



10 Tips for the Work-At-Home Freelance Lawyer

Written on January 19, 2010 by [Donna Seyle](#)

I always return from vacation unfocused, which is particularly difficult when you work at home as a sole practitioner. As I was bemoaning this fact to the author of the following post, she helped me gather up the otherwise diffuse pieces of my mind and set boundaries for my thoughts and actions to help me regain focus. Here are some simple but effective ways to manage your business when your brain wants to play.

Working at home as a freelance lawyer can feel like a blessing or it can feel like a curse. It depends partially on your attitude but also your preparedness level. I know many freelancers who spend a lot of time and effort planning their businesses, but when it comes time to planning the actual working-at-home part, they either get slightly flummoxed, or figure “what’s to plan? I’ve got my desk, my computer – I’ll just ... y’know, *work!*”

While I admire the confidence, I know they’re heading for trouble. The home office poses traps for the unwary! But the good news is that with a little bit of planning, some communication, and some foot-putting-down with family and friends, it’s *very* possible to have a thriving freelance legal business at home.

1. Make a Plan – Work the Plan

First and foremost, simply make a plan. Think about your work goals and spend a few moments of quality brainstorming time outlining exactly how you’re going to accomplish those goals. When we work from home offices, sometimes it’s easy to slip into a “well, it’s not like a *real* business.”

But it is, of course, and if you treat it as such, you’ll have better success meeting those goals. So create a simple business plan, including goals for six months out, a year out, five years, and ten years. It doesn’t have to be an overly complex document but if you have time and skills to do so, polish it up into a presentation-worthy piece. This helps communicate to yourself and others that you’re serious about your business and intent on its success.

2. Anticipate Problems with Home Office Interruptions

Even if you’re single with a roommate (or friends, or neighbors), and certainly when you’re married with kids, you can anticipate a certain number of interruptions. Plan now for how to deal with them and – even more importantly – minimize them.

Simply communicating your expectations and needs with your loved ones goes a long way towards alleviating the problem. Let the people in your life know that simply because you’re at home doesn’t mean you’re watching TV and available for their every whim or need. One good response: “I’ll be happy to help but it’ll have to wait until lunch or after work. I can see you at _____” — this communicates your willingness to help but also maintains proper boundaries and communicates that your business is your top priority. When you take it seriously, others are more likely to do so as well.

3. Make Special Plans for Children and Child Care

If children are mature enough to understand, make certain you give them acceptable times and time limits for interruptions — perhaps “once every hour, but only for five minutes” or “ten minutes at these specific times...” Don’t make these rules overly complex or numerous, and write them down on a large piece of paper or whiteboard posted outside your office area so they can be reminded.

If your children are too young to take care of themselves with an adult on the grounds (who’s working on other things, not actively watching them), then you really should invest in quality child care. Many at-home workers think that they can handle child care and running a business simultaneously, but the truth is almost none of us can. Whether it’s every day, or certain days; in-home care by an individual who comes to you or taking your children to a day care center; you need to make the choices that make sense for you and your family. Whatever you choose, don’t allow this to be a source of guilt. It’s an impossible task even for Superman – or SuperMom.

4. Mind Your Home Office Manners

Can you imagine calling your lawyer and hearing a baby wailing and dog barking in the background? Your lawyer sounding harried and distracted, and apologizing profusely for the chaos? Worse, your lawyer being *so* overwhelmed that she answers the phone with “Hello?!” instead of “This is Linda Lawyer, how may I help you?”

It can happen, and more easily than you might think. Our environment works a strange magic on us over time. At home, working in our pajamas or yoga pants and t-shirts, we fall into the trap of thinking we’re literally “at home.” And, let’s face it: almost none of us act the same way at home as we do at the office.

Decide on a professional way to answer the telephone, and do it consistently. (To avoid sounding stiff and stuffy to friends and family calling to chat, get a dedicated second line, or at a minimum ask about getting a second number with a distinctive ring to it. At least that way you’ll know when the call is more likely to be work-related.) Ensure that noisy pets and kids are kept as far away as possible from your work area. Put a professional-sounding outgoing message on your voice mail or machine, and return calls at a time when the house is more likely to be quiet.

Finally, don’t fall into the trap of thinking that just because you’re more relaxed, you can relax your professionalism. Mind your Ps and Qs, as they say, and continue to uphold office-worthy standards for communications.

5. Keep Your Home Office Organized and Comfortable

One of the neatest advantages to working at home is that you get to design your office your way. So take advantage of that freedom. Research and try out several kinds of office chairs; pick the one that “feels” best to you. Think carefully about your work flow, and put frequently accessed items within arm’s reach. Invest in sturdy stock folders, stackable inboxes, and an easy-to-read wall calendar that will help you keep track of your schedule at a glance.

Finally, make the place pretty. Use plants, artwork, and meaningful knick-knacks to stamp the space with your own style. And put a framed photo of your family or loved ones on your desk so that you can see it. This helps ground you, and remember why you’re doing what you’re doing.

6. Pay Attention to Your Home Office Ergonomics

Day after day of using incorrectly adjusted chairs, desks, and computers can result in repetitive stress injuries that can be painful at best – debilitating at worst. Use this [office ergonomics planner](#) from Ergotron to make your own adjustments.

7. Schedule Regular Breaks for Mental and Physical Health

There's a built-in break-prompt at many offices. It's called "your coworkers." When you have to interact with another individual, you may well segue into casual banter, discussing the last episode of *Fringe* or the big game. But when you're on your own, one of two things (usually both, at various times) can occur. Either you'll end up wasting time (see tip #8 below) or you'll forget to take breaks at all. Both are dangerous. And oddly, the same coping mechanism helps with both: schedule regular breaks throughout your day.

Set aside brief hourly breaks of a few minutes to get up, walk around, grab a glass of water or green tea or a healthy snack, maybe do some quick calisthenics. Also schedule slightly longer breaks for a mid-day meal and a brief bout of walking, yoga, or some other form of light exercise. These breaks will keep your brain sharp, your mind focused, and your body healthy.

8. Don't Let Distractions Steal the "Office" From Your Home Office

It's probably the number-one danger to home office productivity: the myriad distractions that are built in to our home environments. There are your favorite TV shows on DVR to catch up on, an internet to be browsed, any number of home chores that might seem suddenly much more appealing than working on that appellate brief that's due tomorrow.

There are lots of coping mechanisms to deal with this problem. Finding the methods that are most effective for you might take a little detective work.

- Look at your natural energy "budget" and schedule your day accordingly, to take advantage of built-in high energy periods.
- Take the TV out of the office area and put it in another room.
- Schedule time in your day to "reward" yourself with your favorite distraction. Simply extend your work day on either end to make up the difference.
- Disconnect the internet. A bold idea to be sure, but just disconnecting from your network can be enough to keep you on task.

9. Connect Regularly With Colleagues and Clients

Working at home can get quite lonely on occasion. Don't forget to reach out to others — friends, former coworkers, colleagues, other freelancers, clients — on a regular basis. A standing date for lunch can go a long way to alleviating the tedium of so much solitude. Also, consider signing up for a mailing list such as [ABA's Solosez](#) for other solo lawyers.

10. Take Time for Professional Development

Running a business, marketing a business, doing the work ... wearing so many hats can leave a freelancer with precious little time for professional development. But it's crucial to keep those legal skills sharp. Shop around for good CLEs in your field of practice, and choose carefully. Pick seminars that will help sharpen and develop your skills, not merely serve to meet mandatory reporting requirements. Also, take time weekly to read up on the latest developments that impact your delivery of services to your clients, by visiting blogs, using Google news alerts, and reading books and journals.

Conclusion: Working From Home Can Mean Freelance Freedom

There's no question that working from home can be spotty with dangers to your finances, your productivity, and your health, but with a little foresight and planning, any freelance lawyer can overcome the traps for the unwary.

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