

# Create Boundaries Between Home and Work—Even When You Work from Home

During the COVID-19 quarantine, it's easy for work and home lives to blur together

By Theresa Agovino

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**T**ravis James Fell was on a Zoom call with his colleagues when an image of a disembodied arm appeared beside his head. After an awkward silence, a co-worker asked Fell if his home is possessed.

It is not. One of Fell's daughters was tapping his shoulder while asking him a question, and the Zoom settings transformed her limb into a horror movie prop.

Fell said he loves his two daughters, wife and dog, though their frequent interruptions break his concentration, leaving him longing to return to the office after over three months of working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"There is a blurring between work and home," said Fell, a project manager at Hypori, an Austin-based software company. "When I'm at work I have longer blocks of focused time."

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Many employees are still struggling to separate their work and personal lives in what has become a boundaryless world. Lunches with colleagues have been replaced by checking kids' homework or fixing a broken window. Breaks are just as likely to be spent starting dinner as grabbing a cup of coffee. The commute that once served as the demarcation between work and personal zones is gone for many. And the walk between the home office or makeshift workspace to the kitchen or living room isn't enough time to decompress.

While some companies are beginning to bring some employees back to the workplace, many will continue performing their jobs from home.

"People keep talking about going back to the old norm," said Matthew Kerzner, director for the Center for Individual and Organizational Performance ([https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A\\_\\_www.eisneramper.com\\_center-2Dfor-2Dindividual-2Dorganizational-2Dperformance\\_&d=DwMF-g&c=nQOnw6HHAeKBNxj23OXhOw&r=mB27IcYG4xASRwIbfWaldGSyxZ\\_SQduaFJC9YeUSPqI&m=R8gmhtaOfGw8LBuUxoOCu\\_VHc1zFLn7fLUYGUpzabXw&s=zbhie3gu3S6SPQmMRUSuJdhuruhx68wTE\\_VjPGSTMHA&e=](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__www.eisneramper.com_center-2Dfor-2Dindividual-2Dorganizational-2Dperformance_&d=DwMF-g&c=nQOnw6HHAeKBNxj23OXhOw&r=mB27IcYG4xASRwIbfWaldGSyxZ_SQduaFJC9YeUSPqI&m=R8gmhtaOfGw8LBuUxoOCu_VHc1zFLn7fLUYGUpzabXw&s=zbhie3gu3S6SPQmMRUSuJdhuruhx68wTE_VjPGSTMHA&e=)) Psychology at EisnerAmper, a New York City accounting firm. "We are creating the new norm."

A human resources executive in the Midwest misses her 25-minute commute because it gave her an opportunity to shift from work mode to home mode. Now she tries to create the break by exercising, though she can't always carve out the time. That leaves her feeling guilty. "I feel like I'm not at my best for my kids," said the woman, who requested anonymity. "I need something to come between home and work."

Allowing her children to spend significant chunks of time playing video games to keep them occupied while she and her husband work also makes her feel like a delinquent parent. "I think I'm as productive at home," she said. "But it's more stressful."

Fell said he thinks his productivity has slipped even though he is working longer hours due to increased disturbances. "With all the distraction, you have to go back to mental rebooting to focus," said Fell. "I'm not sure if I'm working more, but I'm definitely working longer hours."

Without separate locations for home and work, individuals must adopt behaviors, time and communication strategies to create virtual perimeters, said Donna McCloskey, a professor in Widener University's School of Business Administration who has researched work/life boundaries for decades.

Here are some ways to establish boundaries when changing locations isn't an option.

1. **Maintain as much of your work routine as possible.** Fell still rises at 5 am., exercises, showers, shaves and dresses like he's going to work. McCloskey dons her business casual attire and then goes into her kitchen to fill her travel coffee mug as if she is going to the car. Instead, she heads into her home office. The big mug keeps her from leaving her domain for the kitchen, where she is more likely to run into her husband, children or dog.
2. **Keep a schedule.** Fell said he enters very important meetings in his family's calendar, so they don't interrupt him during that time. McCloskey said her family tries to all have lunch together. This way her children know they will have an opportunity to speak to her, making them less likely to barge into the office. She and her husband also trade off being the "on-call" parent who addresses unexpected issues. That gives them each uninterrupted work time.
3. **Communicate with colleagues about your situation.** The lack of child and elder care may cause individuals to work at odd hours as they tend to family obligations. "Make sure you are transparent with supervisors, peers, clients about the times you are working," Kerzner said.
4. **Try to set up a separate workspace,** even if it is a card table in the garage or a TV tray in a corner. "You want to be able to get up and walk away," Kerzner said.
5. **Develop an end-of-day ritual.** McCloskey said that when she changes into her workout clothes, that is a signal to her family that she is done for the day.

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