

10 Ways to Optimise Homeworking

According to results shown during the Government's daily coronavirus briefings, the number of people working from home has been almost four times higher than this time last year. The latest figures provided (29th May) indicated that for 5 days up to 24th May, 39% of the population was working from home, compared to around 12% in 2019.

Although this percentage may drop slightly, the requirement to work from home wherever possible means that, for the foreseeable future, homes across the country will become the new office workplace. Here, we outline 10 key considerations to optimise homeworking.

1. Conduct a Risk Assessment

Health and safety law requires that employers' do all that they can to ensure the wellbeing of their staff. This obligation has not changed due to the coronavirus pandemic, and so risks to employees need to be managed in the usual way.

Although generally low risk, homeworking is not exempt from the law, and so a risk assessment should be carried out on the home environment to identify hazards. The risk assessment will also need to establish any measures needed to prevent harm to the employee, as well as anyone else affected by their work (including other members of the household).

To assist this process, employers can remotely work through a risk assessment with members of staff or ask staff to conduct their own assessment using a template and guidance.

2. Evaluate how the Home Office is Functioning

As part of the risk assessment, ask staff to take some time to think about what is working, and what isn't. A quick way of doing this can be through the stop, start, continue, change model;

- Stop - what is not working?
- Start - what could be improved and could be implemented?
- Continue - What is working well and can continue?
- Change - What is working to a degree, but could be modified slightly to work better?

3. Create a Good Workspace

Managing occupational health is critical for a healthy workspace. Poor posture while working, or a lack of suitable equipment, can cause serious musculoskeletal disorders (MSD), including injuries to the back, neck, hips, knees or wrists.

With many workers converting kitchen tables and spare rooms into their new office spaces, there is a significant risk that employees could unwittingly be causing themselves long-term damage through poor seating choices or by not having the right equipment.

To ensure staff are protecting themselves from potential MSDs, employers should make an effort to find out about their staff's working conditions and check that everyone knows how to set up their workspace. As a minimum, the risk assessment will likely identify that everyone needs carry out a display screen equipment (DSE) check and know how to report any problems.

4. Encourage Activity

As well as sitting correctly, moving is also an important part of maintaining good musculoskeletal health. In the typical office, people are much more likely to have situations where they need to walk around — as part of their commute, to go to a meeting, or to speak to a colleague. Many of these workplace opportunities to stretch the legs have now been lost, so as well as taking breaks from looking at a screen (as required by the DSE regulations) encourage staff to take a regular breather to get up and move around. Setting a timer on a phone can be a relatively easy way to do this.

5. Create a Good Routine and Balance

Routine is important to help protect mental health and to provide continuity in the working day. Having clear start and finish times helps create work–life boundaries, as can creating a dedicated workspace.

Wherever possible, ask staff to mix up their to-do list to create balance in their work. Spending all day in video conferences can be extremely fatiguing, as can hours in front of a screen with no workplace contact at all. When evaluating new working arrangements, also ask staff to consider how they are finding the new methods of working.

6. Focus on Connectivity

Although Ofcom has reported that broadband speeds only dropped 1–2% during lockdown, for some, connectivity might still be causing problems.

As part of its “Stay Connected” campaign, Ofcom published a list of seven ways people can reduce the strain on the home internet. Suggestions include:

- Switching off the automatic WiFi connection on devices that are not being used
- Managing family activities so that data-heavy tasks (such as streaming films) are staggered
- Getting faster, more reliable internet by connecting an ethernet cable directly between the router and computer, rather than relying on the WiFi signal

7. Ensure Security

Working from home brings additional cyber security issues that organisations may not have considered. The National Cyber Security Centre provides comprehensive advice on what employers might need to think about, but a starting point would be to check that staff:

- Have strong passwords on their accounts
- Know how to use software, and that there are written FAQ documents and guidance
- Are using devices that are properly encrypted
- Know what to do to maximise the security of information and also what to do if any device becomes lost or stolen

If the organisation has any e-learning modules that cover cyber security, then consider asking all staff to carry out refresher training.

8. Consider Fire Safety

House fires are much more likely to occur when people are at home. When considering the home office, ways to prevent fires include:

- Only using laptops on a hard surface to prevent over-heating
- Making sure electrical equipment is turned off at night
- Avoiding “daisy-chaining”: plugging multiple extension leads together
- Not using counterfeit or incorrect chargers for electrical devices

Employees working from home should also check that they have working smoke alarms that are tested once a week.

9. Support Technology

Working from home might mean using new technology. Whereas some may find this an easy transition, others may find it harder. It is commonplace for staff to have previously asked nearby colleagues for help with IT issues, so check in to ask if there are any problems.

10. Improve Energy Efficiency

Working from home will bring additional costs, e.g. to keep the workspace warm. To help keep energy costs low, organisations could raise awareness of energy efficiency measures that staff can adopt. Some examples might include:

- Turning off standby modes on electrical equipment
- Turning lights off when not in use, and checking that energy-efficient bulbs are fitted only filling the kettle up with as much water as is needed when making a hot drink

CONCLUSION

With kitchens and spare rooms now becoming a more permanent office space for many, staff should take time to make sure the space is serving their needs and not causing any damage.

Employers can help with this in the following ways.

- Keeping people safe. Help the team carry out a risk assessment and provide information about DSE checks and fire safety
- Keeping people healthy. Encourage healthy behaviours such as moving around and developing good routines
- Checking technology works properly. Check in with staff regarding any equipment they might need, or technology they are having issues with
- Optimising the set-up. Give staff the time to think about what is working and what isn't and help staff to make their environment as optimal as possible in terms of saving energy and improving connectivity

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

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