Environmental Guide to Working From Home

By Dial A Geek

The remote working trend has been hailed as a surely guaranteed win for the environment.

After all, it means much less commuting and less energy being used by thousands of offices. So, what's the problem?

Unfortunately, if you want Working from Home (WFH) to create a happy team and a happy Earth too, your remote working setup needs some careful consideration.

THE EXCITING ENVIRONMENTAL POTENTIAL OF WFH:

- Cut the commute. Reduced greenhouse gas emissions are what we're after. Personal travel changes during COVID-19 restrictions reduced household emissions by 24%.

- Ditch the disposables. Working from Home means far fewer single-use coffee cups and food containers are bought and thrown away by office workers.

- Eliminate energy usage. In theory, offices being open in a more limited fashion means less energy is needed for heating, cooling, lighting, and equipment use.

Environment questions that remote working raises.

Are fewer commutes better?

Perhaps you and other team members actually walked or cycled or even drove only a short distance to work?

Remote workers relocating to the countryside sometimes offset the green gains they've made by driving more, commuting more rarely but for longer distances, and having larger homes that require more energy to heat.

Could you be creating the worst of all worlds?

Picture a business that has some remote workers and some people in the office. Now both the office and multiple homes are occupied, resulting in more emissions.

Worse, some offices remain open, heated or cooled, and brightly lit whether people are in them or not.

How much energy does a home use?

A modern home with good insulation requires less energy to keep at a comfortable temperature. An older house requires more energy, leading to a larger carbon footprint.

During COVID-19 lockdowns, home weekday electricity consumption rose by 20% or more in some parts of the UK. Is that a net plus for total emissions, or a negative?

7 WAYS TO MAKE WORKING FROM HOME ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY
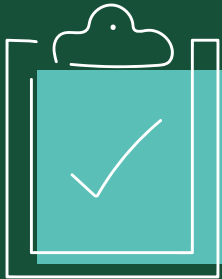
CREATE AN OFFICE FURNITURE AND E-WASTE STRATEGY

Many companies that adopt a remote or hybrid working model find they can downsize their office premises. That's great news for their energy consumption and paper and food wastage.

Unfortunately though, downsizing can create huge quantities of furniture and equipment waste. E-waste can include computers, air-conditioners, batteries, and almost anything with a plug or cord.

Make sure your remote workers know you have processes in place for recycling or reusing office equipment so it doesn't end up in a landfill somewhere.

SWITCH IT OFF

Not only does lighting and equipment that's on when not needed waste energy, it also adds significantly to business and personal energy bills.

- **Switch your devices off** when not in use. Don't leave them on standby.

- **Switch chargers off** at plugs so they don't waste energy.

- **Switch lights off** when you're in a different room or out of the office.

For office managers in charge of workplaces that are now partially occupied, this means lighting or heating only necessary parts so as not to waste energy. It's also worth noting there's no evidence leaving office lights on overnight reduces crime.

USE NATURAL LIGHT AND HEAT

Focus on using natural sources of light and heat whenever possible. There's a reason why "passive" heating is a key part of top building energy efficiency standards like Passivhaus.

At home, try to use daylight rather than artificial lighting as much as possible. Why use a ring light if you can just sit in front of the window? If you're cold, consider a thicker jumper even if you're on a call. If you're too hot, dress appropriately.

It doesn't sound like much, but it does all add up.

BUY LOCAL

One advantage of Working from Home is that your commuting time is suddenly zero. What will you do with those extra hours?

If you want to be more environmentally conscious, you could prepare your own lunch with ingredients bought locally. This has the added advantage of avoiding takeaways.

Food that's travelled halfway around the world obviously has a much higher carbon cost (the accepted measure for this is CO2e, the equivalent in CO2 of all the combined greenhouse gas emissions generated by its production) than food sourced locally.

CUT DOWN EMAIL WASTE

Sending an email costs about 20 times less CO2e than posting a paper letter. Yet it does still have a small carbon footprint attached - and that footprint adds up fast.

The device you're using needs power, of course. But each email also needs space in each data centre it passes through on its way to its destination. Creating that space means emissions.

- Don't email unnecessarily or send short messages like "OK" or "thank you".

- Write as concisely as possible (longer emails require more energy to be read and more space in data centres).

- Fight spam by unsubscribing from old mailing lists, updating your own mailing lists, and avoiding sharing your email address where it can be found by spammers.

ONLY PRINT IF YOU REALLY NEED TO

Excessive email use might be wasteful, but it's nothing compared to the costs of frivolous printing at home or in the office.

Always, always ask yourself if something really needs to be printed. In our experience, most of the time the answer is 'no'.

SWITCH TO RENEWABLE ENERGY SOURCES

Do you know how much of the energy you use in your home comes from renewable energy sources? If you care about the environment, it's worth finding out.

Many energy providers these days will want to boast about their green credentials, so those that don't are pretty suspect. Several smaller UK providers are wholly or predominantly green energy.

Make remote working live up to its potential

Working from Home has huge potential to provide businesses with more productive employees, people with a healthier work-life balance, and save the world while we're at it.

Yet remote working is not an automatic climate victory. Only by knowing the actual situation is more complex than we wish it was can we redefine our working models and be good climate stewards at the same time.