"I'm not one of the people at Goddard building a satellite. It's just easier for me to do a lot of my work from home."
Peter Griffith

says. "If you want an active lab, you have to be accessible. My students can text me with questions such as, 'When are you going to be back in the lab?' or 'How do we order some HCl?'. I make sure that what they need is always there, and that's what has allowed me to work at home when I do." If she needs to stay off e-mail or her mobile for an hour or two, she does so, but provides ample warning that she will be unavailable.

Getting used to providing an open line of communication and a transparent schedule may be an adjustment for researchers who have been accustomed to more autonomy, she warns. "The biggest shocker for most early-career faculty members is how hard it is to be able to stay at home because people rely on you to be in your lab and your office."

Depending on the institution, there may be thorny or murky policy issues on telecommuting to contend with. When Grozema's first child was born and he wanted to work from home, he elected to take a day's paternity leave per week for about one-third less pay for that day.

But when his second child arrived about a year ago, and Grozema considered working from home again, he discovered that many of his colleagues regularly worked from home without having to take leave and get paid less — the policy was not well defined. He approached his department head, and the two worked out an agreement under which Grozema uses a half-day's leave per week when he works from home.

Once remote workers have settled on a schedule, they need to stick to it, say researchers. If time at home provides the luxury of several hours without interruption, an early-career researcher needs to use that time to actually do work — many warn that it is all too easy to give in to the siren song of smartphones and social media. "You have to motivate," says Diaper. "You have to be strict and say to yourself that you have to get the job done. You can't be swayed by your partner's request or your own temptation."

DEALING WITH DOWNSIDES

There are other pitfalls for those who work from home, including the possibility of a lower profile because of reduced visibility. Cardelús says that it is wise to interact regularly and often in person with colleagues, associates and superiors. Working from home "can be very isolating", she says. "You need to be networking — you need to be seen."

Some ways of counteracting the potential 'out of sight, out of mind' problem include securing a mentor who is particularly sympathetic to junior researchers' telecommuting and career-support needs. An understanding mentor might help to keep a home worker's profile high by routinely talking up their work, thus mitigating the impact of decreased visibility.

People who work from home do risk missing impromptu chats, which can do more than just provide entertainment or build rapport — they offer access to unofficial intelligence that is a key part of understanding the changing dynamics of every workplace. "When I'm home, I miss out on going to have coffee with people, and that's when all kinds of information about employment applications, the ministries and the university comes up," says Swart. "If I'm not there, I don't go out — and this kind of information is never shared on e-mail."

It can be a challenge, lament early-career researchers, to deal with the lack of connection with lab mates and department colleagues. "You don't have people around you to talk about what you're doing," says Richard Lonsdale, a postdoc in computational chemistry at the University of Bristol, UK. Lonsdale, who lives two hours' drive away in Birmingham, has been working from home for four days per week, and makes sure that he regularly e-mails colleagues and sets up Skype chats to confer about ideas when he is at home. He also arranges in-person discussions and meetings for days on which he comes in to the university. "You have to make the most of the day when you're in the lab," he says.

Scientists who routinely work from home agree that it takes effort to counterbalance the downsides. But that is not a deal-breaker, they say. "It's not unpleasant to be at a bit of a distance," says Grozema, who adds that a day of telecommuting per week has helped with his work–life balance. "You don't have to be less productive." ∎

"I can escape random questions, other colleagues and the telephone ringing."
Alison Diaper

Karen Kaplan *is the associate Careers editor at* Nature.

TRAINING
Doctorates diversify
Leading European Union (EU) research universities are adding career development to their doctoral programmes, including schemes to help postgraduates into non-academic careers, finds a 27 January report by the League of European Research Universities (LERU) in Leuven, Belgium. Institutions are increasingly offering options including employer-led career-skills workshops, employment forums and fairs, student consultancies and internships with industry, it found. A LERU report four years ago called for such expansion in the face of declining academic research positions and a tight economic climate. Doctoral students sometimes do not appreciate the rare number of academic posts, and institutions need to offer guidance for alternatives, says Katrien Maes, LERU's chief policy officer.

SCHOLARSHIPS
Trust funds PhDs
The Leverhulme Trust, a non-profit research funder in London, will invest £10 million (US$16.6 million) to create 150 doctoral scholarships across all UK science and humanities disciplines. Each award will be for £70,000 over 36 months. Universities can opt to offer extra funding to awardees, says trust spokesman Daniel Mapp. The scheme is meant to help those with undergraduate debt to pursue PhD degrees, but winners do not have to aim for any one professional path. "It will be for individuals to decide how they take their careers forward," Mapp says. Anyone at a UK university is eligible, but UK and European Union students get priority.