



12 Ways to Succeed in a Remote Opportunity

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work was already being embraced by many industries. The ability to work remotely is growing in popularity and the trend is likely here to stay. If done correctly, remote opportunities provide a nice balance of freedom, flexibility, and productivity. Remote opportunities also present unique challenges that demand strong communication skills and an ability to develop creative solutions to unforeseen challenges and problems.

Current social distancing recommendations and “shelter in place” orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic mean that many current students and recent graduates will find themselves working in a remote capacity over the coming months. While working remotely is a different experience, there are ways to embrace it! What follows are some of the most frequently cited best practices for working remotely.

1. Do Your Research in Advance

Do your best to learn as much as you can about the organization that you will be working with in advance of your start date by reading about their mission, products/services, googling recent news related to the organization, and familiarizing yourself with the language, terms, software, etc. that they use.

We recommend reaching out to your supervisor to ask if there are materials you should acquaint yourself with in advance of the opportunity so that you can hit the ground running when you start. You may also want to ask if there are journals, newspapers, or other resources they recommend you add to your daily routine so that you can stay updated on current events and trends related to that field.

The more time you spend preparing for your opportunity, the more confident you will feel when joining your colleagues who may have several more years of experience than you. Do not be afraid to ask questions if you cannot find the answer.

2. Create a Dedicated Workspace

We recommend creating a dedicated workspace somewhere in your home--your bed does not count! Whether this space is a small folding desk in your room or a separate home office, this space must be quiet enough for you to be on phone or video calls and comfortable enough for you to spend a significant amount of time in. If you live with other people, try to set up your workspace in a less-trafficked area. Creating a dedicated workspace will allow you to associate work with a specific space, establish boundaries between work and the rest of your life, and signal your reliability to your team members when they see you consistently in the same location.

Make sure to gather all of the supplies that you will need to be able to do your job effectively including a notepad, pens, pencils, a computer, earbuds/headphones, your phone, and any additional resources you've been instructed to have on hand.

Be mindful of what colleagues can see behind you and that a cluttered workspace or unkempt appearance will influence how your team sees you when they are communicating with you by video. Colleagues will notice disorganization, messes, laundry, and unbrushed hair on video calls and this can distract from tasks at hand by shifting your colleagues' focus to your surroundings rather than the content of the call.

3. Set Yourself Up for Success: Attire, Technology, and Training

Part of feeling like you are working at an office is dressing the part. We encourage you to maintain a level of professionalism and avoid wearing outfits that are too casual. Dressing professionally will help put you in the right mindset and will come in handy when you are asked to join in on an unexpected video call.

Working remotely also means that you will need to adapt to using technology and software platforms for every aspect of your work. Check with your supervisor to learn in advance what types of technology your team primarily relies upon and whether you need to get access to any special technology, such as a VPN log-in. Examples of software you might use on a regular basis include GSuite, Microsoft Office, Google Drive, DropBox, Zoom, GoTo Meeting, Google Hangouts, Join.me, Skype, WebEx, Canva, etc. If there is a particular type of technology you will be using that you are unfamiliar with please do not delay in asking for assistance and/or training from your supervisor.

Access to consistent Wi-Fi is critical to working remotely and is worth budgeting for as you think about the anticipated costs associated with your remote opportunity. You may also want to budget for noise-canceling headphones to help you focus, especially if other people in your household are also working remotely. You may also find that a wireless keyboard, mouse, laptop stand, or even a second screen monitor, are essential to working efficiently depending on the nature of your work.

4. Limit Distractions

If possible, try to work in a space with a door that will limit loud, distracting noises. While we recognize this is not possible in all instances, having the ability to close the door will also signal to your housemates that you are not available at all times and have deadlines and responsibilities to tend to. Keep your family or housemates informed about your work schedule (consider posting it where everyone can see it or share your digital calendar with them) and let them know that if they need assistance with other things that you will need time to fit it into your schedule. If there are noises that are beyond your control, take the initiative to mute yourself if you are on a phone or video call and do your best to keep partners, family members, pets, etc. out of your workspace.

Just as technology is vital to a remote opportunity, it can also provide distractions and disrupt your work. You may want to “snooze” your personal email inboxes to

minimize their likelihood of distracting you and depending on if you need to use your phone for work or not, you may want to put your cell phone on ‘Do Not Disturb’ while working. We also recommend temporarily turning off notifications on your laptop or computer so they are not popping up or making noises while you are on calls with your colleagues.

5. Develop a Learning Contract

One of the best things you can do to ensure a successful remote internship experience is to develop a learning contract that outlines your goals for the summer. Feel free to use the Career Development Office’s [Internship Learning Contract Template](#) as a guide. If you are beginning a full-time job, consider using the learning contract informally as a framework for structuring early conversations with your supervisor, or ask whether the organization has a goal-setting form.

You cannot expect the organization or your supervisor to make your opportunity a meaningful experience for you. Do not assume that your supervisor knows what you want to learn or all of the skills that you already bring to the role. A good learning contract will help you and your supervisor understand from the beginning:

- Your goals for the upcoming summer;
- What actions you will need to do or learn to achieve your goals;
- How your success will be measured and evaluated throughout the summer.

Ideally, you should sit down and outline your learning contract in the days leading up to your internship or in the initial days of your internship. Once you’ve outlined your goals and what you would need to do to meet those goals you should request a time to meet with your supervisor to review this document to make sure you agree with one another and make any necessary adjustments or edits to the document. The more clarity you get around what projects you should be prioritizing and how they connect to the organization’s broader goals and timelines, the easier it will be to navigate a virtual internship experience.

Taking initiative and creating a learning contract signals your intentions and conveys how important experience is to you. Supervisors are usually grateful when students take the time to propose a learning contract and many take their interns more seriously when they see the level of thought and attention to detail that the student has put into the learning contract. It is a great way to make a good first impression and it also serves as a document you can return to if the summer is not unfolding in the way you had envisioned. Learning contracts are fluid

documents that can be revisited and edited throughout your experience if your original goals need to be changed, new goals emerge throughout the summer, or if you are not learning something you wanted to learn.

6. Create Structure and Establish a Routine

One of the benefits of a remote work environment is that there is often a great deal of flexibility around when and where you complete your work. Even though much of a remote work experience is self-directed, it is important to create structure and allocate consistent blocks of time for the work you need to complete. Creating a work schedule will help your body and mind get into work mode and contribute to your ability to focus and be productive. This consistency also makes it easier for co-workers to get in touch with you since they will know your availability. Depending on the opportunity you've secured, it might be preferable (or mandatory) to set your work hours around your organization's business hours so that you are able to easily communicate with your team and be available as situations arise.

We recommend working with your supervisor to identify what days and times you will be working and then communicating these hours out to the rest of your team. Establish work times that both meet the needs of your organization and fit with your schedule and additional responsibilities. If your team uses Google calendar or another online calendar schedule platform, make your availability visible to others to eliminate any questions as to whether you are working or not.

Do your best to be intentional with the way in which you structure the time that you are working and take steps to remain as organized as possible. Some people like to start their day by reviewing and responding to new emails that have come in since they last worked, while others like to start their day with a more self-directed project or task that needs to be accomplished. Give some thought to how you want to structure your workdays and do your best to create a routine. We also recommend clearly laying out all of your responsibilities for the day or week in advance and allocating blocks of time that will allow you to complete your identified tasks. Doing this will help you to stay on track and remain focused when the temptation to procrastinate or be distracted arises -- as it so frequently can in a remote experience.

7. Communication is Critical

While communication skills are essential in just about any work environment, they become even more critical in a remote work environment. Take the time to learn how often and in what ways your supervisor and

colleagues prefer to get updates or questions from you. When you receive a message from your supervisor or colleagues, respond to it in a timely manner.

If your supervisor hasn't already suggested it, consider proposing a standing weekly meeting where you can connect with your supervisor on a continuous basis to connect around your goals, upcoming projects, and daily tasks. We recommend creating a weekly check-in document that you share with your supervisor. Adding updates, questions, and agenda items to this document in advance of your weekly check-in with your supervisor will allow you to have a more focused meeting and communicate to them that you value the time you are being given to meet with them.

Remember to advocate for yourself and to clearly demonstrate the progress you've made in the past week. When you're not physically in an office, it can be difficult for your supervisor to keep your work at the top of their mind, so do not be afraid to bring up important accomplishments, deadlines, or questions. The more effort you make in letting those you work with know what you're working on, how it's progressing, and any issues that arise, the easier it will be for them to work with you, trust you, help you out if you get stuck, and give you new projects to work on.

If you are confused or if questions arise, be proactive by reaching out to your supervisor or colleagues for assistance. Questions are opportunities to learn and the more you err on the side of over-communicating in a remote environment, the better.

8. Seek Out and Incorporate Feedback

In an ideal situation, your supervisor will provide regular feedback into your weekly check-ins or via comments on shared software platforms. If not, ask for feedback. Knowing if you're meeting expectations or whether you should alter your approach to your work in real-time will allow you to make necessary adjustments and give you the confidence needed to move forward.

We recommend using the [Internship Learning Contract](#) as an opportunity to have your performance evaluated mid-way through the internship. By taking the time to pause and reflect on the first half of your internship experience with your supervisor you will gain a greater sense of the quality of the work you are producing, have an opportunity to make adjustments for the remainder of your opportunity, and a chance to modify the contract if new goals emerge or if projects move in a new direction and old goals are no longer relevant.

Similarly, make sure you finish your internship on a strong note by requesting an evaluation at the end of your internship. This feedback is critical as it will be coming from a person who works in your field of interest, has seen your work for some time, and is able to serve as a good judge of how far you've come and what you may still need to work on as you move forward. This feedback could occur informally via a final conversation with your supervisor or it could be a more formal written assessment depending on what your supervisor prefers and is able to do. In addition to reviewing your goals in your [Internship Learning Contract](#), here are some questions you might want to get feedback on:

- What development or progress have you noticed in the student's abilities, knowledge, and professional performance?
- What major strengths of the student did you observe during the internship?
- What would you recommend the student do following this experience to make them better prepared for this profession and workplace (e.g., courses, activities, skills development)?

It is possible that some of the feedback you receive will be critical and will challenge you. Receiving constructive feedback is not always easy to hear, but it does represent an opportunity to grow. The reality is that any feedback you receive is a favor as it will help you improve your work as you move forward. The more you can be receptive to constructive feedback, the better.

9. Document Your Progress

It's good practice to get into the habit of keeping a detailed log of the progress you make on projects or goals and to give your supervisor access to this log. For this reason, a shared spreadsheet or document may make the most sense as it can be updated daily. Reflecting on what you are doing and what you are learning will help you track your progress. Not only will you be able to more clearly see if you are on track for meeting the goals you've outlined in your Learning Contract, but your supervisor will also be able to monitor your progress and get a good sense of how you are using your time. Keeping a detailed log can also make it easier for your supervisor to write a letter of recommendation on your behalf or to serve as a reference for you as they can easily pull up documentation on what you accomplished for them.

You may also want to ask your supervisor how often they want to receive updates from you throughout the week. Some supervisors may want a check-in at the start of the week where you outline your specific goals and a follow-up near the end of the week where you

report back on those goals, and other supervisors may prefer that you keep them updated daily.

In addition to the detailed log of your progress, we recommend that you keep a private journal (digital or paper) that allows you to reflect on your experience as it unfolds. In this private journal you can note day-to-day activities that either fulfilled you or left you wanting to do something different. Specifically, you might want to:

- Log what you're doing each day or each week using the 5 W's and an H (who, what, where, when, why, how).
- Record your feelings about your experience. What are you enjoying? What are you finding challenging, confusing, or frustrating and why? What is not fulfilling to you?
- Keep track of new language and terms that you are learning. Every organization has its own language, including acronyms. The more you get familiar with this, the better.

You can learn a lot about what type of work environment you'll thrive in by paying attention to what you enjoy or don't enjoy about your current opportunity. Continually reflecting on these experiences will allow you to pursue future opportunities that are more aligned with your skills, values, and work preferences.

By keeping this documentation you will be able to look back on your experience to identify accomplishments, skills, and other material you may want to include on your resume, draw upon while preparing for an upcoming interview, or add to your [Handshake](#) and [LinkedIn](#) profiles to demonstrate mastery of skills.

10. Take Initiative and Go the Extra Mile

Once you've established a reputation for being reliable and able to get things done in a timely manner, if you see an opportunity to work on a new project, have an idea that may benefit the team, or want to sit in on an upcoming meeting, don't be afraid to ask if any of these options are possible.

As you complete items on your to-do list, be sure to take initiative and let somebody on your team know that you are ready and willing to take on something new. Do not just idly sit around waiting for the next project to come your way. Take advantage of all of the opportunities you can. It never hurts to do more than what is required if time permits.

11. Build Your Professional Network Virtually

Hopefully, your organization will help you get adjusted to their work culture, but if not, ask about upcoming events. Some organizations may have brown bag virtual lunch sessions to introduce interns to different parts of the organization and hot topics within the industry. Check to see if the organization schedules virtual social gatherings or happy hours and take advantage of opportunities to socialize with the team. Additionally, for those that are going into corporate settings or large non-profits, affinity networking groups will still be meeting virtually to support one another or to continue working on larger issues relevant to that group. These meetings can be a great way to get involved in projects that are outside of your own area.

When working remotely, you will not get the same face-time with your colleagues that you might get in an office. Consider requesting a standing video meeting with your supervisor or brief “walk and talk” calls to get to know other team members. It is common and expected that interns will invite colleagues out for coffee chats or take the time to get to know them more when in a traditional office environment, so seek out creative ways to make this happen virtually.

If these opportunities don't exist, don't be afraid to propose them or to ask your supervisor if they would introduce you to colleagues so that you can set up a time to learn more about them through an [informational interview](#). Make it a priority to build professional relationships with your colleagues. While networking virtually is not the same as being in person, it is still possible to build valuable, lasting connections. Set up regular video calls with people of interest, participate and be active on internal communications like Slack, and talk about your interests outside of work to find common ground with your team.

12. Prioritize Self-Care

In an office environment, it is not uncommon to take a coffee/water refill break, to walk to another meeting location, or to hop next door to chat with a colleague, but these natural pauses or breaks in your workday are not as clear when you are working remotely. The line between “work” and “home” can quickly start to blur. Practicing self-care looks different for everyone, but staying active, eating healthy meals, connecting with loved ones, taking breaks, and asking for help when you need it, will help you feel more balanced and productive when you are working. Be mindful of the impact that sitting for long periods of time can have on your mind and body and schedule breaks where you can

incorporate short periods of movement -- go for a walk, get some fresh air and sunlight, or hold a brief dance party. Establishing healthy boundaries and habits will allow you to enjoy your work more and help prevent resentment and burnout.

Incorporating time for self-care and drawing a clear boundary between “work” and “home” is one of the more challenging aspects of remote work, particularly as the world becomes more connected over time. You will continue to receive emails and notifications throughout all hours of the day (especially if your organization is located in a different time zone than you) and it is important to develop a habit of setting a time when you officially “log off” for the night. There may be important deadlines or projects that require you to ignore this habit from time to time, but deliberately noting when you are no longer available to work can go a long way toward ensuring you take care of yourself in a remote work environment. Be wary of setting the standard that you are available 24/7 as you will miss out on one of the best parts of working remotely: the flexibility it provides to work when you are at your best!

Conclusion

In the end, remote opportunities should be treated and approached the same way as you would a regular opportunity, and all of the tips and suggestions we provided will help you do this. Your main goal should be to learn as much as you can about the work that you are doing while building valuable connections and leaving a lasting impression on your supervisor just as you would try to do with an on-site experience.

The Career Development Office is always available to discuss any questions or challenges you may encounter in a remote opportunity. You can schedule an appointment in [Handshake](#) or email cdo@vassar.edu to be connected with one of us. You do not have to navigate this new terrain alone!

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