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Risk control

WFH Series: Stress Management for Homeworkers



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Introduction

While homeworking has become more prevalent over recent times, it should be acknowledged that the practice may not suit every employee, every job, or every organisation. Whilst the benefits such as reduced operational costs or commuting time may be very compelling, there are some drawbacks to the practice that need some consideration.

The initial switch from office to homeworking may adversely affected the mental health of some staff, however, the negative effect of the change in work location may subside over time for many as staff became more accustomed to working at home. We are in the relative infancy of homeworking on a large scale and so very little study has taken place in order to fully understand the impacts of long-term homeworking.

Homeworking Effects on Businesses

Almost all employees can request to work flexibly if they have been in employment with an organisation for 26 weeks or more. This is often referred to as 'making a statutory application' and can include homeworking. Homeworking isn't an automatic right for the employee as a number of factors are required to be taken into account by the employer. However, the employer must consider the request in a reasonable manner. If the employer does refuse the request it needs to be for one of the eight reasons outlined below:

- The burden of additional costs
- A detrimental effect on the ability to meet customer demand
- An inability to reorganise work among other employees
- An inability to recruit additional employees
- A detrimental effect on quality
- A detrimental effect on performance
- Insufficient work at the times when the employee proposes to work
- Planned structural changes

If an organisation decides to proceed and authorise an employee to work from home then it will need to be able to show that it has discharged its duty of care. Employers have a legal duty to protect employees from harm, and occupational stress is one of the many risks that should be considered.

If an organisation has five or more employees, it is required by law to conduct a risk assessment and record any significant findings. The risk assessment process should pay due consideration to any psychological effect that may be created by any change in work-related circumstances.

The business case for homeworking is well publicised and includes reducing organisational running costs and the utilisation of space more effectively. But what about the moral aspect of homeworking and the effects it has on the employee's mental health?

Loneliness can be a significant detrimental factor for employees who work from home¹.

Assess the Risk

Employees could be at their workstations for up to 8 hours a day or more by themselves in unsuitable conditions in regards to physical and mental wellbeing. Therefore the stressors of working from home need to be taken into account and be recognised and acted upon as early as possible.

An early step would be to assess if the job is suitable for homeworking, not only for the employee but for the business.

Employees who work from home may experience more difficulty when it comes to distinguishing work and personal life boundaries. They may also find it difficult to switch off and end their working day at a reasonable time compared to those who work in an office setting. In a study, 42% of those who worked from home reported frequent night waking, while only 29% of office workers reported the same experience².

The lack of communication from managers and work colleagues can leave an employee feeling isolated and with no instantaneous feedback on how they are performing.

Thoughts of where their career is heading may start to raise concerns and doubts that the company isn't managing their career effectively. Concerns of a lack of recognition and how they compare to their colleagues in similar roles may also play a part in how they feel they are perceived within the organisation and eventually may lead to questioning of their own self-worth.

The lack of control to undertake their work and the lack of support for the completion. In the same study, 41% of employees who worked from home often considered themselves highly stressed, compared to 25% of those who only worked within an office².

HSE defines stress as *'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'*³.

So what do organisations have to do?

Step 1 – Identify the risks

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have laid out six key areas to support organisations in their task of managing stress in the workplace and failing to do so can negatively impact on employee's health and wellbeing:

- 1 Demands – workload, work patterns, work environment
- 2 Control – how much say over the way you work
- 3 Support – encouragement and resources provided
- 4 Relationships – promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
- 5 Role – do people understand their role within the organisation and does the organisation ensure roles are not conflicting
- 6 Change – How organisational change is managed and communicated⁴

Step 2 – Decide who might be harmed and how

Organisations may have access to data which can be used to highlight good and poor practice. Organisations should try not to rely on only one data source as it may not provide an accurate picture. The following sources could be used to acquire the data required:

- Annual staff surveys
- HSE Management Standards Indicator Tool
- Questionnaires and surveys
- Sickness absence data
- Staff turnover rates
- Exit interviews
- Number of referrals to Occupational Health
- Information from existing staff forums

Step 3 – Evaluate the risks

Identify hot spots and priority areas. Check the results with employees.

Step 4 – Record your findings

When complete, findings should be communicated to employees and used to formulate an action plan.

Step 5 – Monitor and review

Consider the activities within the action plan. Seek to identify any underlying issues.⁴

Implement Controls

By implementing a homeworking policy so that both employer and employee are clear about what is expected, the first step to managing stress in a homeworking environment has been achieved. The policy should cover areas such as:

- Health and safety arrangements, including wellbeing
- Access to employees home to carryout risk assessments
- Performance
- Security
- IT Issues

As part of the policy development, the organisation will need to consider the role of the manager and the importance that they have in the process of maintaining a healthy productive workforce. Their role is vital for managing the issue of work related stress and are often the closest to see problems or issues arising at first hand.

Both manager and homeworker may require some formal training. The manager may require training on how to identify the symptoms of stress and may require a better understanding of what is required to effectively support homeworking staff. Some indicators of an individual who may be struggling include:

- Losing track of tasks and time
- Unable to complete tasks on time
- Suffering mood swings including anger, sadness, or irritability
- Suffering sleep disturbance or insomnia
- Exhibiting physical symptoms such as headaches, illness, or dizziness
- Experiencing anxiety or depression

Managing what is controllable through a risk assessment process is important. This will not just highlight an employee's issues but may highlight weaknesses in company polices which may need to be addressed.

Having sufficient communication channels for all matters concerning homeworking is vital. There are many tools available for managing the stress associated with working from home. Here are some factors for reducing stress:

- Focus on what can be controlled
- Recognise the pitfalls - time management / negative behaviour
- Breakdown and block out time to complete tasks
- Talk about expectations with the manager
- Ask for help and support

If homeworking is adversely affecting the health, safety and welfare of employees, then organisations should take appropriate steps to improve the underlying issues. Conducting the risk assessment for homeworking and updating it at regular frequencies is necessary to highlight any areas of concern.

There are four key ingredients for managing productive homeworking:

- Building trust between staff who work from home and their manager
- Agreeing how work performance will be supervised and measured
- Communicating effectively
- Training

Summary

The adoption of hybrid working strategies which involve significant elements of homeworking has presented some new challenges for organisations to address.

But those challenges are not insurmountable, and if managed effectively, can allow organisations to maximise the benefits of new working models.

Managers need to be able to communicate effectively and recognise the signs to look out for to manage stress effectively in their homeworking staff.

Over time, as the new working arrangements are normalised, all organisations need to ensure that their staff may be out of sight, but are never out of mind.

References

- 1 Is Your Remote Job Making You Lonely? Harvard Business Review. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2023/05/is-your-remote-job-making-you-lonely>

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- 3 Stress risk assessment, HSE. Available at: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/risk-assessment.htm>

- 4 How to tackle work related stress, HSE. Available at: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg430.pdf>

Further information

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For more information, please contact your broker, RMP risk control consultant or account director.



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