

IOSH Covid-19 advice

Managing remote workers



Institution of Occupational Safety and Health

In partnership with



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IOSH Covid-19 advice: Managing remote workers

Summary

Advances in technology have allowed a greater number of people to work away from the office. The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has forced an increasing number of employers to create more flexible working environments and find ways of managing workers remotely.

However, working from home or in other remote environments away from the office can raise a range of concerns around the safety, health and wellbeing of employees. This guide provides information when considering how to manage remote workers during pandemics and how to mitigate risks.

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Adapting to a new working environment

With workers operating remotely, it is important to provide advice on how to separate their work and home lives and allow some flexibility.

Lone working can create feelings of isolation, which can be stressful. Workers may have concerns about their health or feel anxious or fearful. They may also have concerns about what to do if they become ill while working at home.

It will be important for line managers to keep in regular contact with their workers, and for regular team meetings to be carried out. These can be done via remote working applications such as Zoom and team chat forums. Identifying the most appropriate remote working programmes or applications and familiarising yourself with how they work ensures regular lines of communication are maintained.

Workers may also be caring for relatives and children, so negotiating a 'lifestyle arrangement', or agreeing to rules around hours of working, shows you are empathetic to the needs of your employees.

Senior managers and line managers should keep track of Covid-19 updates via government and health authorities and keep their workers updated on any developments, especially with any plans for returning to the physical workplace.

If a worker has the virus, keep up to date with what stage they are at and measures they are personally taking to self-isolate. Keep looking out for advice by the health authorities as the worker may still be carrying the virus even though they have recovered.

If your organisation already has remote workers, ask yourself the following questions.

- How many workers are working from home?
- What's the geographical spread of workers working at home?
- What types of activity are involved?
- Are remote workers working from home or other locations?

This information will help when forward planning and managing your workforce effectively.

Prioritise and control workloads and deadlines

When working remotely, it can be difficult for workers to keep track of what is expected from them. Some projects may be brought to the forefront in terms of prioritisation, while other workstreams may be put on hold temporarily.

It is important when engaging with remote workers that you:

- **provide varied tasks** – try to offer some variety of work to allow dynamic thinking and working. This will help to provide fresh cognitive challenges and allow workers to feel stimulated, motivated and productive
- **prioritise workstreams** – make it clear and communicate effectively which workstreams are the priority, and which work can be de-prioritised temporarily. This will help workers focus on the tasks that matter most to the organisation and prevent them from feeling overwhelmed
- **allow flexibility** – allow workers take extra rest breaks if required and to address other concerns or issues alongside their remote working, such as childcare commitments. Ensure that work deadlines and timescales are reasonable. This will help to reduce stress.

Managing remote workers

Managing the occupational safety and health of remote and distributed workers is challenging, primarily because of the reduced opportunities for face-to-face contact.

Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, it can be difficult to capture fully the complexities of remote working environments, but strong leadership and clear communication streams will play a vital role in meeting the ongoing needs of workers who have become suddenly dispersed.

The challenges

Limited face-to-face contact with distributed and home workers makes it difficult to assess how well occupational safety and health (OSH) practices are being carried out.

Reduced access to organisational information also means that it is difficult for workers to stay familiar with OSH practices and procedures. Multiple or moving working locations can make it challenging to predict and control risks faced by workers.

In the case of Covid-19, many workers and organisations are facing uncertainty, and this can have a negative effect on workers' health, safety and wellbeing. Managing workforces remotely requires strong communication, effective use of technology and the requirement for flexible working.

Communicating with workers

It is important to establish strong lines of communication with workers during extended periods of remote working. This is essential for organisations of any size.

There will also be uncertainty around terms of employment and how stable people's jobs are in challenging markets. When communicating with workers, it is important to take opportunities to show transparency around how your company is managing its finances to ensure workers' jobs are protected. This can help to keep workers motivated and helps them to feel supported during difficult times.

Ensuring workers feel supported and have access to important information helps to maintain business continuity and reduces disruption to business processes.

It is important to:

- **keep in regular contact with remote workers** – this will help to avoid feelings of isolation and loneliness. It's a good way to ensure that workers are well and that they understand information and instructions presented to them
- **communicate the organisational plan** – be open and honest with all workers and ensure clarity. Explain what the organisation is doing to help protect its workers, their families and friends, and the organisation itself
- **use varied methods of communication** – this can include teleconference-based applications, which introduces a visual human interface, but can also include telephone, email or applications such as WhatsApp
- **use physical distancing for groups of people** – during extreme situations such as Covid-19, workers will need to conduct virtual meetings rather than meet face-to-face to prevent further spread. In rare circumstances where face-to-face meetings need to occur, it is important to follow the government's advice on physical distancing, making sure to keep a reasonable distance from one another
- **provide disability support** – ensure that coaching support and remote-based organisation still takes place for those who require additional support. Encourage workers to send photographs to highlight any potential issues or adjustment queries
- **set boundaries between working and non-working hours** – allow workers to disengage from work when they are required to. This can also involve agreeing varied or flexible working hours with workers. Avoid sending communications during this period unless it is an absolute necessity. This will allow workers to continue a healthier work-life balance
- **encourage workers to discuss wellbeing/mental ill-health concerns** – this can help to alleviate symptoms and prevent them from worsening. It also allows managers the opportunity to adopt preventative measures.

Managing remote workers

Key questions for senior leadership teams

In 'normal times', the senior leadership team will have a focus on issues such as work culture, employee engagement and delivery of corporate strategy. The Covid-19 outbreak has presented new challenges to executives in all areas of strategic leadership.

Workplaces need to ensure they are engaging with employees in a positive, transparent way and are providing regular updates on organisational objectives and key priorities.

Areas of focus should be on:

- **Work culture** – how is your organisation embedding a strong safety and health culture in its workforce?
- **Employee engagement** – how are you going to ensure you continue to engage and communicate with employees while they are working away from the office?
- **Managing health and wellbeing** – how can you take measures to protect the mental health and wellbeing of workers while they are working remotely?

When managing OSH practices for remote workers, senior leaders should ask themselves the following questions.

- Which existing OSH practices in your business can be modified to account for significant and sudden changes in work environment?
- What bespoke OSH practices can be embedded swiftly to ensure the safety and health of newly-dispersed workers?

Advice for line managers

If you are a line manager your workers will be looking to you for clarity, support and guidance. It is important that you make yourself available throughout the day for colleagues to check in with you at regular intervals.

You should provide:

- 1 competent and motivational leadership** – this reassures distributed workers during an unpredictable period of their working lives
- 2 regular and clear communication** – this needs to be from both line managers and OSH professionals to workers – and vice versa – and helps to maintain company culture and practices remotely
- 3 straightforward and adaptable procedures** – this provides workers with structure in an unprecedented working environment
- 4 up-to-date and easily available resources** – this equips workers at a time when clear information is required
- 5 establish monitoring and reporting systems** – this helps to both protect and empower workers.

The role of the safety and health professional

During challenging situations, OSH professionals are well-placed to provide advice and guidance within organisations and influence senior leaders on how to protect the safety, health and wellbeing of workers.

OSH professionals can also provide information and advice on general health and safety hazards which need to be considered. For example, there should be suitable access to the room you are working in, and you should make efforts to ensure good standards of hygiene are maintained.

Housekeeping, including adequate lighting, removing trailing leads and not using the floor or high shelves for storage, can also reduce health and safety risks in the home.

Sheds, garages, attics and cellars are not generally considered to be suitable working spaces for several reasons, including lack of security. They tend to have limited access, poor temperature and ventilation control and a lack of natural light.

A separate room or workspace, if possible, is the better option to prevent physical intrusions and domestic distractions. If this isn't possible, workers should ensure they set up their desks appropriately.

Managing remote workers

Conducting your own home working assessment

Organisations can train their workers in undertaking their own workstation assessments and letting managers and the OSH adviser know if there are any issues. It is important to ask remote workers to carry out a checklist or take a photo of their workstation so that managers can talk them through how to ensure their working space is adequate.

It's important to remember some workers may find it difficult to adapt to working in an environment with limited social contact, while others may find it harder to manage their time or to separate work from home life. It is important managers provide frequent updates and regularly communicate with workers so that they are made aware of any potential issues as soon as possible and can find practical solutions.

Advice on information gathering

During periods of uncertainty it is important to avoid 'fake news' and to ensure information is factual, clear and from reputable sources.

When advising workers about keeping themselves informed about the latest developments, make sure you:

- **provide clear and factual information** – help to deter workers from obtaining information from negative or unaccredited sources, such as social media platforms. Share information from official sources such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and other trusted sources
- **encourage workers to listen and follow public advice** – local governments will provide ongoing updates and general public advice. Organisations can reinforce such messages and ensure that the correct advice is distributed to their workers
- **advise on when to seek public health information** – advise workers to seek public advice at specific times during the day (once or twice a day) and from reputable sources. This can help organisations to supply positive information and messages.

For more information visit
www.iosh.com/coronavirus

Checklist for organisations

Here is a checklist for organisations to use to think about the health and safety risks of their workers.

Remote worker health and safety checklist		
Name of worker		
Issue	Comments/any actions required	Actions taken
When they are working?		
What they are working on?		
How are they being monitored and communicated with?		
Do the direct/line managers understand their responsibilities for the health and safety of remote workers under their control?		
Are there arrangements in place for providing remote workers with information, instructions and training?		
Are there standards or policies covering people working remotely? If so, have they received this information?		

Checklist for organisations

Remote worker health and safety checklist

Remote worker health and safety checklist		
Name of worker		
Issue	Comments/any actions required	Actions taken
Are there arrangements in place for maintaining workers' equipment, considering the needs of the worker?		
Are arrangements in place for monitoring the health and safety of the remote workers?		
What has been done to assess remote workstations?		
Has the organisation provided work equipment that takes into account the home environment?		
Have workers been given guidance on how to set up a computer workstation ergonomically?		
Have arrangements been made for controlling issues around lone working, stress and general mental health?		

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We set standards and support, develop and connect our members with resources, guidance, events and training. We're the voice of the profession and campaign on issues that affect millions of working people.

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