Work From Home Tips

Introduction

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I've spent 30 years helping small and medium sized estate agents and letting agents solve their IT issues. With the benefit of this experience,
I've put together some information and advice that I hope will help in these difficult times.

I mention lots of products and services but it is important to stress that I don't have any relationship with or get any back-handers from any of them!

I apologise that it isn't very pretty — no fancy graphics or fonts — but I've rushed it out as quickly as possible (not that I could have made it any better with more time — a grade U at O-Level Art is indicative of my skills in this area.)

If you still have unresolved issues, please email me or give me a ring — contact details above — I'm happy to give free advice during the current crisis.

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Getting a better connection at home

If you have a fibre broadband connection at home, great! You've got all you need in terms of connectivity to maintain voice and data communications with the outside world (although there are some tips below to give you a better, more reliable connection)

However, if you haven't or you have to share it with the whole

family who are trapped at home on their gaming consoles and Netflix, the only viable option now is a 4G, or if you are very lucky, a 5G mobile connection. Things like satellite internet connections or district wifi systems involve an installation visit and that probably can't happen now.

5G is only available in small areas of big cities right now.

The quickest and cheapest way of getting a 4G or 5G connection is to tether to your mobile phone. If it shows you have a strong 4G or even what's often called a 3G+ connection, go into your phone's settings and look for the tethering or mobile hotspot options.

Click here for Android instructions from Google

Click here for Apple instructions

You'll get the best speed by getting your phone the best signal. Put it on the window ledge and, if necessary, an upstairs window ledge. Normally, the wifi tethering is powerful enough to allow the phone and computer to be some distance apart.

Take care with data usage, though. You'll be surprised how much data you will use.

On a Windows 10 PC, you can track data usage via the Data Usage Overview tool. Click the Windows button (bottom left of the screen and just type in Data Usage – the tool should show in the list. Click into it and you'll see your available connections. Choose the one you use (wifi or ethernet) and you'll see your usage.

On a Mac, open up the Activity Monitor then click on the Network tab to see current data usage. You'll get a breakdown of which apps use most data

If you are on a work supplied laptop, you can gauge your usage easily – home usage should be the same as work usage over the

last 30 days. If you are staring to use a new computer or your home computer, you won't have this ability. As a guide, I can easily use 20gb of data per month in web browsing and email. Microsoft Outlook is particularly greedy on data and I'll explain below how you can minimise this.

So, before tethering to your mobile phone, check your data tariff. Ideally, upgrade to an unlimited data tariff.

Alternatively, you could set up a separate 4G wifi connection.

Vodafone, EE & Three all have home 4G solutions – essentially just a new 4G specific router. In the run up to 5G rollout where generally data plans will be all-inclusive, there are some great deals – £50 per month for unlimited data.

Click Here for EE's 4G Home Broadband

Click Here for Vodafone' Gigacube 4G /5G Home Broadband

Click Here for Three's 4G Home Broadband

Click Here for O2's 4G Home Broadband

Tips for improving home broadband speed.

Finally, just a quick observation about Microsoft Outlook's data usage. Outlook loves to synchronise everything all the time. If you are on a fixed data contract or a slower connection, consider swapping to use Outlook.com, Microsoft's free online version of Outlook itself. it is pretty good and has all the features. the big benefit is that all the data synchronisation happens in the cloud – not on your PC. So, your data usage drops away dramatically – you are just displaying simple web pages. It has some limitations but not as many as you might imagine and I know plenty of people that have given up on the desktop version of Outlook.

Reboot your router. A router is a computer in its own right, It has memory, storage and software. A reboot flushes a

router's caches and processes. It might also give you a fresh connection to your Internet Service Provider's network infrastructure. They might connect you to less used or newly installed infrastructure. Don't do it too often though — once a fortnight is enough. Some routers have a learning mode which can limit performance until they have tried to determine your use patterns.

- Cable your computer to your router. It probably has at least 2 ports on the back. Get a Cat 5 cable of the required length from Amazon and plug in!

- Move your router away from other sources of electromagnetic interference — so keep it as far away as possible from TVs, cordless phones, microwaves, portable speakers etc and make sure that its data cables are not wound around mains power cables.

- Try repositioning the router — WiFi signals are relatively weak and whilst they will penetrate stud walls, they often don't penetrate brick or walls with aluminium foil insulation or steel beams. Purists will tell you to keep the distance between the router and the phone socket as short as possible but I've often found that swapping from a 1m cable to a 3m cable in order to move the router out of a corner will be a big improvement.

- If brave, you can have a look at the router settings. You'll need to find the IP address of your router then connect to it. On a Windows 10 PC, click start then type cmd — this will show you the Command Prompt app. Click it and you'll get an old fashioned 1990s DOS prompt (something like *c:/users/your_initials)* in a small window. Type in *ipconfig* and [enter]. You'll get a lot of text — you are looking for *default gateway* — something like *192.168.0.1.* That's the IP address of your router. Close the Command window and return to the

21st century! Fire up your favourite browser. In the address line at the top, enter *http://* followed by your default gateway – so in my case that's *http://192.168.0.1*. If you've got this right, your router's control panel login will appear. You'll then need to enter the correct username and password – this is often on a sticker on the router. Many manufacturers have a default username and password – mine is *admin* and *password.* If you are lucky, your router control panel will appear. About the only thing I'd recommend changing is the wireless channel. Channels 1,6 & 11 are best as they are the only ones with frequencies that don't overlap other channels but if your neighbours use these, you could try others. Your router's wifi will switch off and back on if you change channels – so don't do it mid-Zoom as it will cut your devices off! Whilst in there, how about giving your router a more sensible name? Look for SSID – that's the name that's broadcast. It will be something generic – SKY43C22 or similar – change it to something more familiar or even something humorous. If you know what you are doing, you could look at the Quality of Service (QOS) settings – these allow you to prioritise Voice, video etc.

- Add another Access Point to your network. Domestic, home routers just can't cope with lots of devices and wifi repeaters aren't very reliable in my experience – they often don't manage channel selection or Network Address Translation (NAT) well. My house has around 20 connected devices before anyone switches on a laptop or iPad – we have TVs, Sonos, Apple TV, Sky, Hive heating, a Ring doorbell, internet connected smart switches etc. Spend £75 on a

  Ubiquiti Access Point, position it in the middle of your house and cable it back to your router with CAT5 cable (out of the window for now if necessary!). Connect all your devices to it, not the ISP supplied router and your

whole internet experience will be transformed!

Using Microsoft Software at Home

I've stuck this post in towards the top of my document because Office 365 may be the answer to your business collaboration needs (storage, meetings, chat etc) rather than just the obvious software needs

Naturally, Office 365 includes the latest versions of Word, Excel, Powerpoint etc. It is good to have unified versions across your business. Version differences between home and work can create quite a few headaches. A beautifully styled brochure created in an earlier version can go all over the place when opened in the latest Office 365 version of Word.

Another benefit with a business Office 365 subscription is that you get 1TB of storage that can be shared between users. That's an admirable replacement for a dedicated file server in an office and overcomes the whole work-from-home document sharing situation. See my Storage article below for other solutions

A standard business subscription is £7.99 per user per month — click here to see more info and buy. I think that's a pretty good deal — Word, Excel, Powerpoint etc plus some decent OneDrive shareable storage.

So, that's a few good reasons to subscribe for Office 365. A single user's Office 365 subscription can be used on a number of computers belonging to that user. My Office 365 is on a Mac Book, a PC and an iPad.

However, go mad and get Microsoft Office 365 Business Premium for £9.99 and you get Microsoft Teams included.

Teams replaces the need for Slack (my favourite chat tool) and

Zoom (the business web conference tool).

I've only just started to use it and I really like it. Sometimes, Microsoft's bolt-ons can seem a little like, well, bolt-ons – poor clones of better commercially available software. I think Teams is better than some of their other efforts and I'd recommend giving it a try! See my Chat and Meetings sections for more on this

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Work Phones at Home – Don't just Divert, Get VOIP

Many businesses have converted to Voice Over IP (VOIP) phones in recent years. If the phone on your desk has a CAT5 or similar network cable rather than a thinner dedicated phone cable (which might plug into a BT style socket), you've probably got some sort of VOIP system.

There are 2 main types – those that need a switching box in the office like an old fashioned phone system and those where the switchboard functionality is handled in the cloud by your provider.

If you've got an office based switching box system, you'll need to speak to the supplier. It could be that the system allows for remote access but I've not come across many that do.

If you have a cloud-based switchboard, you are in luck! You should be able to plug your phone into your router at home and it will probably work. If it doesn't, don't worry – it might have been set up with a static IP address that only works in the office – your supplier should be able to fix this for you. One tip – don't plug a VOIP phone into a wifi extender – perhaps the sort that work through the house's mains electricity wiring. These things have too much "latency" and

will mess the call quality up. Better to buy a long Ethernet cable and trail it through the house or even, for temporary use, out of the window and along an outside wall and back in through another window. Standard CAT5 isn't built for outdoor use but a month or two in better weather won't hurt it. If your router doesn't have enough ports, buy a cheap switch –

Click Here for a £15 top quality Netgear 4-port switch I've found on Amazon

So, if you've got true Cloud based VOIP or your phone supplier can sort out a remote connection, you should be OK. Everyone will be able to work at home as though at the office – picking up calls, voicemails, transferring calls etc.

If not, you'll need to come up with a solution.

It might be tempting to simply divert inbound calls to a mobile. That could mean all calls divert to one staff member who acts as receptionist or you could try to divert calls from individual phones to separate mobiles.

That's OK for a day or two but the loss of voicemail, call transfers etc will drive you crazy

So, my recommendation is to quickly set up a cloud based VOIP system with a new number and divert all calls to it. It will cost you just a few pounds per user and you won't necessarily need new phones as I'll explain below.

Unless you can find a better option, sign up for voipfone.co.uk.

This is a London based business with great support. They've worked from home for 10 years! Their product is controlled from a simple web based control panel. We used it almost from the beginning at Expert Agent and it scaled up to our 30 staff without problems.

You'll need to setup a new incoming but local number for £2

per month via Voipfone or your chosen supplier. Make sure it is a local number because unless you plan to stick with this permanently, it will be the number your clients see on their caller ID when you call them. Get your current provider to divert your main incoming number to it – clients can then either call back on your old advertised and now diverted number or straight to the new local number on your VOIP system. You then need to set up extensions for each member of staff – £1 per user per month. That gives you the capability for an unlimited number of inbound and outbound calls – you can all be on calls at once. You'll only need additional incoming numbers if you want to publish Direct Dial numbers for each staff member. You can now call each other's extensions for free. You'll get personal voicemail. Outbound calls are very cheap and you can buy an all inclusive package which can be shared across users.

Once you've done this, you can get very clever with IVRs ("press 1 for sales, 2 for lettings"), music on hold etc

You'll need equipment to make and receive calls. You could buy Voipfone.co.uk's recommended desk phones for about £50 but I'd recommend using a "soft phone" for now – that's software for your PC or an app for your phone. I've had most success with Zoiper –

click here for the Zoiper website or download the Zoiper app for your phone.

If you need advice setting all this up, let me know – happy to help!

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Accessing Office Based Software

from Home

If you run your business on cloud based software like Expert Agent, Jupix, Alto, DezRez etc you are probably already happily working from home.

If you've got older stuck-in-the-office software (I'm tempted to ask why but now isn't the time!), you'll have to sort out some way of gaining access to it. If you are in this situation, you are not alone. In my experience, lots of lettings businesses in particular have older server based accounts software still in use.

There are, in my experience, three ways of running office based software remotely.

Create a Virtual Private Netwirk (VPN) If your IT suppliers have planned ahead, they may have created a Virtual Private Network using a fancy router such as a Draytek Vigor and VPN software that gives each PC an office IP address even when working elsewhere. If you've got this, you should just be able to fire your antique software up normally wherever you are. Data access will be slower than usual and dropped connections risk data corruption though.

Use Server Based Remote Access Products Another method is to put fancy remote control software such as Microsoft's Remote Desktop Gateway or a Citrix Nestscaler Access Gateway onto your server and you can then connect from multiple remote devices. These are fairly robust enterprise standard products that will have been professionally installed and will only fall over if the server packs in.

Both of these are complex to set up at both server and workstation end. If you haven't got either of these options set up now, the chances are you won't get someone in to set it up for you now. So that leaves Option 3..

Use Peer to Peer Remote Control Software If you don't have something like options 1 & 2, you are probably going to have to use things like TeamViewer or LogMeIn to connect a member of staff's home computer to the computer they've left behind in the office so they can drive it my remote control. These sort of connections are easy to set up but can be a bit flaky – if the office computer goes to sleep, it may not reconnect for example. However, there's little danger of data damage – the home PC is effectively just an extra monitor, keyboard and mouse connected to the office computer. If the connection is lost, the office PC just sits there waiting for you to reconnect. Don't forget to turn the office monitors off, though, otherwise everyone waiting in the supermarket queue will see what you are working on!

Of the two (and there are lots more) I'd go for Team Viewer. There's a free version for private, non-commercial use plus a 14 days trial then about £35 per month – Click here to find out more

The other issue with all this is speed. Domestic fibre broadband is asynchronous – fast down the line from the internet but slow back up. So, if an office shares a single 70mbps fibre broadband download speed, it may only have 5mbps back up the line. That's not a lot for 5 home based users to get access to their desktop computers via TeamViewer or LogMein. Converting to a 4G or even 5G router might solve the problem on paper because both technologies are synchronous (same speed up and down). It isn't that simple though – 4G adds latency and jitter into the mix. I've had no experience of 5G yet. So in the absence of 5G, better to stick with fixed cabled connection at the office end though 4G/5G works well to replace slow connections at home.

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Use Live Chat with your team

You will inevitably miss out on the type of instant responses you can get verbally in an office.

Slack is loved by corporates and bigger organisations. It is a bit like WhatsApp for businesses.

You can create departments, rooms, topics etc and can then either give everyone free access to all or restrict as required.

Use it to replace shouting "Has anyone seen the key for Flat 5 come back in?".

However "Can I have a coffee, please? isn't supported.

There's a free trial then it is about £6 per user per month

However, if you have Microsoft Office 365, you may already have Microsoft Teams and that's a good Slack alternative. Click here for my post about using Microsoft software.

All of these tools have mobile apps. You could use WhatsApp instead but even with the WhatsApp Web tool loaded on your PC, you won't get the same level of features and control. Also, nobody gets a day off if you start to use a WhatsApp group — everyone feels the need to look and respond to new WhatsApp messages!

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Keep up the Morning Meetings — use a virtual meeting tool

You need to keep in touch with your team.

A morning meeting over the internet is a great way to do it.

If you haven't got anything else, use Zoom — click here to find out more about it. Zoom is my favourite conferencing tool.

However, if you've got or are about to get Microsoft Office 365 so that everyone has the same version of Word, Excel etc, you may already have Microsoft Teams which does much the same job and replaces Slack, my favourite chat tool too. Click here to see my post about using Microsoft Software.

With either MS Teams or Zoom, you just sign up, create a meeting and send everyone the link. You can use the same link every morning if you want to. It is free for personal use

Everyone appears on their webcam in a small window and can chat using their PC's microphone and speakers.

Everyone can present from their PC, Mac or mobile. You can view spreadsheets, documents, powerpoint presentations etc.

Virtual meetings are fun. The first time you try it, schedule the meeting to "open" at least ten minutes before the time you want to start — maybe 845am rather than 9am.

That lets everyone join in and have some fun — there will be pets, kids, funny hats, musical instruments, odd inappropriate clothing etc on screen and lots of laughter. That's great for moral at this dificult time.

If you are the boss, let everyone do this without you — just jump on a couple of minutes before the meeting start time.

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Try Virtual Viewings

This advice might be a bit late. To offer virtual viewings, you'd need to get into the properties to take the photos.

However, it isn't beyond the bounds of possibility that some

vendors might be prepared to take photos for you.

I really like EyeSpy 360 which is a "create your own" 360 degree tour product. It has a great "Live Viewing" capability where you can chat to viewers using your PC and show them the tour. They can wander around by themselves whilst you watch too.

The tours are created using either a 360 degree camera such as the Ricoh Theta or via a rotating head that sits between a tripod and your mobile phone.

EyeSpy supplied me with a rotating head called The VR Kit and I found it better than the Ricoh when used with a mobile phone that supports HDR (I have a Galaxy S10). However, the Ricoh is "point and shoot" – set it up on a tripod in a room, click the shutter in self-timer mode, leg it out of the room and come back in 20 seconds to move to the next room.

Could you drop this equipment off at a vendor's front door with some instructions or you at the end of a phone?

Back at the office, making the tours is very easy. Have a look at the EyeSpy 360 site for more details

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Cloud Storage to replace the office fileserver

There are lots of solutions to this.

If you don't have much need for shared storage, just use a free Google Drive account which gives each user 15gb of space. You can then quickly set up a folder (call it "cloud server") in someone's account and then share it with everyone else. You can then copy the contents of that creaky, noisy and vulnerable office server to it. The snag with Google Drive is

that extra space isn't expensive — 100gb per user is £2 per month but you'll need to buy this for every user if the "cloud server" grows beyond 15gb

If you have a Microsoft Office 365 account, that comes with 1terrabyte of OneDrive data space (1000gb). I must say it isn't clear whether that's per person or per business but either way it is a lot! It works much the same way. I'd set up the "cloud server" folder, share it and let everyone copy files to and from it.

OneDrive has a bit more security than the free version of Google Drive. Google Suite is Google's business solution and comes with lots of space for around £5 per month.

Finally, there's Dropbox — the original cloud based storage product. Dropbox business is £10 per month per user (you need to subscribe for 3 users) but you get 5TB of space for that price. There's a month free trial

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Easy Electronic Document Signing

In my experience, many agents (and particularly letting agents) have been put off electronic document signing (e-signature) through fear of complexity. incompatibility or legal validity.

In fact, e-signature is easy to set up, works with any document creation tool or software and the big suppliers have all had their processes tested in UK courts.

Some of the estate agency software products already handle document signing though I'm a bit dubious of home-made solutions that haven't been tested in UK court — particularly those where the consumer (vendor, tenant, landlord etc) signs a wrapper put around the document rather than the document itself.

Unless you have e-signature in your software, you'll need to sign up for a third-party solution. They all work in a similar way. You create the document that needs signing, you save it as a PDF and you upload it to their websites. You then position boxes over where you want to sign and where you want the other party to sign. You can add date boxes, name boxes etc. You then submit the document for signing . You decide the order that it gets signed it – the other party then you or the other way round. It then sends a link to the document by email or you can send the link yourself by email and/or text. Each party signs and both get a copy.

If you reuse the same document (maybe a tenancy agreement or agency terms), you just send a previously set up document.

The two big players in this space are Adobe Sign (formally Echosign) at £15 per month and Docusign at £20 are safe bets. Of the two, I'd go for Adobe Sign as these days it is bundled with Adobe Acrobat so can create and more importantly edit PDF files.

e-sign.co.uk is a UK business with a slightly different business model. They do an annual subscription or a pay-as-you-go model for £1.60 per "envelope" – an "envelope" can contain up to 4 documents that require esignature. Like Adobe and Docusign they do a free trial but then if you are uncertain how many documents you'll need signing in these difficult times, this could be a good option

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