



## Risk control

### WFH Series: Stress Management for Homeworkers



In partnership with



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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 seem compelling, there are some drawbacks to the practice that need some consideration.

The initial switch from office to homeworking may adversely affect 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 to fully understand the impacts of long-term homeworking.

## Effects on Businesses

The statutory right to request flexible working applies to anyone legally classed as an employee<sup>1</sup>.

A person is likely to be legally classed as an employee if most of the following conditions apply:

The person:

- Is required to work regularly unless they are on leave
- Can usually expect work to be consistently available
- Cannot unreasonably refuse to do the work
- Receives paid holiday – they might also have additional contractual holiday entitlement
- Is subject to the employer's discipline and grievance procedures
- Is required to give notice to their employer if they want to take maternity, paternity or adoption leave
- Cannot get someone else to do their job
- Does not decide how, when and where they do their work (this is decided by the employer)
- Does not provide the materials, tools and equipment for their work (this is provided by the employer)

If most of the above do not apply, the person is more likely to be a worker or self-employed.

The right applies from the first day of employment.

The request for homeworking is often referred to as 'making a statutory application'. 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 to protect employees from harm, with occupational stress being 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 home<sup>2</sup>.

## 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 considered and acted upon as soon 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 experience<sup>3</sup>.

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 a lack of career progression due to a lack of visibility may arise. 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 in undertaking their work and a lack of support for its completion may also be harmful. 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 office.

HSE defines stress as *'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'*<sup>4</sup>.

So what do organisations have to do?

### Step 1 – Identify the risks

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE)<sup>5</sup> 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 communicated

### 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, trends, 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 for improvement.

### Step 5 – Monitor and review

Consider the activities within the action plan. Seek to identify any underlying issues that need addressing.

## Implement Controls

The first step is to implement a homeworking policy so that both employer and employee are clear about what is expected. 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 policies 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 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 modern employment 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

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

## 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

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



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