

# 101

TIPS

*for*  
**Telecommuters**

*Successfully Manage  
Your Work, Team,  
Technology  
and Family*

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**Debra A. Dinnocenzo**

"A powerful human performance tool and versatile 'coach in a box' for legions of home-based workers . . . A must-read for telecommuters and their managers."

—Mark E. Little, Vice President, Sales Planning, Kinko's

An Excerpt From

*101 Tips for Telecommuters:  
Successfully Manage Your Work, Team, Technology, and Family*

by Debra A. Dinnocenzo  
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## Preface

It's been difficult during recent years to avoid noticing the increased coverage that telecommuting has received in the business press. Stories about the challenges and rewards of telecommuting are especially visible during times of natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, floods, blizzards) and other traffic traumas (e.g., bridge collapses, roadway reconstruction, the Olympics).

Much of the early coverage of the telecommuting trend focused on the increased availability of cost-effective computer and telephone systems. While these advances in technology have given us the proliferation of notebook computers, desktop videoconferencing, and vital levels of corporate computer network connectivity, we're beginning to understand the importance of the human side of telecommuting. *People* telecommute; computers and telephones are *tools* that facilitate the telecommuting process. As we look beyond modems and multimedia, a broad range of human factors impact the success of telecommuting. Understanding these human factors and learning how to effectively manage the nontechnical aspects of telecommuting, while competently handling the technical realm, is essential to your success as a telecommuter.

I envisioned this book as a succinct, easy-to-use guide for current and aspiring telecommuters. As a seasoned telecommuter, I've seen firsthand the factors that make telecommuting prosper or fail. I've also witnessed the significant impact telecommuting can have on one's quality of life—both good and bad. But from all that I've seen and experienced, I have found that telecommuting can have a predominantly positive impact on your quality of life, your productivity, your peace of mind, and (if you're like the rest of us) your eternal

quest for the much-sought-after *balance* between work and the rest of your life.

All of the advantages, though, are contingent on your ability to telecommute *wisely*. In writing this book, my goal is to help you learn some of the secrets to effective telecommuting. It is my fervent hope that, in reading this book, you will discover ways to open doors to telecommuting success that enable you to prosper—both personally and professionally—by achieving whatever goals you have for your telecommuting venture. Until now, some of those goals were only dreams. With the right information, skills, and mindset, you can now transform those dreams into reality!

Debra A. Dinnocenzo  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA  
1999

# How to Use This Book

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*101 Tips for Telecommuters* is designed for current and prospective telecommuters or home-based workers who want to increase their level of skill and effectiveness. It provides information, suggestions, guidelines, insights and glimpses of reality from the “trenches of telecommuting” based on firsthand experience. With an emphasis on the relationships and interpersonal interactions critical to telecommuting success, this book offers readers a unique and practical view of the pros and cons, the good/bad/ugly, and the critical criteria for successfully and enjoyably working from home.

This book is focused primarily on the issues and needs of telecommuters—those who regularly work from home during some portion of their work week. However, many of the issues and challenges faced by telecommuters are strikingly similar to those of other home-based workers who may not refer to themselves as telecommuters. Therefore, others who work from home (e.g., consultants, salespeople, trainers, et al.) will find value for significant portions of their work-at-home needs and issues.

You can derive the greatest benefit from the book by selectively reading tips that align with your areas of greatest need, interest, frustration, or anxiety. While reading the book from cover to cover is an option, the book is designed so that tips can be read in any order. Refer to the next section, **Where to Begin**, for suggestions on the tips most appropriate for you as starting points.



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- Each tip includes an addendum referred to as the TIP<sup>2</sup> which suggests you should “Transfer It Promptly To Improve Performance.” Each TIP<sup>2</sup> offers action guidelines to help you apply the recommendations presented in the context of the tip.
- Reading the tips without taking the time to apply the TIP<sup>2</sup> to your work or your life will diminish the value of the tip and the

book. Reading the tip and taking the action in the TIP<sup>2</sup> section will get you the best result.

- Therefore, I suggest that you read a tip each week or every few days, providing ample time to apply what you've learned or take the action steps suggested. This is far more critical than the specific order in which the tips are read, so prioritize them according to your needs. In this way, the information and action steps are relevant to you and to your specific needs as a telecommuter. This is a sure-fire way to ensure you're getting a great return on your investment of the money to purchase this book and your time to read and apply it.

## Where to Begin

Relax! Unlike how so much of the rest of your life feels, it's okay **not** to digest this entire book **now** by reading it from cover to cover without a break. As a matter of fact, this is definitely not the way to derive the greatest benefit to you and your work (see the preceding section, **How to Use This Book**). To help you determine where it's best for you to begin, use the following guide. Prioritizing the tips and reading them according to your specific needs will provide more immediate and relevant results.

<b>Statement most appropriate for you:</b>	<b>Begin with these tips:</b>
I'm thinking about becoming a telecommuter.	1, 2, 12, 13, 26, 32, 33, 35, 36, 48, 68, 83, 85, 86, 88, 101
I want to telecommute and am ready to begin discussing this with my family and boss	1, 2, 3, 31, 35, 40, 48, 49, 61, 83, 85, 88, 101
I'm ready to start telecommuting, but need to plan/prepare my:	
• self	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 13, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 101
• office	1, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 86, 101
• work processes	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 24, 25, 27, 101

- family 1, 2, 13, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 40, 42, 44, 46, 47, 101
- work relationships 1, 2, 3, 48, 49, 50, 51, 53, 56, 57, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 67, 68, 101
- equipment/supplies 1, 8, 9, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 92, 93, 99, 101

I've started telecommuting and on some days I think I've made a big mistake!

- 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 11, 13, 19, 21, 24, 26, 29, 31, 32, 33, 40, 42, 48, 51, 56, 62, 66, 67, 84, 91, 94, 101

I've been telecommuting with some success, but I'm still encountering a few "bumps in the road" with regard to:

- family conflict/demands 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 39, 40, 42, 47
- mixed signals or unclear expectations from my boss 48, 49, 57, 58, 59, 61, 62, 63, 64
- uncooperative co-workers 48, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 62, 63, 64, 65, 67
- distance communication/meetings 48, 57, 58, 60, 62, 63, 64, 65
- priorities and productivity 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 29, 61, 75
- disorganization and distractions 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 33, 34, 61, 75
- loneliness 7, 23, 26, 30, 32, 48, 51, 54, 56, 57, 82
- overworking (again!) 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 15, 21, 23, 24, 26, 29, 30, 32, 47, 56, 66, 68, 75, 91, 100
- unreliability of others 31, 32, 42, 45, 47, 48, 50, 51, 60, 62, 68, 71, 72, 73, 74, 78, 81
- technology snafus and crashes 17, 83, 84, 86, 91, 97, 99

## 1

## Assess Yourself for Telecommuting Success

Telecommuting is not for everyone:

- You can get lonely and miss being with people every day.
- You may feel isolated and invisible.
- You might lose sight of goals and not feel motivated.
- You could detest some of the mundane aspects of working from home.
- You might experience more conflict with your family.

And it's not easy:

- You may find yourself working more hours than before you telecommuted.
- You could be frustrated by the hassles of technology when it fails.
- You can run into problems with co-workers who resent your telecommuting.
- You might experience breakdowns in communication with your boss or your team.
- You could find yourself spending more time than you imagined serving as your own maintenance person, computer technician, electrician, office designer, furniture mover, and filing clerk.

But the rewards are tremendous! As other telecommuters will tell you:

- “I’m so much more productive than when I commuted to the office everyday.”
- “Now I can actually concentrate and think clearly without all the distractions and interruptions I used to deal with in the corporate office.”
- “I love telecommuting . . . and my kids like having me closer to home. We see more of each other now, and that’s worth any trade-offs that come with telecommuting.”
- “It’s helped me increase my output, be more responsive to customers, have more time for exercise, and eliminate much of the stress I felt from my long commute everyday.”

You're certainly not alone if you find yourself wanting to telecommute or have already jumped on the telecommuting bandwagon. But before I learned how to telecommute successfully, I discovered that there are distinct skills, attitudes, and behaviors essential to that success. Many can be learned, developed, reinforced, and honed once you're aware of them and understand your own strengths and weaknesses with regard to the criteria for successful telecommuting.

Using this book as a guide will help you address many of the critical aspects of effective telecommuting. It's important, however, that you begin by identifying those areas that are of particular importance to you and your needs. By doing so, you'll gain greater insight to your own ability to succeed working from home and can focus your ongoing learning and development efforts to ensure your continued prosperity as a telecommuter.



Use the following “Telecommuter Self-assessment Checklist” to identify areas of concern and strength for you as a telecommuter. To enhance the usefulness of this process, also give the checklist to:

- Your boss
- A trusted co-worker who knows you well
- Your spouse or significant other
- A close friend

Ask for their perspective on any obstacles to your success and compare their responses. Use the insight gained from the checklist to guide your decisions about whether, when, and how to use telecommuting to your best advantage.

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## **Telecommuter Self-assessment Checklist**

Put a check mark next to all those that apply to you. If you are thinking about becoming a telecommuter, consider whether items you *do not* check will create a barrier to your success as a telecommuter or will require extra effort on your part to overcome a potential obstacle.



If you are already telecommuting, use this checklist to identify any areas of difficulty that are detracting from your productivity or satisfaction as a telecommuter.

### **Personal Traits/Preferences**

I believe I:

- enjoy working independently.
- like to think through and resolve problems myself.
- am a high initiative person.
- am not a procrastinator.
- can set and stick to a schedule.
- like to organize and plan.
- am a self-disciplined person.
- am able and willing to handle administrative tasks.
- can balance attention to major objectives and small details.
- do not need constant interaction with people.
- can work effectively with little or no feedback from others.
- enjoy being in my home.
- do not need frequent feedback or coaching.
- have the required level of verbal and written communication skills.
- can pace myself to avoid both overworking and wasting time.
- can resist a refrigerator that's only a few steps away.

### **Job Appropriateness**

My job:

- requires minimal face-to-face interaction.
- involves many responsibilities that can be met by phone, fax, or modem.
- allows for accountabilities to be quantified, measured, and monitored.

- affords me the freedom to manage my work as I see best.
- does not require frequent interaction with work associates.
- involves co-workers who are supportive and collaborative.

## **Home Office Space/Environment**

I have a space for my home office that:

- has an adequate amount of work space for my current needs.
- would provide opportunities for future expansion.
- has an adequate amount of storage space.
- has adequate lighting.
- has sufficient ventilation.
- has a safe number of electrical circuits.
- is quiet enough to allow me to concentrate.
- provides appropriate separation from home/family distractions.
- is a pleasant and comfortable space I'd enjoy working in.
- is a reasonable distance from needed business services.
- has no zoning or lease restrictions that preclude telecommuting.
- has adequate insurance coverage to protect business equipment.

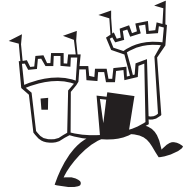
## **Family Support**

My family:

- is supportive of my desire to telecommute and will react positively.
- is willing to minimize distractions and interruptions.
- will not require care or involvement from me during work hours.
- can accept my need to focus on work during business hours.
- is stable and has no relationship conflicts that would be distracting.

# Working Well in Your Home Office

---



## 2

## Focus Your Life

Few things will undermine your telecommuting effectiveness as swiftly and significantly as a lack of focus. The myriad distractions that bombard a telecommuter (ringing phones, incoming faxes, buzzing doorbells, chatty friends, whining children, etc.) along with the ever-present demands of the moment (looming deadlines, crashing computers, demanding clients, frustrated co-workers, impatient bosses) contribute to our occasionally taking our “eye off the ball” with regard to our true focus.

A quick scan of the dictionary definition of *focus* produces words and phrases such as:

- ➔ *convergence*
- ➔ *adjustment*
- ➔ *positioning*
- ➔ *clear image*
- ➔ *central point*
- ➔ *sharpness*
- ➔ *concentrated*

*Focus* serves as:

- ◎ Your guiding light; the purpose underlying your actions.
- ◎ The vision to which you calibrate your achievements.
- ◎ The clear and unambiguous ultimate objectives or goals that justify your effort.

Achieving focus is at the core of success in nearly every enterprise. But a lack of it can be particularly detrimental to the telecommuter whose continued success is tied to achievement of results. While this is certainly true for focusing your job in general as well as the details of your daily work, it is also applicable to your overall life focus. The underlying reason for my foray into telecommuting is attributable to focus: the priorities in my life became clearer and my desire to telecommute evolved from those priorities. Once I embraced a vision of myself telecommuting, I moved toward opportunities and learnings that allowed my vision to transform—and I started telecommuting!

Somewhere there must be estimates of the huge amounts of money spent on goal setting, life planning, time management, and values-clarification systems and programs. Who wouldn't agree that having a life plan isn't a good idea? Who wouldn't agree that clarifying your values, establishing your life priorities, balancing your various life roles, etc. isn't essential to a well-lived life? But, how many of us actually do this type of life planning? And if we attempt it, do we have the discipline to follow through, refine, update, and implement our plan on an ongoing basis? Just how many (well-designed and well-intentioned) day planner/timer/runner systems have been abandoned and added to the accumulation of stuff we think there isn't enough time to do?!

Be careful not to let a time-consuming or misused planning system become a barrier to your life-planning efforts. So, abandon the system if necessary (or begin to use it properly), but don't abandon your focus! Without a clear definition of your life focus, your daily priorities and work goals soon become empty means to a dissatisfying end. Most important, like so much else in the life of a telecommuter, your commitment and discipline to use whatever process you choose is the real key to a focused life.



Schedule a life-focus planning session with and for yourself. Block off time on your calendar, and find an appropriate place where you can commit some undisturbed time to contemplate and create. In the spirit of simplicity, begin by defining the:

- 4** most important things in your life
- 3** most important values you hold
- 2** most important things you want to accomplish before leaving the planet
- 1** thing you want people to most remember about your life

Get more detailed if you want—write a life mission; identify your life roles and define the priorities in each role; write your eulogy; map out a 5-, 10-, and 20-year plan—but don't procrastinate on the major points until you have time for the detailed version. You'll soon figure

out that the “big picture” represents the most critical aspects of your life focus; the details will fall into place naturally.

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## 3

### Focus Your Work

Bringing focus to your work is critical to defining your job purpose and accountabilities. As a telecommuter, with a strong orientation to achievement of results, clarity regarding your job and your accountabilities is a fundamental communication tool between you and your manager.

If you work remotely, be certain you clearly define your:

- Mission
- Job purpose
- Key measures
- Rewards

Your *mission* should relate to the mission of your organization and should express objectives in areas such as market share, growth, levels of service to customers, positioning of your business relative to the industry, and the competition or perceptions of the marketplace or your customer base. Your *job purpose* states why your particular position exists and how it supports the mission. For example, the corporate annual report might provide a clear mission. But if you think your job purpose is to expand marketplace awareness and your boss thinks you were hired to increase sales, it would be useful to sort this out sooner rather than later.

Specific *key results and measures* are absolutely critical. You and your manager must have a crystal-clear agreement on how your effectiveness and success will be measured. Without such performance measures, especially when you telecommute, there's a risk that evaluations of your performance will be based on subjective criteria or— even worse—on what's seen by your manager versus what you

deliver in terms of results. Finally, *rewards* (merit increases, advancement benchmarks and timeframes, bonuses, other perks) should be clearly tied to performance measures. Otherwise, there's a huge risk of confusion, assumptions, second-guessing, disappointment, anger, resentment, and job dissatisfaction.

When you telecommute, it's essential that you take steps to clarify agreements between you and your manager to ensure that your job focus is clear. In my telecommuting work arrangements, I've consistently supplemented my telecommuting agreements with more specific job performance measures documented through the performance management process (Tip 61). However it is handled, *be sure* it's addressed. Take the initiative when necessary to discuss, clarify, and document the terms of your role and your relationship with whoever evaluates your performance and influences your future. Therefore, if your organization doesn't utilize a structured telecommuting agreement or performance management system, create one and negotiate the details with your boss.

Remember that ultimately *you* are responsible for managing your performance, your work, and your future (Tip 30) and for determining on a day-to-day basis how best to ensure that your goals are realized.



TIP<sup>2</sup>

Create a job plan that includes the following items:

- 1 Purpose statement for your position with a clear statement of the added value you bring to:
  - Your organization
  - Customers
  - Other stakeholders
- 2 Identify at least five key results you're expected to achieve, with specific measures by which your results are made visible.

Discuss/review this with your manager and document your agreements.

**TRANSFER IT PROMPTLY TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE**

## 4

## Focus Your Day

Regardless of the goal setting or time management system you use when telecommuting, you should begin each day knowing:

- What your *priorities* are (and why they're critical).
- What you need to *accomplish* (be certain you can quantify, measure, or otherwise clearly define this).
- What your *game plan* is for achieving the needed results (this includes both the “how” and “when” components of your daily action plan).
- What the *rewards* are for accomplishing your goals for the day (the immediate payoffs to you personally and professionally).

Your daily *priorities* are based on your job focus (Tip 3) and are the “call to action” for your day. For example, your priorities may relate to things like closing sales, completing articles, or designing strategic change plans. What you need to *accomplish* on a given day would be more specific and clearly measurable: complete a sales proposal, finish another phase of research, or complete the development of a change-management survey. While clarifying priorities and tasks to be accomplished are important to anyone who values productivity, telecommuters can be especially vulnerable to factors that diminish daily focus. Aside from distractions and demands of the day, you must maintain your focus without the benefit of co-workers, team members, or other more traditional workplace influences that may contribute positively to focus. For example, if a team is pulling together a major presentation or finalizing a project design, the energy and visible signs of progress that may exist in a team work area or a project “war room” won't exist in your home office. Since you'll need to maintain the same focus, however, you'll also need to be clear about what must be done when you leave your office at the end of the day (hopefully, at a civilized hour!).

Your *game plan* includes a list of “to do” items that support the accomplishments you're targeting for the day. These items could involve anything from phone calls with clients, conference calls with team members who are collaborating with you on a project, documents you need to write, feedback to be reviewed and discussed with



colleagues, meetings with your manager, etc. Your game plan would detail the importance of each task, when you need to complete it, and how. For example, a sales executive may note in her/his schedule for the day that one of the “must do” items in connection with a major proposal is the completion of the pricing plan, to be accomplished by calling the marketing manager for input on the discount schedule and reviewing the draft plan with the sales manager before 2:00 P.M. so it can be faxed to the client to meet the 4:00 P.M. deadline. Of course, the sales executive also would plan the reward for completing and faxing the proposal (and completing other work targeted for that day).

Rewards (Tip 29) can be anything that provide incentives and motivate you (take a snack break with the kids, head out to the gym, visit a favorite chat room on the Internet) and keeps you focused on the things that contribute to your success in your work and your effectiveness as a telecommuter. Specific daily goals and associated rewards were vital to my ability to complete this book. On a few days (or nights) when deadlines were approaching, my reward was fairly basic: complete the tips that had to be written for that day, *and then* I could leave the office and/or finally get some sleep!



Decide which daily planning process is best for you. If you're not sure, start, at a minimum, with a blank piece of paper (or a new document on your computer). Be sure to put in writing your prioritized “to do” items for your next work day. It's a simple step, but all the great journeys begin with one!

To get more specific, determine the:

- 4** top priorities in your current work.
- 3** specific accomplishments targeted for your next work day.
- 2** actions you must take to complete your accomplishments.
- 1** reward you'll attach to completion of targeted accomplishments.

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