



Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety

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## Telework / Telecommuting

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### ▼ What is telework or telecommuting?

It is becoming more and more common for people to do at least some of their regular work from home or another location instead of going into the office. Technology has made it possible for a worker to stay at home but be connected to the office by telephone, computer, modem, fax or e-mail. This type of arrangement is often called 'telework' or 'telecommuting'.

### ▼ What are some of the advantages and disadvantages about teleworking?

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• less distractions from co-workers</li> <li>• more flexibility with organization of daily tasks (better personal time management)</li> <li>• savings in time and commuting costs</li> <li>• higher job satisfaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• isolation</li> <li>• lack of separation between home and work</li> <li>• more distractions from family</li> <li>• potential for excessive working hours</li> <li>• less awareness of changes in company</li> <li>• fear of being under-managed or "out of sight, out of mind"</li> </ul>

Company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improved employee retention</li> <li>• often higher productivity</li> <li>• less lost hours due to traffic problems</li> <li>• reduced absenteeism</li> <li>• savings in energy, office space requirements, maintenance and housekeeping.</li> <li>• increases number of potential candidates for a job</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• difficulty maintaining contact and open communication with the employee</li> <li>• difficulty maintaining adequate communication between other employees or with customers</li> <li>• possible delay in customer service</li> </ul>
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## ▼ What are some issues surrounding a telework arrangement?

From a health and safety viewpoint, employers and employees should consider a few important points when agreeing to a telework arrangement. These include:

- workstation design and arrangement (ergonomics)
- work scheduling and distribution
- working alone
- workers compensation and occupational health and safety laws

## ▼ What are some ergonomic tips for setting up a home office?

A home office should meet the same health and safety standards as those available at work. For example, you should make sure that:

- Your desk, chair and other accessories are of a comparable (equal) quality to that in the office. For example: the desk should be appropriate height and sturdy enough to handle the weight of any peripheral equipment that you may place on it (e.g., computers, printers, fax machines, scanners, etc.).
- Your workstation is adjusted properly: the keyboard is at the right height (wrists are in a neutral position). The kitchen table is not an ideal work surface as the table is too high and doesn't allow for proper positioning of the wrists in relation to the keyboard.

- Lighting is properly arranged: there should not be reflections on or glare from the computer monitor.

For more information on how to set up a workstation, please see the [Ergonomics](http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/ergonomics/) (<http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/ergonomics/>), section of OSH Answers.

## ▼ What are some tips for work scheduling (work load) issues?

Duties, expectations, and dead lines should be clearly outlined and agreed upon by both the supervisor and the teleworker. Be careful not to "over work". There are natural breaks in an office environment that will not occur at home. Discussions with co-workers or a quick walk to the printer offer opportunities for a change in body position that may be missing in a home office. Extended hours in the same body position or repeated motions can lead to various musculoskeletal injuries.

## ▼ Are there any safety or security issues to working at home?

A home office should offer the same level of safety and security as the employee would receive at the regular work office. When an employee is working at home, they are most often working alone. While working alone in itself is not a risk, it can present a unique situation should something unexpected happen. It is important to keep to a contact schedule even if there are not "work" details to discuss.

For more information, please see the [Working Alone](https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/workingalone.html) document in OSH Answers. (<https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/workingalone.html>)

## ▼ What is an appropriate home office environment?

An appropriate work space at home may include:

- a space or room where it is easy to concentrate - preferably separate from other living areas and away from the television
- level of security as required by the workplace
- necessary telephone lines (separate from family line if required) and answering machine or voice mail

- telephone line or cable for e-mail and Internet connections, if necessary
- control over temperature, light and sound
- household members who will understand you are working and will not disturb you unnecessarily

## ▼ What are some additional items for a home office safety checklist?

In addition to those tips mentioned above, the following should be investigated.

### Fire Protection

- Is there a smoke alarm in the office?
- Is there clear access to a fire extinguisher?
- Is there a carbon monoxide detector in areas where there are fuel-burning appliances?
- How many exits are available and where are they?
- Does telework space meet safety requirements of local building and fire codes?

### Emergency Procedures

- Has an evacuation plan been established?
- Are the first aid supplies adequate?
- Are emergency contact numbers posted near the telephone?
- Has a periodic contact schedule been established?
- Does your office contact know how to reach someone near you in the event of an emergency?

### Electrical Safety

- Are extension cords in good condition and positioned properly?
- Are cords and cables causing a tripping hazard?
- Are outlets grounded and not overloaded?
- Is there surge protection for electrical equipment?
- Is there sufficient ventilation for electrical equipment?

## ▼ What are some tips for the employee who is working at home?

While you may not have to drive to get to work that day, it is still important to keep to a 'work day ritual'. Some tips for working at home include:

- Have a specific location where you work. This may be a room, or just a corner of a room, but it is **always** the place where you do your work.
- Begin and finish at the same time every day you are working at home. Have a beginning and end of day ritual. Since there is no longer a 'break' between waking up and going to work, some teleworkers find it helpful to actually leave the house and walk around the block before starting work. You may want to end the day the same way.
- As you would for working in the office, set a schedule and stick to it. Make a 'to do' list and check your accomplishments at the end of the day. Stick to deadlines.
- Maintain contact with the office. Establish a routine for contact with your supervisor, or co-workers. Keep your supervisor informed of your progress and any difficulties encountered. This contact includes the need for overtime to complete projects.
- Attend meetings and gatherings at work as often as possible. This interaction helps keep you from becoming 'invisible'.
- Determine what interruptions are okay and what is not. Tell your friends and family what the ground rules are.
- Be honest with yourself. Teleworking is not a substitute for child or elder care, nor is it a way to simply save money on commuting costs. Too much compromise on the part of the employee or employer can lead to problems and possible failure to meet the terms of the teleworking agreement.

## ▼ What issues should be considered when offering a telework arrangement?

One of the most important health and safety questions that should be answered when working at home is who will be responsible for health and safety issues and worker's compensation if the teleworker is injured. To avoid complications, there should be a written agreement between the employer and the teleworker clarifying these matters. Teleworkers should not be subjected to reduced health and safety standards at home.

Other important health and safety issues include:

- Will the employer or the health and safety committee have access to the house for safety inspections? Or, will alternative arrangements be made such as the worker using checklists or submitting photos of the work area?
- What parts of the house will be considered the 'workplace'? Is the bathroom and/or kitchen included?
- That teleworkers must immediately report any incident or injury to their supervisor (just as they would at the office).
- How will incidents be investigated?

This policy could also outline:

- Who buys and maintains the equipment such as the desk, chair, computer (including software and updates), fax, general office supplies, etc.
- If remote access to company's main computer systems are available outside of the office or not. If possible, how and what type of software or equipment is necessary.
- What expenses will be reimbursed (dedicated telephone lines, Internet access, business telephone calls, office supplies)?
- What hours the employee will be available?
- How will overtime be approved?
- When and how often the employee will check for messages?
- Will the primary contact method be by telephone or e-mail?
- What number to call to reach employee at home. Is there an alternative number?
- Who will have access to home-office phone number?
- Listing of work assignments, due dates, work expectations, etc.

## ▼ Do occupational health and safety laws in Canada cover teleworking arrangements?

It is not clear how occupational health and safety or compensation laws cover teleworking arrangements. In addition, these laws are different in each jurisdiction.

It is important to contact your local government department responsible for occupational health and safety to find out what laws apply to your situation. A list of phone numbers and addresses for these departments is available at [Canadian](#)

Government Departments Responsible for OH&S  
(<http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/information/govt.html>).

You may also want to check with your union, other labour or employment contracts, or your Joint Health and Safety Committee or member as well as company policies.

## ▼ **What is an example of a checklist for teleworking policies?**

The following issues or points can be used as a checklist for a teleworking policy:

- Is there a statement which outlines what types of jobs or tasks may be done at home, or will each application be handled on a case by case basis?
- Is there a statement that indicates that except where outlined in the teleworking policy that the employee's regular conditions of employment remain the same?
- Have arrangements been made for normal supervision of the employee to continue (including frequency of contact between employee and supervisor, ongoing feedback, performance appraisals and career development)?
- Has the exact location (full street address) and contact details that the employee will be working from been recorded?
- Does having a home office violate municipal zoning regulations?
- Is there a statement that the employee will follow all of the company health and safety policies when establishing and working in a home office area?
- Will business meetings be held at the employee's residence, a third location, or at the regular office? If meetings may be held in the home office, a statement that the employee will keep the home office area safe for themselves and others who may enter it may be necessary.
- Is there a policy detailing how communications between the teleworker, co-workers and customers will function?
- Is there an agreement about travel time and mileage allowance, if any, between the employee's home and the regular work location? What arrangements are needed if the employee is sent away from the home location on work business (but not to report to the office)?
- Is there agreement on how the workload will be assigned? How will overtime be approved?
- Is there a need for company (proprietary) information to be stored in a locked room, desk or file cabinet?

## ▼ How do I evaluate the telework arrangement?

In most cases, a telework arrangement should be offered on a trial basis for a specified period of time. The policy should clearly state what criteria will be used to evaluate the arrangement. Evaluation may include the following items:

- meeting deadlines
- overall and/or employee productivity
- progress of individual or team assignments
- availability to receive and return calls
- impacts on the employee at home as well as other staff in the office
- customer service delivery
- the ability to attend meetings, even on short notice

In some cases, only changes to the telework arrangement may be necessary, while in others the arrangement may be ended. Keep management, supervisors, and staff up-to-date if changes to the overall policy occur.

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### Publications

[Workplace Health and Wellness Guide](#)

(<http://www.ccohs.ca/products/publications/wellness.html>)

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