

# Home working

## Introduction

The Government puts the number of home workers in the UK at well over three million and is encouraging employers to be flexible as to where people work. This is a method of working which can be relevant to many jobs, but is not a specific job in itself.

As a definition, home workers are people who do the work they are employed to do either at home, or in other premises of their choosing.

Many of the hazards that might compromise health and safety while working at home will be the same as in the workplace, but there will be additional hazards.

This chapter helps employers to ensure that staff working at home are protected under health and safety law.

## The legal position

Legislation relevant to home working includes:

- Health and Safety at Work etc Act (HSWA) 1974
- The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (MHSW) 1999
- The Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations (DSE) 1992
- Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations (PUWER) 1998.

## Employer responsibilities

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974, employers have a duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of employees. Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, employers are required to assess all significant risks, which include risks to home workers. Employers must also make adequate arrangements for managing their control measures.

In addition, under the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992, employers are required to assess display screen equipment risks, ensure that workstations meet the minimum requirements, inform users, plan work for changes of activity/breaks, provide eye tests and provide health and safety training. The employer must also arrange a workstation assessment of all display screen equipment users, including those working at home.

Under PUWER, employers are required to ensure that all equipment used by people for work is suitable and safe and, importantly, that adequate training has been given.

## Employee responsibilities

It is not only the employer who has responsibilities under health and safety legislation. Under the HSWA, employees have a duty:

- to take reasonable care of their own health and safety, and that of other people who may be affected by their activities at work
- to co-operate with their employer to enable the employer to comply with health and safety duties
- to use all work items provided by their employer in accordance with the training and instructions they receive to enable them to use the items safely
- to inform their employer of any work situation that could present a serious danger to health and safety or of any shortcomings in the employer's health and safety arrangements.

## Risk assessment

In most cases, the employee's home office will require control measures to be put in place following the risk assessment. What the employer does then depends on factors such as how much time the employee is likely to spend working at home, and what the budget is.

Based on these factors the employer may do any of the following:

- agree with the employee how a laptop is to be used and that work may be limited to a certain number of hours per day
- purchase and install a similar workstation, chair and desktop computer to those used in the organisation's offices
- provide furniture and IT equipment from stock already in the office
- give the employee a budget and allow them to select items from a trusted commercial office furniture supplier
- conclude that the home is not suitable for work due to lack of space or other problems.

The employee should receive training in good ergonomic and safe working practices in the home office. This should cover:

- workstation set up and assessment
- how to adjust the chair
- how to adjust the workstation, where appropriate
- good posture

- avoiding unnecessary repeated stretching, bending, twisting to reach equipment and materials
- changing tasks and position regularly to vary posture
- taking regular breaks
- taking mini breaks
- performing regular, simple exercises involving fingers, wrists, elbows, shoulders, back, legs
- what to do if the symptoms of work-related upper limb disorders (WRULDs) are experienced.

However, it is not the employer's responsibility to show the employee how to use equipment they have been given by, or purchased directly from, a third party.

## Practical steps to home worker safety

Perhaps the single most important contributor to healthy working at home is the way the employee's workstation is set up. Many people already have a room or part of a room kitted out with desk and computer, but it is unlikely to satisfy a health and safety assessment. Additionally, many people assume it is acceptable to work on a laptop at the dining table, or sitting on a sofa. Although ergonomics and display screen equipment hazards are important, there are other risks present to home workers that are not always obvious.

### Lighting

Adequate lighting is very important if people are to avoid eye strain. Natural daylight is vastly preferable to artificial light. Adjustable task lighting should also be considered if good natural light is not present and for cloudy or dark days. Managers should remember that the older the employee is, the more light they will need. Vertical window blinds are good for eliminating glare on sunny days and avoiding unnecessary heat gain. Workstations should be positioned side-on to the main source of natural light. Facing a window will expose the user to glare and put the keyboard and monitor in shadow, while sitting with a window behind will cause glare on the screen.

### Dehydration

Home workers will not have the advantage of chilled water fountains like many of their work-based colleagues, but taking sufficient fluid is very important if people are to maintain their mental capacity. Remind home workers to keep a bottle of water on the desk and to ensure they drink at least two litres of water each day, or more in hot weather. Homes are often kept warmer than offices in winter and employees should be advised on how to ensure the atmosphere is not too dry.

### Noise

Environmental and background noise is often an issue in the home. Other members of the family may be at home while the employee is working, so music and loud conversation are possibilities. Traffic and aircraft noise may be a nuisance and neighbours may also cause noise. Some compromise needs to be reached, especially if the individual needs to concentrate on detailed work or use the telephone a lot. Otherwise it may simply not be possible for the employee to work at home.

### **Lone working**

An aspect of home working that many people fail to appreciate is that in most cases the employee will be working alone. Lone working in many scenarios is recognised as a risk that needs to be controlled. Employers of social workers, district nurses, housing officers, people working in petrol stations and those who work outside normal hours, like cleaners or security guards, are today much more aware of the need to assess these risks. But home workers also face hazards due to working alone. What if the individual becomes ill during the working day, falls down the stairs or receives an electric shock?

A formal 'keep in touch' process (depending on the type of risk assessed) should be negotiated alongside new employment contracts or prior to the employee starting home working. See the chapter on lone working.

### **Stress**

Both employer and employee need to understand and discuss possible downsides before any agreement to work at home is reached, certainly on any long-term plan to work from home. In order to avoid unnecessary stress, discussions should cover points such as the following:

- is the individual able to cope with the isolation of working without day-to-day support from colleagues and supervisor?
- how able is the employee to solve routine problems thrown up by IT, telephone calls, the work itself?
- will the home situation impact on their ability to do the job? Discuss partners, childcare, elder care, pets, neighbours, environmental noise
- what agreement is to be reached on hours? Will the individual be expected to work specific hours, and will it be acceptable for the employer to contact them out of those hours?
- will work be controlled by automatic means, say by software? How much control will the individual have over the pace of work? This can be a significant cause of stress
- how will the work and the individual's performance be assessed? Are both parties happy with the arrangements?
- what training will the individual need?

On an ongoing basis, much stress can be avoided by maintaining good contact with home workers. Managers can do this in a number of ways, such as:

- remembering home workers when setting up team meetings, briefings and training days
- including home workers on training courses
- emailing and telephoning home workers every day, ensuring there are reasons for permanent home workers to come into the office regularly so they maintain informal contact with their colleagues.

## More information

Health and Safety Executive – [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)