Managing your workload at home

We all play numerous roles in our lives. We can be a spouse or partner, a parent, a child, a friend, a team or club member, and have a specific work role as well. In each of these different roles we adopt certain specific behaviours. Think, for example, about how you behave towards your own children (if you have them; if not, to nephews or nieces, or friends' children), including how you speak to them, and then how you speak to your own parents.

> *Role theory* is a perspective used in sociology and social psychology that describes how we act out certain roles as part of our daily lives. *Role conflict* occurs when we are faced with having to adopt different roles at the same time – when a friend or relation calls us at work, for example. The embarrassment that many people feel derives from having to act a social role in a work role setting.
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> We learn how to perform a role through interactions with others, both through observing and copying the behaviour of other people and their responses to our own behaviour. This involves conforming to *social norms* or experiencing negative reactions and even ostracism if we fail to observe them. One aspect of role theory is concerned with the relative amounts of *power* associated with certain roles. This power can be the level of influence that certain role players have, and their ability to use that influence to control other's behaviour, a classic example being parents, whose relative power lasts when their children are well into adulthood.

When you go to work you also adopt a role, use language differently and often put on a uniform – not necessarily a branded employer uniform, but clothes that you really only wear to work. Your journey to work provides a transition time, when you switch from your home role to your work role, because the work role is probably the most significantly different of all the roles we play.

When we work from home, this transition period is lost, and the opportunity or need to switch roles happens repeatedly through the day. Children may need attention; an Amazon delivery arrives; a housemate wants to know if you want to play FIFA later. This all makes it hard to focus properly on the work role and to adopt the behaviours that come naturally at work. What can you do to overcome some of these role clashes?

- Create a transition period for yourself – go for a walk round the block before starting work, for example.
- Still wear a uniform, and not a formal top with jogging bottoms so it doesn't show on video calls! Put a full 'uniform' on in the morning and get changed at the end of the working day.
- Agree rules with others about your and their behaviour, to help you focus – this is not always possible, especially with young children about, but try your best.
- Don't pretend. If you are on a formal work call and a young child comes in crying, don't try playing two roles simultaneously. Being a parent is the most important role you will ever play, and it must take precedence. Other people will recognise this.

Manage your time

Time is a perishable commodity. In other words, if you don't use it now, you lose it and you can't get it back. There is only a limited amount of time available to us, although some people do seem to have far more of it than others or, at least, seem to be able to do far more with their time than we can. Often this is because they are better at managing their time effectively. When we work with other people, this creates a structure to our working that we often don't recognise, until it isn't there any more. We respond to the cues that other people give in what we do and the pace that we do it at.

The *Hawthorne experiments* (1924-33) at a Western Electric Company plant established the power that group enforced social norms can have in controlling the work rate. If an individual were to operate outside the acceptable range established by the group (working much faster or slower) then the group would impose social sanctions to bring the individual back in line. This was often done unconsciously - the norms had emerged informally as the level at which it was possible to work and the sanctions were often equally unconscious. The researchers found that variations in the work practices or environment could cause work rates to alter for the short term, but that they would gradually revert back to the norm.
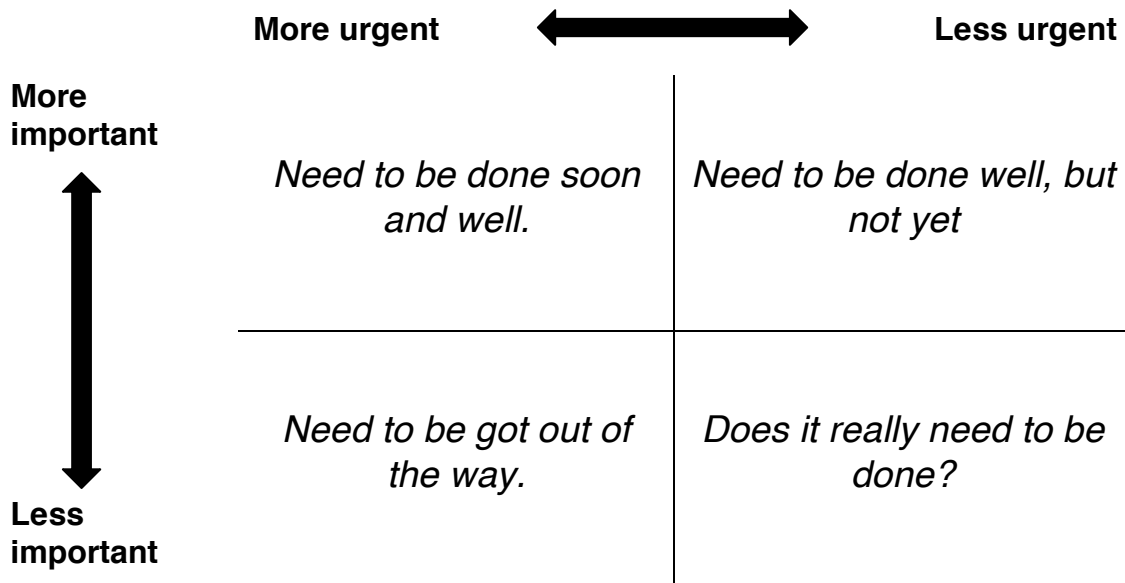
Managing time is about recognising that we often have some choice over when we do our tasks and what else we do as well as the tasks that we have to do, but we often don't actively seek to do it. We allow social norms (normal work practices), the demands of colleagues and 'the way we've always done it' to shape our working day and week. However, once these influences are removed, or seriously disrupted, by working at home, we lose the framework they gives for managing our time.

If you want to improve your use of time, it is worth spending a little time during one week just keeping a record of what you actually do with your it. Make a table with all the hours of the day down the side, for each day in the week, and then record what you do with each hour. Then total up the hours you spend on different types of task You may be surprised how your time goes.

This *time log* (as it is called) is a useful way of getting a clear picture of what you actually do. You can also distinguish between the tasks that you have to do because somebody tells you to, tasks that you have to do but can choose when to do, and tasks that you choose to do yourself. You could also note down the tasks you wanted to do but didn't get round to doing because you ran out of time.

Another valuable tool for managing your time is a *to-do list*. As its name implies, a to-do list is a list of tasks we have to do! However, most people stop at that, or just reorganise the list without any formal system. To manage your time better, write down all the tasks that you have to perform and then sort them into regular tasks, tasks that you have to do on a daily, weekly or monthly basis, and those that are irregular or one-off tasks.

Use this to prepare a weekly *work schedule*. The regular tasks can then be allocated a time slot pretty accurately – if you do this regularly, you know roughly how much time it will take. (There are apps on most computers these days that are designed to help you do this – now is the time to learn how to use them!) By giving these tasks a regular time slot, you are imposing a pattern on your working day that is often missing when we work from home. Then analyse the other tasks, the irregular ones that you have to do, using the *urgent/important grid.*

	More urgent ⟷ **Less urgent**	
More important ↑	*Need to be done soon and well.*	*Need to be done well, but not yet*
Less important ↓	*Need to be got out of the way.*	*Does it really need to be done?*

Urgent tasks need to be done within a short space of time because other tasks depend on them, because safety or security is at risk if they are not done soon, or because someone with more power has said they must be done. By comparison, important tasks are tasks that have a major effect on other people or other tasks, much else depends on them.

Urgency is all about time being of the essence, importance is about the scale of the effect the tasks will have. We can easily treat some tasks as important because we enjoy doing them or because of the effect they have on others, making us seem to be important or powerful because we are doing them. Some urgent tasks are also important, but not always - it is too easy to confuse urgent with important, and to think that because something is urgent that we have to drop everything to deal with it. Equally, when something is important we can treat it as urgent and do it now despite the fact that it could wait and, perhaps, be done better.

1. The more urgent and more important tasks have the top priority and must be scheduled first. Generally these should be done as soon as possible, but any small, urgent but less important tasks may be done first, to get them cleared.

2. The less urgent by more important tasks need to be scheduled when they can have your full attention. Plan when to do them, allocate time and don't allow yourself to be distracted so that you can give them your full attention.

3. The more urgent but less important tasks need to be done quickly. If possible, try passing them on (delegating) to another team member if you are really pressed for time. If someone else has asked you to do it, do ask them if they are really so urgent – sometimes we can mistake another's request to have something done quickly as meaning that it really is urgent.

4. Do the less urgent/less important tasks really need to be done? If they do, or will become more urgent or important if put off, schedule them for when they can be done easily without disrupting other work, or see if someone else with less pressure can them.

You can use the urgent/important grid to help you establish priorities and allocate these tasks to your work schedule. This is the point when you have to be very careful about allowing your personal preferences shape your scheduling. When a task is not

so urgent but we enjoy doing it (or enjoy it more than others) we can view it as more urgent or important than it is, and give it a higher priority than the jobs we don't like doing. One trick is to pair up tasks we don't like and those we do, with the latter scheduled to be done immediately after the ones we don't like. They then give us an incentive to complete the less favoured tasks and to avoid *procrastinating*.

'Procrastination is the thief of time'

Procrastination is the tendency to put things off or allow yourself to be distracted. We all get distracted by:

- other people
- other tasks (particularly if someone else says that it is more urgent than the one we are doing) or
- our own preferences (if we don't really like doing the tasks we are doing.

Being distracted by others happens because they have less work to do, are less committed to the work they have to do, or need help to do their job. You need to defend your own time from other people who try to steal it from you. If someone in your team is not busy then help them to find tasks to do to keep them busy, if necessary by delegating some of your tasks.

Working from home presents a whole lot more distractions than when you are in the workplace, from family and friends to getting the washing on the line! Even getting a cup of tea or coffee can present an excuse to disrupt your working pattern for longer than normal, if you allow it to.

Everyone procrastinates like this at one time or another. Recognising that you are doing it is the first step to overcoming it. There are lots of reasons why we procrastinate, but techniques to discourage ourselves from doing so include:

- Think of new or different work as a positive experience, a chance to do something different or learn new skills.
- Mix up your tasks to create the energy you need to perform your job well.
- Switch between tasks that you like and those that you dislike.
- Save your most liked tasks to the end, as a reward for finishing the ones you don't like.

Working smarter not harder

The lockdown and the resultant need for many people to work from home can be seen as an opportunity to develop flexible working in a way that maximises the benefits to employees and employers alike. If you are caring for others as well as working from home, you might be able to agree alternative working hours with your employer, so that you have more time to undertake other tasks during the day. A seven or eight hour day might be spread over a longer period, with one or two hour breaks during the day to allow you the time you need, or over a longer working week, if that is possible.

Some work tasks may well be done differently, particularly now that video-conferencing has become more widely used. Everyone has had to change how they work during these difficult times, and many (but not all, by any means) have found that this has brought about real improvements in the way they work. This can mean improved *efficiency* (greater output with the same or even less input), improved *effectiveness* (better output for the same input) but, most importantly, a better *home/life balance*. When the lockdown ends, some will be all too glad to go back to

their workplaces, but others will want to continue working from home and many will want to be able to combine both in ways that fit their lives better, reducing their commuting (and consequent pollution) and the space requirements in offices and other workplaces, and benefit us all.