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Risk control Homeworking



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Homeworking

Introduction

Homeworking covers a number of working situations, including outworkers or piece-work, incidental homeworking and agreed and defined regular homeworking. It is the shift from traditional office working patterns of being physically present in an office from “9 to 5” that is being adopted as a more productive way for the modern business to operate efficiently and more recently, to cope with the consequences of the pandemic. 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 an agile, dynamic and resilient organisations by introducing different ways of working flexibly. This reduces travel time and achieves a 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 office¹. However the impact of the pandemic has seen these figures rise dramatically this year, with the Office For National Statistics stating that in April 2020 “46.6% of people in employment did some work at home”² with 86% of these doing so as a result of coronavirus.

The Impact of COVID-19

Since the onset of the pandemic a large number of employees have suddenly found themselves to be home or remote workers by necessity rather than design. Cut off from normal daily face to face interactions while being forced to deal with the challenges of limitless connectivity, the pressure of constant availability, and the demands of video conferencing and a tech driven approach in this new world of work.

This can add an extra dimension to the effective management of homeworking, with it now being undertaken for roles that up until the pandemic were not considered as suitable or perhaps appropriate. Account of this needs to be incorporated within the risk management approach being applied.

As our understanding of the virus increases, attempts have been made to get the UK back to work with more specific guidance underpinned with the simple “Hands, Face, Space” message and the recent introduction of tiered alert systems to avoid a further UK wide lockdown. Control measures are increasingly regional and dynamic in nature, with employers and homeworkers having to respond in kind to ensure compliance and appropriate levels of protection.

As the pandemic has progressed it has become increasingly clear that these changes are likely to be medium - long term, offering no immediate prospect of a return to the previous, more social way of working. For many this may lead to increased levels of uncertainty, concerns regarding work security with increased levels of anxiety as employees try to prove their output and ongoing commitment. So in this new landscape what steps can you take to offer the best protection for your staff and your organisation?

Homeworking

Homeworking - as part of your operating strategy can bring many benefits to your business, attracting fresh investment and new talent. Office space costs are reduced, less time and energy is wasted on travel to and from the office and potentially your staff will have less sickness absence.

The dark side to the operation 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 to the rest of 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 some people may find motivation more difficult in these circumstances.

The employees’ home environment and circumstances may also not be suitable. A strong working relationship between employee and employer will help any homeworking policy implementation and mitigate against the risks that arise from the activity¹.

Homeworking Policy

The CIPD³ 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’. This could include a section dealing with employees that have recently become home or remote workers due to the requirements of pandemic restriction and /or revised risk management.

- Eligibility criteria
Clearly identify which roles are being delivered remotely as a result of the pandemic and which roles were otherwise identified as being suitable for homeworking
For those roles that have become homeworking in response to the pandemic you will need to demonstrate how this decision was reached, including what alternatives were available and/or offered
For other homeworking roles outline how the role was assessed, how approval is sought and granted and what criteria needs to be met by the employee to qualify as a homeworker.
- Roles and responsibilities
The expectations of the employee as a homeworker and how this differs from an office based employee.
- Health and Safety
The health and safety requirements that need to be met by the employee including display screen equipment requirements and notification to the employee of the employers' right to inspect the homeworking site. Ensure these reflect recent COVID-19 risk management best practice guidance.
- Wellbeing and Mental Health
Outline what steps you are taking to address the Wellbeing and mental health of homeworkers, including the support systems that are made available for these, including COVID-19 test, trace and isolation requirements, particularly as the pandemic continues.
- Data Security
Requirements on managing sensitive information outside the office, disposal of documents and compliance with data security policies at home.
- Equipment and supplies
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 for enforced homeworkers to help manage the risk of stress and anxiety they may suffer due to the increased reliance on new technologies.
- Linkage with other policies
Flexible working policy, equal opportunities policy 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 home workers or other people as a result of the work being undertaken within the home. With the sudden onset of homeworking for many and the corresponding adoption of ad hoc home workstation setups, it is even more 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.

The business could consider the production of homeworking guidelines and a checklist to support the process, with organisations such as the CIPD offering examples that can be used⁴.

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 website².

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 you will keep in touch – weekly calls, visits to the office while complying with local COVID-19 restrictions and how often these should be.

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

Provide advice, guidance and support to assist home workers build resilience and look after their own health and wellbeing, particularly during the ongoing pandemic.

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. This is an area that had developed rapidly over recent months with a significant increase in workers that are home or agile working, many of whom did not consider or ask to be in this position. With the pandemic showing no signs of allowing a return to the previous working face to face working patterns 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.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/coronavirusandhomeworkingintheuklabourmarket/2019>
- 2 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/coronavirusandhomeworkingintheuk/april2020>
- 3 <https://www.acas.org.uk/coronavirus>
- 4 https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/cipd-hr-inform-home-working-guide_tcm18-74193.pdf
- 5 <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/flexible-working/homeworking-questionnaire>
- 6 <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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