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# Occupational Safety and Health in the World of Homework

Protecting employees from occupational health and safety risks is an everyday challenge and since the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, risk management has become even more complex. As the Covid-19 pandemic was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020, many countries were plunged into lockdowns to curb the spread of the virus. This meant that work either had to come to a complete standstill or new work setups had to be adopted to observe the travel restrictions, quarantines and curfews put in place by governments. It has been more than a year and new variants of the virus are being detected meaning that the world may continue operating under numerous restrictions which change the work setup. In addition to that, with the digital era we now live in, homework may become the new normal. Thus, there is need to ensure that your employees that are working from home are safe.

The office and/or workplace environment is usually geared to counter risks that may arise because of the hazards associated with the nature of the job. Although it remains their responsibility to ensure employees are safe even when they are working from home, employers are faced with a plethora of challenges. For instance, it is difficult for the employer to have control over the home environment from which the employee is working.

## PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS

Psychosocial risks arise from poor work design, management, as well as a poor social context of work, and they may result in negative psychological, physical and social outcomes such as work-related stress, burnout or depression. Psychosocial risks and work-related stress are among the most challenging issues in occupational safety and health. They impact significantly on the health of individuals, organisations and national economies. In this scenario, whilst working from home, employees may feel isolated, they tend to get lonely and this can have detrimental effects on the employee's mental health. The high stress levels have an impact on their productivity thus affecting overall performance of the organisation. Being away from the office, if emails do not get replied as expected, this triggers psychosocial risks. A lack of direct contact with the manager and delayed feedback might make one worry about their performance.

Since it is the employer's responsibility to ensure the employee's mental health well-being, the employer needs to ensure that mental well-being is on the same level as physical well-being. Building a relationship with employees is another way of promoting psychological well-being. The employer can achieve this by

## START/FINISH TIMES AND SUPERVISION

## ERGONOMICS

initiating conversation with employees even as they are working from home. These conversations need not be work related only, one can throw in a few questions about employee's life outside of work. Being humble and also valuing everyone's perspectives goes a long way in ensuring employees' mental well-being. Someone's confidence is boosted from knowing that you value what they have to say and that everyone in the organisation has something to offer.

Burnout is a major issue for people working from home. This results from constant access to work devices and office files. One might feel obligated to working all night at the desk or starting exceedingly early in the morning thus long working hours. Epidemiological studies have shown the negative effects of long working hours on the risks of cardiovascular diseases chronic fatigue, stress, depressive state, anxiety, sleep quality, all-cause mortality, alcohol use and smoking and self-perceived health, mental health status, hypertension, and health behaviours,(Artazcoz et al, 2008). The employer needs to come up with programs which enable all employers working from home to stay in touch and keep connected for both social and work events. This encourages communication within the team and can be achieved by making use of software such as Microsoft teams and zoom to boost morale. There is also need for supervision through scheduling regular check-ins with employees working from home and encouraging a good work/life balance. Organizations also need to encourage their employees to go on breaks as they normally would go for tea and lunch break when at the office so that they are able to exercise and stretch.

"Ergonomics is the scientific discipline concerned with the understanding of interactions among humans and other elements of a system, and the profession that applies theory, principles, data and methods to design in order to optimise human well-being and overall system performance." International Ergonomics Association. The office and/or workplace environment is usually geared with ergonomic furniture to ease the pain of repetitive stress. However, when one is working from home there is no guarantee that every home has a proper desk and chair which protects the employee from health problems associated with improper ergonomics that may develop over time. Work that can be done from home is mostly office based meaning the employee may need to be on the workstation for about 8 hours making ergonomics very essential. You have probably come across funny pictures of people using ironing boards or side tables as their desks whilst working from home, this is the scenario in most cases and these employees are at risk of musculoskeletal disorders if they work in that setup for a prolonged period. With the Covid-19 situation, it is uncertain how much longer people may need to work from home, so the employer must do something to ensure that the employee is safe.

In this scenario, the employer must ensure that the employee has the same ergonomic furniture at home that they would normally have in the office setup. The challenge is that this is an additional cost that most organisations might not have budgeted for. The changes during Covid-19 pandemic may have affected sales thus making it even more difficult to put aside funds for this additional cost. Thus, it may take time before every employee who is working from home may get the required ergonomic furniture. However, nothing stops the employer from carrying out ergonomic assessments on all who are working from home upon the employees' request. This has to be based on employee request so that there is no privacy invasion.

Additionally, the employer may also have virtual training sessions which serve as reminders for employees to adopt the best possible posture whilst working regardless of the working environment. These sessions may also serve the purpose of guarding against psychosocial risks as home workers won't feel alone.

In as much as every one of us would like to think our homes are safe, working from home is not always safe. The home environment consists of hazards which include poor lighting which may lead to eye strain and poor ventilation which may lead to sinus problems.

The presence of other family members may result in many distractions which reduce the employee's productivity. If the environment is too loud as well, the employee working from home may not be able to concentrate. This not only lowers the employee's productivity but also leads to high stress levels due to failure to meet deadlines.

In addition to that, when working from home, employees are more at risk of having chronic diseases because of lack of exercise. There is a high risk of suffering from sitting-related complications because unlike office workers who move around by either driving to work or commuting and moving from one office to the other, they are most likely to stick to their workstation throughout the day. This leads to health problems ranging from obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and circulatory problems just to mention a few. The employees working from home may also sustain injuries as they are going about their work. This could include tripping over power cables, computer falling on their foot or even being electrocuted.

The employer may want to protect the employee working in the home environment from the above-mentioned hazards and risks but the fact that the employer does not have control over the home environment may make it exceedingly difficult. Some employees may be staying in houses which do not have adequate space for assembling a proper workstation which allows for neat tucking away of electric cables as well. So, in as much as the employer may have the capacity to provide ergonomic furniture, space may be a limiting factor. Furthermore, some employees may be renting the houses thus may not be able to allow any adjustments for proper ventilation and natural lighting. High-density setups may be generally loud thus distractions will be inevitable. The employer must do what is reasonably practicable to ensure that risk is reduced to acceptable levels.

However, organizations should build a strong safety culture as this will enable the employees to practice safety even at home. Some examples are when the employee may be able to tuck away power cables and clear their workspace of any clutter. They may also secure carpets to the floor to avoid tripping and ensure heavy items are not stored on high shelves as they could fall on them. The employer needs to ensure that the employees are well trained to do risk assessment so as to ensure the safety of their homes. There is also need to come up with a working from home safety and health policy.

## ENVIRONMENT-INDUCED HAZARDS

**This policy should address some of these questions:**

- **Will the employer send a safety and health representative to conduct a safety assessment?**

- **How will incident and accident investigation be carried out?**

- **What is the procedure for accident reporting by employees working from home?**

## ELECTRICAL SAFETY

With huge numbers of people continuing to work at home, many may be putting themselves at unnecessary risk due to unsafe electrical setups and practices at home. By using extension leads and adaptors to plug additional devices into a socket, there is a danger that they could be overloaded, creating a fire risk. Below are some tips for those working from home:

**Electrical Safety tips when working from home:**

- Don't charge your electrical items on the bed.

- Always charge on a hard, flat, non-flammable surface.

- Avoid overloading sockets and extension leads

- Keep your workstation tidy.

- If you are working in a small workspace, it's important to keep your drinks away from electrical items.

- Be mindful of cables, they present a trip hazard to you and others in your home

- If your cable doesn't reach don't plug it into another adaptor, move your workspace closer to the socket or use a longer lead.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, employers must carry out a suitable and sufficient risk assessment of all the work activities done at home. All assessments need to identify the hazards that are present, to assess the extent of the risks and make decisions on how to manage such risks, so far as is reasonably practicable to comply with health and safety law. The employer's safety duty now more than ever needs to extend to mental health, including the risks of isolation, overwork, or failure to take proper breaks. On the other hand, employees have a duty to take reasonable care of their own health and safety and that of others who may be affected by what they do or don't do, and to report all employment-related hazards. For homeworkers, the other people who may be affected are likely to include other family members, neighbours, visitors and so on. With the uncertainties brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and the ever-evolving work setups, both employers and employees need to ensure that the home environment is safe to work in at all times.