Out of 'site', out of mind?

Managing office teleworking in the 21st century

Advances in information technology mean that more and more people are working away from the office. Teleworking has many advantages – including reduced costs for employers and greater flexibility for employees – but it also raises new health and safety concerns. Our guide explains how to protect your staff and improve efficiency by managing the risks sensibly.

What is 'teleworking'?

Teleworking isn't a job, but a way of working 'at a distance', using information technology to allow employees to undertake work away from the employer's premises. Teleworkers can be based at home, in a location not far from home, or can be mobile and connected, either by wire or wirelessly, from anywhere in the world. Teleworking has increased dramatically with the growing use of information technology. In particular, the use of portable equipment – laptops, palmtops, mobile phones – means many people now find their job includes teleworking to some extent.

Teleworking offers many advantages to the employer and employee, by reducing costs of accommodation and travel, allowing flexible working and improving work efficiency. However, teleworking can bring its own health and safety hazards, from working in isolation to a lack of control over the work environment. Organisations involved in remote working need policies and procedures to ensure the hazards are managed effectively. This IOSH guide covers some of the health and safety management issues that employers and their health and safety advisers need to consider when developing a teleworking policy. Help on other aspects of managing teleworkers can be found in some of the publications listed at the end of the document.

Out of 'site', out of mind? focuses on home-based and mobile 'office' work and, though it's based on UK standards, it addresses issues found anywhere.

Office teleworking – headlines

- Teleworkers are people who:
  - work from home
  - work at other employers' offices
  - work on the move

- As well as the traditional risks to people who use computers, this guide looks at:
  - setting a healthy work–life balance
  - coping with 'information intrusion'
  - handling isolation issues for people working in their own homes
  - agreeing a lifestyle contract with teleworkers

- You also need to consider risks from:
  - driving at work
  - personal security outside the office
  - working alone

- You need to monitor the health and safety of teleworkers:
  - to ensure the changes you've made are effective
  - to keep up with developments in how teleworkers operate
  - to reflect best practice

Risk assessment

You'll need to look at the risks from both perspectives – your organisation and the individual teleworker.

It's best to start at the organisational level:
- how many staff are teleworking and how many are likely to be doing so in the near future?
- what's the geographical spread of teleworkers?
- what types of activity are involved?
- are teleworkers working from home, from other work locations, or travelling from place to place?

The way you manage health and safety risks will depend on all these factors – our 'Audit checklist for office teleworking' will help you assess your current situation.

You need to consider risks associated with the use of computers and work equipment, stress, lone working, manual handling and so on. The assessments need to take account of the specific work environment and needs of the employee, so a major consideration will be how individual assessments are to be managed when there's a large number of teleworkers. The line manager or a trained assessor can visit teleworkers working at fixed workplaces to carry out assessments. Alternatively, you may need to train teleworkers to carry out their own assessments, with the manager or trained assessor visiting only where there are specific problems that the teleworker can't deal with, or to carry out sample monitoring checks. Checklists and/or interactive computer-based packages can lead inexperienced staff through the risk assessment process. Asking the teleworker to provide a plan or photo of the workstation can help the manager check that the assessment is adequate. Health and safety advisers can provide guidance on the best way to manage assessments, assist with training and provide advice on specific issues. Our 'Feedback checklist for office teleworkers' and 'Assessment checklist for office teleworking' can help inform the risk assessment process.

The main risk assessment issues that need to be considered are:
- work environment
- work equipment
- work-related stress
- travelling
- working alone.

Work environment

Working from home
There's a fine line between taking reasonable precautions and invading personal privacy. However, issues such as available space and lighting should be risk-assessed. As a minimum, there should be enough room for work to be carried out, including space for the workstation, ancillary equipment (eg printers, fax machines) and storage of materials. If the employee is working permanently from home, they should ideally use a separate room. This reduces physical intrusion into the home, helps keep domestic interruptions to a minimum and reduces risks to other people at home (eg young children). If the room is lockable, so much the better – this improves the security of your equipment and data.

Sheds and garages are not generally recommended for teleworking because of inadequate controls over security and the working environment. Care should also be taken when considering attics and cellars, because these spaces often have limited access, poor temperature or ventilation control and a lack of natural light.

General health and safety hazards need to be considered by both the employer and the teleworker because employers have little direct control over the home workplace. There should be suitable access to the work room and the employee needs to ensure good standards of housekeeping, including adequate lighting, removing trailing leads and not using the floor or high shelves for storage.

If the house is not suitable, you could consider setting up, or becoming involved in, a local 'telecottage'. Telecottaging consists of a number of employees teleworking from a satellite workplace. It has the advantage of helping to reduce social isolation while still giving some of the flexibility of teleworking, although the employee will still have some travel and the employer must continue to bear the expense of accommodation. In the case of a telecottage, you have complete control over the working environment to ensure it's healthy and safe.

If you specifically recruit someone for a teleworking job, it's relatively easy to set minimum requirements for their workspace. More often, however, employers try to free up office space by asking existing employees to spend more time working from home, or employees, equipped with portable computers, ask to work from home. If someone is working from home only part of the time, the assessment of whether the home provides a suitable workplace should take this into account.

Working at other employers' workplaces
It should be easier to ensure a suitable work environment when an employee is based at another employer's workplace than if they're working from home. However, this shouldn't be assumed. Where an employee will work

regularly at the same workplace, there should be a formal agreement on what aspects of the employee's health and safety management each employer will take responsibility for. The agreement must ensure, as a minimum, that a suitable workspace is provided and emergency arrangements are clear, and it must specify who is responsible for conducting risk assessments and providing workstation equipment.

Travelling from place to place
In this situation the employee will probably be using a laptop computer in various locations (eg on the train or in a hotel room or café). You should try to minimise the need for this kind of activity, but where it's necessary, you should train your employees to avoid prolonged work in unsuitable environments, to set up the workstation as ergonomically as possible and to take frequent breaks from using their laptop.

Work equipment

You should apply similar furniture and equipment standards for a home workstation as you would in an office. A suitable desk and adjustable chair will normally be needed. These should be ergonomically designed to reduce risks of musculoskeletal problems. Allowing employees some choice in style will enable them to choose equipment that suits the décor of their house.

You may need to provide accessory equipment, such as task lighting to supplement domestic lighting.

Computer workstations
Permanent computer workstations need to be competently assessed and legally compliant as a minimum. Accessories such as footrests and document holders may be necessary – this will be determined by the workstation risk assessment.

If the employee is travelling from place to place, their equipment needs to be light and portable. In such cases a laptop is typically provided. Laptops can themselves present a hazard, as they have limited adjustability. Minimising the amount of time spent using a laptop, and taking regular rest breaks, will help.

If an employee uses a laptop regularly for long periods at the same workstation, you will need to provide accessories, such as a mouse, keyboard, screen (or laptop riser) and docking station. This should be determined on the basis of the workstation assessment, taking account of the user's needs, space restrictions and the time spent using the computer. Flat screens and wireless technology can be helpful, particularly where space is limited.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has produced guidance on computer workstation assessment – see our further reading section.

Maintenance of equipment and electrical safety
You need to consider how scheduled and breakdown maintenance of work equipment will be carried out. You can help reduce frustration and worktime wasted by providing:
- good instruction and training on the use of software and managing minor equipment failures
- a dedicated helpline
- a procedure for returning items via a courier
- a supply of spare items to replace faulty equipment temporarily.

Alternatively, it may be possible for an IT service group to visit employees at their homes to carry out maintenance and repairs.

Portable electrical items – from laptops to mobile phone chargers – require regular inspection to ensure they are maintained in a safe condition. Some equipment may also need combined inspection and testing. IT equipment often requires only visual inspection by a competent person. This could be done by the employee (after suitable training) or during monitoring visits. Choosing low-voltage or double-insulated equipment means the need for regular electrical testing can be minimised. The HSE has published guidance on electrical safety in offices – see the further reading section.

Clearly you can't be responsible for the whole domestic electrical system. Nevertheless, if there are concerns about its 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.

Transporting equipment
Manual handling hazards will be a significant consideration in determining the suitability of work equipment for mobile workers. The advantages that smaller, lightweight equipment may have in reducing manual handling risks need to be balanced against potentially increased ergonomic risks in using such equipment. To reduce carrying of unbalanced loads by hand, you should consider providing backpacks or wheeled trolleys. Employees should always be given some choice in the type of equipment chosen.

Members of staff may need to transport additional items, such as brochures and files. Manual handling risk assessments will be necessary to determine how any risks will be controlled. Depending on the assessment, you may need to consider:

- reducing loads
- using a wheeled case or trolley
- providing instruction in good lifting techniques.

A wide range of HSE publications give guidance on manual handling assessment – the most relevant ones are listed at the end of this guide.

Work-related stress

Teleworking hazards extend beyond the physical work environment. Working arrangements are also important: for example, some employees 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. For these reasons it's important to consider competence in areas such as time- and self-management at the recruitment and selection stage, or before allowing existing employees to work from home.

Employees need to be aware of issues of time management and social isolation and that working from home isn't always an easy option. Those who apply to work from home thinking that it will give them an opportunity to juggle their work around a busy home life may find that the opposite is true, as it can be difficult to turn off the computer and close the office door at the end of the day, especially when deadlines are looming. Teleworkers may be tempted to work longer than normal hours, due to the lack of direct supervision.

'Information intrusion' is a curse of the modern age. The insistent ring of a mobile phone is difficult to ignore. The sheer volume of email can mean that individuals feel they have to deal with it on a daily basis – even when 'not working'. Palmtop and wireless technology can exacerbate this.

Employees should be given some practical training and tips on how to separate their work and home lives. Simple things like installing a dedicated telephone line for work, which is switched to an answer phone at the end of the working day, can help. It may be appropriate to negotiate a 'lifestyle contract' with the teleworker. This involves formally agreeing ground rules relating to childcare, hours of work, access to the office and use of mobile communications. The organisation should monitor this – for example, the manager could make enquiries during one-to-one meetings to ensure teleworkers are managing their work–life balance effectively.

The issue of 'lone working' is also a major consideration for employees working at home and travelling. All teleworkers (including those working at another employer's workplace) risk feeling isolated, and some people can find this stressful. They may also have concerns about what happens if they have an accident or become ill while working alone. Workers who travel on their own may be worried about the risk of assault, particularly if they're carrying valuable equipment.

It's important to maintain good communication systems and formal means of contact with the employer to minimise feelings of isolation. How this is achieved will depend on the size and nature of the teleworking situation, but you should consider:
- regular one-to-one meetings with the line manager either at the employee's house or an agreed location
- regular meetings between teleworkers and co-workers – these give employees the opportunity to network and get to know each other. They can also be used to deliver training or reinforce the organisation's standards
- requiring teleworkers to attend the office once a week to ensure continued familiarity with corporate systems and with personnel at the office
- dedicated phone and/or ISDN lines
- 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. However, bear in mind that connections can be frustratingly poor or slow, particularly if it's not possible to use broadband
- access to the organisation's intranet site or a secure area of the Internet for employees
- access to helplines for support in dealing with software problems and equipment failures
- online meetings or virtual discussion forums, tele- or video-conferencing
- identifying individuals as key contacts who have specific responsibility for routinely contacting teleworkers 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
- including teleworkers in out-of-work social occasions and celebrations and in the circulation of company newsletters and updates.

Travelling

Driving
Employers have little control over public transport systems, but you can take steps to reduce road risks when driving. You should consider:

- encouraging employees to use trains and planes – they're safer than being on the road
- ensuring employees are competent and capable drivers by regularly checking their documentation and, where necessary, providing additional driver training or health checks
- making sure that vehicles are safe for work use, and especially that:
  o they're suitable for the work, taking account of the driver's comfort, the vehicle's safety features and the need to carry additional work equipment
  o there are suitable arrangements for maintenance, including requiring drivers to carry out regular safety checks
  o an emergency breakdown service is provided
  o safety equipment (eg first aid kit, fire extinguisher, reflective jacket and warning triangle) is provided.
- planning journeys thoroughly and setting work schedules that are realistic and flexible, so that employees do not feel under pressure to drive too fast, for too long or when weather conditions are poor
- ensuring that employees are clear about your expectations in relation to safe driving standards – such as your policy on using mobile phones or drinking and driving (some companies insist their staff drink no alcohol at all before driving).

Employees can't concentrate on driving while conducting business discussions on a mobile phone and it's illegal in the UK to use hand-held phones when driving. Hands-free sets can also cause distraction and their use should be avoided or kept to an absolute minimum. Employees should be expected to make or receive calls only when stationary.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) has published extensive information on occupational road risk – have a look at its website. The HSE and the Department for Transport have produced joint guidance on driving at work (see our list of further reading).

Travelling and working alone

The risk of accident, illness or assault while an employee is working alone should be assessed. In many cases the risk while travelling will be little different from that experienced while working alone in other ways. However, sometimes employees may have to visit people or places where they feel more vulnerable or may be at greater risk. All of these team members should be given information on safe practices when working and travelling alone.

It's important to have a system for monitoring the whereabouts of teleworkers who travel alone. As a minimum, the employee should record full details of where they're going and the expected travel time. At the end of the working day, either the employee should ring or text an agreed contact or 'buddy' to say they are home, or a family member should have details of whom to contact if they have any concerns. There are mobile phone systems available that monitor lone workers' whereabouts. These can be easier to manage than systems based on 'buddy calls', but their use needs to be weighed against the loss of human contact, which may be important in avoiding feelings of isolation.

The HSE has produced guidance on risk assessment for violence and lone working and the Suzy Lamplugh Trust also provides information and resources on personal safety.

Monitoring teleworkers' health and safety

Putting in place clear, consistent management systems will reduce risks to teleworkers, but it's only through regular monitoring that you can be sure risks are being controlled adequately and the systems are effective. The line manager or an appointed assessor should make regular enquiries to ensure the employee is following safe practices and not experiencing aches or symptoms of stress. You should review risk assessments regularly and involve the employees affected. If it's not practical for the manager to visit individuals, the employees could complete a regular self-assessment of risk, which their line manager checks and discusses with them.

It's important to make sure that teleworkers don't feel divorced from decision-making about their work and workplaces. Consultation, involvement and representation of teleworkers should be encouraged as effective mechanisms for determining whether health and safety arrangements are good enough, and for making improvements. A regular forum where employees can discuss their work and any concerns should be considered. Some employers hold regular 'conferences' for their teleworkers, mainly to provide training but also to give them an opportunity to feed back their views and experiences. In some cases, the line manager or another appropriate person may need to visit employees at home to provide advice and support.

Employees need to know the procedures for reporting work-related accidents and ill health or any health and safety concerns. All reports received should be investigated by the line manager, with competent health and safety or occupational health support

Outworkers

The term 'teleworking' is also sometimes applied to 'outworkers' – people undertaking a variety of tasks, such as textile and factory assembly work, in their own homes or in premises nearby. In these situations, you'll need to address hazards such as powered machinery and safe storage of components and substances, as well as ergonomic problems. If you're interested in learning more about this area, have a look at the case studies in the HSE's guidance leaflet INDG226 and at the HSE website, where you can search for hazard-specific guidance.

where necessary. It's good practice for the manager to enquire proactively about the health and safety of employees and it's also advisable for organisations to monitor staff turnover and sickness rates, which, if higher than average, could indicate that staff are not happy with working arrangements.

Teleworkers should be included in company occupational health services such as health surveillance. If they use computers they should receive free eye tests as appropriate.

The health and safety adviser should also monitor the organisation's health and safety arrangements for teleworking and their effectiveness. The 'Audit checklist for office teleworking' and 'Feedback checklist for office teleworkers' may help with this.

Further information

More detailed information on health and safety risks associated with teleworking is available in the publications and on the websites listed here.

HSE publications and website

The HSE website (www.hse.gov.uk) contains topic pages on a number of key risk areas, including stress, road safety and musculoskeletal disorders. They give guidance on good practice and links to more detailed guidance.

The following HSE publications are available from HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO10 2WA. Many are free guides which you can download in pdf format from the HSE website.

*   *Driving at work: managing work-related road risk* (INDG382), 2003; www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg382.pdf
*   *Getting to grips with manual handling* (INDG143), revised 2004; www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg143.pdf
*   *Health and safety of homeworkers: good practice case studies* (RR262), ISBN 0 7176 2888 4, 2004; www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr262.htm
*   *Homeworking guidance for employers and employees on health and safety* (INDG226), reprinted 2003; www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg226.pdf
*   *Maintaining portable electrical appliances in offices and other low-risk environments* (INDG236), reprinted 2004; www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg236.pdf
*   *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999: Approved Code of Practice and guidance*, ISBN 0 7176 2488 9
*   *Manual handling assessment charts* (INDG383), 2003; www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg383.pdf
*   *Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992. Guidance on Regulations* (L23), ISBN 07176 2823 X, 2004
*   *Memorandum of guidance on the Electricity at Work Regulations 1989* (HSR25), ISBN 0 7176 1602 9, 2003

*   *Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998* (L22), ISBN 0 7176 1626 6
*   *Tackling work-related stress* (INDG281), revised 2004; www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg281.pdf
*   *The law on VDUs: An easy guide – making sure your office complies with the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992 (as amended in 2002)* (HSG90), ISBN 0 7176 2602 4
*   *Working alone in safety* (INDG73), 2002; www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg73.pdf
*   *Working with VDUs* (INDG36), ISBN 0 7176 2222 3, revised 2003; www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg36.pdf
*   *Work with display screen equipment: Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992 as amended by the Health and Safety (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2002* (L26), ISBN 0 7176 2582 6
*   *VDU workstation checklist*, ISBN 0 7176 2617 2, 2003
*   *Violence at work: a guide for employers* (INDG69), revised 2004; www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg69.pdf

DTI publication

The Department of Trade and Industry has published *DTI telework guidance* (2003), available to download from www.dti.gov.uk/er/individual/telework.pdf

Other useful websites

*   www.gilgordon.com – a US teleworking site
*   www.rospa.co.uk – the RoSPA site contains information and resources on occupational road risk
*   www.suzylamplugh.org – the Suzy Lamplugh Trust's website contains information on personal safety when working and travelling alone

Useful contacts

The Telework Association
(also known as TCA)
+44 (0)800 616008
www.telework.org.uk

The Future Work Forum
Henley Management College
Greenlands
Henley-on-Thames
Oxfordshire RG9 3AU
t +44 (0)1491 571454 ext 2205
www.henleymc.ac.uk/henleyres03.nsf/
pages/fwf

Working Families
1–3 Berry Street
London EC1V 0AA
+44 (0)20 7253 7243
www.workingfamilies.org.uk

The Work Foundation
(previously the Industrial Society)
Peter Runge House
3 Carlton House Terrace
London SW1Y 5DG
+44 (0)8701 656700
www.theworkfoundation.com

National Group on Homeworking
Office 26
30–38 Dock Street
Leeds LS10 1JF
Advice line: +44 (0)800 174095
+44 (0)113 245 4273
www.homeworking.gn.apc.org

Acknowledgements

IOSH is Europe's leading body for health and
safety professionals. We have over 28,000
members worldwide, including more than 8,000
Chartered Safety and Health Practitioners.

The Institution was founded in 1945 and is an
independent, not-for-profit organisation that
sets professional standards, supports and
develops members and provides authoritative
advice and guidance on health and safety issues.
IOSH is formally recognised by the ILO as an
international non-governmental organisation.

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

AC/RJ/100206/PDF

image: www.sxc.hu/mphoto