



Covid-19 – maintaining the health, safety and wellbeing of your homeworkers

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Made possible



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This guide has been produced to provide a simple reference for health, safety and wellbeing matters to be considered when asking employees to work from home during the Covid-19 outbreak.

There is well publicised guidance and instruction regarding self-isolation, self-distancing and arrangements for furloughing employees, but what about those employees who, for the first time, are being asked to work from home?

Some of these workers may already have experience of a day or so a week, but few of them will have worked full time from home and few of their managers will have managed large teams in such circumstances.

In addition to the basic health, safety and wellbeing risks associated with a large population of the workforce working remotely, there will be other business critical risks associated with these changes. For reference, some of these risks are covered in our Resilience Series article [“Home working – 7 questions all businesses should ask now”](#)

Employers have the same health and safety responsibilities for home workers as for any other workers and we have identified three basic areas to consider:

1. Safety
2. Physical health
3. Mental health and wellbeing of employees

Safety

General employee safety considerations for temporary homeworkers will not be as rigorous as for permanent homeworkers, but as indicated, employers have the same health and safety responsibilities and so basic information and controls should be provided.

These should extend to basic safety requirements around electrical installations, fire prevention, manual handling and general housekeeping. [A basic employee factsheet has been produced by Safety & Health Practitioner and this can be shared with employees working from home.](#)

Basic precautions employers can take to promote employee safety include the following, remembering that the workspace is within the employees' home and in all probability, they had no intention of using this workspace for work activities:

- > Encourage employees to keep their workspace as tidy as possible and to remove excessive waste from their working area. This will help to reduce slips and trips and fire exposures, as well as ensuring escape routes are maintained.
- > Ensure that electrical supplies are safe, robust and without signs of damage. The employer is responsible for the electrical maintenance of company provided equipment, but the employee should also ensure that fixed installations are maintained in a safe condition.
- > Employees should be encouraged not to be tempted to undertake any excessive manual handling activities arising out of homeworking.
- > Encourage employees to maintain their working environment as far as possible to ensure that there is adequate lighting, heating and ventilation.

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Physical Health

For those people who are working at home on a long-term basis, the risks associated with using display screen equipment (DSE) must be controlled. This includes doing home workstation assessments.

For temporary homeworkers in the current crisis, the HSE have stated:

“However, there is no significant increased risk from DSE work for those working at home temporarily. For these circumstances, employers do not need to do home complete workstation assessments”

Employers should consider asking employees to complete a basic checklist to see if they can maximise the benefits of reorganising their workspace from a physical health risk perspective. [The HSE provide one here.](#)

Basic precautions

Some basic precautions employers can take to promote physical health are below:

- > Where possible, support the purchase of prescribed and specified workstation equipment such as desks, chairs, screens, keyboards and mice, so that employees are not working from a laptop for prolonged periods.
- > Where a laptop is likely to be used predominantly, encourage employees to use a table with a supportive chair and not to work with their laptop on their knees, and to take a break every 30 minutes if working off a laptop with no separate screen, keyboard and mouse. [Basic guidance for laptop ergonomics are demonstrated in this video.](#)
- > Encourage employees to work in a separate area away from other householders, away from distraction, but preferably not in a bedroom.
- > Mandate employees take breaks from their desks at least every hour, even if they have a workstation set up.

- > Encourage and support employees to participate in stretching exercises or desk yoga.
- > Encourage employees to take their Government permitted exercise during the working day to suitably break up their time at their desk, and to encourage this to be in the fresh air.

Mental Health and wellbeing

We should remember that employees will be experiencing a complete change in their work life, and this is with the backdrop of a potentially deadly virus affecting their families and friends, access to 24/7 media reporting of the crisis and day to day increased anxiety regarding things like challenges around shopping for basic essentials. There is no doubt that this is a heady mix of stressors that will significantly impact the psychological health and wellbeing of a number of workers.

We have previously published an article in our Resilience Series detailing advice for employers and employees regarding consideration of employees' mental health and wellbeing when working from home entitled; [“Caring for your mental health when working from home”](#)

Employees used to the hustle and bustle associated with a busy workplace, may be feeling disconnected, isolated or abandoned and this can affect stress levels and mental health. Being away from managers and colleagues could make it difficult to get proper support.

Others will struggle to separate working life from home life. Remote workers may be tempted to work longer than normal hours, due to the lack of direct supervision. In some ways, '24/7 availability' is a curse of the modern age.

A report from the World Economic Forum in 2019 pointed to the fact that a 2017 United Nations report found that 41% of remote workers reported high stress levels, compared to just 25% of office workers. The WEF believed that being 'out of sight, out of mind' and the tendency for managers to become increasingly task focused and actually attempt to micromanage more than before, was partly to blame.

Not all individuals are naturally psychologically resilient, and the current climate will be testing even those able to ordinarily cope with change.

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Basic precautions

Below are the basic precautions employers can take to promote good mental health:

- > Ensure that managers keep in regular touch with homeworkers, preferably through video conference calling. Ensure that such calls are not exclusively focussed on business matters.
- > Mandating a flexible working day to accommodate domestic commitments in these unique times e.g. home schooling, supporting elderly relatives. Although it is recognised that for permanent homeworkers, routine is critical to boost mental health, it is felt that flexible working in the current environment is more conducive to wellbeing.
- > Encourage healthy lifestyle and wellbeing through active promotion and regular communication.
- > Encourage virtual social events within and between teams.

- > Provide access to mental health awareness training, particularly for managers to help them with the management of their employees.
- > Mental health charity Mind has large number of significant resources for employers and employees, including a number of free downloadable resources, to support businesses and employees during these challenging times. [Visit their website to find out more.](#)
- > [Champion Health has also provided free access to their online Mental Health Awareness training material during the crisis here.](#)

There's no doubt that the current unique situation, will have thrown large numbers of employees into a potential homeworking situation for which they weren't prepared.

With some basic control arrangements and support however, employers can minimise the health, safety and wellbeing impacts of these changes to their employees, at a time of heightened vulnerability.

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