Risk control

WFH Series: Stress Management for Homeworkers

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Introduction

Homeworking was on a gradual, but slow, upward trajectory even before the lockdown. It was relatively rare in 1981 when only 1.5% of those in employment reported working mainly at home, but by 2019 it had tripled to 4.7%.

However, the number of homeworkers rose dramatically and during lockdown. The proportion reporting that they worked exclusively at home rose eight-fold from 5.7% of workers in January / February 2020 to 43.1% by April 2020 and, even though it had fallen by June 2020, it remained high (36.5%)[1.]

With homeworking becoming more prevalent, it should be acknowledged that homeworking may not suit everyone or every organisation and there may be some drawbacks to what seems to be becoming common practice.

One survey suggests that almost nine out of ten (88.2%) employees who worked at home during the lockdown would like to continue working at home in some capacity, with almost one in two employees (47.3%) wanting to work at home often or all of the time. Early evidence suggests that a massive return to pre-COVID-19 patterns of working is unlikely to happen as many employees have got used to and experienced the benefits of working at home[1]. In addition, productivity has not been seen to be adversely affected by the shift towards homeworking and organisations have recognised the potential financial benefits.

The initial switch from office to homeworking may have adversely affected the mental health of some staff, however, the negative effect of the change in work location may have subsided over time for many as workers became more accustomed to working at home or were moved back to their traditional places of work as restrictions were gradually eased. We are in the infancy of homeworking on a large scale and very little study has taken place in order to fully understand the impacts of homeworking over the long term.

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 includes 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, 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 stress is one of the many risks that should be considered.

If an organisation has fewer than five employees then it doesn't have to write anything down, but it is useful to do this anyway so that it can be reviewed later if something changes. If the organisation has five or more employees, it is required by law to conduct a risk assessment and record any significant findings.

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?

Facebook has gone on record to suggest that half of their staff are likely to work from home by 2030, however, Mark Zuckerberg has said "only one in five were enthusiastic about doing so and more than half want to return to the office as soon as possible"[3].

Some studies have shown that loneliness is one of the largest contributing factors for employees wanting to return to the office[6].

Assess the risk

Employees could be at their workstations for up to 8 hours a day 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 to be to assess if the job is suitable for homeworking, not only for the employee but for the business.

This document is part of the Working from Home series (WFH)

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. 42% of those who work from home report frequent night waking, while only 29% of office workers reported the same experience[4].

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 of the tasks can also add to the stress levels. 41% of employees who often worked from home vs. office considered themselves highly stressed, compared to 25% of those who worked only within an office[4].

HSE defines stress as *'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'*[2].

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 communicated [2]

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. Is there any underlying issues evident? [5]

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 on 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 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 strategies 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, organisations should take appropriate steps to improve standards. 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

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Further information

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