



Working from Home

A simple guide for employers

Introduction

Following the outbreak of COVID 19, the Government has requested all but essential key workers stay at home. Many employers already encourage working from home as this can limit absences, increase productivity, and save money, but it also presents additional risk to employees and, in consequence, increases risk exposure to employers.

The issues

Many organisations fail to recognise home working as lone working. Often, health and safety measures are ignored as employers lack any form of control over an employee's home working environment. However, the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 states that an employer shall ensure, so far as it is reasonably practical, the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees – this also extends to home workers.

Consequently, it is essential employers manage the risk of home working as they would manage the risk of office based working.

The key challenges employees who work from home face include:

- Workstation set-up
- Isolation
- Mental health
- Communication
- Lone working
- Physical Health
- Injuries

Risk management advice

Workstation set-up

It is not always possible or practical for employers to complete full workstation assessments of their employees' home workplaces and consequently, employers should follow the Health and Safety Executive guidance to encourage staff as to how best set up their workstation at home.

Isolation

It is vital a homeworker should not feel cut off. Employers should appreciate that it is easier for office staff to reach out for help which means homeworkers have to make extra effort to keep in touch with colleagues and their manager. Managers should therefore make themselves available to the rest of their team and ensure they know how to be contacted and to contact them.

Communication

This can be a challenging area as research has found that office-based managers tend to communicate more frequently with office-based staff than home-based staff, and more often than managers who travel and work at home, yet who still have to effectively supervise and support their staff. The employer should make sure the homeworker fully understands the hours and the core hours when they should be at work, what is expected of them in their roles and how they are expected to work.

Mental health

A United Nations report found that 41% of remote workers reported high stress levels, compared to just 25% of office workers. Being 'out of sight, out of mind' and the tendency for managers to become increasingly task focused and attempt to micro-manage more can be a factor. You may provide access to support services through your workplace - if you do, make sure these are advertised well and find out whether there are specific resources available.

Make sure people also know where they go and who they talk to internally. If you have mental health champions, allies or mental health first aiders make sure they have the latest information, and that if you change working practices, that this network of mental health support carries on if possible. Many remote workers say the lack of community and a disconnect from the overall company culture is one of the biggest downfalls.

Lone working

By the very nature of home working, employees will be at greater risk as there is no supervision present, and there are no other workers to assist if something does go wrong. Managers should make sure there are arrangements in place for checking up on lone workers. This could include daily calls, e-mails or online meetings with co-workers. This will also be important in ensuring business can still be conducted effectively and minimise the chances of workers feeling isolated or abandoned.

Physical health

There is a growing public awareness of the risks of serious ill-health associated with prolonged periods of inactivity including sitting. Encouraging employees to regularly change posture – for example by standing, moving around and changing their seated position (e.g. reclining when not typing) - is vitally important to avoid static posture and regular prolonged periods of sitting.

Injuries

The main injuries associated with DSE/VDU work are:

- upper limb disorders (including pains in the neck, arms, elbows, wrists, hands, fingers)
- back ache
- fatigue and stress
- temporary eye strain
- headaches

This is in addition to the other hazards of the home workplace, such as tripping over cables or carpets, lifting injuries, picking up boxes of paper, etc. There is also the added risk of injury to others in the household such as children. The causes may not always be obvious and can be due to a combination of factors, but enough is known about the importance of some measures to allow the risks to be tackled effectively for example, providing employees with information on how to safely set-up a home workstation, the need to sit properly and take breaks as postural hazards can result from poor ergonomics, etc.

Copy and paste the following into your web browser for more information and guidance:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/talkingleaflets/indg226.mp3>

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg90.htm>

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/workers/home.htm>

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/signs.htm>

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/help-employee.htm>

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak/while-working>

Disclaimer:

Please note that the Information contained herein has been provided to you for general information purposes only and is considered confidential and/or privileged information, which you must not distribute to any third party, in whole or part, without Protector's express written permission. Whilst all reasonable care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is comprehensive and accurate, Protector makes no representation, warranty or undertaking, express or implied, as to the accuracy, reliability, completeness or reasonableness of the Information. Any assumptions, opinions and estimates expressed in this document constitute Protector's judgment as of the date thereof and are subject to change without notice. Any projections and/or proposed risk mitigating solutions contained in this document are based on a number of assumptions as to existing risk conditions and there can be no guarantee that any projected outcomes will be achieved, nor that no other risks exist. Protector does not accept any liability for any direct, consequential or other loss arising from reliance on the contents of this document, and provides no guarantee that recommended remediation measures supersede, or replaces any statutory obligations.