

How to Manage a Temporary Period of Homeworking

What is homeworking?

Homeworking is when a member of staff is allowed to conduct their daily duties from home on an occasional, temporary or permanent basis. In its simplest terms, it means that employees work from home with the same contractual obligations, such as core working hours, pay and adherence to usual company policy.

Essentially, homeworking is a type of flexible working arrangement that allows staff to work outside of traditional 9 to 5 days. All employees have the right to request flexible working hours after 26 weeks of continuous service, which can include home working. Whilst you do not need to permit flexible working, or homeworking, you would have to consider it in this situation and provide sound business reasons for its refusal. For more information on flexible working, please refer to our in depth [guidance](#).

In light of the coronavirus outbreak, you may be considering letting staff work from home who are either self-isolating and able to work, or as a precautionary measure in general.

The benefits of homeworking

Homeworking can be a very popular option with staff, providing them with a degree of flexibility whilst also assisting them in meeting the demands of their role. With studies showing that modern workers tend to gravitate towards roles that do offer flexibility such as this, homeworking can be a good way of both attracting and retaining key talent to your company.

Staff who are able to work from home can be available to look after their children if necessary, something that can be very helpful to working parents in particular. Such an option can help to avoid them having to take prolonged periods of time away from work or even leaving their role entirely, an issue that can lead to working mothers in particular missing out on key opportunities for progression.

From your point of view, having some staff work from home can free up space in the workplace, meaning that you will need to facilitate less desks, and the associated costs, for staff. Whilst different employees will work in different ways, some people may be at their most productive when they are able to work in their own, quiet surroundings.

During the coronavirus outbreak, asking staff to work from home puts them at a decreased risk of getting the virus and therefore having to spend a prolonged period of time away from work whilst sick. This is because they will have less opportunity in which to come into contact with it, such as on public transport. There is also less chance of them bringing the virus into work with them if they do remain at home.

Maintaining a homeworking policy

Whether you are thinking of implementing homeworking on a permanent basis, or as purely temporary measure, it is advisable for you to have a clear company policy. This policy can outline eligibility requirements for homeworking, the process for applying for and accepting this period and how such an arrangement will work in practice.

Considering who should work from home

Legally, as an employer, it is entirely down to you who you decide to let work from home and your decision should depend upon eligibility (see 'eligibility for homeworking' below) and accessibility (see 'accessing home environments' below). That said, who you should consider letting work from home on a short-term basis, especially as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, will ultimately depend on the needs of your business.

For example, it would be acceptable to only permit staff who have to use public transport to work from home, as they may be more likely to come into contact with the virus on busses or trains than those who drive or walk.

Homeworking does not need to be a company-wide implementation. That said, you should take care to avoid favouritism. If some employees are to be allowed to do this over others, you should be open and honest with your workforce and outline why this is.

Eligibility for homeworking

Before permitting an individual to work from home, you should first assess the impact that such an arrangement could have on your company. Fundamentally, regardless of the reasons behind the homeworking arrangement, you need to make sure that it is not going to place your business at a significant disadvantage.

Firstly, consider if the employee's job can feasibly be done from home, and the ease in which they would be able to do this. In a temporary arrangement, especially in light of the coronavirus outbreak, you are going to want to make this transition as easy as possible. If it is going to take time and money to establish their home work space, or if you do not feel it is feasible, this may not be the best option for you to consider.

Then, you need to look at the individual themselves. There is obviously going to have to be a degree of trust between yourself and them that they will be able to do their job and not use homeworking as an excuse to, essentially, not do it. Are they good at managing their own workloads and daily pressures? Do they get easily distracted? Have they had any disciplinary issues since they were employed, or have they displayed forms of behaviour that has given you reason to doubt them? Fundamentally, you must assess if you think they would be reliable when they cannot be under the direct supervision of management.

Assessing home environments

Employers have a duty of care towards the health, safety and wellbeing of their staff, and this extends to those who work from home. To this end, before permitting any member of staff to enter into a homeworking arrangement, you need to check that their home environment is suitable.

You will need to assess the space that is in their home in which they will have to work and whether there are any hazards that could place them at risk. If they are to use any appliances, such as a computer, you will need to make sure that this will not place them at any undue risk that they would otherwise not have come into contact with had they stayed in the usual workplace. All employees who are allowed to work from home should also be reminded of the company's health and safety policies.

Ideally, a full health and safety risk assessment should be conducted on the workspace, but if this is going to be a quick arrangement then there may not be time in which to facilitate this. Instead, you can ask the employee to conduct an assessment of their working space and report back to you in order to determine its suitability.

Consider what the employee will need

From here, you should determine what you may need to provide to the employee, such as a company laptop, a telephone, or particular forms of software. This will vary from job to job; for some, a connection to the internet may suffice. For others, they may need to be given more appliances in which to do their job.

It is important to take care in this situation and, where possible, avoid the employee using their own personal devices. It may be difficult for you to get the employee working again if their appliance breaks or is unreliable.

Data protection

If the homeworker is likely, in the course of his or her work, to obtain or use personal information about individuals, you should ensure he or she is trained fully in the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation and current Data Protection Act relevant to data security. Issuing, or re-issuing, your data protection policy is advisable.

Consider also if they are going to need to take confidential information home with them and if this will remain safe whilst in that environment. For example, do they have cabinets in which to store files to keep them away from children that may be present and, if not, is this something that you would be able to provide?

Establish a homeworking agreement

At this stage, you should ask the employee to sign a written agreement which outlines how long the period of homeworking is to last for. If it is being introduced as part of your response to the coronavirus, you may consider stating that it will be regularly reviewed and that the period of homeworking will cease when it is no longer deemed to be necessary.

Within this agreement, employees should be reminded of the expectations placed upon them by the company, such as disciplinary procedures. It should also be specified what hours they are expected to work; you may wish for them to continue to work their usual hours or, alternatively, may be happy for them to change these on a temporary basis.

The agreement should also specify that staff should not work for longer than their usual hours, in line with the Working Time Regulations 1998. At no point should you encourage them to do so if such a provision is going to mean they are working for longer than 48 hours per week and they have not signed an opt-out agreement.

Managing the homeworker

Once the period of homeworking has begun, it is important to keep in regular contact with the employee. You should set them clear targets to work towards and invite them to outline why these targets have not been met as a way of making sure that tasks are still being completed. One option is to request that they submit daily or weekly reports whilst the period of homeworking continues. By keeping in regular contact, you can also keep them up to date on all developments, such as the company's continued response to the coronavirus issue.

It is also important to maintain this contact with the employee in order to ensure that they are not being adversely affected by the arrangement. Whilst some individuals may prefer working from home, others may start to feel isolated, something that could potentially impact upon their performance. If an issue such as this does start to develop, it may be that the agreement needs to be re-assessed.

If your company has access to an Employee Assistance Programme, you should also remind your staff that they are able to use this.

What to do if the homeworking arrangement does not work during the coronavirus outbreak

If you decide that the homeworking arrangement is not working and your business remains open, you can terminate the agreement and ask the employee to return to work as normal. If the employee refuses to return, you might consider treating this as a disciplinary matter, however it is advisable to have a degree of flexibility. For more information on the best response to employees who are worried about coming into work due to the coronavirus, please refer to our web pages.

If you have had to close the business as a result of the virus and the individual is deemed unable to be given work whilst at home or elsewhere, they would need to be placed on lay-off according to your company procedures.