

## **HOMEWORKING – IS IT FOR YOU?**

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Over the last few years there has been a huge growth in the numbers of people working from home or remotely. This has been caused by the increased use of the internet, email, broadband and mobile phones and recently introduced wireless technology facilitating the ability to work wherever we like.

There are many advantages to this type of working, which we can all recognise; the work-life balance is much improved without the stress of struggling to work every day on the congested road and increasingly disorganised rail systems. So much time is saved by not having to get up at the crack of dawn to get to the office on time and exhaustion is a distant memory as we leisurely wake up, eat a decent breakfast in the comfort of your kitchen then get the kids to school before sitting down to the computer to start the working day.

As long as we meet our targets and maintain our usual output, the hours we work need not be fixed if our work (and where relevant our manager) dictates, so that by working flexibly we have the time to do that bit of shopping for mum and attend that dentist appointment.

Having set up and completed a risk assessment on the work area to comply with health and safety what could be easier than working from home?

The reality is, however, that it doesn't suit everyone. Working from home can be very isolating. How many of us actually see our neighbours and friends during the day now – they are all out at work! Being alone day after day with no social interaction can be very lonely without that “over the photocopier” chat, gossip with the tea-lady or the office Friday pub lunch where we can look forward to the weekend.

For those individuals prone to depression working from home can become a nightmare with the distinction between work and home becoming a blur.

The saying “out of sight out of mind” might apply with a perception of being ignored by the company, if we are an employee, can set in, only getting the odd phone call to check that performance targets have been reached and to find out when the monthly figures will be sent in. In such circumstances a feeling of de-motivation and being undervalued can occur and lead to a drop in performance.

Working from home is ideal for self-starters who can discipline themselves to work set hours so that there is a clear distinction between work and home. Line managers of such individuals have to have the experience and skill to be able to manage at a distance and understand the issues that arise.

First and foremost, the type of work needs to be adaptable to home-working such as administration, freelance interviewing and sales.

The line manager needs to be able to encourage team interaction by organising team meetings at a single location on a regular basis to provide valuable information on what is happening within the business, any job vacancies and training & promotional opportunities. Perhaps there could be the occasional video conference where physical group meetings are not possible. Such get-togethers should be supplemented by weekly phone calls and emails to keep in touch.

The line manager needs to be able to communicate clear goals and the standards expected within the home-based role and be equipped with the tools for measurement and assessment of work quality to ensure that everything is satisfactory.

Security of information and data protection should be a high priority. A decision should be taken whether to give remote workers full or controlled access to network links using an IT security risk assessment. The issue of company laptops with encryption software, for example, would reduce the possibility of disaster with important corporate documents getting mixed up with the children's homework or theft from the boot of a car.

Also the installation of virus protection and guidelines on authorised use of additional software and prohibition of USB sticks and floppy discs to transport data should be essential.

Information on using secure servers and taking daily back ups should be incorporated into an IT security policy both for remote (and office) workers giving details on not sharing passwords, not opening suspicious email attachments and visiting work-related websites only. Clear instructions for not modifying any company spreadsheets and macros without authorisation can also help to provide guidelines on what is acceptable IT use.

Companies considering implementing home or remote working should think about running a pilot scheme to see if it is feasible and practical for business and individual needs before making a commitment. A policy should also be developed and communicated to the workforce to provide clear procedures in this area.

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