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Risk control

Homeworking



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Homeworking

Introduction

Homeworking as a concept covers a number of working situations, including outworkers or piece-work, incidental homeworking and agreed and defined regular homeworking. It denotes a shift from the traditional office working pattern of being physically present in an office from '9 to 5'. The practice pre-dates the 2020 pandemic by many years, however, the popularity of the practice increased dramatically as millions of workers were relocated from offices to homes in order to reduce risk of virus transmission. It is often considered as a more productive way for the modern business to operate efficiently and can offer financial savings such as the reduction in required office space. Keeping pace with the high demands of business management in the 21st Century, working across international boundaries and maximising employee working hours has transformed the way we work. Employers are creating work environments that support agile, dynamic and resilient organisations by introducing different ways of working flexibly. This reduces travel time and contributes to the achievement of a better work life balance bringing benefits to the employee and employer alike with research by ACAS finding a mixture of home and office working providing the most job satisfaction and work performance while reducing stress¹.

Figures from the Office for National Statistics prior to the pandemic lockdown showed that less than 30% of workers were fulfilling part of their working role away from the office². However the impact of the pandemic saw those figures rise dramatically, with the Office for National Statistics stating that in April 2020 "46.6% of people in employment did some work at home" with 86% of these doing so as a result of coronavirus³. In February 2022 UK government guidance to work from home ended, however less than 20% of workers who had converted to working from home returned to the office, 80% of those surveyed planned to work in a hybrid pattern⁴.

Homeworking

Homeworking as part of your operating strategy can bring many benefits to your business: attracting fresh investment and new talent; reducing office space requirements and associated costs; and less time and energy is wasted on travel to and from the office improving workforce morale.

The downside to the homeworking practice is that, if managed incorrectly, homeworkers can feel isolated from the rest of the business and detached from a corporate working environment. This can lead to rogue / maverick behaviour and actions being taken where employees view themselves as independent from the business.

In the absence of a suitable framework and guidance the homeworker may work beyond their contracted hours through fear that their manager may not trust / believe they are 'working enough' and fail to switch off. Homeworking is not suited to everyone and some may struggle to concentrate as they would in the office and could be less productive, while others may find motivation more difficult in these circumstances.

The employees' home environment and circumstances may also not be conducive to homeworking. A strong working relationship between employee and employer will help any homeworking policy implementation and mitigate against the risks that may arise from the practice⁵.

Homeworking Policy

The CIPD⁶ recommends establishing a homeworking policy clarifying the organisation's view of and approach to homeworking, clearly defining what is meant by 'homeworker'. There are permanent, regular and ad hoc home working arrangements and the business should provide enough information in a policy to enable an employee to determine which category applies to them.

Other areas which should also be addressed as part of the policy include but are not limited to:

- Definition of homeworker types
Clearly define how the policy is to be applied to the varying degrees of 'homeworker'.
- Eligibility criteria
Clearly identify which roles are potentially eligible / suitable for homeworking. In addition, outline how approval is applied for and granted and what criteria needs to be met by the employee and role to qualify for homeworking approval.
- Roles and responsibilities
The expectations of the employee as a homeworker and how this differs from an office based employee.
- Health and Safety
Specify the minimum health and safety requirements that need to be met by the employee including ergonomics, electrical safety, and display screen equipment.
- Wellbeing and Mental Health
Outline what steps are being taken to address the wellbeing and mental health of homeworkers, including the support systems that are available.

- Data and Cyber Security
Clearly specify the requirements for managing information and cyber-security outside the office, disposal of documents and compliance with data security policies at home.
- Equipment and supplies
Address the issue of provision of work equipment and supplies necessary to undertake the role.
- Information, Instruction, Guidance and Training
Ensure that suitable and sufficient information, instruction, guidance and training are to be provided by relevant persons. This is particularly pertinent to help manage the risk of stress⁷ and anxiety they may suffer due to any increased reliance on new technologies.
- Linkage with other policies
Consider how this policy relates to other relevant policies that address related issues such as a flexible working, equal opportunities, display screen equipment etc.

Managing the Risk

Under UK Health and Safety legislation, it is an employer's duty to consider the potential cause of harm to their homeworkers or other people as a result of the work being undertaken within the home. It is important that employers undertake and regularly review risk assessments of workstations and home / remote working arrangements to ensure that all required controls continue to address and manage the risks.

It would be beneficial to consider the production of homeworking guidelines and a checklist to support the process, with organisations such as the CIPD offering examples that can be used⁵.

When considering whether an employee is eligible for homeworking, managers should document whether:

- The job role is suitable for homeworking
- The employee is suited to homeworking e.g. are they self-motivated, performing well in their role and able to work without direct supervision
- The home environment is suitable for homeworking.

This could form part of the overall risk assessment and it may be appropriate to establish a homeworking agreement based on the findings of the assessments. There is guidance available from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) on conducting a risk assessment which is free to download at www.hse.gov.uk/risk

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) has produced guidelines recommending four key ingredients for managing productive home working:

- 1 Building trust between staff working from home and their manager
- 2 Agreeing how work performance will be supervised and measured
- 3 Communicating effectively
- 4 Training

They have produced a guide for employers and employees which can be downloaded from their website⁶.

How can you support your homeworkers?

Ensuring there is sufficient contact with colleagues by drawing out contact and touchpoints back at base and / or the use of office buddies to keep up dialogue.

Agreeing how to keep in touch – weekly calls or visits to the office and how often these should be undertaken.

Ensuring managers are sufficiently trained to recognise the trigger signs that the work environment is not right, the employee is overworking, is experiencing stress or has withdrawn from the team.

Provide advice, guidance and support to assist home workers in building resilience and empower them to look after their own health and wellbeing.

Hybrid Working

As employers adjust their plans⁸ for the workplace, some are looking to develop hybrid working arrangement where employees attend the workplace periodically, while retaining homeworking capability for the majority of their working week.

Where employees make a formal request for hybrid working through a flexible working policy which is accepted, this will amount to a formal change to terms and conditions of employment. Hybrid working can also be undertaken on an informal basis without a contractual change.

Employers should make sure that employees and managers understand the differences and the implications of both, taking legal advice where appropriate on their specific contractual implications of hybrid working.

The new Flexible Working Act is due to come into force in early 2024 after being sent for royal assent in July 2023. This legislation will clarify employer and employee rights and responsibilities. RMP will release further guidance once this legislation has been released.

Summary

Homeworking arrangements require a documented framework, assessment, guidance and agreement between employer and employee, with ongoing communication, to operate effectively and reduce the risk of ambiguity over roles and responsibilities for both parties. There continues to be a significant number of workers that are home or agile working, many of whom did not originally consider or ask to be in this position. With homeworking seemingly here to stay, there is a real need to invest the required resources to effectively identify and manage home working risks.

If managed effectively, homeworking can be a productive and worthwhile option for many employees and employers, allowing them to get the best out of their working time and the organisation.

References

- 1 <https://www.acas.org.uk/homeworking-a-guide-for-employers-and-employees>
- 2 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/coronavirusandhomeworkingintheuklabourmarket/2019>
- 3 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/coronavirusandhomeworkingintheuk/april2020>
- 4 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/homeworkingintheukregionalpatterns/2019to2022>
- 5 <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/flexible-working/homeworking-questionnaire>
- 6 <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/flexible-working/planning-hybrid-working>
- 7 <https://www.acas.org.uk/working-from-home-and-hybrid-working>
- 8 <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/>

Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

Get in touch

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