

Work fast.
Work smart.
Step up to the tool the pros use.



Reduce your total cost of ownership with Adobe FrameMaker 10

Take advantage of the enhanced XML/DITA/S1000D content authoring, reviewing, managing, and publishing capabilities of Adobe FrameMaker 10 software to make your structured migration a streamlined, timesaving, and cost-effective move.

Choose your preferred mode of authoring—Take advantage of the enhanced XML/DITA/S1000D authoring capabilities that make FrameMaker as good at structured authoring as it is at unstructured authoring.

Manage content more effectively—Enjoy out-of-the-box connectivity with Microsoft SharePoint and EMC Documentum, and integration with other leading content management systems via WebDAV enhancements.

Speed up time to market and reduce localization costs—Efficiently repurpose content into the languages and formats customers demand.

Work more efficiently—with an intuitive interface, predefined templates, customizable workspaces, and a host of usability enhancements. Collaborate faster with PDF-based roundtrip peer reviews.

To learn more about and Adobe FrameMaker 10, please visit:
<http://www.adobe.com/products/frameaker.html>

To test-drive Adobe FrameMaker 10 as a part of Adobe Technical Communication Suite 3.5, please visit:
<http://www.runaware.com/clients/adobe/techsuite/>

Now, get more bang for your buck! Introducing Adobe FrameMaker Improved Upgrade Plan.

Complimentary Bronze support. Exclusive utilities and plug-ins. Training and consulting enablement. Special rights to buy Adobe development support.

To find out more about Frame Maker Improved Upgrade Plan, visit <http://www.adobe.com/products/frameaker/improved-upgrade.html>

This issue of Intercom is sponsored by Adobe Systems Incorporated.

Adobe, the Adobe logo, and FrameMaker are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Adobe Systems Incorporated in the United States and/or other countries. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.



A VIRTUAL SUCCESS:

Best Practices for Working Remotely

By BARRIE BYRON | *Associate Fellow*, and ANN GROVE | *Senior Member*

Introduction

Many of us work from home, at least part of the time. According to Thomas L. Friedman's book, *The World is Flat*, today 23.5 million—16 percent of the American labor force—works from home at least part of the time. However, as remote workers, we face unfamiliar challenges for which we are not prepared.

We have learned through research and experience that best practices for virtual work must include earning trust, maintaining high visibility, and practicing healthy work habits. With home offices in two states and virtual work experience in both contractor and employee roles, Barrie recently concluded a 42-month term on a global team at IBM, which provides extensive resources for virtual workers based on its own research. Ann has been working remotely as a technical communicator since the late 1990s, often for clients who do not typically extend that privilege.

Defining virtual work

Work is something that you do, not a place where you go. Virtual work is work that is performed at a location other than the traditional onsite company office. While virtual workers are often based at a home office, the virtual worker can work from any location that has a few modest essentials.

Virtual work goes by many names, including distance work, e-work, mobile or remote work, OTTO (other than traditional office) work, telework, telecommuting, and WFH (work from home).

Benefits of virtual work

Many of us who work virtually feel empowered by the increased flexibility and control over our environment and schedule. Information is widely available about these benefits, such as:

- ▶ Increased productivity: Fewer distractions; work at your own pace.
- ▶ Less stress: Avoid rush hour, office politics, harsh lighting, and cubicles.
- ▶ Greater work/life balance: Stay closer to the people you love.
- ▶ Reduced commuting costs: Save time and money.

Challenges of virtual work

Drawbacks of working virtually, which are often not openly discussed, can be significant and include:

- ▶ Social isolation: No “water cooler” chats, reduced informal and face-to-face communication, fewer opportunities to build camaraderie.
- ▶ Home distractions: Chores, home services, family interruptions replace office disruptions.
- ▶ Lack of work boundaries: Inability to disengage from work; tendency to work longer hours.
- ▶ Reduced visibility to management.

Assess your compatibility with a virtual lifestyle

If you answer yes to 8 out of these 10 questions, you might make a good virtual worker. If you already work virtually, your answers will inform you of some areas where you might need development.

1. Are you an independent, self-starting, self-confident, and outstanding communicator?
2. Can you create and meet personal productivity goals without much external accountability?
3. When you feel unmotivated, can you muscle your way through it? (Can you resist temptations such as FaceBook?)
4. Can you commit to core work hours, regardless of unrelated opportunities and interruptions?
5. Are you comfortable working through your own technical issues?
6. Do you find it easy to build meaningful relationships with others through email, online chats, and phone calls?
7. Do you have an area of your house, preferably with a door, that you can dedicate to your work?
8. Are you willing to invest a few of your own dollars to create a comfortable and appropriate home work environment?
9. Do you have a healthy respect for company rules regarding security, regardless of whether you think that you will get caught?
10. Can you fulfill your interpersonal communication needs outside of your job?

If you answered “no” to any of the above questions, the rest of this article may help you address a weakness.

Earning and maintaining trust

Earning and maintaining trusting relationships in the virtual context requires a very deliberate effort to both start and maintain the flow of communication. In fact, studies show that twice as much time and effort is required to create and maintain virtual relationships.

Do what you say you will

To be seen as trustworthy, you must consistently meet your goals, commitments, and deadlines. The saying “under-commit and overdeliver” applies well here. If you have conflicting priorities or find yourself short on time to meet your deadlines, ask your manager for feedback on how to prioritize your tasks, so that you add value where it is needed.

Protect your company's assets

As a trusted virtual worker, you are responsible for your workspace security, whether or not your company notifies you of a specific virtual work policy. You should follow the same protocols you would follow in the office, including such things as following computer use guidelines, locking your computer to something immobile, and putting your

An employer's perspective

Often, technical communicators will say, "I don't know why my company is so reluctant to allow telecommuting. It's ridiculous."

Consider, though, the challenges a business faces in allowing virtual work.

Ethics: As virtual workers, we have an increased opportunity to break important ethical guidelines. For instance, we can use paid company time to work for another client or perform unrelated volunteer work.

Security: Many security breaches originate with a laptop, whether the laptop is lost, stolen, or violated by hackers. You will quickly understand the risks if you perform a quick Web search of "laptop security breach."

Management: Not only do workers have to adapt to virtual work, but so do managers. "You have to get used to managing by results instead of managing by presence," says David C. Baker's undated article published this summer titled *Integrating Remote Employees Well* (www.commart.com/Columns.aspx?pub=5550&pageid=1578).

Convincing your manager that you should work virtually

Perhaps you aren't yet telecommuting but are interested in pursuing it.

If so, you must consider this question: Why is telecommuting in the best interest of your manager and your employer or client? You must form a business case.

For instance, you can present supporting research. Your manager might be swayed to consider virtual work due to compelling corporate benefits, such as:

- ▶ Increased productivity of 10 to 35%, according to various studies
- ▶ Less sick time
- ▶ Reduced turnover

In addition, you should define the benefits for your specific role. For instance, perhaps it would give you better flexibility to take international calls outside of your core work hours.

Finally, you can propose a trial period to help your manager become more comfortable with the arrangement. In your proposal, identify specific milestones and create a communications plan to proactively communicate your progress.

Clear, written expectations can help you not only avoid disputes about your performance as a virtual worker but resolve any issues that arise by providing a point of reference.

electronic media or printed materials in a locked drawer at the end of your workday.

Why? Because your company's confidential information—and particularly its network—is only as secure as the weakest link. Your goal is to avoid being the weakest link. Can you imagine if your sloppy security practices resulted in a multi-million dollar investigation, publicized in the news, requiring notification to your employer's customers and clients? It happens. For instance, about a quarter of significant healthcare security breaches involve laptops—lost, stolen, and hacked. Some other high-profile breaches have occurred when employees lost confidential printed materials, for instance on a train, or otherwise failed to control or destroy paper documents.

Maintaining high visibility

Besides meeting your commitments, the other main key to building trusting relationships is maintaining high visibility in your organization. To stay visible, you should proactively report your status, publicize your achievements, participate in cross-functional teams, manage your schedule with trust in mind, and stay connected.

Proactively report your status

Ann has a saying: Your manager should never have to ask you for your status. You should voluntarily provide a status before your manager ever comes to you looking for a progress report.

Barrie developed a personal dashboard database on a Documentum eRoom for her current contract. The dashboard provides at-a-glance status for projects and documentation review cycles.

Even when no weekly status report is required, we send periodic updates to our managers or coworkers. In addition, we schedule periodic one-on-one meetings with our managers and clients, as well as other team members, to ensure transparency and proper coordination with those whom our work impacts.

It's also important to actively participate in team conference calls and meetings to strengthen your reputation and credibility. Be on time and be an active participant.

In all of your communication, you should emphasize your interest in maintaining open communication, so that people begin reaching out to you. By maintaining a fairly constant flow of communication and by employing consistent communication practices, you create the social glue that keeps people connected in a virtual context.

Self-promote through progress reports on personal and team projects

Your achievements as a virtual worker may be less visible in your organization, so it is your responsibility to be deliberate in self-promoting, communicating, networking, and developing relationships. You must be reflexive and self-manage your career, communication, and performance.

Participate in cross-functional teams

IBM studies show that you will build trust and visibility by participating in teams and projects that involve multiple departments. In addition, filling a role that requires both functional and technical skills also increases your visibility.

As your roots grow with wider contact throughout your organization, you are also combating social isolation, and increasing your value and political strength.

Manage your schedule with trust in mind

Part of staying visible involves letting your coworkers know when you will be working. Further, you will be more productive if your family and friends also understand your work schedule.

Perhaps you are like Ann who, when left to her own devices, prefers the flexibility to start her workday anywhere between 6 AM and 11 AM. That approach worked well for most clients when she was single; she just scheduled most client meetings for the afternoon. However, eight years ago, she moved to a rural area where virtual work is still not common. Ann's flexible schedule caused great confusion, and consequently the people in her life did not respect her work time. Therefore, she established and defends consistent core work hours with a set start and end time, and declines nearly all daytime meetings that are not work-related.

Barrie also adheres to core work hours, but she sometimes uses her lunch hour to meet with friends. In the summer, she even hosts Friday luncheons at her New Jersey home to celebrate the abundance of fresh produce. She clearly states on invitations that the event is from noon to 1 PM. At 1 PM, Barrie goes back to work.

Build relationships

To further enhance your visibility, you need to build friendships with your coworkers and colleagues outside of your employer, meeting face-to-face when possible. Investments in personal relationships pay huge dividends.

Get to know your team and your manager

You will find times throughout the day when you have an opportunity to ask about your colleague's personal interests or family. For instance, you can use the time before your planned meeting begins to exchange personal greetings and encourage informal conversation. If you and a coworker learn that you both have a love of travel or books or a passion for animals, you become more three-dimensional to each other and real bonds begin to form.

Stay active professionally

Besides nurturing friendships at work, both of us make an effort to engage in professional activity outside of work, often at our own expense, to ensure our knowledge is up to date. In fact, we met through STC, and through occasional contact across years, gradually built the friendship we have today.

Both of us grow and maintain our personal networks through professional meetings, email, and social networks including LinkedIn.

Meet face-to-face when possible

The most effective work relationships occur when you meet with your manager and colleagues face-to-face, at least once.

If you are traveling in a city where your coworkers live, consider asking them to meet in person in a business-appropriate setting. If your employer is not willing or is not able to pay for travel, then consider funding it yourself. Barrie, an avid traveler, has had social outings with colleagues in Massachusetts, in Seattle, and even in the San Francisco airport.

Six habits for virtual success

To maximize your productivity and maintain harmony with those in your life, you should formalize a set of best practices. Feel free to adapt our six habits for virtual success for your own use:

1. Meet your deadlines.
2. Maintain high visibility in your organization through regular contact with your team.
3. Maintain self-discipline for consistent start and end work times, and communicate your schedule at work and at home.
4. Focus only on work during work hours.
5. Get up, get dressed, and go to work.
6. Take breaks. Leave the house at lunch or after work.

Conclusion

While virtual work offers many benefits, it also requires proactive measures such as more frequent and different types of communication, more self-promotion, more self-management of time, and constant vigilance to maintain home-work balance.

In time, your efforts to build trust and maintain visibility will become second nature and you will be known far and wide as a virtual success. ■

BARRIE BYRON is an award-winning information developer for software products with more than 20 years of professional experience. Barrie currently works virtually as a contractor on a U.S.-based team with members in three time zones. An STC advocate, she is currently an STC Associate Fellow, serves as the competitions manager for STC's Philadelphia Metro Chapter, and a senior STC member. An active Toastmaster, she has earned the Toastmasters Advanced Communicator Gold and Advanced Leader credentials.

ANN GROVE is president of and lead consultant for Logical Writing Solutions, Inc., a company she founded 11 years ago. She runs her successful technical communication business from her picturesque 6.5-acre farmette in Central Pennsylvania. A prolific writer, she often serves as the company's lead writer, and also manages the company's consultants. She is a senior member of STC.