



Remote Work Guide | 10 Minute Read

How to Survive and Thrive While Working Remotely: Lessons From a Distributed Global Marketing Agency



Table of Contents

Introduction: Working Remotely in COVID-19 Times	2
Who Is This Post For?	3
How To Survive and Thrive While Working Remotely	3
1. Staying Productive	4
Pro Tip #1: Mimic Your Office Schedule	4
Pro Tip #2: Allow for Flexibility In Your Schedule	5
Pro Tip #3: Assign Deadlines (Mini-Sprints) to Daily Tasks	6
Pro Tip #4: Do Your Heavy Work In Your Most Productive Hours	7
Pro-Tip #5: Shut Off and Tune Out Distractions	8
2. Staying Connected	9
Pro Tip #6: Over-Communicate (and Then Communicate Some More)	10
Pro Tip #7: Make Time for Face Time	11
Pro Tip #8: Use Audio File Instruction	12
3. Staying Healthy	13
Pro Tip# 9: Create Work and Living Boundaries	14
Pro Tip #10: Give Yourself Breaks Throughout the Day	15
Pro Tip #11: For The Parents	18

Introduction: Working Remotely in COVID-19 Times

2020 certainly is a year for the books.

COVID-19 has dramatically shifted daily life for nearly every one of us. From enormous economic shifts to changes in how we're able to interact with one another, the pandemic has required many adjustments to the way we do business, communicate with colleagues and loved ones, and balance our family and professional lives.

The workplace has been especially impacted by the pandemic. When strict social distancing and isolation restrictions were implemented around the world, businesses were quickly required to adapt. And for many, adapting meant a massive physical shift of the workforce away from the central office and into various home office scenarios.

For businesses and employees accustomed to the normalities of office life, this shift has introduced unprecedented changes (and challenges) to the workday. No longer able to meet and talk in person, teams have had to rapidly find new ways to communicate, collaborate, and execute across distributed spaces. Further, individuals have been challenged to find solutions to carry out their work responsibilities while suddenly working from home, where family responsibilities (such as homeschooling) compete for the employee's attention.

Yes, these are crazy and extraordinary times. To cope, teams and individuals will need to acquire new practices (both professional and personal) to ensure they remain successful and sane. Because let's face it, working from home just isn't for everyone.

Which is exactly why we decided to pen this guide.

As a largely distributed team, the crew here at [Total Product Marketing](#) has learned firsthand how to stay productive and happy when working remotely. There's no better time than now to share how we navigate the challenges of remote work and keep our productivity soaring.

In this post, we share practical tips for working remotely that outline how we:

- Stay focused (in less than ideal environments)
- Keep communication flowing (when distributed locally and across long distances)
- Balance parenting and working from home
- Maintain our wellness (and sanity)
- Continue to deliver the high-quality results that [our clients](#) have to come to expect

Let's dive in.

Who Is This Post For?

- Managers looking for ways to keep their team focused, productive, and healthy while working remotely
- Teams that are suddenly working from home and struggling to focus
- Teams looking for tools to help them work and communicate remotely
- Employees in need of wellness ideas to keep them balanced and healthy while working from home
- Employees trying to juggle work from home duties with parenting and homeschooling



How to Survive and Thrive While Working Remotely

Remote work and working from home have grown in popularity over the past decade. This is particularly true in early adoption industries like tech, where many companies operate somewhere along the spectrum of partial to fully remote.

For employees who favour working remotely, the benefits include greater [flexibility](#), time with family, reduced commuting time, and so on.

But working remotely is not for everyone, and it's certainly not without its challenges — with *productivity*, *connectedness*, and *wellness* often taking the biggest hits. We address these major challenges

below and offer firsthand solutions from our team to help you better cope while working from home during these crazy times.

1. STAYING PRODUCTIVE

Many of us on the team have been hearing personal anecdotes from our friends and families that one of the biggest challenges they're facing right now is finding focus while working from home.

This comes as little surprise.

For anyone used to the structure of office life, the relative looseness of the home office can certainly put a dent in the ability to focus. At home, distractions beckon our attention at every turn. From chores and entertainment to family members running amok, home is inherently not a breeding ground for focus.

Here's what we suggest to get that focus back on track:

Pro Tip #1: Mimic Your Office Schedule

If you work from 8 am to 5 pm in the office, do your best to replicate that schedule at home. Your brain and body are already trained to work these hours. By maintaining a similar schedule, you'll increase your ability to focus on your work tasks. Additionally, maintaining a regular schedule will ensure you more easily balance your work and personal life.



"Getting into a routine helps. I set small goals (finish this assignment, rewrite this paragraph, etc.) after which I'm allowed to take a break. If I'm struggling to concentrate, I will take a 15-minute yoga break."

— Irene, Content Strategist, Toronto, Canada

"Keep your work during your work hours and schedule other tasks outside of that time. Don't get in the mindset that you'll do chores during the day and catch up on work later."



— Pam, Public Relations Manager, Portland, Oregon



“I try to keep my schedule in line with regular office hours so that I know within this window is dedicated to work only. I do give myself some short breaks in between, but definitely no TV, no vacuuming, or doing online shopping until I finish the tasks for the day.”

— Suki, Marketing Automation Specialist, Vancouver, Canada



Pro Tip #2: Allow for Flexibility In Your Schedule

Keep in mind that some adjustments to your typical work schedule may be needed — especially for those who are suddenly juggling homeschooling and parenting duties with working. Work with your team to cover your gaps and clearly communicate when schedule adjustments are needed.

“If you can’t keep your normal schedule, then early on work out a way to achieve the same level of productivity. Whether that’s working 4 hours early in the morning, then 3 hours in the evening perhaps after the kids are asleep. Set daily goals.”



— Lisa, Director, Design & Development, London & Vancouver, Canada

Also, be mindful that you may actually be more productive than you think while working remotely. With the distractions of colleagues and office socializing removed, it's likely that you can get more done within a shorter time at home than you do in the office. Don't believe us? Grab your phone or a timing app and try timing how long it takes to finish your various tasks throughout the day. You may just surprise yourself!



“When you work an 8 to 5 in an office, you may spend 6 of those hours in meetings (at least!), 30 minutes having coffee breaks, and the rest of the time socializing. The important thing to remember is that 5 to 6 productive hours at home could be the equivalent or greater than 9 unproductive hours at the office.”

– Catherine, Director, Content Marketing, Vancouver, Canada

Pro Tip #3: Assign Deadlines (Mini-Sprints) to Daily Tasks

If you're prone to procrastination, or finding that you're more prone now while working from home, we recommend assigning deadlines with hard completion times to your daily tasks (even those without hard deadlines from your work). We like to call them “mini-sprints”.

Here's an example:

Task	Mini-Sprint Deadline
Reply to morning emails	9:30 am
Draft report outline	11:45 am
Review video script	2:00 pm

These mini-sprints will give you a specific task to zero in on and will help ensure you get it done.

“I make a conscious effort to break up the day by allotting finite time to individual tasks.”

– Makiko, Managing Director, Vancouver, Canada





“Deadlines are my drivers. I focus my priorities and plan my day/week based on the deadlines I have to meet. I am motivated to achieve my deadlines so this is the main way I stay focused on what I need to accomplish.”

– Lakhvir, Strategist, Vancouver, Canada

Pro Tip #4: Do Your Heavy Work In Your Most Productive Hours

We all have optimum times throughout the day when we are the most productive. For some this is the morning, for others it’s the afternoon and beyond. Recognize what time period is your most productive and load that duration with your focus-intensive tasks (like writing, designing, planning, etc.). Use your less productive time to tackle the more admin-heavy items (like responding to emails, submitting expenses, etc.).

More specifically, follow these steps to ensure you’re reaching your most productive output:

- Identify your most productive time periods (morning, after lunch, early evening etc.).
- Break your to-do list into task heavy and task light items.
- Notify your team when you are working on your “task heavy” items so they know you won’t be answering emails and messages during that period.
- Turn off all distractions (email, phone, etc.) during your “task heavy” work hours.

“Staying focused can be a matter of understanding yourself, and what works for you. Sometimes a deadline is enough to keep you on track. Other days it’s about setting yourself a task list, finding some good music, and making sure you have enough tea bags to last the day.”



– Lisa, Director, Design & Development, London & Vancouver, Canada



“Afternoons are when I’m most able to slip into the ‘writing zone’. As such, I generally pack all my non-writing duties, such as emails, into the morning and reserve the afternoons for my heavier writing tasks.”

– Jyl, Content Strategist, Vancouver, Canada

Pro Tip #5: Shut Off and Tune Out Distractions

If there is one thing in abundance in the home office, it’s distractions.

From cell phones and unwatched Netflix episodes to hyper children, barking dogs, and chores, working from home is ripe with focus-busting diversions. Together, these distractions can have a huge impact on our ability to focus on our work. While most of us wish our minds could seamlessly juggle a million things at once, the fact is our attention is a very [finite resource](#). Meaning we only have so much attention to spend before our minds simply run out of the ability to focus.

As such, we need to protect our attention span like a precious commodity. To do so while working from home, we suggest that you:

- Turn off all notifications on your cell phone during the workday and keep your phone out of arm’s reach to prevent yourself from checking it incessantly.
- Set defined periods for checking your inbox. Switching away from your task at hand to email many times throughout the day makes it more challenging to resume focus.
- Do not engage with your chores until the workday is done. Just as they did when you worked from the office, your chores can wait.

“Shut off distractions, don’t have your phone in arm’s reach at all. Always plan your work and work your plan. Turn off the TV when you are in a work burst. Don’t check emails every two seconds, plan to check every hour on the hour.”



– Tyler, Director, Paid Media, Vancouver, Canada



“Throw on a pair of headphones with a rotating mix of music genres. For anyone new to working from home, I would stick to music with no vocals as that can be distracting to the uninitiated.”

– Mike, SEO Specialist, Toronto, Canada

“If I’m working somewhere with a lot of distractions I like to turn to white noise apps to help cut out the background. [Noisli](#) is one of my go-to white noise apps and is packed with tons of background eliminating sounds, like rain, wind, thunder, and more.”



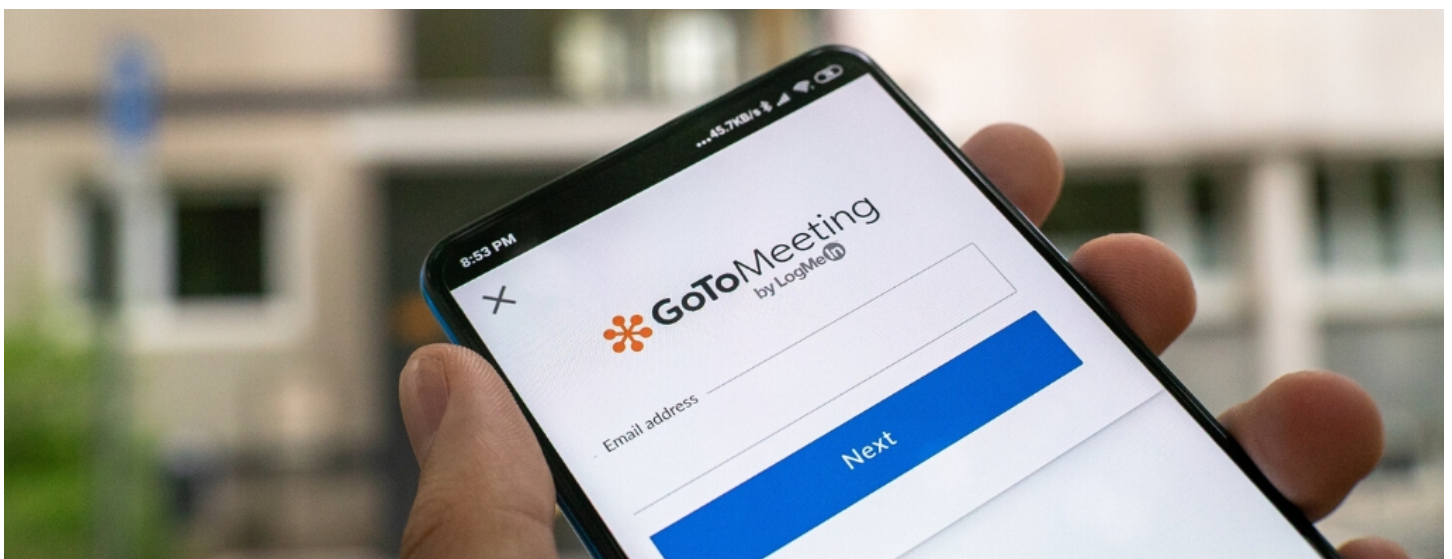
– Jyl, Content Strategist, Vancouver, Canada

2. STAYING CONNECTED

Communication lies at the core of any business. It’s how we relay information between teammates, vendors, customers, and more. Without communication, businesses (like humans) would struggle to find meaningful connections with the world around them.

The advent of COVID-19 has challenged teams like never before, to get creative in how they stay connected to one another and the outside world when working in isolation. The pandemic has also placed new pressures on individuals to stay connected with their peers in the absence of office interactions.

Here are a few of our tips for keeping the communication flowing while working remotely.







Pro Tip #6: Over-Communicate (And Then Communicate Some More)

If there is one thing that's especially vital while working remotely, it's over-communication. Unlike the office setting, where employees can easily hash out project and task details in person, remote work requires extra effort to make sure everyone has a clear understanding of what's happening. Even if it feels unnatural (and it probably will), share status updates with your team multiple times throughout the day – via emails, messages, or your team's communication mode of choice.

Remember, while working remotely, your team can't physically pop by to see you (and you them). As such, you'll have to take extra steps to keep transparency and communication alive and well in your team.

Here at TPM, we use a mix of tech platforms to keep our communication and productivity flowing (see table). We basically live on these tools each and every day and rely on them to stay connected and ensure our projects are executed on time.

For those of you just getting familiar with the new fleet of communication tools available, here are our favourite tools and how we use them:

Tool	Purpose	What We Use it For
 slack	Team communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• General internal communication (has replaced all internal emails)• General client updates• Knowledge sharing and education
 Trello	Project management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Managing all stages of our client projects (strategy through design)• Communicating project specifics• We heavily rely on Trello's card labelling feature that allows us to denote the status of a card (e.g. "accepted – but not started", "work in progress", "under client review")• We also make good use of the platform's checklist feature, which allow us to break down a major project into sub-tasks to give full transparency to everyone on the project
 GoToMeeting	Video calls	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Internal and external video calls• Recording internal and external interviews
 toggl	Web-based time tracking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tracking billable client hours



“Email is pretty much banned as an internal communication platform here at TPM. We rely heavily on Slack for general communication and Trello for all our project related items. Being able to track back all communication on a task is critical and email is an awful vehicle for projects.”

– Dean, Principal, Vancouver, Canada

“As a distributed team we’ve had to learn to get creative when it comes to keeping our communication and business alive. For us this means employing a mix of solid project planning, video conferencing, and messaging tools, and providing clear guidelines on the internal function of each platform.”



– Makiko, Managing Director, Vancouver, Canada

Pro Tip #7: Make Time for Face Time

Office-based work offers the amazing luxury of many face time moments between coworkers. It’s in these moments that a lot of informal work planning happens. And when bonding happens and company culture grow flourishes.

Think about all those wonderful ad-hoc moments around the office: the kitchen, pre/post meeting chats, coffee breaks, lunch-time strolls. Those moments are vital to keeping employees connected and healthy – and that connection is needed now more than ever.

Beyond bonding, face time also enables real-time collaboration, [enrich feedback](#), and opens up opportunities for healthy discourse that simply can’t happen in asynchronous messaging scenarios.

While the temptation to skip meetings when working remotely may be high, we definitely recommend against it. With varying levels of social isolation in place right now, face time chats may be one of the few chances you and your team [have to connect with others](#).

So rather than skip those meetings, see them as a chance to keep the personality of your business alive. And just like in the office setting, that means meetings shouldn’t be solely reserved for business talk.



“When working remotely, make sure the conversations aren’t always about work or projects. Give yourself the chance to socialize a bit – share jokes and daily experiences before hopping into work.”

– Virg, Senior Graphic Designer, Vancouver, Canada

The next time you have the choice between an online chat or face-to-face meeting, we encourage you to go with the latter (at least part of the time). We especially encourage managers to do so, in the form of 10-minute 1:1 check-ins or short group calls depending on your team size.

This small effort will give your employees the chance to connect with you and one another in a human way – something that’s especially important right now.

“Remember that people are social animals. While working remotely there are no opportunities for serendipitous meetings so you need to find creative ways, like video calls, to give them that outlet.”



– Dean, Principal, Vancouver, Canada

Pro Tip #8: Use Audio File Instruction

Another great communication tool we rely on here at TPM is audio file instructions. We typically use these audio instructions to relay important information at a project’s onset (such as a client’s needs and overall project goals).

Because our team is heavily distributed, these audio files allow us to relay important information or feedback while also embedding a human tone that often gets lost or misinterpreted in a text note. Being able to incorporate our voices into a memo also enables our team to provide feedback in a friendly way so as not to accidentally cause hurt feelings with the receiver.

The audio files also allow the sender to provide rich information and detail much faster than it takes to compose an email or message. Further, because the files are recorded, they allow the receiver to listen to the note on their own time without the need for a Skype or video call.

There are many audio tools out on the market. Here at TPM, we rely on [QuickTime Player](#). It’s quick and easy to install, and recordings easily can be saved as MP4 files and attached to our Trello cards.

“Audio files allow me to infuse personality into my communication with my team and provide feedback in a friendly way. Tone can get easily lost over Slack or texts. With audio files, I can give further direction with full transparency on my intentions without having the receiver misinterpret my message.”



– Dean, Principal, Vancouver, Canada

3. STAYING HEALTHY

The connection between wellness and productivity has been [well documented](#). Businesses around the world have taken notice by implementing various forms of wellness programs from on-site yoga classes to on-tap kombucha to keep their most valuable assets (their employees) in tip-top shape. And those investments are paying off. According to a [study by Harvard](#), for every dollar spent on wellness programs, company absenteeism costs fell by nearly \$3.

But with social isolation measures in place, employees must now find ways to maintain their wellness (and productivity) without the support of those programs. Here’s what our team does to stay balanced and in top work form while working remotely.



Pro Tip #9: Create Work and Living Boundaries

While working from home, the boundaries between work and life are highly blurred. This is especially true for those of you living in busy multi-member households (and even more for those with young ones running about). Even with these challenges, it's important to carve out a clear physical boundary between your work space and the rest of your living space.

This is certainly easier in larger homes where there's more room to segment between different functions. But with a little creativity these boundaries can be set in even the tightest of apartments.

For example, if your work area now takes place in your living area, we recommend carving out one corner where you work from every day. Establish another for your relaxation and entertainment space, and another for other functions like working out.

With specific zones in place, it will be easier for your mind to slip into and out of specific functions as you move throughout your space.

"I've created different zones in my home that are dedicated to different activities such as working, relaxing, and working out."

— Alisha, Director, Social Media, Philadelphia, PA



For others, these boundaries may simply take the form of setting defined work and life hours. This sort of boundary setting ensures that each function is given its rightful attention while also ensuring they don't overflow into one another.



"I aim to start early in the morning and close the day before 5:00 pm so that I can enjoy the rest of my day."

— Walter, Graphic Designer, Vancouver, Canada

"I try to 'shut down the office' around 6:00 pm each day and have a technology-free evening."

— Erin, Content Strategist, Vancouver, Canada



Pro Tip #10: Give Yourself Breaks Throughout the Day

Breaks are a regular part of life in the office setting. When working from home, however, break time is not as readily defined, leading many to work for longer than normal stints. Even though the temptation to keep on working may be strong, we've learned from experience that you'll actually be much more productive if you allow yourself regular breaks throughout the day. While advice varies on break intervals and durations, the general rule is to break around [every 50 – 60 minutes](#) of work time.

If remembering to step away from your desk is an issue, we suggest setting timers on your phone to remind you to get up and stretch, drink some water, or go for a walk.

Here's a rough schedule to follow based on an 8:30am – 5pm workday:

Break Time	Break Summary
9:15 am – 9:30 am	Coffee break
10:20 am	Stand up and stretch for two minutes
11:10 am	Go to the kitchen and grab some water
12:00 pm – 12:30 pm	Lunch
1:30 pm	Stand up and stretch for two minutes
2:30 pm	Grab a snack
3:30 pm	Go to the kitchen and grab some water
4:15 pm	Stand up and stretch for two minutes

Of course, what you choose to pack into those breaks is up to you. The important thing is to give yourself those little moments throughout the day to step away and breathe. Your well-being (and productivity) will thank you for it.



"I take breaks outside in the sun and take breaks with my family as well as needed."

— Mike, SEO Specialist, Toronto, Canada

"Take breaks and spend quality time with your family during the day instead of being half invested in your work or your relationships."

— Tyler, Director, Paid Media, Vancouver, Canada

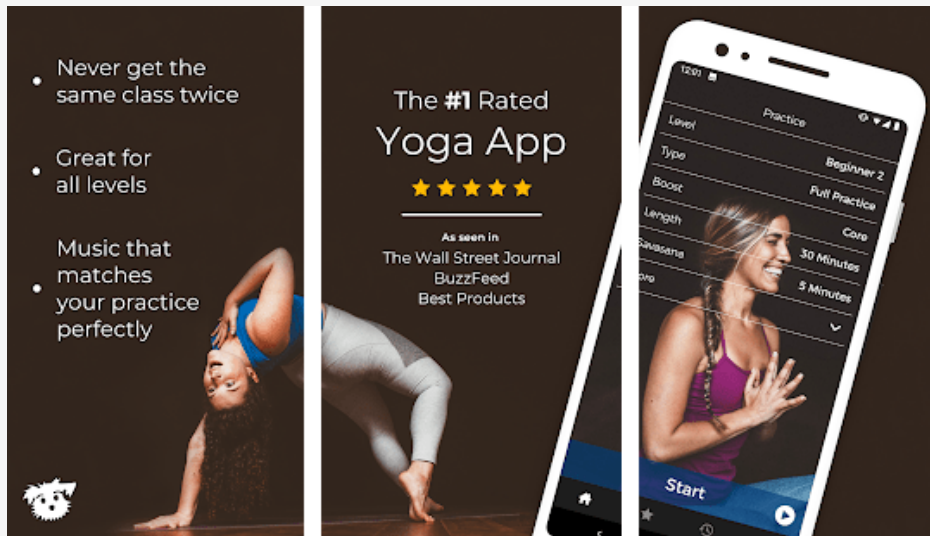


Wellness Apps to Check Out

Looking for an extra boost to keep your mind and body healthy while working remotely? The following apps offer a great selection of wellness practices to keep you in good form:



Calm: This helpful little app is packed with a wide range of music that makes it easier to tune out the outside world (smartphone and desktop versions available). Calm is also loaded with an amazing catalogue of meditation sequences (of varying lengths and focus). Also be sure to check out Calm's collection of bedtime stories (for adults and kids) if falling asleep is an issue for you right now.



[Down Dog](#): This yoga app is a favourite on our team. Completely customizable, you can build your classes to suit your mood, energy, music taste, ability, and more. Down Dog was also one of the first apps to step up and offer its services for free when the pandemic first hit. The app now offers very affordable monthly and yearly subscriptions. The company also offers HITT and Barre versions of the app for those of you looking for more intensive workouts.



([Drink Water Reminder](#) app)

Drink Water Apps: Most of us know that [staying hydrated](#) is vital to our health and immunity. But how many of us actually drink as much as we need to? If remembering to chug the H2O throughout the day is an issue for you, give [one of these apps](#) a try. It allows you to set handy reminders on your phone to alert you when you need to get some more of the good stuff in you.

Pro Tip #11: For The Parents

COVID-19 has placed more pressure than ever on working parents. With no school to usher the kids off to, parents everywhere suddenly find themselves simultaneously juggling the roles of employee, teacher, and parent.

Every parent and household has their own unique needs and will certainly figure out what works best for them and their kids. That said, it's important to remember that these are unprecedented times. With that in mind, remember that it's ok if you can't do it all (in fact, it's basically impossible).

Consider this advice from child and family psychologist [Dr. Emily King](#):

Parents: What we are being asked to do is not humanly possible. There is a reason we are either a working parent, a stay-at-home parent or a part-time working parent. Working, parenting and teaching are three different jobs that cannot be done at the same time.

It's not hard because you are doing it wrong. It's hard because it's too much.

Do the best you can."

Just focus on keeping yourself and your family healthy. Everything else will follow.

Here are a few tips from the parents on our team who balance working from home with parenting:

"Over the years I've learned to work in chunks of time. I schedule meetings for when I have someone to watch the kids, or as a last resort, put on a good movie or show to keep them busy (and quiet)."



– Christine, Sr. SEO Specialist, Vancouver, Canada



"My days are broken up now between focusing on my kids and working. I don't think it's possible to do both at once, so I don't try. A couple hours in the morning go towards work. Then teaching the kids. A schedule of on and off. My days have gotten longer, but I feel grateful that I have this time to spend with my kids."

– Makiko, Managing Director, Vancouver, Canada