science* is a registered trademark of AAAS.