Does Memory Suffer if You Work Outside the Office?

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In today’s workforce, people often bring their work home with them, or to a coffee shop or library. When people ask themselves why these are good places for doing work outside of the office, they often think about the fact that these places are quiet, calm or have lots of space to spread out. People will rarely argue that the similarity between their desired remote work location and the office is the reason for being so productive. However, memory is better if all work is completed in the same or a similar location.

This phenomenon is called context-dependent memory, which is defined as having superior recall when information encoding and retrieval occurs in the same external context. To give an example, if someone is in a particular room when learning a piece of information, memory will be superior if that person is also in that same room when recalling the information (Greenspoon & Ranyard, 1957). Keeping the environment consistent is effective because factors in the environment act as cues for recall. For instance, even subtle things, like office supplies or a photograph, often serve as recall cues since they were associated with the information that was learned (Eich, 1980).

This is a robust phenomenon, with a meta-analysis indicating consistent effects across a number of studies (Davies & Thompson, 1988). In addition, this phenomenon has been demonstrated for a number of contextual elements, from chewing peppermint (e.g., Johnson & Miles, 2008) to listening to music (e.g., Mead & Ball, 2007) to consuming caffeine (e.g., Kelemen & Creeley, 2003).

But, what does this mean for people who take their work home with them? It is easy to jump to the conclusion that doing work in more than one location is a bad idea, given these findings. After all, memory may be compromised if people work in different areas and lack those memory cues.

However, that may be a premature conclusion and the solution is not to eliminate work completed outside of the office. On the contrary, people can make small changes to minimize these deleterious effects on memory. For instance, recent research has shown that a thinking exercise in which one visualizes the self in a particular environment (e.g., home, work, school) is sufficient to bring forth these memory cues (Garczynski & Brown, 2011). While people do not have to visualize their workspace to be productive outside of work, simple changes to one’s workspace outside of the office can make a large difference.

“Context-Dependent Memory: Memory is better if all work is completed in the same or a similar location.”

Tips for making the home or telecommuting area like your workspace

Use the same portable technology at the office and outside of the office.

If you do all of your work on the same device, be it a laptop or ipad, you will make your workplace environment and your home environment more similar to one another. This will enhance consistency between a number of small things that could enhance memory, such as the keypad.
Bring your work habits home with you.
What do you do while completing work in the office? Do you suck on hard candy? Drink coffee, water or tea? Listen to classical music? Keep up these work-time habits even when you are not in the office.

Make the workspaces more similar.
If your office space is relatively isolated, the work you bring home with you should be completed in a private office as well. If your workplace is bustling with people, it may be best to keep this consistent and work at a coffee shop.

The same can be said for your physical surroundings.
If your office space is brightly lit, you should make sure that your home office is brightly lit as well. If you have a picture that sits on your desk at work – something you regularly look at, try having the same picture in a similar frame sitting on your desk at home.

Essentially, the more your physical workspace at home can resemble your physical workspace at the office, the less interference will occur.
In summary, research on memory-dependency effects shows that memory is superior when the context is kept the same between learning information and retrieving it. Employees who occasionally telecommute or take work home with them can use this to their advantage by making small changes to their work space at home, so it is more similar to their office environment.

References


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