



Unstructured Weeks

There are a great many things about my high school that I loved. One of my favorite parts of that 4-year stint, though, was unstructured weeks. What, pray tell, is an *unstructured week*?

Well, as in most schools, we usually adhered to a regular format; in our case, it was 7 periods daily. That was the *structured* week. You followed your schedule; you went to class.

But then, there were *unstructured* weeks! Assignments were given before the week began, and the expectation was that you would find a place in the building to work and just get 'er done. Teachers were available for scheduled appointments or for impromptu conversations and assistance. There was flexibility to delve deep, tackle projects, read and reread, watch relevant programs, meet with teams ... do whatever you needed to do to understand content and complete assignments. And, it was all at your own pace.

Honestly, some of my classmates struggled during unstructured weeks and the absence of a set schedule. On the other hand, observing others of us during unstructured weeks was akin to seeing a butterfly breaking free from a cocoon. For us, these were periods when we got to explore and accomplish much more than we ever could in the traditional 7-period world.

Whether you realize it or not, today's workplace is increasingly adopting the structured-unstructured approach. For some, the unstructured option of remote work or an alternate work schedule occurs according to a weekly or monthly time frame; others are offsite far more often. Consequently, managers and workers alike must come to grips with how to navigate this new environment.

So, join me for this month's edition of **EA Insights**. Let's consider together how to make remote work really work. With hope, this will help your unstructured time to become as much, if not more, productive than your time in the office!

All the best,

June

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Remote Work That Works

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Remote work...hmm, can you say, "complicated freedom"?

As technology has advanced, office rent has risen, and the expectation of a four-walled workplace has changed, we have gained far greater flexibility in how, and where, we work. The possibility of functioning outside of the office, however, presents interesting challenges for staff member and manager alike. So, let's take a few minutes to examine five ways to make remote work really work...for everyone.

Determine the Roles and the People

It's sometimes comical to watch what happens when an office adopts a remote work approach. People office-wide can't wait to sign up. Big surprise, though...not every job can be done remotely. Receptionist, you may raise your hand to join the offsite group but, how will you greet visitors from home? (And, installing a Ring device in the lobby that's connected to your phone probably isn't a winning recommendation!)

For remote work to *really* work, a company's management has to do its homework first. There has to be an investment of time looking at the organization's roles and considering if and how each could be performed remotely. The company must consider its needs, its resources, and lots more, in a strategic and organized manner, before launching and publicizing a remote work scheme. When it does so, staff will know whether their jobs are eligible for the offsite option and understand why.



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"Quotes"

*"It used to be presumed that if you weren't at your desk working, you weren't working[.] *** Sometimes [away from your desk is] where your better creative work happens."*

~David Chipperfield

"The nice thing about [working] at home is that it's almost as though I'm doing it already. I get out of bed thinking of my work, and I don't have to go anywhere to do it."

~Patrick deWitt

"I like to work from home. I do most of my writing in bed, late at night after everyone has gone to sleep. I need to be alone with my thoughts, and late at night is about the only time that can actually happen."

~Donald Driver

"[Our company] helps work be more human - you can stay at home and work alongside your kids -- and it makes [it] more personal."

~Caterina Fake

"These two staples of work life -- meetings and managers -- are actually the greatest causes of work not getting done at the office. In fact, the further away you are from both meetings and managers, the more work gets done."

~Jason Fried

"I work ... at home two days a week so I can do deep thinking, writing and reflecting."

~Anders Hejlsberg

"We live in an environment in which connectivity and cyberspace are transforming all workplaces[.]"

~Peter Maurer

"I get as much writing done at home before I go into work."

~John O'Keefe

But then, there also are decisions to be made about the team members who, as individuals, qualify for remote work status. A word of advice is in order here. If a person has a history of not being productive in the office, this might not be the best candidate for remote work. (Now, I do say "might" because there are some for whom the office, with its surroundings and/or coworker distractions, present the biggest challenge to productivity. A change of scenery might just do the trick.) That's why decisions must be made carefully and supervisor insight called upon for each individual.

Along the same lines, decisions about remote work participation should never be considered irrevocable. Because remote work often is considered a privilege and not a right, developing a reassessment schedule is helpful. It allows a supervisor to rethink a former "no" to remote work, as someone increases his reliability. It also is a way to monitor how a person in the program is leveraging her offsite time and whether the option of flexibility has proven to be a positive way for her to accomplish work.

Confirm Set-Up

Question: Can a carpenter build a house without a hammer?
Question: Can a nurse wrap a wound without gauze?
You see where I'm going here.

Just as a person needs access to certain equipment, connections, supplies, materials, etc. in at his/her regular work site, the person needs similar access to essential tools to perform assigned functions when offsite. So, to make remote work *really* work, there must be a good understanding of what it takes to carry out each role and what the company's equipment/supplies/access responsibilities, etc. will be when the person works offsite. Depending on the nature of the work, it also may be necessary for company and staff member to assess the offsite work space to confirm its sufficiency for the work to be done. The reality is that remote work isn't always plug and play. Because of that, some strategic thinking is required.

Set Work Schedule and Accessibility Expectations

Ever see someone who was "working from home" running errands, going to the movies, or at noshing midday at Starbucks...sans phone or computer? Ever send an email or try to call someone who's *supposed* to be working remotely, and all you get is silence? (One-Mississippi, two Mississippi...five million, two hundred thousand, fifty two-Mississippi...nada!) Yup, although working remotely does not mean being tied to the dining room table from 9 to 5 with no breaks, it also does not mean undeclared paid leave without either.

Remote work is most successful when there are clear expectations about the work schedule a person's to follow when offsite. Now, for one company or for a particular role, the bottom line may be that it really doesn't matter. As long as the work is getting done, folks may not care if staff are on from midnight to 8 am; just do it! For other organizations or roles, though, adhering to certain core work hours may be important so that there's better monitoring or so that others have access to those offsite and can collaborate easily about ongoing work contributions. There's no right or wrong way here. What is important is discussing, at the outset, the expectations for the remote worker's schedule as well as the level and means of accessibility expected so that all is clearly presented *before* the person ever heads out of the door. This helps to clarify matters for that staff member, his/her manager, and even for colleagues who need to reach out throughout the day to keep their own work moving forward.

Define Deliverables

Besides the frustration around *when* remote staff are working, another challenge I hear frequently revolves around *what* is getting done. Defining specific deliverables for an offsite period is one way to resolve this issue.

Whether the goal is to accomplish a set portion of a project, make a certain number of calls, write a report, or craft a strategy, it is helpful for a staff member (and the responsible manager) to enter each offsite period with a productive end result in mind. In fact, that's not a bad target for each day or week -- whether on- or offsite. Such definition lends purpose to the workday, and it helps both staff member and supervisor assess effectiveness and/or areas where support may be needed.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

In case you haven't guessed, at the core of productive remote work is communication. Clearly, a great deal of communication should take place long before Day 1 of a person's remote work in order to lend clarity around expectations, responsibilities, and processes. But, the interaction doesn't stop once the alternate work approach starts. During offsite time, communication continues to be important -- aiding the supervisor to do the job not only of supporting the person but also of advancing the work as well as helping that remote employee to stay connected to others in and away from the office.

Communication also is critical anytime the staff member is back onsite. After every remote work period (or at set intervals for those whose primary workplace is offsite), a debrief conversation is extremely useful for sharing impressions and determining corrections to be made by the company, the manager, and/or the employee to make the next on- or offsite work period a successful one.

Remote work *really* can work well. However, it doesn't happen automatically. Effective remote work requires planning, effort, and communication from all involved.

Do you lead a company that's grappling with how to launch or improve a remote staff program? Are you a manager struggling with how to effectively lead a team of on- and/or offsite staff? Are you a staff member, seeking to make the most of your remote work experience? If so, call on us at **Executive Advantage**. We're here to help you reach peak productivity whether in the office or working remotely. **Contact us today.**

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"I work at home, in the country, and days will go by when, except for my husband and son and the occasional UPS man, the only sentient creatures that see me are my chickens and turkeys."
~Susan Orlean

"I am a father, and sometimes I want to stay close to home. By varying the workplace, it gives me space to breathe."
~Colin Salmon

"I work from home a lot. I think I get as much work done at the office as at home, and I'm used to working with people who don't work in the office. I don't really care where they are, even if they're on a banana leaf somewhere. If they deliver their work, I am completely fine. I don't need someone sitting at their desk to produce."
~Kate Spade

"If I'm really under pressure to get work done, I can adapt to most situations, but I prefer to be at home, in a comfortable chair, with as few distractions as possible."
~John Corey Whaley

"Time is valuable, and telework is a viable component to help improve quality of life in many ways."
~Rob Wittman

"I think it's important to have flexibility to work wherever is best for you. I actually encourage people to work at the cafe - or from home or wherever works best for them."
~Anne Wojcicki

About Executive Advantage

At **Executive Advantage**, we are committed to providing results-based business and management consulting, leadership development, and coaching support. We partner with business leaders to build healthy, well-functioning organizations, where goals are met and people thrive. We also partner with individuals to create professional (and personal) lives with clearer direction, improved results, and greater balance.

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