

# Have you done your 'Homework' on risk?

**It is unknown exactly how many people** work from home in Australia. A 2008 ABR survey found that 2.4 million Australians work from home at some point during the working week. Due to advances in technology and communication, compounded with the recognition of the financial benefits of enabling employees to work from home, it is likely that this number will continue to increase.

In fact, not only is home working on the rise but remote working as a whole is too, with many organizations encouraging employees to utilize 'drop in' and 'hot desking' facilities.

As the phenomenon of remote working takes its hold, HR Managers and OH&S professionals alike are presented with fresh new challenges to ensure companies continue to meet their legal requirements in terms of Health and Safety issues.

In order to address your remote working policy it is crucial to fully understand the task in hand. It may be necessary to consult with various stakeholders in the business to identify exactly who works remotely to determine exactly what tasks are being conducted off site. This will allow you to identify potential hazards and devise suitable measures to address these.

## 'Acting' on the Risk

The Occupational Health and Safety Act 2000 states that it is a legal requirement of an employer to 'ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of all the employees', with no distinction made between office based and remote workers. With the forthcoming legislation and the recent High Court decision in Kirk, this stance is not set to change. This therefore indicates that an organization is to identify and assess risk, and to take measures that are reasonably practicable to eliminate or mitigate those risks.



In simple terms, this means that an employer must provide risk assessments for remote workers, in the same way they are obligated to do so for office based workers. A thorough workstation assessment and training should be conducted, highlighting the possible health and safety pitfalls associated with office based work. It is paramount that those employees working from home are doing so from a designated work area and that the minimum standards with regards to workstation design are adhered to.

An area which companies can often find to be contentious issue is the selection and provision of home office furniture. However, as such decisions can dramatically impact upon an employee's health and wellbeing it is important that the company has the final say; a stance that should be firmly stated in a remote working policy.

There are also issues in terms of insurance, storage of sensitive information and data protection. Additionally, do those working from home have easy access to fire extinguisher, smoke alarm and first aid kit? These are all areas that can be easily addressed by adopting a 'give and take approach'; however this should be done as a priority and subsequently outlined in the remote working policy.

Arguably, one of the biggest challenges companies are faced with is how to conduct risk assessments and training for staff scattered at various locations. This is often conducted by 'face to face' assessment on site, however lengthy travel to an employee's home and the cost associated with doing so can make this an expensive and unappealing prospect. Online assessment and training programs can play an important role here in ensuring an employee's remote working environment is safe and potential hazards have been identified. Simple to use management systems provide managers with the peace of mind that an employee has undergone necessary health and safety training.

To illustrate this point further, take the example of an employee working from a laptop at home. It is widely recognized that using a laptop incorrectly for prolonged periods can have detrimental effects on a user's spine. By using a computer based training program, employees can be easily educated in safe laptop use, examples of a safe posture and the importance of frequent breaks from a static posture. In this case, not only is the organization ensuring the safety of its employee, but almost certainly increasing their productivity too.

As the number of full and part time remote workers in Australia grows, it is crucial that they are provided with the training and equipment to ensure a safe set up. A comprehensive risk assessment should be conducted and clear guidelines should be established to address such issues should they arise. It is a sign of the times that remote working is here to stay - providing careful planning has been applied and certain challenges have been met, there are significant benefits to be enjoyed by all those involved. How HR professionals and others concerned meet these challenges is still yet to be seen.

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