



# Ground Rules for Remote Work

A Quickstart Guide by The Midnight Corporation

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## 1: Setting Boundaries.

Going into the office, then coming home is a natural boundary between work and home life. Remote work blurs those lines to the point they can become invisible, which can result in strain on both fronts.

Many of these tips come down to attention management. After all, you only have so much attention to give, so managing it effectively is crucial.

### Separate work space and living space.

Ideally, set up your remote work space in a separate room: a guest room, a spare room, even a dining room that is separate from the living space. If you have more limited space, you can still set up your work area with different items, then pack them away at the end of the day.

At the beginning of the day, set up your workspace. At the end of the day, take your workspace down. Even just putting a desk plant on the desk during working hours, and putting it back on a shelf at the end of the day can go a long way towards creating this mental separation.

### Separate work time and home time.

Sharing a space makes it easy to share time and attention. That means home life will pull you away from work and work will pull you away from home life. With kids and pets it's not always possible to set a hard boundary, but being aware of the need to separate the time means you can at least minimize negative impacts on both.

Having an established work space is a good start to managing this. Recognizing that some chores or tasks need to wait for after work is the next step.

### Establish group norms

Group norms are the rules that we, as groups, collectively agree to, either explicitly or implicitly. With the change of what constitutes normal in your life, new group norms need to form, and forming them explicitly will lower strain later. Don't forget, each of us has at least two groups that need norms set: work, and home.

Have an open conversation with the whole group about what norms should be agreed to. Treat it as a brainstorming session, and examine ideas. Some norms may have unintended

consequences. Don't be afraid to revisit norms as time goes on. What worked at first may no longer be necessary, or new needs may come up.

## **Just because someone wants your attention doesn't mean you have to give it.**

This is a subset of the group norm discussion, in many ways. It warrants its own section because this particular point comes up a lot in remote work, and managing it isn't hard with the right mindset. It applies equally to work, and home life, though of course how you handle it will be different. If your day is a litany of distractions, making any actual progress is very difficult.

If you are focused on a task and a coworker requests your help with something, make the decision of what the immediate priority is. Can the distraction wait 10 minutes for you to finish?

## **Using different user accounts for work and personal.**

If you are using your own personal computer to do work, create a whole new user account to work from. This will let you set up your virtual workspace in much the same way you've set up your physical workspace.

This may seem like a small thing, but all the small things add up to a big drag on your attention.

## **2: Communicate Freely, but Effectively.**

When far away it's easy to fall out of sync and feel disconnected with coworkers. When in a shared space there are opportunities for casual communication, such as bumping into someone in the hallway. When remote, this exchange of information doesn't happen naturally so it needs to be done in a way that keeps everyone aware of what they need to be aware of.

Don't lose sight of effectiveness, however. If every detail is shared in a single channel, it becomes hard to follow. Break off topics into different channels, rooms, or whatever method your chosen tool uses.

## Be careful communicating too much.

Communication needs to happen freely, but much like being CC'd on every email in the company, there comes a point when there is more noise than there is usable signal. Different tools have different ways of dealing with this, and group norms also factor in here.

Striking the right balance will be a matter of learning what works best in your organization. Keep an open dialogue about what is working and not working, and adjust as you go.

## Use the right tools.

It may be tempting to use text messaging to personal cell phones throughout the day, but this blurs that boundary between work and home. If possible, use a tool like Slack, MS Teams, or HipChat to keep in touch and in the loop.

These tools all have ways of managing communications into different channels, threads, and helping users manage their attention effectively. At the end of the work day, you can then step away from the work communication tool and keep that boundary between work and home.

## One-on-ones are important.

With the loss of so much casual communication, checking in with fellow team members one-on-one is more important than ever. These can be a quick conversation, and the goal should always be to keep communication open, and solve problems. If something isn't going well for one person, sharing that can mean improving relationships and tearing down barriers.

Keep in mind the established group norms during these one-on-ones (in fact, there should be group norms established *about* group norms!) Also be sure to set the best communication medium for each person. Some will do better with a video call, others may do better with a phone call.

## Virtual meetings are very different from in person meetings.

Remember that virtual meetings are fundamentally different. Even with video, body language is different, and many non-verbal cues get lost. Tone of voice can be different

with variations in microphone and speaker quality. Breaking in when you have something to add can be especially challenging when a lot of people are on the line.

This is a great place to have a set of group norms. Pay special attention to being sure people get the opportunity to speak, and how to signal when someone needs to chime in, how to signal agreement, and any new issues that come up as your group gains experience in this medium.

### 3: Communicate Asynchronously

Talking to someone on the phone is synchronous because both parties are communicating about the same thing at the same time. Email is asynchronous, because one person is sending the email and the other person is reading it at another. Remember that advice about setting boundaries? Not getting an answer right away may be that person setting boundaries.

Topics that we're used to communicating synchronously may be better suited to asynchronous when working remotely. That doesn't mean everything should be asynchronous, but it does mean being conscious of what you are communicating is important.

### Track work in a shared space (visually if you can!)

This an offshoot of communication, but it has to do with meta-information.

1. The biggest thing that gets lost working remotely is the context of a shared workspace.
2. Tracking work in a central location, where others can see it, helps rebuild that context. This is NOT about looking over people's shoulders. This IS about knowing what each other is doing so we can help each other out.

### 4: Take on some Agile practices.

When not writing whitepapers about pandemics, The Midnight Corp follows Agile practices and offers Agile coaching, and Agile and project management training as a service.

### Retrospectives are Key!

If you've been part of a lessons learned session, a post mortem analysis, or even just said to yourself "I think I'll do that differently next time," then you already have a handle on the

basics of a Retrospective. The purpose of a retrospective is to discuss as a group what went well, what didn't go well, and what will be done differently the next time.

At first, have retrospectives every week or two. As your group gains experience, have retrospectives every two to four weeks based on what works best for your group. Best practices call for the retrospective to last one hour for each week of the time period covered. This helps ensure there is enough time to cover the topics, but that the retrospective itself doesn't become a burden.

## Daily Standup

Distinct from a daily status meeting, a daily standup is focused on quickly (emphasis quickly) making sure everyone has context as to what everyone else is doing. Three questions are usually answered: what did I do yesterday, what am I doing today, and what is blocking my progress.

Each person should only take about a minute to give this information, because this is not a status meeting. Likewise, this is not the place for managers to ask detailed questions, but instead to identify that a further conversation (outside of the standup) needs to happen.

## 5: Remember your health

There's no shortage of things to be stressed about, so don't lose sight of your basic health needs. Get up and stretch regularly (far more than you think you need to.) Get some exercise. As long as you can maintain the 6 foot rule, go for a walk (though reconsider if you are coughing or otherwise symptomatic. Still follow basic common sense here.) And don't forget your ergonomics. Now is not the time to develop a repetitive strain injury.

I'm no health expert, but there are plenty who are. Seek out advice on specifics there.

**We're all in this together, and we've got your back.**

You can email us today at [contactus@midnightcorp.com](mailto:contactus@midnightcorp.com) or [midnightcorp.com](http://midnightcorp.com)

