

Agile working: Get up to speed quickly

Change can be challenging at the best of times. This crisis has meant many organisations have been forced into creating virtual teams overnight, often with people who have never worked from home before. So, here's a quick guide to developing healthy, happy and productive homeworking individuals and teams.

Developing a homeworking policy

It's not only important you have one, your employees need to familiarise themselves with it, too. It should detail:

- How your employee can request home working: the process and possible outcomes
- What support an employee can expect to enable them to work from home
- What running costs and expenses you will cover
- Rules around taxation
- Requirements, cover and any potential restrictions as a result of mortgages, leases and insurance
- How performance will be monitored, managed and supported
- Obligations around information, data security and confidentiality
- Health and Safety requirements and considerations

To be clear, this is so much more than an administrative tick-box; this is about creating and communicating a culture of care.

Risk assessments

Employment and Health and Safety laws, in the UK, do not differentiate between working in an office or from home. Whilst it won't always be possible to complete a risk assessment – particularly in the current climate – it's important that you set out the requirements of working in a safe space.

- As a basic minimum, you should ask your employees to confirm over email that they have a safe space to work. That said, could line managers complete a basic assessment via a video call?

Security and confidentiality of data

Your GDPR obligations do not disappear because of Covid-19. You should consider what steps and or restrictions you will need to put in place to protect personal data if it's being taken off-site. If you are requiring employees to use their own devices, such as PCs and tablets, you need to consider how this will affect confidentiality requirements and take any necessary cyber-security precautions as a result.

Practical considerations and expenses

Think about what resources employees may need. This may be equipment, an office chair or basic stationery supplies. Items like phone, broadband, stationery, postage are all legitimate expenses. Be clear about what you will and will not cover. And be clear about how employees should claim. In the current financial climate, some organisations are deferring payment of expenses until a return to normal office working and the liquidity of the business. If this is a decision you intend to make, it's important to clearly communicate this to your employees from the start.

Setting up a working space

Homeworking is in place for the foreseeable future. Some may have never worked in this way before. Help your employees think about where a suitable space might be. Here are some practical things to think about:

- Natural light: not only is it a better working environment but it can also help combat fatigue
- Spending a lot of time on calls? If others are in the house, consider a room with a door
- If possible, and space permitting, try to work in rooms that aren't part of your daily routine or spaces where you normally relax
- If space is tight, consider delineating home and work in other ways e.g. working at a different space on the dining room table to where you'd sit to eat your meal

Unless an employee lives alone, keeping disruption to homelife and work-life is going to be difficult, in lockdown. Others will inevitably be at home, too. We need to manage expectations accordingly. And remember: Tidy space, tidy mind!!

Health & wellbeing

This is going to be key as we all try to keep calm and work through this. It will be super important to check in with employees and colleagues regularly to ensure that they feel supported. For some people, working from home may cause increased levels of stress, trying to balance the demands of work, home, dependents/childcare and the uncertainty that we all face ahead. Others may not cope well without the structure and routine or with having to work in isolation. You may experience employees working longer hours as they no longer commute to and from work. Below is a list of practical steps to promoting health and wellbeing at home:

- Encourage people to use their usual commuting time or lunch times to adopt some self-care practices. Maybe a walk or an online exercise class?
- Have you thought about how you can continue their development? How about asking your team to watch the same Ted Talk or read a specific article and then have a virtual discussion about it?
- Think about adopting virtual breaks – a video conferenced team coffee or lunch, where you talk about anything other than work?
- Encourage your team to take regular breaks, move away from their working environments, get some air. It's no different to being in the office and time away from the screens will boost productivity

- Encourage your team to create new routines to try and give those that need it some structure. Regular team meetings and one-to-ones will help and enable employees to remain connected. Simple things like to-do lists and getting up and dressed for work (not necessarily in a suit!) can help people focus on the day ahead
- Try to think about types of work your employees are delivering. Could they team up?
- Do you have existing wellbeing practices that can be adopted virtually e.g. office meditation or yoga that could be accessed online?
- Do you have an employee assistance programme? Now would be a good time to remind employees they have access to it
- Think about ways in which you can recognise and reward employees. Get creative. It doesn't have to be financial. A shout out on LinkedIn, a day off or an e-card could all help to boost morale

The key with all of this is to keep connected and, wherever possible, stay upbeat and have fun. Everyone will experience different emotions and challenges at different times and it's about understanding and supporting them as individuals as well as teams. **Don't make assumptions about what people need – ask them!**

Ways of working

As both leaders and employees, this will be a new way of working (whilst you might be familiar with working from home, you may not have experienced your whole team or company doing the same, before). It's important to be kind and patient with each other and reach out to those that might be living and working alone.

Be clear around your expectations of individuals and teams and back them up in your actions. If you want to encourage employees to use their morning commute-time to adopt self-care practices, for example, then don't email or call, during that time! Are there core times that you need people to be available for? Or could you allow people to work whatever hours they need, providing they deliver as required?

Flexibility is an important consideration for anyone with children or other dependents, right now. Could employees work their hours early in the morning or late at night or even over a weekend in lieu of weekday working, if necessary?

The key to everything is always going to be communication and in this current climate, we need to do it regularly, so people feel reassured, informed and engaged. We all know that the grapevine can work in any format. Now is a time to keep gossip and speculation to a minimum. If you've got nothing to tell people, then that's what you need to be telling them.

If you require further clarity around any of the issues outlined above, then please do not hesitate to get in touch:

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