



HR Broadcast – Homeworking

For something like 18 years of my career I have been classified as a “homeworker”, which means that I have had my formal, permanent base at home. This is different from a “worker from home” who will have their permanent base elsewhere, usually in an office, but occasionally will do some work from home. From a health & safety, and more specifically, a risk assessment point of view it is very important that a distinction is made between the two classifications.

It is estimated that there are over 4 million employees who are classed as homeworkers and over the years there have been many arguments and debates as to the benefits and disadvantages of this type of arrangement. I am now office based but the experience of homeworking that I have means I am well qualified to take part in this debate.

In recent years a great deal has been said about the benefits of homeworking from both the employer’s and employee’s perspective. With the benefits of technology such as e-mail, VOIP, Skype, etc. I firmly believe that it doesn’t really matter where a person works; what is important is what they do when they are at work. Whether it’s a full time, part time or ad hoc arrangement, homeworking can motivate employees who often see it as a benefit. In addition, employees can save money on commuting and in many cases reallocate this extra time. Also, because of the potential for a better work-life balance, if managed properly, homeworking can make employees more productive. For the employer homeworking saves money on valuable and in some cases expensive office space.

It is my view that homeworking provides a quieter atmosphere to work, is a much less stressful environment, with fewer distractions which results in far greater productivity.

Research has suggested that some employers don’t like the concept of homeworking with the reason being that they assume those employees who work remotely are not really working. It has been suggested they have this view because of the loss of control as they cannot witness the productivity first hand. My view is that this is more down to the skill of line management and measuring an individual by input (number of hours that are worked) as opposed to output (what is actually produced).

However, it’s fair to say there are some major downsides and these should not be overlooked. In September 2016 PhD students at the London School of Economics undertook research into homeworking and found that, where homeworking is made a full-time arrangement - as opposed to part time or ad hoc - the benefits for both the employee and the employer generally disappear over time. One of the main reasons for this is that homeworking is no longer perceived as a discretionary benefit or a privilege when it becomes long term, i.e. the everyday norm for an employee. Also, some employees start to resent homeworking due to their increased utility bills, such as for gas and electricity in the winter, and other associated costs, even though they may no longer have travel expenses.

Some people argue that homeworking benefits can disappear simply because there is no clear



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boundary between home and work. For example, working at home can be convenient, but it can easily invite disruption in the form of friends and neighbours popping in, or unexpected childcare duties because the employee is already at home. Home-based employees can also find it difficult to switch off from work, especially where they don't have a dedicated workspace or work area.

For successful homeworking my view is that having a dedicated room, where the door can be shut to separate home life from working life is essential. A guy who worked for me for many years in the past, when spending the day in the office which was located at his home always dressed in his three piece suit, and on entering his office hung up his jacket and proceeded to work in his collar and tie with accompanying waistcoat until such time as he had finished work for the day. He even took his packed lunch into his office. At the end of the working day he would collect his jacket and make his way to his bedroom in order to change into casual clothes. This gentleman was a very hard worker, with excellent productivity which was consistent over many years, but it was the wearing of the suit and tie along with having his packed lunch that enabled him to separate home life from working life. For him, as with me, it was a very successful working arrangement although I never went to the lengths that he did in order to separate home life from business life.

One of the plus points of homeworking is reduced sickness absence rates and there is some merit in this, as least from a physical illness perspective anyway, e.g. a sick employee won't come into your workplace and pass their

bug on to others. In fact I have statistical information, from my own experiences of homeworking, showing a negligible absence rate over a sustained period of time

That said, homeworking can be detrimental to an employee's mental wellbeing. Whilst, in the early stages it will be new and exciting, as the months roll on the employee may feel a growing sense of isolation - those mundane conversations with colleagues have a primal purpose as all human beings need social interaction. This is where the skill of the Line Manager is essential in determining how much, or indeed, how little contact is required. I would also add that regular team meetings at the office base can be particularly helpful from a social point of view.

If homeworking is something you are considering for your staff I would suggest a trial flexible working arrangement. It's up to you how long this trial lasts but a test period of something like three months would allow both the employer and the employee to assess the long-term viability without any commitment. However please don't forget that even though an employee works from home, health & safety risk assessments must be undertaken, especially those relating to the home office environment and work station.

If you would like to discuss this further please feel free to contact either Danny or Andy at Nicholsons.