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Coronavirus and Home Working

Introduction

Now that the governments covid-19 epidemic plans are in full swing, many employers are having to consider home working for employees, where possible, for the very first time. Not only is it the first time, many organisations have considered this, but there is also no guidance from the government as to how long this may be for, it may be a month, for some workers it may be three months or it may well be for longer.

Insurance

As an employer, you first need to consider the practicality of staff working from home and as we all know, this means a call to our insurance providers, to make sure we are covered for the activities we plan to undertake. Low risk activities such as office work may well be covered, but what about activities involving production activities, stock or visitors.

Is the product insured, do you need public liability insurance, do employees have business use insurance on their vehicles? Business use insurance will be required on employee vehicles, if used for any form of work activity as they are based from home, they no longer commute to work.

All these questions need answering, at the initial stage as part of your risk assessment process.

As an employer, you should tell your employer’s liability insurance company that you’re arranging remote working for your staff. It’s also a good idea to recommend that your employees discuss working from home with their home and car insurance providers, to make sure they have suitable cover too.

Risk Assessment

Having checked and sorted out relevant insurance cover, employers need to consider the health and safety implications and what for some, may be the daunting thought of risk assessments.

The main risk assessment issues an employer will need to consider are:

- The employees work environment.
- Any work equipment provided to the employee.
- Lone working arrangements.
- Fire implications of home working.
- Mental health and wellbeing.

Employees can complete a ‘Home Worker Self-Assessment Form’ to assist in the risk assessment process, but as an employer, you must conduct a general assessment for home working, which may need amending for some individuals and supplementing for others such as new and expectant mothers or disabled workers.
Working Environment

As an employer you will have to negotiate the very fine line between complying with your legal duties, by taking reasonable precautions and the possibility of invading your employees' personal space, their home.

You should try to address the balance by using the little used health and safety phrase, common sense.

As the employer, you do need to assess the risks of issues such as available space and lighting, by making sure the home worker has enough room to work and there is some form of suitable lighting.

This only means ensuring that as a minimum, there is enough room for work to be carried out, including space for other equipment e.g. printers and storage of work materials. It is important to remember, not everyone’s home, may be suitable for home working and now, there has been no relaxing of health and safety duties, because of the epidemic. It is not recommended that you let staff choose sheds, garages, attics and cellars, because these spaces often have limited access, poor temperature or ventilation control and a lack of natural light.

Own Computer or Own Equipment

As the coronavirus should only cause temporary home working, it may be ok for home workers to use their computer own equipment to log in to work networks / emails via a VPN connection. Also consider document sharing systems to facilitate remote working and collaboration.

If, however you do not allow this or the home working arrangements are likely to be longer term, you will need to consider establishing more ergonomically suitable Computer workstations.

You should apply similar furniture and equipment standards to a home workstation as you would in an office, while the location has changed, the work activities haven’t.

A suitable desk and adjustable chair should normally be required, but the reality is where are these going to fit and how will they get to the employees' home.

Because of this, your risk assessment needs to recognise the hazard of poor ergonomics and you need to put in place suitable alternative controls. e.g. work on kitchen/dining room table, make the available seating as comfortable as possible and take regular breaks, every hour. A five-minute break every hour is better for the body than a 15-minute break every two to three hours.

If an employee is based at home and uses a laptop regularly for long periods at the same workstation, you’ll need to provide accessories, such as a mouse, keyboard, screen (or laptop riser) or docking station. The specific details should be determined through the workstation assessment, taking account of the user’s needs, space restrictions and how long they spend at the computer. Accessories such as footrests, document holders and task lighting may be necessary – this will be determined by your risk assessment.
Electrical Safety

You also need to consider how you'll carry out scheduled and breakdown maintenance of work equipment. You can help reduce frustration and wasted work time by providing: - good instruction and training on how to use software and manage minor equipment failures along with access to a dedicated IT helpline.

Portable electrical items – from laptops to mobile phone chargers – require regular inspection to check that they’re still safe to use and some equipment may also need combined inspection and testing, (Portable Appliance Testing) PAT.

IT equipment often requires only visual inspection by a competent person. This could be done by the employee (after suitable training).

Clearly you can’t be responsible for the whole domestic electrical system at your employee homes, however you do need to make sure it is safe if you have concerns about electrical safety or the availability of sockets (leading to trailing leads or over-use of extension leads), you’ll need to agree with the employee how these hazards will be controlled.

Lone Working

Due to the coronavirus there is every possibility home worker will be at home with family members, however some may not, meaning you still need to assess the risk that an employee might suffer an accident or illness while they’re working alone.

As part of the risk assessment, make sure that all lone working team members have information on how to work safely and a system for checking the safety of workers who are working alone.

As a minimum, the employee should email, call or text at the beginning of the day and at the end of the working day to an agreed contact or ‘buddy’ to say they are starting or finishing for the day. This human contact is an important measure in avoiding feelings of isolation.

Fire Risk

The fire implications of home working need to be considered as part of the over all risk assessment process, but as previously pointed out should not be overly intrusive.

As an employer you need to ensure that home workers have only the basic fire safety measures in place such as smoke detectors. Other risks from electrical appliances you are providing should be addressed under work equipment and electrical safety.
Mental health and wellbeing

Home working hazards extend beyond the physical work environment used. Safe working arrangements are also important. Employees may find it difficult to adapt to working in an environment with little, limited or no social contact, while others may find it harder to manage their time or to separate work from home life, especially in a home potentially full of individuals self-isolating.

For these reasons it's important to consider both competence and flexibility in areas such as time- and self-management as these are extraordinary circumstances.

It is vital to maintain good channels of communication and maintaining open means of contact with remote workers to minimise potential feelings of isolation. How you do this will depend on the number of remote workers you're dealing with and what they're doing, but you should consider: - regular one-to-one via video conferencing between remote workers and their colleagues or line managers.

Other controls for maintaining good mental health and wellbeing for home workers can include:

- Good access to information, such as policy documents, internal contact directories and essential files. This can usually be achieved through connecting online to the organisation’s server.
- Access to helplines for support in dealing with software problems and equipment failures
- Procedures if information technology systems fail.
- Identifying people as key contacts who have specific responsibility for routinely contacting remote workers and acting as their first port of call.
- Providing contact details of key people such as employee representatives, health and safety advisers and human resources officers.

Monitoring Home Worker Health and Safety

Employers need to ensure that they are putting in place clear, consistent management systems to reduce risks to home workers, but this can only be achieved through regular monitoring.

By monitoring effectively, you can be sure risks are being controlled adequately and the systems are effective. This monitoring is not for time management or productivity, this is purely to ensure health and safety arrangements are completed.

Home worker line managers should make regular enquiries to make sure the employee is following safe practices and not experiencing aches or symptoms of stress. Employers should review risk assessments regularly and involve the employees affected.

Because of the governments coronavirus controls, it will not be practical for managers to visit home workers, therefore employees could complete a regular self-assessment of risk, which their line manager must check and discuss with them on a regular basis.
Take good actions now, so you can position for recovery and growth when the COVID-19 crisis passes over.

For support with anything in this checklist, contact our 24-hour helpline or visit: www.parkcity.co.uk/covid-19-resources-for-business.html