

## **Employers Be Aware ...**

Many business leaders assume that the current trend of staff working from home is temporary while the UK manages the threat of coronavirus, and that we'll eventually get back to more traditional working practices.

However, the truth is that the workplace will never be the same again post-pandemic – and the workplace we go back to will be very different to the one we left.

Business leaders will need to develop a vision of what their own workplace is going to look like – for example are you going to have your staff – or a proportion of your staff - working from home permanently? And will that be for all or part of their working week?

When you consider increased concerns around safe-working post-pandemic, coupled with economic and environmental considerations, it's likely that for a lot of companies there will be a desire for some element of home-working in certain roles.

Employers should be aware of things they need to consider. Under Section 2 of the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974, employers have a responsibility to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees. It's okay thinking that by letting them work from home you are putting their safety first, but there are wider considerations. This includes both their physical and mental well-being. So let's look at this in more detail:

## **Physical well-being**

If you are asking your employees to work from home, then you have a duty of care to ensure that their environment is suited to what you are asking them to do. The chances are most will not have a dedicated workspace at home and they may find themselves working in unusual situations.



According to a recent survey by Ascenti, the physiotherapy provider, the majority of UK employees working from home since the outbreak have done so from their sofas!

72% reported having worked from their sofas and more than half said they had also worked from their bed – this figure jumps to 91% for 16-24 year olds. Working from the sofa or bed can put a real strain on your body and lead to aches, pains and injuries further down the line.

Other seating options included kitchen chairs, the floor and bean bags. Half said they were experiencing more physical pain since working from home.

It's probably unlikely that the HSE will be expecting businesses to be conducting risk assessments for temporary home-workers right now – however it is something you will need to consider if the practice becomes a more permanent arrangement – starting to address this now will give staff the support they need and help mitigate any future claims for injury.



## **What can employers do to mitigate risk?**

It's probably not going to be practical to send someone to everyone's house to do a risk assessment so other options to consider could be:

**Provide guidance on how to ensure they are working safely at home** – this could include:

- How to maintain good posture
- Whether the workspace or chair can be adjusted
- How best to arrange the workspace
- Ensuring regular breaks are taken
- Ensuring adequate lighting

**Remind employees they need to assess their workstation.** The HSE provides some useful guidance on this assessment which can be found following this link <https://www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/workers/home.htm>

**Conduct an on-line mini risk assessment** – looking at computer set up, position of screen and offering advice to improve their set-ups

**Consider the equipment** being used - laptops are not ideal in the long term as you can't position the keyboard away from the screen – laptop stands though can be used to improve ergonomics

Provide an **online survey** – a checklist of questions for employees to answer, taking note of any issues raised and action taken

These are just some suggestions - each employer will need to consider what specific measures are required to enable an employee to work safely whilst at home, ensuring the continuity of the business and their own health and safety.

All that said, employers can only be expected to take reasonable practical steps in the current circumstances so it makes sense to keep a record of the risks assessed, steps considered, actions taken - and why certain actions were not taken e.g. lack of resource.

## **What about the mental well-being of staff after lockdown?**

Taking steps to maintain the mental health of staff will be equally important after lockdown. In particular, employers may encounter workers who:

- Have become accustomed to their new routine, and do not want things to return to how they were
- Are suffering from what people are labelling 'coronaphobia' and are worried about returning to work

- Have suffered stress due to their own brush with the virus
- Have suffered coronavirus-related bereavements
- Have had personal issues during lockdown - such as relationship issues or financial pressures

All of these individuals will require ongoing help and support if they are to overcome the mental health issues they have developed because of the coronavirus pandemic.

## **What practical steps can employers take to support the mental health of their staff?**

Keep connected - this can be done by phone or video calling

- **Have regular feedback conversations** (see the first paper in this series – A New Way of Managing Performance)
- **Remind staff they are still part of a team** – hold team video calls to help prevent feelings of isolation, and to boost team morale
- **Be supportive** - encourage staff to be honest about the issues they might be facing and help them to work out practical solutions
- **Be honest about the impacts coronavirus is having on your business** – and what you intend to do to minimise these and how they might be affected by any plans
- **Communicate clearly** – and make sure managers are able to answer any questions
- **Remind staff of the available support** – how to get help and who they can speak to
- **Look out for the first signs of stress** such as a sudden drop in performance or erratic behaviour

## **Guidance you can offer your employees:**

The internet is full of information that can be used by your staff to help protect their well-being during lockdown and whilst working from home. Some of the main recommendations include:

- **Keep connected** - staying in touch with them via telephone or video calls can help combat loneliness and isolation

- **Maintain a routine** - having a routine can be really beneficial for mental wellbeing
- **Eat well and exercise** - physical health has a major impact on mental health
- **Sleep is important** - changes to daily routine can quickly lead to poor sleeping habits, but sleep is really important in maintaining good mental health
- **Do something you enjoy or learning a new skill** – can make you feel positive and help to minimise the amount of time spent worrying
- **Relaxation techniques** can really help with feelings of anxiety
- **Reduce time watching news and social media** - too much can lead to an increase in fear and it is possible to quickly lose perspective and increase anxiety levels
- **Speak out** - a problem shared is a problem halved, so talk about any worries with a friend

The pandemic might have brought us into unprecedented times but it does also provide an opportunity to improve awareness of both physical and mental well-being in the workplace.

There's a whole range of information available online for both employers and staff including the acas guide which can be found via this link

<https://www.acas.org.uk/working-from-home>

## One more thing ....

Some of your employees working from home may be using confidential information for example customer details. So another area for consideration is how to protect this information, which could be on a laptop, USB stick, or in paper format.

The answer is to have the correct policies in place and then make sure they are followed. Your staff should be informed that they are responsible for ensuring the security of all information they take outside your premises. Simple steps such keeping data with them at all times when travelling (ie not left unattended in a car) and to ensure that they are kept in a secure place if taken home or to another location should be made explicit. You may want to

discourage the removal of paper documents as the risk of inadvertent loss is considered to be greater.



Another factor is that others within their households may have access to the data – for example documents can be left on a coffee table, or data on a computer screen can be seen by anyone visiting.

You may want to consider including within a home working policy an obligation on your staff to ensure that other members of their family/friends/visitors are not able to see the content or have any access to the information belonging to your company.

Given the potential for this to amount to a data breach, the home working policy should spell out that failure to adhere to the terms of it is likely to amount to a disciplinary offence, which, in some cases, may be considered to be gross misconduct.

If you would like any support or advice tailored for your company on any of these issues then please contact:

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July 2020