

What is Homeworking?

Out of sight should not mean out of mind - with more people now working from home, organisations must ensure they have considered any risks and put policies in place to protect their employees.

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) describes homeworking as, “A type of flexible working which depends on the agreement between an employer and employee.”

Homeworking involves working from home on a full or part-time basis. As such, the role usually involves working in isolation from other people and without direct supervision.

Health and Safety Requirements for Homeworkers

If you have more than five employees, you have a legal requirement to assess potential risks to their work environment before employment begins and record any significant findings. You must:

- Conduct risk assessments at the start of the employment or contract and when there has been a significant change to the home and review at least annually where there is no change
- Provide adequate information, instruction, training and supervision on health and safety matters
- Involve homeworkers when considering potential risks and discuss how best to control them
- Take appropriate steps to remove risks around the home wherever possible

Homeworking Risk Assessment

Before an employee can begin working from home, you must perform a risk assessment. This will prevent and control potential risks to your employees, and make sure you are meeting all the health and safety requirements.

Although your employees might be working from the comfort of their home, as an employer you still have the same duty of care for them as you do for your office-based employees. The risk assessment includes checking the workstation, space, lighting, flooring, ventilation, desk, chair, computer, data security, relevant insurance, electrical installation and anything else required for the employee to work safely and effectively.

The aim of the risk assessment is to highlight areas of concern in relation to health and safety while working from home, as well as to help you decide on the right level of supervision required for an employee's welfare.

It is your responsibility to provide any equipment needed for the employee to effectively carry out their responsibilities. The employee is responsible for resolving any home-related issues highlighted in the assessment.

The Pros and Cons of Working from Home

There are many factors that can influence your willingness to consider working from home as an option. The obvious question is whether the job can be done away from the office, if there is one.

EMPLOYERS - Benefits of Homeworking;

Increased productivity: Homeworking could increase productivity by cutting out commuting time and allowing more flexible working.

Reduced overheads: There are a lot of costs associated with the running of an office. Utility Bills and the rental of the commercial space are just a couple of the things that you could save money on when an employee works from home. However, there might be some initial costs incurred in terms of additional equipment and training.

Geographical location: When hiring an employee to work from home, you can cast a wider net for candidates. It can also help organisations who want to expand into different geographical locations.

Reputation: Most potential employees now check out company reviews from previous employees before applying for a job or accepting an offer. Being a flexible employer can also contribute to attracting potential employees as well as retaining current employees.
Benefits of homeworking for employees

Flexibility: A happy employee is a more productive employee. Although employees have to work the required hours agreed upon by all parties involved, they do have the option of deciding how they are going to spend that time to complete tasks and meet deadlines.

Good riddance to commuting: According to *Inside* magazine, the average employee spends nearly 200 hours commuting to and from work every year. Taking the worry out of commuting can result in higher productivity from an employee. Not to mention the costs they could save on not commuting, leading to happier workers.

EMPLOYERS - Disadvantages of Homeworking:

Managing remote working: Managers might consider it more of a challenge to manage and monitor remote workers than they would managing office workers. Before considering remote working, you need to know that you can trust the employee to carry out tasks efficiently and with minimal supervision.

Security: You also need to worry about the security concerns involved with employees working from home, especially if your business handles personal and private information. As the new GDPR law came into effect earlier this year, employees should be trained in the importance of keeping company and client information safe. Businesses found to be in breach of the new GDPR laws are liable to a fine of up to 4% of annual profit.

Communication: Another concern is the possibility of poor communication or miscommunication between employees and even clients. However, with all the communication platforms now available to us (such as email, phone, Skype, Zoom, etc) it has become much harder to excuse poor communication.

EMPLOYEES - Disadvantages of Homeworking:

Limited group input: Homeworking means an employee will not be able to get as much input on projects from other employees in the office. However, the popularity of some of the platforms mentioned above does make communication between employees easier.

Distractions: A recurring concern for homeworkers is the number of distractions available to them. However, with online monitoring tools like Jira and Trello you can keep an eye on tasks as your employee completes them. This helps you stay on top of employee productivity.

Development: Working from home can cause difficulty in development and training for employees. Employees learn from their colleagues and co-workers. The office is a natural environment to impart knowledge, share information and upskill.

However, with Skype and video conferencing keeping in touch is much easier than ever before. As of 2018, there is no reason why a remote worker should fall out of sync with the rest of your team.

Homeworking – Recognising and Managing Mental Health

There are courses on offer such as Mental Health First Aiders, to train staff to support colleagues both in terms of common problems such as anxiety or depression, through to suicidal-level distress.

Mental health first aid does not mean those individuals can act as professional counsellors, but rather it gives people the confidence to know how to deal with someone who is “not OK” on a first-aid basis, hopefully enabling them to offer support before the problem escalates.

The role of the mental health first aider is to:

- Spot the signs of mental ill health or distress
- Start a conversation with the colleague in question
- Listen non-judgmentally
- Assess the risk to the individual and to others, including the mental health first aider themselves
- Give reassurance and information, whether in terms of self-help strategies or encouraging them to seek professional help
- Escalate to the emergency services, if necessary
- Follow company procedures in terms of documentation, confidentiality, etc.

The support they offer could also be as simple as:

- Meeting someone daily for a cup of tea to make sure they are coping
- Supporting them into work so they meet a friendly face first thing
- Helping to rearrange to-do lists to manage workloads
- Reseating them in a quieter area within their working environment
- Taking some time out with them - for a walk at lunchtime, a coffee within their day

The organisation should support its mental health first aiders by:

- Arranging initial training
- Keeping their training up to date with regular refresher courses
- Naming a mental health champion — to help normalise conversations around mental health
- Creating clear referral and assistance pathways for the mental health first aiders to signpost
- Getting them known around the company — posting their names and pictures next to physical first aiders, for example, on the organisation's intranet, in kitchens, etc.

The impact of having mental health first aiders in the organisation should be measured. This could be done through, for example, monitoring any changes in the:

- Number of people accessing an EAP with mental health problems
- Documentation produced by the mental health first aiders and line managers according to procedures
- Rate of sickness absence and time taken to return to work
- Staff surveys

How to Administer Psychological First Aid

Psychological first aid can significantly reduce long-term emotional damage if employees are exposed to a traumatic event, such as a distressing workplace accident or a terrorist attack for example.

The following list of six essential steps may help to providing support after a traumatic incident.

1. Become knowledgeable about normal reactions to abnormal events

Faced with shock and distress, many people panic. Because they feel frightened and threatened, their instinct is to want to escape quickly or fight their way through it. Others can become almost paralysed with fear and unable to think or do anything.

It is important for those of us supporting employees in this state to understand that all these reactions are natural responses to unexpected, sudden and powerful experiences. By being aware of these different reactions, managers and colleagues are much more likely to stay calm and be in a position to help others without becoming overwhelmed by the intensity of their distress.

2. Empower, Educate and Encourage

Often when helping distressed people, we think we know what they need. However, one of the most important things managers can do is to empower employees to think about what they need for themselves.

In practice this requires empowering them to take a proactive approach to their own recovery. You can help by asking them what they most need to feel safe and secure again, and supporting them to meet this need for themselves. If they want someone they trust to collect them, encourage them to make the call themselves instead of doing this for them. It's important to be compassionate, but in a way that gets them to start functioning again.

3. Remember the ABC of Psychological First Aid

Just as there's an ABC for physical first aid:

- **A**irway
- **B**reathing
- **C**irculation

There's also an ABC for providing psychological first aid:

- **A**ttend to
- **B**asic needs with
- **C**ompassion

Psychological first aid is basically a series of helpful conversations that gently directs people to a position of stability, safety and calm. The most effective psychological first aid often comes from friends, family and colleagues who can use their familiarity with the distressed person to offer practical, non-intrusive support. We have a heightened alertness and a heightened memory for specific acts of kindness during stressful times. So if you can offer this immediate support it will be remembered.

4. Prepare Managers and Leaders

Although professionally trained trauma management specialists can be swiftly deployed to deliver appropriate psychological support in the aftermath of an incident, it's the immediate response of managers and leaders that has the biggest impact on the health of employees.

Anyone in a position of authority needs to know how they will approach internal communication as well as external communication. There is a plethora of training workshops on handling the media during and after traumatic events, but what about communication to staff?

Employees will be sensitive to the tone and words of the organisation at this time, so ensure that all communication is frequent, regular, factual, compassionate and action-focused. Otherwise social media communication will take over and become the authority voice.

5. Plan for the Unexpected

The very nature of traumatic events means they are bolts from the blue. No one could have anticipated them when they set off for work that morning. Even so, you can better manage the unexpected by developing a business continuity plan that not only looks at practical considerations — such as relocation of workspace and contacting next of kin — but also how best to meet the psychological needs of employees. The better prepared you are with training, information and practical resources, the more engaged and positive your staff will be during the recovery.

6. Create Support Networks

Most people are resilient and will recover with the support of family, friends and the wider community. That's why, as well as encouraging empowerment and education, any psychological first-aid strategy should also encourage people to connect with others for support.

The more engaged and interconnected people are during a normal working day, the more likely they are to support each other after a crisis. Employers can help create support networks by facilitating group discussions on topics of interest or concern to employees.

**For further information contact the
BPIF Health & Safety Team**

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