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WORKING FROM HOME

Healthy sustainable working during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond

WORKING AT HOME IN A HEALTHY, SUSTAINABLE WAY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

Working from home has become widespread since restrictions to control Covid-19 were introduced in the UK. This has meant a major shift for individuals and organisations. Some have found it a positive experience. Others have struggled to adjust to new environments and work patterns. As lockdown measures are relaxed, homeworking is expected to continue making it the 'new normal' for many.

THE SHARE APPROACH

SHARE is a psychologically informed approach designed to capture the essential elements for making homeworking a success for both employees and employers. This document details the practical steps and considerations needed to create healthy, sustainable homeworking conditions. The five components of SHARE are:

1. Safe homeworking: Duty of care and setting up the workspace.
2. Help yourself and others: Communicating and meeting needs.
3. Adapt to change: Diverse home situations and styles of the 'new normal'.
4. Relieve the pressure: Maintaining work-life balance with a flexible approach.
5. Evaluate: Review the situation regularly to ensure ongoing success.

It is important that employers and employees work together to ensure successful homeworking. The following guidelines are based on an approach of open communication and shared commitment to homeworking during the pandemic and beyond.

PART 1: SHARE: WHAT EMPLOYEES NEED TO KNOW
PART 2: SHARE: WHAT EMPLOYERS NEED TO KNOW
PART 3: SHARE IN PRACTICE: KEY POINTS SUMMARY

PART 1: SHARE FOR EMPLOYEES

1. Safe homeworking

Homeworking brings unexpected demands which need to be considered when creating a working space and routine. You will be going through a period of adjustment as you start to acclimatise to the new normal.

Homeworking environment. Find a suitable place to work which is quiet and free from distractions. Consider your needs for equipment and the setting – chairs, tables, keyboards, space to take notes, good lighting, good airflow. Ensure electrical safety of work equipment and compliance with fire safety regulations. Remember, employers have a duty of care to protect the health and safety of employees, so you should raise any concerns you experience.

The needs of others in your home. Consider how you will meet any caring responsibilities to reduce pressure on yourself by managing competing demands on your time.

Take breaks. Schedule regular breaks. Take time away from screens and move around. This helps to reduce eye strain and musculoskeletal problems.

Protect privacy. 'Compartmentalising' personal space and ensuring privacy is more difficult when homeworking. Develop strategies to maintain privacy,

(e.g. check what is visible in a video call. Wear headphones for confidential calls).

Keep data safe. Data protection legislation (GDPR) applies when homeworking and organisations should provide guidance to employees on what to do. Take the same precautions you normally would (e.g. use lockable cabinets and comply with clear desk rules). Be aware that:

> Some electronic tools may not support data protection.

> Homeworkers may be handling personal data or commercially sensitive information.

> It can be challenging to maintain security when sharing workspaces or computers.

Working with distressing information. Consider your work-life balance and psychological health if your work involves dealing with potentially upsetting material to stop this spilling over and 'contaminating' the home.

2. Help yourself and others

Communication and compassion are key to ensuring that homeworking goes smoothly for employees and employers.

Communication. While your employer will expect you to be productive when homeworking, you will have distractions and demands at home which differ from your previous work routine. Make sure you negotiate your schedule with

WORKING FROM HOME

your employer and let co-workers know when you are 'on duty'. Email can be a source of stress, so schedule time to prioritise and respond. Setting an automated email reply outlining your availability may help manage people's expectations.

Work intensification. Technology enables remote working and permits scheduling of work around other responsibilities. However, work intensification can result when people use this flexibility to work longer and harder. Being 'always switched on' can lead to cognitive weariness, headaches, blurred vision, etc. Setting 'rules of engagement' for screen time and taking breaks between virtual conferences can help mitigate the impact. 'Switch off' from technology used for work to help you recoup your energy and concentration.

DEVELOP NEW SKILLS

Consider the knowledge, skills and abilities needed for effective remote working. Your line manager may be able to conduct a digital skills audit and arrange training for developing digital resilience.

Keeping motivated. There will be a period of adjustment as you start to familiarise yourself with your 'new normal'. Remember to schedule time
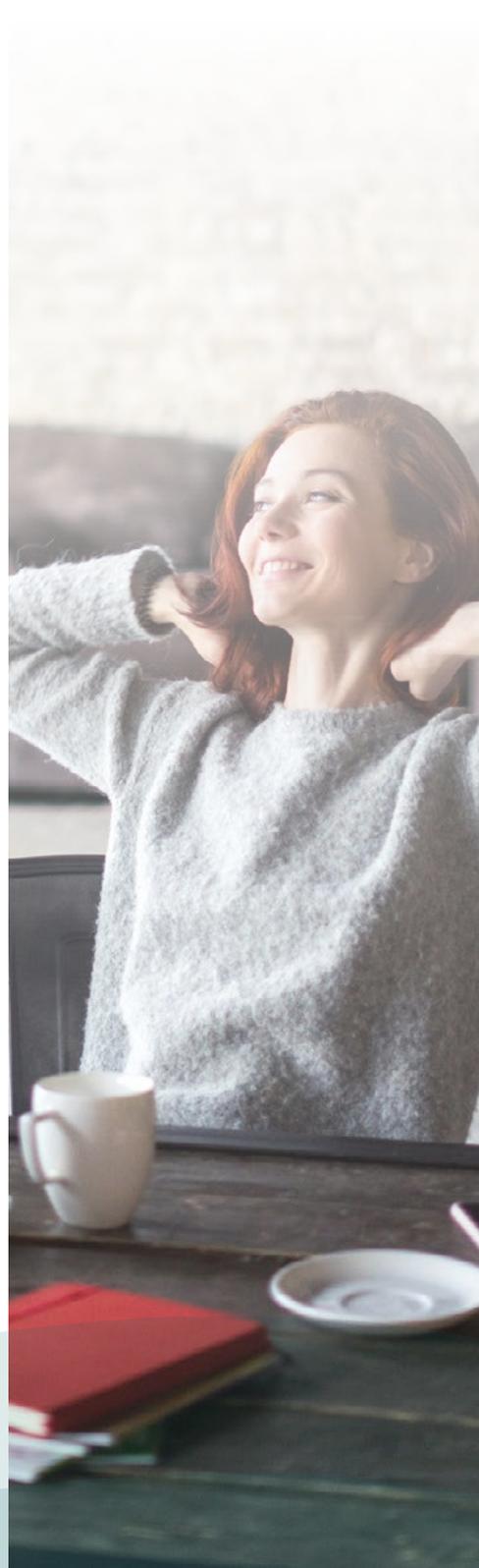
for work and non-work activities, keep in touch with your colleagues and supervisor, set (and stick to) working times, establish realistic goals, monitor productivity over time, maintain a list of achievements, and understand that many people are experiencing concerns about their health and job security.

3. Adapt to change

Some people adapt easily to homeworking. Others take time to adjust and find a way to make it work. It can help if you allow for these changes and differences in yourself and colleagues. Some common differences to be aware of are outlined here.

Different homeworking styles. People vary in how much they prefer to separate their work and personal lives. Agree how you can best work from home with your employer, colleagues and family. This will help you avoid role conflict.

Setting boundaries. The boundaries between work and non-work time can become very blurred when homeworking. Establishing a routine can help. Include a 'proper' lunch hour and regular breaks away from your workstation. Adopt an 'unwinding ritual' for transitioning between work and home: change your clothes, have a shower, cook a meal, or go for a run. Mindful walking can be a good way to switch off.

Stay socially connected. Working remotely can be socially isolating; a particular risk while people are confined to their homes during the pandemic, especially for those living alone. Loneliness can lead to stress, anxiety and depression, and reduce motivation, engagement and job performance. Feeling connected with others is beneficial, so find ways to maintain social contact at work (e.g. 'virtual coffee time' for a catch up, or a quiz).

Consider the gains. Look for positives in the current situation (e.g. gaining extra time by not commuting, learning new skills that will help you in the future, more opportunities to be with your family or have quality time for yourself).

4. Relieve the pressure

Keep active. Physical inactivity can have serious consequences for health. Minimise sitting time, take regular breaks and schedule exercise sessions. Try standing or walking around during calls or online meetings.

Sleep well, eat well. Adequate rest and sleep, eating healthily and keeping hydrated are crucial for wellbeing and cognitive performance. Schedule time for refreshments in your diary.

Benefits and risks for work-life balance. Working at home can benefit work-life balance and wellbeing, offering more

flexibility and autonomy. However, some people experience role stress, when meeting the requirements of one role (e.g. employee), conflicts with the needs of another, (e.g. parent). Be realistic about what can be done in the time available. This will help minimise disruptions and allow quality time in each role.

If you feel that your workload has increased significantly since you started homeworking and you are unable to meet your personal needs and responsibilities, contact your line manager to discuss.

5. Evaluate

Ensure regular reviews. Regularly evaluate how you are using the SHARE approach and whether both your needs and your employer's needs are being met. Establish regular check-ins with your manager and if you need to implement changes, clearly communicate your suggestions and how they will work. This will help avoid any misunderstandings and maintain a collaborative approach.

Maintain work-life balance with a flexible approach.
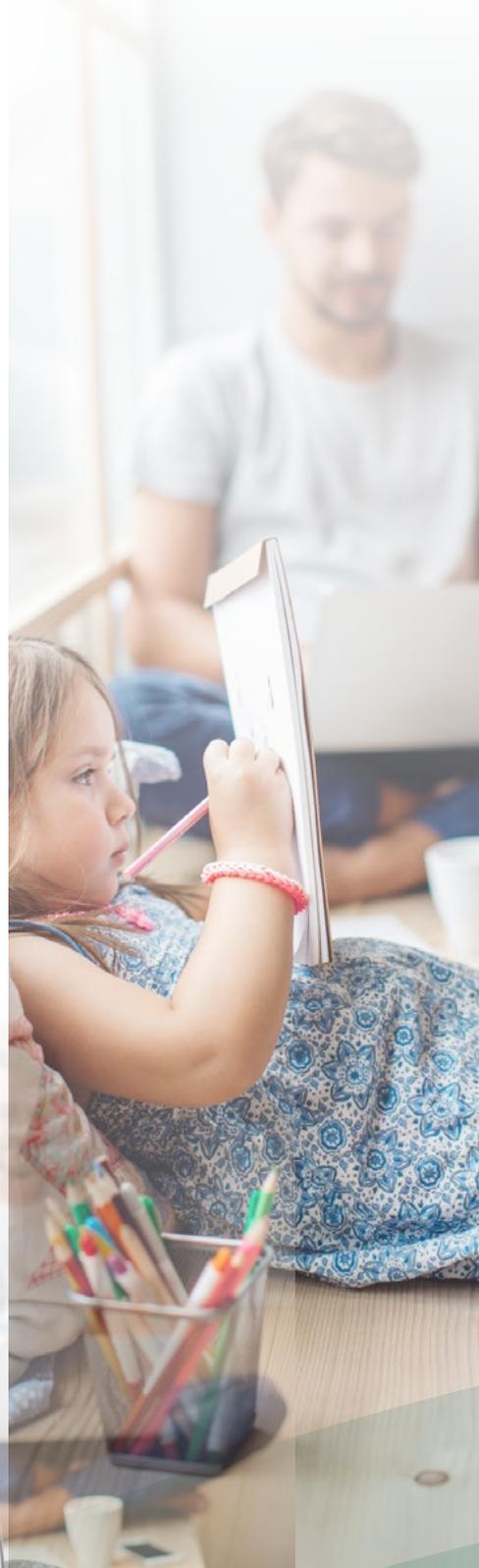
PART 2: SHARE FOR EMPLOYERS

1. Safe homeworking

Homeworking has allowed many businesses to continue to operate, but its sudden introduction required employees to work in unfamiliar ways in conditions of uncertainty. Being anxious and having concerns about reduced control and loss of support networks, are therefore understandable. Ensuring 'business as usual' under pandemic conditions poses challenges for any manager. Remember that the advice to employees in the previous section is also relevant to the needs of managers working at home, but some more specific guidance is provided here. As employers and employees adjust and work towards a 'new normal', different issues may arise.

Duty of care. The governments of the UK nations recognise the duty of employers to support the wellbeing of staff working at home during the pandemic. Provide clear guidance for accessing support from human resources and occupational health.

Create the right conditions. Negotiate arrangements that meet the individual employee's situation. Creating conditions in which

stress is reduced and engagement increased will help them to do their best. Avoid 'blanket' guidance – if you advise against working in a bedroom, remember that this may be the only quiet space available to some. Remember that some people are unaccustomed to self-structuring their working day and will need additional support.

Establish trust. Building trust between managers and staff is fundamental. Strike a balance between being interested and supportive and acting in ways that could feel intrusive. Knowing your staff as individuals will help you find the right balance.

2. Help yourself and others

There are many ways in which you can support employees to do their best.

Set realistic expectations. Remember that what could be done previously may not be possible under current conditions. This may mean implementing a flexible 'work when you can, as much as you can to your best ability' policy. Jointly agree realistic expectations for your employee's performance.

Communicate. Having time for discussions and feedback is key. Regular team or one-to-one meetings will help employees feel supported and overcome isolation. Be flexible and ensure that meeting methods and timing are agreed. Use this time for:

Regular check-ins.

Setting and evaluating work tasks and goals.

Providing support.

Seeking views about changes and key issues.

Technology. Technological solutions that help teams to collaborate are important. Remember that some employees are less confident with technology. Managers can assess confidence levels, and provide support and training for developing digital resilience.

Hidden costs of homeworking. Employees save by not commuting but incur other costs at home (e.g. printing, heating). Organisations can look at ways to help with these costs.

3. Adapt to change

Transitioning to homeworking, especially when multiple employees are affected, can be challenging. There are some critical areas to consider.

Recognise diverse needs and circumstances. Some employees will be experiencing major challenges, including caring responsibilities, home schooling, health issues, sleep disruption, rapid upskilling, disability and anxiety. Take account of personal circumstances.

Understand the risks. Pressure to be 'always-on' is a key concern. Blurred boundaries may encourage people to work longer and harder, or substitute work for other activities such as socialising, which are unavailable during current conditions. Over-work can have serious implications for wellbeing and job performance. Look out for signs of over-work (e.g. exceeding targets) and continuing to work when unwell (presenteeism). Ensure that sickness absence processes are followed.

Assess and address risk. A risk assessment of physical and psychological factors, including employees' distractions and concerns, is useful for agreeing expectations about performance at an individual level.

4. Relieve the pressure

Be flexible. Managers can feel a loss of oversight when teams are physically distant and worry about productivity. Avoid excessive surveillance and micro-management, as these reduce morale and damage working relationships.

Show support. Regular 'check ins' with employees can establish whether they are managing their workload without compromising work-life balance and wellbeing. Show compassion, respect and genuine concern for people's wellbeing and their personal circumstances.

Role model behaviour. Role model healthy behaviours and be kind to yourself, prioritising your self-care, getting regular exercise, enough sleep and time to spend with your family and friends.

Expectations are high. Many managers are now responsible for keeping the business afloat while supporting their staff through a major transition. If you are feeling anxious about work and home demands, you should discuss this with your own line manager and seek appropriate support.

5. Evaluate

Maintain regular reviews. Lockdown conditions and personal circumstances are subject to change, so regularly evaluate how you are using the SHARE approach and whether both your needs and your employees' needs are being met. Establish regular check-ins with each employee to discuss homeworking and ensure you both understand individual circumstances and expectations. This will help avoid any misunderstandings or miscommunications while maintaining a collaborative approach.

Avoid any misunderstandings or miscommunications while maintaining a collaborative approach.

PART 3: SHARE IN PRACTICE

Key guidelines for employers and employees

SHARE	Employers	Employees
1. Safe homeworking	• Consider your duty of care • Provide practical guidance to employees • Maintain trust and communication	• Identify an appropriate workspace • Plan your day and schedule breaks • Consider privacy and data regulations
2. Help yourself and others	• Set realistic expectations • Communicate and check-in regularly with employees • Support the development of digital resilience skills • Consider employees' hidden costs	• Communicate and stick to your schedule • Make sure to switch off regularly • Develop new skills if possible, including skills for digital resilience
3. Adapt to change	• Recognise diverse needs and circumstances • Understand the risks • Assess and address risk	• Allow time to develop your own style of homeworking and establish a routine • Set boundaries between home and work life • Stay socially connected and consider the positives
4. Relieve the pressure	• Use a flexible approach • Show support • Role model healthy behaviours	• Maintain work-life balance • Keep active • Sleep well, eat well
5. Evaluate	• Regularly review your SHARE approach with each employee	• Regularly review your SHARE approach with your manager

CONCLUSION

Working remotely in a healthy and sustainable way involves:

- Employees developing the skills and competencies needed to work at home safely and effectively, ensuring they set appropriate boundaries between their work and personal life.

- Employers supporting remote working by recognising the risks for physical and psychological health and addressing these, understanding diversity, and using flexible approaches as every situation will be different, managing expectations, ensuring effective communication, providing support and ensuring people feel appreciated.

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FURTHER READING

Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19)
www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/offices-and-contact-centres

Managing risks and risk assessment at work (HSE)
www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/index.htm

Society of Occupational Medicine
www.som.org.uk

Home office, mobile office – Managing remote working (IOSH)
https://iosh.com/media/1507/iosh-home-office-mobile-office-full-report-2014.pdf

Getting the most from remote working (CIPD)
www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/flexible-working/remote-working-top-tips

Preparing your organisation for homeworking (CIPD)
www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/flexible-working/homeworking-questionnaire

Homeworking – A guide for employers and employees (ACAS)
https://archive.acas.org.uk/media/3905/Homeworking---a-guide-for-employers-and-employees/pdf/Homeworking-a-guide-for-employers-and-employees.pdf