PMA COMPANIES

Guide to Setting up a Safe, Healthy and Productive Home Office

During this unprecedented time, employers are finding it challenging, yet imperative to demonstrate their commitment to the continued health, safety and well-being of their employees. Many employers have temporarily assigned their employees to work from home to combat COVID-19 exposures. With this assignment, employers should aim to ensure the success of their teams at home by taking a broader look at some of the primary factors that impact work from home.

Since risks associated with working from home are varied and circumstantial, PMA Companies has provided guidance below for employers to consider when overseeing an "office to home" transition. The guidance provided covers the logistics of relocation, setting up a safe home working environment and managing work schedules and task variation. It is also important to think about the broader wellness factors associated with a sudden shift to working from home.

Decisions and Planning Associated with Working from Home

When a company makes the decision to permit employees to work from home, whether it is planned or spur-of-the-moment, the safety of the relocation presents several basic and immediate considerations. Practically speaking, employers want to minimize the risk of injury (strains, falls, etc.) and damage to equipment while transporting work items to the employees' cars or their homes. Risks will vary, and managers can help assess them accordingly.

Practical items to consider include:

- Which employees in the organization will work from home?
- How will workstation equipment such as a computers, printers and related equipment and supplies be moved safely out of the office, through the office, through parking lots and to the

employee's car—and then to home? Are all employees capable of performing these tasks, or do arrangements need to be made for assistance?

- Likewise, how will you assess the employee's ability to disassemble and set up the equipment (technical and mechanical "know-how")? Lack of ability could lead to frustration and even increase risks associated with performing these tasks. Is technical support available to help the employee ensure everything is working properly?
- Setting up a safe, comfortable and productive work arrangement in the home can also present challenges. How can the company assist?
- If an employee is feeling stressed or having trouble adjusting, is there an employee assistance program or Human Resources department available to help them through the initial change in operations?
- At the same time, employees also have a responsibility to do what they can to improve the safety and comfort of their home office. Health and safety are a shared responsibility.

Temporary home office work is sometimes associated with unique circumstances, thus not affording the opportunity to address every concern fully; but the list above gives some primary considerations for those making these transitional moves**.**

Safety Considerations in the Home

Accidents around the home are a common occurrence. Although none of the items below are exclusively "office risks," they all pose risks to the safety of telecommuters:

- Sidewalks and walking surfaces outside the home, along with varied weather conditions, should be considered.
- Slippery floors and stairs, uneven floor coverings, staircases without handrails, toys, pets and even misplaced shoes may generate tripping concerns.
- Protruding and/or sharp corners on tables being used as workstations or in various rooms of the home can be a hazard.

Environmental Considerations

The environment a person works in can affect their productivity and long-term success:

- It is prudent for a home office worker to maintain a comfortable temperature, particularly as computer equipment tends to generate heat.
- Fresh air and adequate ventilation are important, particularly in warmer temperatures. High humidity is tiring and can also damage computer equipment.
- Inadequate lighting can cause eye fatigue, create headaches, deter focus and contribute to higher stress levels.
- Ambient noise can also lead to headaches, stress and reduced productivity. Likewise, occasional loud noises and/or excessive vibration from sources outside the home such as construction work can be distracting for home offices as well.
- Lack of space on a desk can also cause stress for the worker.
- Home office equipment can also have higher power requirements, meaning that plugs and fuses can become overloaded creating fire risks. Use of extension cords and power strips can create tripping hazards.

Task Variability

How work is scheduled and performed at home can impact both well-being and productivity. One idea to consider is task variety or variability. Task variability relates to the need to avoid repetition and its effects—as well as the effects of not moving at all! It also highlights the impact of variety on the cognitive (mental/concentration) load of a person as both too little and too much can have negative effects:

- Too much repetition can lead to the body being unable to keep up with the demands for nutrients.
- Too little movement (i.e. static holding) can result in the muscle not being able to efficiently distribute nutrients and oxygen or perform typical bodily functions.
- High cognitive demands – the worker may feel unable to "keep up."

- Low cognitive demands – the worker may more easily lose focus or attention, impacting the quality of the work.
- Organizing and planning work appropriately can ensure that there is variety in the workday and that rest breaks are well timed. This helps the worker stay engaged and productive and helps to avoid physical discomfort. It may also reduce the risk of gradual cumulative injuries.

Don't Overlook the "Human Machine"

Don't fail to introduce strategies for addressing broader wellness factors as well, such as the impact of sleep, fitness, nutrition and smoking on the well-being of the employee. Below are items to consider in helping to support overall well-being of your employees working from their homes:

- Without fresh air and exercise, people start to feel tired much sooner.
- Maintaining a basic level of fitness should also be encouraged.
- Employees should maintain regular, nutritious eating patterns; avoiding the tendency to overeat or indiscriminately choose snacks throughout the day. Some at-home workers tend to put on weight because they are snacking more frequently on "grab and go" foods that may be unhealthy.
- Drinking recommended amounts of water should also be encouraged. Keeping fluid levels up reduces stress on the body.
- It is possible for employees to get so involved in work that rest breaks are overlooked. Scheduling breaks generally reduces body discomfort and can reduce the risk of repetitive strain injuries (musculoskeletal disorders). Daily schedules should include regular micro-breaks for stretching, walking around the house, perhaps even leaning back into a chair—anything an employee can do to relax the body.
- Fatigue can be an issue for employees. It can be easy to work late into the night while working from home. Maintaining a sufficient, regular sleeping routine will assist in keeping your work-at-home workers productive.

Psychosocial Factors

Psychosocial factors are those that relate to how individuals interact with their new work environment – practically and socially. Stress is a notable problem in today's world and strategies to reduce the number of stressors in an individual's environment can have a positive impact on well-being, safety and productivity. Employees should be aware of the possible **work** and **non-work** challenges they might experience when transitioning to a home office.

- Possible **work** challenges can include:
  - Working remotely can bring on anxiety in some employees who may wonder, "Am I doing enough?" or "Is my work product good enough?"
  - Inadequate time management skills can also lead to increased stress levels. The prospect of not meeting deadlines can become a major issue, as can having to work long or different hours with less socialization.
  - A lack of job satisfaction can be both a cause and a result of stress.

- Possible **non-work** challenges can include:
  - The change in relationships (and roles) in the "work/home environment." Home-based workers are likely to see more of their family, which can sometimes pose challenges and increase stress levels.
  - Financial concerns could also appear to be more important when working from home.
  - Although too much social interaction (during work hours in an office) can be a problem, not enough can also be an issue. A good social life can be an antidote for work-related stress. Even if face-to-face interaction is not possible, keeping relationships with coworkers, family or friends alive through phone calls, facetime or texts can foster better employee well-being. Consider regular business unit teleconferences as a minimum.

Working Together to Improve Productivity and Reduce Claims

The concept of employees working from home is not a new one and the number of people working at home has risen sharply—particularly in these challenging times. As employers and employees, we all have to work together to promote the well-being, safety and productivity of the individual and the organization. Working from home *can* improve productivity, staff happiness and well-being, and can save both employers and employees money in the long term. Working from home can also reduce risks over time if it is done in a mindful, strategic manner. As a result, each organization should take their unique circumstance into consideration and plan for ways to reduce the risks of moving workers to their home, getting their workstations set up safely and then keeping them safe and productive for as long as needed. Should you have any questions or require additional information, please contact your local PMA Risk Control Consultant or email us at heretohelp@pmagroup.com.

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