# Five Tips for Working Virtually

By, Erick Ruiz, Ph.D.

Working virtually is not as simple as changing the location of work. Working virtually requires discipline, careful planning, and consideration of how we use technology to communicate with others. Successful virtual work groups establish shared norms, an online culture, and use their instant messaging tools effectively. Unsuccessful work groups mistake virtual work as a geographic challenge that is simply resolved through technology. Virtual work changes the way workgroups communicate and impacts virtual worker's perceptions and trust with each other. The good news is that the tools to be successful are available--we just need to use them.

Here are five tips for working virtually, which is based on the results of research conducted with virtual workers around the country (Ruiz, 2017). These tips are based on a simple idea that virtual work challenges arise when virtual workers forget that they are communicating through technology with another person.

1. **People first!** Reinforce social presence by starting conversations or communication exchanges with non-work related discussion. For example, ask how the other person's day is going or follow up on a previous conversation about non-work related activities they may have mentioned. Initiate an instant message conversation every morning, even if it's just to say hello or good morning. Unless the person you are communicating with prefers to get right to business, reinforcing your social presence emphasizes the human element.

2. **Relationships matter!** Maximize your face-to-face (video) or voice time to establish relationships. Turn on your camera during meetings, even if you are only on camera for a few minutes. Ask the other person to share what they did over the weekend. When you communicate with someone through instant messaging or email, your voice and your face will come to the other person's mind and help to reinforce that the relationship is with a person and not the computer.

3. **The status message field is your virtual seat.** When we are physically at work our co-workers know because they see us sitting in our seat. When we work virtually, our availability icon or status message serves the same purpose. Update your status message daily (e.g., 3/1, 7 to 4pm EST, cell number), and check your status icon settings. There's nothing more frustrating than seeing someone's status icon showing available when really they're not, and not everyone uses the same settings to automatically change their status message either!

4. **Create shared expectations.**  There are different expectations when it comes to instant messaging or email.  Some workers believe that instant messaging means synchronous communication, while others may see instant messaging as asynchronous.  The only way to figure out if someone expects an instant response to an instant message or email is to ask.   Email communication also present similar challenges.  Some workers believe that all emails must be acknowledged or requires an immediate response.  Others see acknowledgements as cumbersome or adding to the number of emails they already need to read.  The only way to ensure that someone is meeting your expectations for a response or action is to state it in the message.

5. **Pick up the phone!**  When instant messaging or email threads start to get long or when there's question about intent, pick up the phone and reconnect as people.  How often have you reacted to an email to later discover that you misread the message after hearing the other person's explanation?  Misreading emails may be a sign that we are reacting to what we see on the computer and not what we heard directly from the other person.

Virtual work can be rewarding, and virtual workers are able to establish trust and collaborative relationships with other virtual workers.  It is not necessary to sit next to someone physically to establish a collaborative work relationship.  Following a few simple rules and establishing a daily routine when arriving at your virtual desk can help you succeed with your virtual co-workers and with clients you serve.

**References**

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