Remote Work Tips and Tools

A short set of tools and tips for working remotely

Overview

In light of concerns over the Coronavirus (COVID-19), there is an elevated interest in working remotely. In the sections below, we provide helpful tips and tools for teams working from home. These sections vary from productivity tips to alternative ways of communicating over the web. We hope these practices shape your efficiency long after you have arrived back at the office.

Productivity

Working from home poses unique challenges and opportunities for a team's productivity. Many studies find that employees are actually more productive working remotely and without the interruptions of office life. However, flexibility can also lend itself to self-imposed pressure and blurred boundaries. So, in general it's good to provide your staff with tips for staying productive while also maintaining a work-life balance.

Set your schedule the day before

Take 15 minutes at the end of each day to schedule when you will work on tomorrow's projects. By blocking out these working sessions in a shared calendar, you not only stay on task but also let your team know when they can or cannot reach you. Scheduling out your day—and sticking to it—can be parameter-setting too. In addition to scheduling your working hours, we recommend scheduling your evening plans as best you can. This keeps your work life from bleeding into your personal time.

Note: You can also alert your team to your availability by scheduling online and offline hours in Google Calendar, Slack, and other various platforms.

Work from a distinct location in your home

We're creatures of habit. When we're on a sofa, we want to binge-watch a show. When we're in bed, we want to sleep. To increase your productivity, find an office-like space at home (even if it's just a chair and table) and set it apart for work-only activities. That way when you sit down in your home "office," your brain will know it's time to focus and innovate.

Take timed breaks to boost productivity

Don't underestimate the power of mental (and physical) breaks for your productivity! Remote employees may unknowingly take fewer breaks and end up sitting more than the average employee. When you schedule your breaks, be intentional to move around, take a short walk, stretch, and relax.

One of our favorite focus boosting hacks is the Pomodoro Technique, which encourages a five-minute break at the end of every highly focused 25-minute working session. For more information on Pomodoro, we recommend this article: https://bit.ly/2TNJSVE

Avoid the urge to cancel meetings

When working from home—especially for the short-term—it can be tempting to think, "I'll take care of this when I get back into the office." Don't let your future workload pile up by putting off important meetings or projects. With a disciplined approach to setting meetings and following through, you can be just as productive and collaborative a team as ever. We recommend utilizing video conferencing tools (see our recommendations below) to host meetings from home.

Remote Meetings

Working remote is our business model, but it did not come without challenges on how to stay aligned. We tried many options from Google Hangouts to Microsoft Teams, but once we found Zoom, we did not look back. The reliability and ease of use is a great fit for us, especially because we host a lot of meetings with people outside our organization. If we only hosted internal meetings, Zoom would be pretty costly for the investment.

Here's a summary of video conferencing softwares:

Zoom and Pricing

Zoom is preferred if you have a high number of meetings with people outside your organization. The cost $14.99 for small teams and up to $19.99 for all the extras. However, if your meetings are always under 40 minutes, the free plan is the way to go.

Google Hangouts and Pricing

Google Hangouts might be a great fit if your team already utilizes Google and you conference internally. One downside to watch for is that most people already have a Google account, which poses some challenges switching back and forth between work/personal. Google Hangouts is included for organizations that already use G Suite. Nonprofits have access to G Suite Basics at no charge.

Microsoft Teams and Pricing

Much like the Google Hangouts, if you have a high number of internal meetings and already use Office 365, Microsoft Teams is a great fit. The cost is included with your O365 membership, and they also have a free version. This app has a huge download file size, which made it challenging to use externally.

Project Management

If your church isn't currently using a project management system, this is the time to start. A good handle on project management will increase team visibility on projects, keep work moving forward, and eliminate confusion about team priorities.

Here we highlight two project management systems—Asana and Monday.com—that are easy to use and train your teams on.

Asana and Pricing

We love Asana for its intuitive navigation and easy-to-build project boards (see above). Assign tasks to yourself or teammates, track progress, and get email notifications and reminders.

- Importing into Asana: https://asana.com/apps/csv-importer

[Monday.com](#) and [Pricing](#)

Monday.com is also a good option for managing your remote team in one place. What sets this platform apart is the ability to add code-free automations to your boards and monitor your team's workload with one simple view.

- Importing into Monday: https://monday.com/integrations

Communication

We can all agree that effective—and sometimes instant—communication is vital in ministry and the workplace. While email can be effective for some conversations, chat tools that provide dedicated channels (rooms) and integration with other applications can offer a big productivity boost.

[Slack](#) and [Pricing](#)

Slack is extremely popular and has extensive integration with many of the tools mentioned above (Asana, Zoom, Google Calendar, and Outlook, to name a few). It also has an excellent set of resources for getting started (https://slack.com/resources). The free version is limited to a subset of the capabilities of the full version, but it is still very effective for helping small teams.

[Microsoft Teams](#) and [Pricing](#)

Microsoft Teams integrates together chat and collaboration with online audio and video calls in the same application. In this way, the software acts as a central hub for your team to chat and conference with one another. Office 365 Business Essentials includes Microsoft Teams in the package, so you may have access to this solution right away. As mentioned above, Microsoft also offers a [nonprofit plan](#) for Office 365 Business Essentials that includes Microsoft Teams.

[Google Hangouts](#) and [Pricing](#)

Google Hangouts is included with G Suite, so this tool may also be at your fingertips and ready for use. Your team can communicate via web browser for text or use a 3rd party desktop app called [YakYak](#). The app provides web conferencing, messaging between your team, and integration with some other Google products like Google Calendar and Gmail. We recommend taking advantage of Google's [nonprofit](#) plan.

Time Tracking

The nature of our work at DTS sent us on a search for the best ways to keep track of the time we spend on tasks. We needed a software that 1) integrated with our project management system and 2) offered easy reporting. Your church or nonprofit may not have the same needs as DTS, but time-tracking can still be useful to any individuals and teams who want to know how efficiently they are completing tasks as well as how much time should be slated for future projects.

[Harvest](#) and [Pricing](#)

Harvest is a time tracking and invoicing application that integrates with a wide range of applications. The free version is limiting, only one user and two projects, but they offer nonprofit pricing that helps alleviate the cost. It provides users with an iOS and Android app as well as a desktop application. Harvest integrates directly into Asana, Slack, Quickbooks, Chrome, and many others.

[Toggl](#) and [Pricing](#)

Toggl is an extensive application with desktop apps, web browser integrations, and a web portal with advanced reporting capabilities. It includes some extra functions like a Pomodoro timer, offline mode, and auto tracking, which are focused on helping remote workers stay productive. Our team uses Toggl for its reporting features and user experience.

Two Meetings You Need Most

To keep your team on the same page, we recommend implementing two important meetings.

Weekly Power Hour Meetings

This 60-minute team meeting should happen first thing Monday morning—or the first day of your work week, respectively. The purpose of Power Hour is to provide a high-level overview of the current projects and goals for the week, giving team members an opportunity to discuss any roadblocks, give a progress update, and clarify deadlines. For this meeting, it makes sense to assign a point person who will read through the list of current projects. If there's time at the end of the meeting, have team members take turns sharing which projects they plan to work on throughout the week.

Daily Stand-up (DSU) Meetings

This 15-minute team meeting should take place at the beginning of each day (except on the day you have Power Hour). Brevity is the key to this meeting—thus the name Daily *Stand-up*. DSU consists of each team member sharing the answer to these three questions:

1. What did I work on yesterday?
2. What am I going to work on today?
3. Is there anywhere I am stuck?

Note: these meetings are not about your team proving they are productive—a common trap! Encourage members to list only the three or four projects they feel the team would benefit from knowing about. If someone reveals they are "stuck" in a way that can't be quickly resolved, move on and loop back around to that person at a later time. A key phrase for this meeting includes, "Let's take this conversation offline."

Conclusion

Inspired by stories of people coming together in times of crisis, this document represents our humble attempt to provide resources to churches and team leaders that find themselves suddenly managing remote working environments. Done right, working from home can clarify your processes and boost productivity. We know that God can use anything for good, so we pray that your team finds renewed community, focus, and intentionality, even under these unlikely circumstances. God bless you!