



# Workers Working from Home

Core Body of Knowledge for the  
Generalist OHS Professional

Second Edition, 2019

37.4



**AIHS**

Australian Institute  
of Health & Safety



**Australian OHS Education  
Accreditation Board**

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## Workers Working from Home

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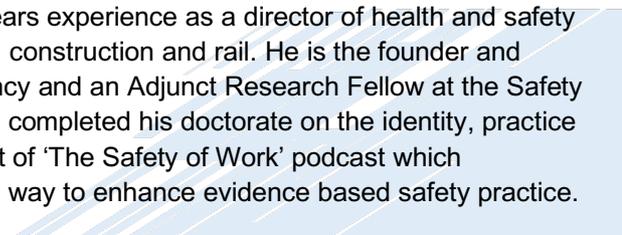
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# Data collection

## Survey

The Australian Institute of Health and Safety (AIHS) conducted a survey of OHS professionals to explore their experience of managing the health and safety of people working from home. The survey was conducted in the last two weeks of April 2020 when most workplaces were three to four weeks into transitioning at least a part of their workforce to working from home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 310 respondents, most were Australian with the greatest representation being from the Australian eastern states. Over 60% were operating across more than one state. While most were from private organisations, government employers were also well represented as were larger organization with 74% of respondents working in organisations of 500 or more employees.

## Interviews

The following people provided input to the chapter via technology-enabled consultative forums. The Australian Institute of Health & Safety is appreciative of their time and interest.

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|---------------------|--|------------------------|
| Sally Bennett       | Director, Risk Management  | Arts Centre Melbourne  |
| Dr Daniel Carpenter | Chief Executive Officer  | TIKS                   |
| Genevieve Hawkins   | General Manager, Coles Group Insurance   | Coles                  |
| Geoff Hoad          | Chief Safety Officer   | Blacktown City Council |
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## Personal communications

Our thanks to Dr Kirsten Way (University of Queensland) and Dr Carlo Caponecchia (University of NSW) for the conversation that underpinned section 5 *A Broader view*.

## Workers Working from Home

### Abstract

Working from home, in some form, has always been a feature of work. The recent COVID-19 pandemic and the government recommendation for workers to work from home where possible has cast new light on working from home, and in particular the health and safety implications. With working from home likely to be a significant feature in ongoing working arrangements it is vital that we learn from the recent experience to optimise the outcomes of working from home for the worker and for the organisation. Building on the limited literature, this chapter draws on the outcomes of a survey and interviews with OHS professionals to develop principles for OHS practice to inform the design of work for working from home.

### Keywords

safety, health, wellbeing, OHS, working from home, WFH

### Contextual reading

For a full list of chapters and a synopsis of the *OHS Body of Knowledge*, readers should refer to Chapter 1 Preliminaries. Chapter 2, Introduction, describes the background and development process while Chapter 3, The OHS Professional, provides context by describing the role and professional environment.

### Terminology

Depending on the jurisdiction and the organisation, terminology refers to 'Occupational Health and Safety' (OHS), 'Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) or 'Work Health and Safety' (WHS). In line with international practice, this publication uses OHS with the exception of specific reference to the Work Health and Safety (WHS) Act and related legislation.

### Jurisdictional application

This chapter includes reference to Australian work health and safety legislation. This is in line with the Australian national application of the *OHS Body of Knowledge*. Readers working in other legal jurisdictions should consider these references as examples and refer to the relevant legislation in their jurisdiction of operation.

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# 1 Introduction

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century technology has paved the way for contemporary workplaces to embrace many different and diverse ways of working. Flexible working arrangements have become common and tele-working, or working from remote locations, including a worker's home has become increasingly common.

This potential for a shift from centralised work to working from home was identified back in the 1970s and 1980s (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016). Flexible working arrangements have progressed steadily, especially in response to organisations focusing on increasing gender diversity and supporting employee work-life balance. However in 2020, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic many workers found themselves in an enforced working from home situation. It has been estimated that more than 30% of all workers in Australia have been working from home for almost 2 months at the time of publication of this chapter (Pennington & Stanford, 2020).

Waters-Lynch (2020) suggest that in Australia almost a third of people do some work from home but this number is inflated by those who work from home to catch up on work from the office (42%). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home as part of flexible work arrangements represented 13% of the workforce; childcare or family considerations 4% and as a condition of employment 8%.<sup>1</sup> (ABS, 2015 as reported by Waters-Lynch, 2020.) Such working arrangements are not a new phenomenon but as noted by Harpaz back in 2002:

The real change, then, is not the advent of telecommuting or that work takes place at home but that telecommuters work at home within the structure of an organizational framework. (Harpaz, 2002, p.74)

It is this change of context that imposes obligations on employers to address workers health and safety while they are working from home. Historically, the standard of health and safety for workers while working at home has not been equivalent to the standard expected in more centralised workplaces. (Vassie, 2000; Quinlan & Bohle, 2008.) Managing the health and safety of workers working from home is a complicated issue as the boundary between work and personal life is blurred, however it is much more than ensuring workers have an ergonomically suitable work station.

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<sup>1</sup> Other reasons for working at home include wanting a home office/no overheads or to operate a farm.

In 2002 Harpaz described the possible advantages and disadvantages for individuals, organisations and society. (Table 1.) While the evidence may not have been clear at that time, research has since supported Harpaz’s suppositions.

**Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of ‘telecommuting’ (Harpaz, 2002, p.76)**

|            | Advantages   | Disadvantages  |
|------------|--|--|
| Individual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy/independence</li> <li>• Flexible working hours</li> <li>• Improvement in time management, professional flexibility</li> <li>• Savings in travel time and expenses</li> <li>• Flexibility in arranging supervision of family members/dependents</li> </ul>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impaired feeling of belonging</li> <li>• Feeling of isolation</li> <li>• No separation between spheres of work and home</li> <li>• Need for self-discipline</li> <li>• Lack of professional support</li> <li>• Impeded career advancement</li> <li>• Over-availability syndrome</li> <li>• Personal unsuitability</li> <li>• Legal issues</li> </ul>      |
|            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased productivity</li> <li>• Increased provision of human resources</li> <li>• Significant decrease in absence and tardiness levels</li> <li>• Savings in direct expenses</li> <li>• Increased motivation and satisfaction</li> <li>• Creation of positive organizational image</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Application difficulties for organizations with centralized management</li> <li>• Investment in training and new supervision methods</li> <li>• Possible damage to commitment to, and identification with, the organization</li> <li>• Changes in work methods</li> <li>• Cost involved in transition to telecommuting</li> <li>• Legal issues</li> </ul> |
| Society    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduction of environmental damage</li> <li>• Decrease in traffic/congestion</li> <li>• Solutions for special-needs populations</li> <li>• Savings in infrastructure and energy</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of a detached society</li> </ul>   |

This chapter has been developed in response to the dramatic change in Australian workplaces and work conditions brought about as a result of the Australian Government recommendation for Australian workers to work from home as part of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. (See Department of Health, 2020, March, 21.) There is a plethora of information available on the health and safety aspects of working from home<sup>2</sup> but little on the role of managing OHS for workers working from home and the role of the OHS professional. The information that is currently available focuses on compliance with legal obligations.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Safe Work Australia guidance, SWA, 2020.

The chapter recognises that the rapid move to high numbers of workers working from home creates unprecedented issues for the management of OHS in the short-term and that the nature of the issues will change as the situation evolves. This includes into the 'post-covid' environment where working from home for part or all of the working hours is likely to become an established feature of work. It is currently projected that more than one third of employees who have been forced to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, will continue to do so when the pandemic is under control (Pennington & Stanford, 2020).

While the move to working from home is complicated by the physical and psychological issues around the COVID-19 pandemic we have attempted to isolate the working from home issues and deal with those as part of ongoing practice for OHS professionals. There is very little recent research into managing the health and safety of people working from home and no research from the perspective of the OHS professional.

The objective of the chapter is to provide a basis for discussion among OHS professionals and provide a stimulus for research informed by contemporary OHS theory into the design of work for working from home that addresses physical and psychological health as well as organisational needs. The chapter gives a brief review of the history of working from home and relevant aspects of Australian Fair Work and Work Health and Safety legislation are identified to provide a context for the current situation. Responses to an online survey of OHS professionals together with thematic analysis of ten interviews reveals some key lessons for the management of people working from home. Identifying the need to develop a holistic approach to the design of work for working from home, the chapter considers some elements of motivational theory and how organisations may move to a model of work for working from home that supports good health and safety for workers while keeping in mind organisational outcomes.

## 2 Historical perspective

Working from home is not a new phenomenon. Going back to hunter-gatherer times animals, grains and other materials were brought into the home for 'processing' into food, clothing and bedding materials. In medieval times (5<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century) peasants shared the 'long house' with their animals and daily work activities such as spinning, weaving, butchery and tannery all occurred under one roof (Workhome, n.d.). During this time merchants and craftworkers also operated from a home-base but often separated from the living space in what might be considered the first 'home offices' (Weiler-Reynolds, 2017). The Renaissance period (14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century) with its focus on knowledge, education and the arts and related administration led to the concept of an 'office'.

It was the Industrial Revolution (mid 18<sup>th</sup> to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century) with centralisation of work around availability of steam power and eventually electricity that took work out of the home. The role of 'technology' in driving the change brought about by the industrial revolution is reflected in the development of the 'office' which was enabled by the telephone, the telegraph and the typewriter (mid 19<sup>th</sup> century). While the 'office' or the 'factory' continued to be the place of work, technology changed the nature of work with the first personal computers being used in 1975, the internet coming into being in 1983 and WiFi being invented in 1991 (Toptal, n.d.). In 1993 management guru Peter Drucker declared commuting to the office obsolete (Waters-Lynch, 2020). However, during this time managers and many organisations resisted working from home arrangements based on arguments such as :

1. "If people work at home, how can one tell how well they are doing or whether they are working at all?"
2. "Work at home would cut off employees from needed contacts with their co-workers and others."
3. "Working at home will simply prove impractical: too many distractions and the lack of a quiet place in which to work." (Washington Post, 1979 in Weiler-Reynolds, 2017.)

In many organisations this resistance to workers working from home has continued with any working from home policies often reflecting a gender bias focusing on those with 'childcare responsibilities' (which usually means women). A gender bias is also reflected in the recent history for working from home where the 60s and 70s saw an overwhelming female participation in working from home with multilevel marketing schemes (e.g Tupperware, Avon) and artisan/craftworkers.

Taking a more recent view of working from home, a 2014 Australian study that investigated whether working from home aided in work-life balance found that there was "no simple answer".

- Working long hours was linked to working from home
- Working from home was linked to higher pay but the higher pay did not recompense for the longer hours worked
- Employees valued flexibility of working from home and this was generally related to higher job satisfaction
- Positive effects of working from home were more likely for those workers who had explicit or implicit arrangements to work from home compared with those who worked from home as a way of managing long work hours. (Dockery & Bawa, 2014.)

Throughout modern history, working and personal lives have been tightly coupled and the recent gradual shift to working from home has brought challenges and resistance from many employers. There are risks and benefits to employers and workers in working from home.

For some employers the opportunity to attract talented workers from a broader geographical area, and reduced office costs provide advantages. While for others the fragmentation of their workforce creates perceptions of inefficiency and lower quality work outcomes. For some workers, being able to work from home at a time and pace that suits them is motivating and having a quiet space without a busy commute to the office creates the opportunity for more productive work. While for others the blending of work and personal lives creates anxiety, and the availability of the home office environment lengthens working hours.

## 3 Legal context

### 3.1 Australian Fair Work legislation

The Australian Fair Work Act 2009 provides employees working within the national workplace relations system with the legal right to request 'flexible working arrangements'.<sup>3</sup> Such arrangements include a range of options including:

changing the location of work or the need to travel to work (for example, working from home) (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2018, p. 2.)

This right does not apply to all workers – eligible employees must meet certain conditions such as:

- Being a parent or responsible for the care of a child who is of school age or younger
- Being a carer
- Having a disability
- Aged 55 years or older
- Experiencing violence from family member
- Providing care or support for a member of the immediate family who is experiencing family violence. (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2018.)

Employers must seriously consider such requests for flexible work arrangements but may refuse on 'reasonable business grounds' which must be detailed in a formal response to such requests. (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2018.)

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<sup>3</sup> Some Australian states and territories also have laws providing similar rights. e.g. equal opportunity legislation in Victoria.

## 3.2 Work health and safety legislation<sup>4</sup>

The Model Work Health and Safety Act (WHS Act) (WHS Act, 2002) allows for work across a range of worksites by defining a workplace as:

a place where work is carried out for a business or undertaking and includes any place where a worker goes, or is likely to be, while at work. (WHS Act s 8 (1))

While private residences are excluded from the operation of health and safety legislation, where they are being used as a residence, where a worker is undertaking work at home for a business or undertaking the duties owed under the Model Act still apply.

A person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) has a primary duty of care to:

... ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of:

- (a) workers engaged, or caused to be engaged by the person; and
- (b) workers whose activities in carrying out work are influenced or directed by the person, while the workers are at work in the business or undertaking. (WHS Act, s 19(1))

A further requirement under section 19 of the WHS Act potentially presents an interesting element in managing the OHS of workers working from home:

A person conducting a business or undertaking must ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that the health and safety of **other persons** is not put at risk from work carried out as part of the conduct of the business or undertaking. (emphasis added) (s 19 (2))

These obligations “include any place where a worker goes, or is likely to be, while at work” but is tempered by what is ‘reasonably practicable’ taking into account and weighing up all relevant matters including:

- (a) the likelihood of the hazard or the risk concerned occurring; and
- (b) the degree of harm that might result from the hazard or the risk; and
- (c) what the person concerned knows, or ought reasonably to know, about:
  - (i) the hazard or the risk; and
  - (ii) ways of eliminating or minimising the risk; and
- (d) the availability and suitability of ways to eliminate or minimise the risk; and
- (e) after assessing the extent of the risk and the available ways of eliminating or minimising the risk, the cost associated with available ways of eliminating or minimising the risk, including whether the cost is grossly disproportionate to the risk. (WHS Act, s 18)<sup>5</sup>

The duty of care obligations relate to the risk posed by the work being conducted and not the risk that may derive from the home environment itself. Perhaps the most important elements

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<sup>4</sup> Workers’ Compensation legislation also applies to workers working from home but is not addressed as part of the *OHS BoK*. For information on workers compensation as it applies to working from home contact the relevant state agency.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the interpretation and application of *reasonably practicable* see *OHS BoK* 9.2 Work Health and Safety Law in Australia.

in applying the concept of reasonable practicability to risk control in the work-home situation is consideration of whether it is suitable to implement certain risk control measures in a home environment.

The requirement for the PCBU to address health and safety risks while the worker is working from home may also be required under the Model Work Health and Safety Regulations (WHSR) (SWA, 2019) which refers to remote or isolated work which is defined as “work that is isolated from the assistance of other persons because of location, time or the nature of the work”. (WHSR s 48(3)). In such cases assistance particularly refers to medical assistance and attendance of emergency workers as may apply when a person operating machinery in a home environment suffers an accident requiring medical assistance. In such cases the PCBU is required to provide a system of work that includes effective communication with the worker.

The WHSA also places obligations on the worker and these obligations continue to apply when the worker is working from home. The worker, while at work, must:

- (a) take reasonable care for his or her own health and safety; and
- (b) take reasonable care that his or her acts or omissions do not adversely affect the health and safety of other persons; and
- (c) comply, so far as the worker is reasonably able, with any reasonable instruction that is given by the person conducting the business or undertaking to allow the person to comply with this Act; and
- (d) co-operate with any reasonable policy or procedure of the person conducting the business or undertaking relating to health or safety at the workplace that has been notified to workers. (WHSA, s 28)

In addressing all of these obligations it is important that both physical and psychological health is considered (WHSA s 4).

Extending obligations of PCBUs under the WHSA to workers working from home means that managing the health and safety for such workers should be based on a risk management approach (WHSA s 17) and where practicable consider the:

- Work environment (WHSA s 19(3a))
- Plant and structures (WHSA s 19(3b))
- Systems of work (WHSA s 19( c))
- Use, handling and storage of plant, structures and substances (WHSA s 19(3d)).

Of particular relevance is the “provision of any information, training, instruction or supervision that is necessary to protect all persons from risks to their health and safety arising from work ...” (WHSA s3 (h)). As demonstrated in the survey results and discussions

reported in section 4, many of the strategies employed in managing the health and safety of people working from home focus on information and training.

In the context of working from home the concept of 'supervision' usually adopted in centralised workplaces changes to one that may be mediated through a range of communication and strategies. Such strategies can also facilitate the PCBU's obligation to monitor "the health of workers and the conditions at the workplace .... for the purpose of preventing illness or injury of workers arising from the conduct of the business or undertaking" (WHS s 3(i)). This process can become complicated when assessing the risks posed by the home vs that of the work, for example ensuring safe access and egress where the home may have inherent risks.

While the condition of 'so far as reasonably practicable' applies, PCBUs should be aware that the duty to consult is not negated or reduced due to what might be seen as the limitations created by a dispersed workforce. The PCBU must:

consult, ... with workers who carry out work for the business or undertaking who are, or are likely to be, directly affected by a matter relating to work health or safety. (WHS s 47(1))

Where workers are represented by a health and safety representative, the consultation must involve that representative (WHS s 48).

While a PCBU conducts a business or undertaking, companies also have 'officers'. An officer is a person who makes decisions, or participates in making decisions, that affect the whole, or a substantial part, of a business or undertaking and has the capacity to significantly affect the financial standing of the business or undertaking.<sup>6</sup> An Officer's obligation under the Work Health and Safety Act to demonstrate *due diligence* (WHS s 27(1)) in ensuring that the company has processes in place to ensure the health and safety of workers also applies in the context workers working from home. The 'reasonable steps' for demonstrating due diligence (WHS s 27(5)) require the Officer to:

- Acquire and keep up-to-date knowledge of work health and safety matters (s 27 (5)(a))
- Gain an understanding of the nature of the operations generally of the hazards and risks associated with those operations (s 27 (5)(b))
- Ensure that the PCBU has appropriate resources and processes to eliminate or minimise risks to health and safety from work carried out (s 27 (5)(c))
- Ensure that the PCBU has appropriate processes for receiving and considering information regarding incidents, hazards and risks and responding in a timely

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<sup>6</sup> Where an officer is defined within the meaning of section 9 of the *Corporations Act 2001 (Cth)*.

way to that information (s 27 (5)(d))

- Verify the provision and use of the resources and processes to minimise risk and to receive information regarding incidents, hazards and risks and responding in a timely way. (s 27 (5)(f)).

In summary, the same legal obligations under the Model WHS legislation apply to work being undertaken from home as in a usual workplace, and a PCBU must consider the unique factors which impact on the health and safety of workers and others from the work being undertaken from home and ensure the implementation of reasonably practicable risk control methods to comply with their legal obligations.

## 4 OHS professionals' view – Initial implementation of working from home in a 'Covid' environment

The move to working from home as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic has seen considerable media attention but, as noted in the Introduction, there has been little or no structured research into managing the health and safety of those working from home. This section reports the outcomes of a survey of OHS professionals and practitioners together with interviews of selected OHS professionals to identify lessons learned.

### 4.1 Survey

The Australian Institute of Health and Safety (AIHS) conducted a survey of OHS professionals to explore their experience of managing the health and safety of people working from home. The survey was conducted in the last two weeks of April 2020 when most workplaces were three to four weeks into transitioning at least a part of their workforce to working from home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Survey respondents were asked questions relating to:

- The status of their working from home policies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Issues faced in transitioning workers to working from home
- How the issues were addressed
- Lessons learned from the experience that they would pass on to others.

Of the 310 respondents, most were Australian with the greatest representation being from the Australian eastern states. Over 60% were operating across more than one state. While

most were from private organisations, government employers were also well represented as were larger organisations with 74% of respondees working in organisations of 500 or more employees. (Table 2.)

The extent of the challenge faced in transitioning workers to working from home is indicated by the 33% of respondees who had no policies for working from home in place at the commencement of the pandemic and the 81% who found that their policies were not fit for purpose (Table 3). With at least 70% of respondents envisaging at least some workers would continue to work from home post the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important that the health and safety of these workers is well managed (Table 3).

**Table 2: Demographic details of survey respondees**

| Respondee details                          |               | % response<br>n=310 |
|--|---------------|---------------------|
| Country of origin                          | Australia     | 97%                 |
|  | NZ, UK, other | 3%                  |
| Main state of operation                    | Vic           | 34%                 |
|  | QLD           | 21%                 |
|  | NSW           | 19%                 |
|  | WA            | 14%                 |
|  | SA            | 6%                  |
|  | ACT           | 3%                  |
|  | Tas/NT        | 3%                  |
| Operation across more than one state       | Yes           | 63%                 |
|  | No            | 37%                 |
| Employer                                   | Private       | 64%                 |
|  | Government    | 23%                 |
|  | NFP           | 7%                  |
|  | NGO           | 1%                  |
|  | Other         | 5%                  |
| Size of organisation                       | <100          | 26%                 |
|  | 100-500       | 26%                 |
|  | 500-1000      | 39%                 |
|  | 1000-5000     | 18%                 |
|  | >5000         | 17%                 |
| Member of an OHS professional body         | Yes           | 89%                 |
|  | No            | 11%                 |
| Certified as OHS professional/practitioner | Yes           | 56%                 |
|  | No            | 44%                 |

NFP – Not For Profit.

NGO – Non-Government Organisation that operates on a non-profit basis.

**Table 3: Status of policies and indications of future working from home**

| Question   |                              | % response<br>n=186 |
|--|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Did your organisation have policies in place for working from home?  | Yes                          | 67%                 |
|  | No                           | 33%                 |
| Were these policies fit for purpose for the current requirements?  | Yes                          | 20%                 |
|  | Helped but required updating | 50%                 |
|  | No                           | 31%                 |
| Do you envisage that the current working from home arrangements will bring about an ongoing focus on working from home in your organisation? | Yes                          | 42%                 |
|  | Somewhat                     | 28%                 |
|  | Perhaps, can't tell yet      | 20%                 |
|  | No                           | 11%                 |

When asked to list the top three issues encountered at the commencement of the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents reported issues directly related to the risk presented by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, as well as issues in transitioning workers to working from home, with these two areas often inextricably integrated.

Issues associated with the COVID-19 response included:

- Implementing physical distancing onsite
- Obtaining supplies and ensuring good hand hygiene practices
- Lack of personal protective equipment
- Conflicting information, managers and workers not recognising the risk and not changing behaviour in the workplace
- Implementing new ways of working, changed procedures to comply with physical distancing requirements
- Keeping sight of pre-existing hazards while working to manage emerging hazards
- Mental health and anxiety around the virus as well as uncertainty related to job security and infection risk.

There were two aspects to the issues related to working from home:

- Those arising for the OHS professional not being onsite (see Table 4 for some examples)
- Those related to the health and safety of workers working from home.

**Table 4: Examples of perceived issues arising from OHS role not being on site**

| Issue   | How addressed                          |
|---|--|
| Maintaining OHS presence with leadership team                             | Initiating communications with leaders |
| Audits, inspections and risk assessments                                  | Training                               |
| Reliance on others for information  | Virtual tours                          |
| Lack of visibility on site  | Network of trusted individuals         |
| Difficulty checking effectiveness of communications                       | Maintain communications with HSRs      |
| Having to rely on others for implementation of safety improvement actions |  |
| Not being able to give back-up support to front line workers              |  |
| Not having ad hoc conversations to get that extra information             |  |

The issues related to the health and safety of people working from home identified through the survey were analysed into six themes:

1. Communication
  - New technology to manage virtual and remote working
  - Increased meetings to respond to changes in work activities and work processes
  - ‘Echo chambers’ created by people maintaining contact with those who share similar views and not being in contact with those who might have different views.
2. Trust
  - Resistance by some managers in workers moving to working from home
  - Working from home seen as a ‘rort’ or ‘holiday’ by those who cannot work from home.
3. Physical health
  - Ergonomic set up of workstations and working from home environments
  - Reduced physical activity and increased daily screen time
  - Increased workload, working hours, stress and fatigue.
4. Psychological health
  - Isolation from family, peers and social network
  - Difficulty creating boundaries between ‘work’ and ‘home’ time and activities.
5. Job design
  - Reduced ability to complete tasks under new working arrangements
  - Organisations not being able to provide ‘suitable duties’ for people on return to work

- Difficulty involving supervisors in day-to-day work.
6. Risk management
- Maintaining an effective risk management approach to current and emerging issues.

## 4.2 Targeted interviews

In April 2020 targeted interviews were held with 10 OHS professionals from a diverse range of industry sectors<sup>7</sup> to identify the strategies employed in moving significant numbers of workers to working from home as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The objective of the interviews was to identify lessons for the management of health and safety of workers working from home on an ongoing basis and the role of the OHS professional in facilitating and supporting this process. The semi-structured interviews were based on the following four key questions:

- What was the status of working from home in your organisation 'pre-covid'?
- How did you manage the move to working from home as part of physical isolation?
- What issues did you encounter?
- What were the key learnings for you that you would pass onto other OHS professionals?

The interviews were audio recorded and analysed for themes. Two limiting factors associated with this data collection that may not be transferable to previous or future working from home arrangements are that:

1. For most workers, the move to working from home was not negotiable
2. The organisational working from home strategy and the experience for the worker of working from home was inextricably linked with the response to the COVID-19 threat.

Table 5 summarises the reported status of working from home arrangements prior to the mandatory requirement for physical distancing and working from home. Table 6 lists the issues identified by interviewees in implementing working from home arrangements and the range of responses. Without exception the interviewees considered that the 'new normal'

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<sup>7</sup> Size of organisation ranged from 25 workers working from home through 500, 5000 to 20,000 workers working from home. Industries included arts and entertainment, retail, education, aged care, local government, transport, energy, telco, technology and research.

post the COVID-19 pandemic would include a significant increase in ongoing working from home arrangements.

**Table 5: Summary of working from home arrangements prior to physical distancing requirements for limiting COVID-19 infections**

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| Policy         | All organisations had a policy. Nature of policies varied including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic guidelines focusing on ergonomic set up</li> <li>• Structured policy requiring approval of ergonomic set up and other arrangements</li> <li>• Policy as part of diversity program</li> <li>• Well established program with Executive support.</li> </ul>  |
| Implementation | While policies existed, the level of implementation varied with a generally low level of working from home: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nil or very few working from home, with senior managers sometimes working from home as an extension of their in-office work</li> <li>• Some regular working from home (e.g. 1 day/week) with other adhoc arrangements</li> <li>• Up to 20% working from home on any given day</li> </ul> |

**Table 6: Issues identified in implementing working from home as part of physical distancing requirements for limiting COVID-19 infections**

|            | Issue  | Examples of response   |
|------------|--|--|
| Physical   | With one exception, VPN access for large numbers of people working from home was an issue  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IT issue which in most cases was quickly resolved with telco support</li> </ul>   |
|            | Access to ergonomic equipment for home work stations   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopted a 'reasonable' and pragmatic approach to optimising available equipment</li> </ul>  |
|            | Ergonomic checklist approach found to be unworkable or not practical in many situations  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moved away from strict ergonomic checklist approach to guidelines for comfort and movement</li> </ul>   |
| Contextual | Physical environment - home not designed as workplace (eg small studio apartments, house-sharing, difficulty in creating a designated workspace) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where possible the option of being at work was offered by rotating those at work with those working from home, the use of alternative worksites which enabled physical distancing was also offered</li> <li>• Pragmatic approach to optimising the working from home environment</li> </ul> |
|            | At risk individuals (e.g potential for domestic violence)  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where possible, offered option of being at work by rotating those at work or where possible making alternative worksites available</li> <li>• Increased one-on-one contact by supervisor</li> </ul>   |
|            | Caring commitments (children, elderly)   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offered flexible self-determined hours, short days, access to leave to balance short days</li> </ul>  |

| Issue              |   | Examples of response   |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Management of work | Management of time, being organised, creating boundaries b/n work and home<br>Team connectiveness       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technology to support video conferencing, team communications</li> <li>• Daily team check-in and 'one-on-ones' that address work priorities</li> <li>• Closed group-based social media (e.g. Face Book and Yammer) for non-work related engagement within the workgroup</li> </ul>  |
| Management support | Visible leader support vital  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular leader communications</li> </ul>  |
|                    | Some managers had difficulty in adjusting to a different management style for workers working from home | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leader support</li> <li>• Mandatory requirement of working from home required managers to adapt</li> <li>• Realisation of productivity benefits aided acceptance</li> <li>• Guidance and mentoring to support managers in adapting their management style</li> </ul>  |
| Communications     | Mis-interpretation when communications not F2F leading to conflict                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging listening</li> </ul>  |
|                    | Over-communication leading to too much screen time  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limiting time in meetings</li> <li>• Flexible approach across business units</li> </ul>   |
| Psychological      | Identified as a potential problem by all organisations  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhancement of existing programs to support psychological health (e.g. increased EAP access through telehealth)</li> <li>• Access to or development of information &amp; resources including 'handy tips', tool-box talks, podcasts/webinars, SMS broadcasts</li> <li>• Regular leader-led communications</li> <li>• Guidance for managers on supporting workers working from home</li> </ul> |
|                    | Individual psychological suitability for working from home and those who might require extra support    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With supervisors identified: psychological characteristics e.g. independence; need for connectiveness as a basis for individual support</li> <li>• 'One-on-one' check-ins</li> <li>• Individual control plans</li> </ul>  |

### 4.3 'Lessons learned'

Although conducted independently, the survey responses set the scene for what was more in-depth findings from the interviews. The survey responses described what might be considered 'tactical' issues and actions in implementing working from home while the interviews gave greater insight to the issues and a way forward.

Traditionally, OHS professionals and organisational approaches to managing OHS for working from home arrangements have focused on physical working conditions. While the survey identified psychological health as an issue, psychological health was given a higher priority by interviewees such that psychosocial health was seen as the major issue to be addressed for workers working from home both in the current COVID-19 driven environment and in the design of working from home arrangements in the future.

Our knowledge about supporting the psychosocial health of workers working from home is continuously evolving and is likely to require a different approach compared to that required for workers operating in face-to-face workplaces. OHS professionals interviewed considered that the health and safety of workers working from home could only be addressed by considering OHS as an integral part of designing and implementing working from home arrangements.

One of the major outcomes of the interviews was the need to re-think and re-design traditional workplace and role arrangements for working from home. Such an approach would address both physical and psychological health and safety as well as work outcomes.

Eight key principles emerged from the discussions.

*1 Recognise the diversity of the work group*

Do not treat workers working from home as a homogenous work group – recognise the diversity in age, lifestyle, life priorities, physical, psychological, mental and cognitive profiles when developing policy and process and implementing working from home arrangements.<sup>8</sup>

*2 Flexibility*

Policies and arrangements for working from home should be flexible to allow for the diversity of workers, their home environments and home commitments as well as the requirements of the work. Flexibility in the timing of tasks and meetings is important.

*3 Empowerment and ownership for workers*

Workers need to be empowered and have ownership of their health and safety when working from home. This is not an abrogation of the employer/PCBU responsibility but recognises that the work is occurring in the person's home and that they are best placed to know their home and the likely hazards. Employers should not prescribe the conditions for the work to occur but should enable and support the worker to establish a healthy and safe environment.

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<sup>8</sup> See also *OHS BoK Individual differences* (in planning at time of writing).

#### 4 *Holistic approach*

Guidance for workers working from home should be holistic. The guidance should go beyond the physical conditions of the work environment (e.g. an ergonomic approach to workstation set up) to address: physical comfort, management of work and work hours. Guidance should include information that supports an understanding of the issues that may be associated with working from home, the worker's health and integration with other aspects of their life. Strategies to manage these issues include suitable breaks and establishment of boundaries between work, home and leisure activities. Guidelines may be different for workers who are working from home for all or a majority of their work hours compared to those who are only working from home occasionally.

#### 5 *Belonging*

Irrespective of their work location, workers need to be able to identify with their work and have a sense of identity, social connectedness and belonging to the workgroup.

#### 6 *Leadership*

Support of organisational leaders is vital to enabling safe and successful working from home arrangements. This support should not only be for working from home as a concept but encouraging managers to support and value workers and the potential difficulties that some workers may face in working from home. Efficient and equitable working from home arrangements may require re-thinking of work design and criteria for evaluating work performance.

#### 7 *Support for managers*

Managing workers working from home requires greater trust and a different management style compared with managing workers in a face-to-face environment. Effectively managing working from home arrangements requires managers to know their workers well as individuals so that they can support their individual needs and ways of working. Some managers and supervisors will require support and mentoring to enable them to expand their management approach.

#### 8 *Risk management approach*

Communicating information and advice about managing OHS for workers working from home should be based on a risk management approach. As with all risk management the context in which the risk occurs is vital and in working from home arrangements this context is different to a traditional organisationally owned and controlled workplace. These differences need to be respected and OHS professionals, managers and workers need to work together to identify the needs and conditions to support safe and healthy work.

## 5 A broader view to inform design of work for working from home

While working from home has been a feature of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic it is likely that in the long term there will continue to be significant numbers of the workforce who work from home or remotely for a proportion of their working hours. Psychosocial health is seen as the most critical factor in managing the OHS risks of people working from home. This risk cannot be adequately controlled merely by more online meetings or webinars on self-management and wellness.

A holistic approach is required to the design of work for people working from home. Such an approach should consider the physical, psychological and practical needs of the workers while keeping in mind the productive needs of the organisation. The principles that emerged from the interviews provide a valuable starting point. This section expands on the principles by drawing on motivational theory to identify the individual and social needs of people as it can be related to working from home arrangements. A framework from the distributed work academic literature is introduced through which organisations may progress in implementing such a holistic approach to the design of work for working from home.

### 5.1 The individual

Motivational theory and particularly self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) is a useful starting point to inform the design of work broadly, and also specifically for working from home arrangements. Extensive research initially by Deci and later Deci in collaboration with Ryan has led to the finding that:

Human beings can be proactive and engaged or, alternatively, passive and alienated largely as a function of the social conditions in which they develop and function. ... [R]esearch guided by self-determination theory ... [has] led to the postulate of three innate psychological needs – competence, autonomy and relatedness – which when satisfied yield enhanced self-motivation and mental health and when thwarted lead to diminished motivation and well-being. (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68)

While their research focused on psychosocial health and wellbeing Ryan and Deci also made the link between the three innate psychological needs of:

- Competence
- Autonomy and relatedness and
- Commitment, effort and high-quality performance. (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 76)

These innate psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness resonate with the key principles developed through analysis of the survey responses and interviews with

OHS professionals reported in sections 4.1, and 4.2 especially flexibility, empowerment and belonging.

Daniel Pink in his popular but well referenced book *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us* applies the principles of self-determination theory to develop a model of motivational theory that is useful in designing work for working from home. Pink (2009) describes three innate needs that drive individuals in their motivation and support their psychological health: autonomy, mastery and purpose.

## 1 *Autonomy*

Autonomy is about self-direction and 'acting with choice' and has been linked with wellbeing and job satisfaction leading to increased performance. Autonomy supports engagement, whereas its opposite, control leads to compliance and often disengagement. Pink explains autonomy as having four elements, or four 'Ts' with some elements being more important to some people than others. Autonomy extends to:

- Task – what people do
- Time – when they do it
- Technique – how they do it
- Team – with whom they do it.

This view of autonomy reflects the feedback from OHS professionals that workers working from home should "be empowered and have ownership of their health and safety when working from home" (section 4.3). However Pink's view of autonomy goes further. In his view autonomy is not simply empowerment (something given by management); it is different to independence (working alone); and it is more than flexibility (which 'simply widens the fences and opens the gates'). Importantly, where there is autonomy there is still accountability. Workers working from home should be provided with increased discretion and autonomy over their work in relation to the four 'T's' above with appropriate strategies to provide accountability.

## 2 *Mastery*

Autonomy facilitates the development of mastery as it supports engagement and innovation with job tasks, which leads to a desire to be better at something that matters. Going beyond autonomy, there are further organisational and individual factors which contribute to mastery.

At the organisational level, mastery is supported by:

- Clear goals or objectives that focus on learning outcomes rather than performance outcomes

- Timely and constructive feedback
- Intellectual challenges that match abilities. (Pink refers to 'goldilocks challenges', those that are just right.)

At the individual level there needs to be an acceptance that :

- Mastery is a mindset – a belief in themselves and their ability to grow and develop
- Mastery is a pain – requiring commitment, practice, perseverance and effort
- Mastery is an asymptote – it can be approached but never achieved.

Mastery as an individual motivator is important to the organisation, as one of the best predictors of productivity is a desire for intellectual challenge (Sauerman & Cohen, 2008). Managers should find ways to promote the ongoing development of mastery associated with work tasks being performed in working from home arrangements.

### 3 Purpose

Autonomy together with mastery can yield high performing individuals, however when combined with a clear purpose to achieve a greater objective there is often a further synergistic effect. Thus the third element of Pink's theory of worker motivation is 'purpose' which goes beyond monetary pay or profit to have some element of altruism or 'greater good'. Pink's description of 'purpose' encompasses the relationship element of self-determination theory and also the requirement to establish a sense of 'belonging' identified by the OHS professionals (section 4.3).

Within organisational settings purpose is established through activities such as:

- Setting shared goals that focus on organisational and team purpose rather than profit
- Policies which avoid turning intrinsic motivation into extrinsic drivers which only achieve compliance (e.g. codes of conduct or checklists which set a standard for compliance)
- Words or language used within the organisation (e.g. 'we' or 'us' compared with 'they')

## 5.2 The work system

Having recognised the need for individual worker autonomy, mastery and purpose in designing working from home arrangements (or in fact any work) the challenge is to make it happen. This may not be easy for organisations, managers or OHS professionals. Such redesign of work requires commitment and leadership by organisational leaders and other

influencers, for example human resources and OHS professionals. It will require some managers to give up many of their preconceptions about their management role being about 'controlling' work tasks and outcomes. It will require increased trust by both managers and workers.

The first steps towards work re-design are likely to be the hardest, but the major and forced adjustments made by workers and managers during the COVID-19 pandemic may create a unique opportunity for such a change to be made. In moving to embed a sustainable approach to working from home it will be useful to consider an approach where the organisation moves along a continuum of increasing autonomy.

Matt Mullenweg (2020), developer of open source web platform WordPress, proposes that 'distributed work', like in the case of working from home, can be described at five levels which he likens to the levels of autonomy for self-driving vehicles.<sup>9</sup> Mulliweg's five levels can be summarised as:

- |                |  |
|----------------|--|
| <i>Level 0</i> | Jobs which require physical presence and cannot be done from other locations.  |
| <i>Level 1</i> | Work normally involves use of company equipment in company time and at a company site. When required, such as in an emergency, work may occur at home for a few days but there is a tendency to put tasks off until back in the office. No effort is made to make work remote-friendly with dedicated work VPN technology required to access resources such as calendar and email. |
| <i>Level 2</i> | Acceptance that work is going to occur at home results in attempts to recreate the office environment and technology in a remote setting. Meetings are mainly synchronous via electronic platforms and there is a lot of anxiety among management about productivity.  |
| <i>Level 3</i> | Acceptance of the ongoing role and benefits of working from home seen as an investment in appropriate equipment and a move to asynchronous meetings often supported by face-to-face meetings. Written communication becomes more important.  |
| <i>Level 4</i> | People's work is evaluated on what they produce, not how or when they produce it, with trust being important. Decision-making is often slower, more deliberate and informed.   |

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<sup>9</sup> See for example, Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE) in NHTSA, n.d.

Recruitment is not limited by geographic area enabling access to a broader talent pool; retention goes up with more investment in training and coaching. Real-time meetings are taken seriously, structured by agendas, pre-work and post-work.

*Level 5* People consistently work better and more creatively than in-person work environments; they have time for investing in their wellness and psychosocial health. This level is not fully attainable but does offer an ideal or vision.

As a result of implementing working from home as part of managing the risk of COVID-19 infection, many Australian organisations have moved from Level 1 to Level 2 with associated psychosocial and performance challenges. With knowledge of features of work design that motivate individuals and support good physical and psychological health and safety, OHS professionals are well placed to assist organisations to move to a higher level of effective and sustainable working from home arrangements and organisational climates.

## 6 Implications for OHS practice

This preliminary review of the literature and practices related to the management of the OHS risks to people working from home shows that the health and safety of workers working from home cannot be separated from the overall job design and relationships intrinsic to the work. When the needs of workers, especially their psychosocial needs, are met then working from home can be good for workers and for productivity.

Implementing such a change is not easy; it requires organisational commitment, leadership and trust and is best approached as a continuum rather than a 'leap' as was imposed in the response to the COVID-19 threat. This section draws on the findings from the survey and interviews (section 4.3) and the literature on motivational theory (section 5.1) to describe a holistic approach to arrangements for working from home that address worker and organisational needs. Guidelines for OHS professionals in facilitating such a work design model are also provided.

### 6.1 A holistic approach to work for working from home

Working from home can be beneficial for the worker and the organisation but, if not designed to meet the needs of the worker, can have significant physical and psychological health impacts. Safe, healthy and productive working from home is not about just doing the same

work, in the same way, in a different location but requires that a specific mindset is brought to the design of work. This chapter has shown that work arrangements for working from home should consider:

- Job design that gives the worker ownership of their work and of the measures to control the OHS risk
- Communications that foster a sense of belonging in the worker
- Leadership by the organisation and by individual managers that is enabling rather than controlling
- Trust between managers and workers which is closely related to the nature and style of the communications and leadership
- Risk management that considers the context of the risk in the broadest sense, not just the work itself but the home, community and societal context on which it occurs.

These elements in the design of work have been integrated to create a model for the design of work for working from home. (Figure 1.) While this model applies to all work whatever the context it has been derived from the current working from home experience and each element is particularly important in the working from home context.

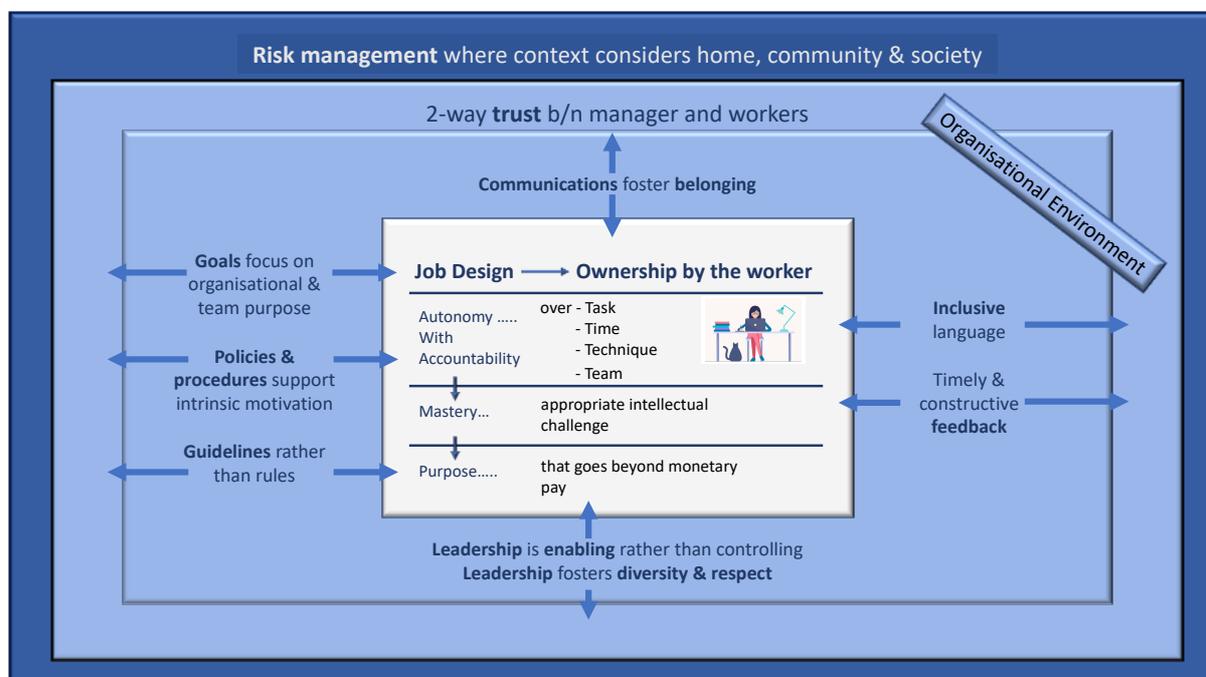


Figure 1: A model for design of work for working from home

The key themes drawn out by this model show that successful working from home requires:

- *Creation of two-way trust* between managers and workers
- *A new level of ownership of the work by the worker*, with workers having more autonomy over their work while being accountable, a mindset of mastery and a strong sense of purpose for their work.

These outcomes require an *organisational environment* where:

- Leadership is enabling rather than controlling and fosters respect for diversity
- Communications that are at the heart of creating trust and fostering belonging
- Work goals focus on organisational and team performance
- Policies and procedures support intrinsic motivation
- Organisation of the work and the work environment is based on guidelines rather than rules
- Language is inclusive
- Feedback is timely and constructive
- A high standard of risk management which considers much more than the immediate work environment.

This model also aligns with the definition of ‘good work’ as defined in the consensus statement on the Health Benefits of Good Work proposed by the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM) and signed by more than 300 Australian and New Zealand organisations.<sup>10</sup>

Good work is engaging, fair, respectful and balances job demands, autonomy and job security. Good work accepts the importance of culture and traditional beliefs. It is characterised by safe and healthy work practices and it strikes a balance between the interests of individuals, employers and society. It requires effective change management, clear and realistic performance indicators, matches the work to the individual and uses transparent productivity metrics.(RACP/AFOEM, 2017.)

The OHS professional has a key role in facilitating the implementation of this model. Guidelines to support the OHS professional in this role are outlined in the following section.

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<sup>10</sup> The AIHS is a signatory to the consensus statement.

## 6.2 Role of the OHS professional

In supporting the health and safety of workers working from home, the OHS professional is a facilitator rather than a front-line operator. This role may require some adjustment by those OHS professionals whose approach and interactions focus on frontline engagement.

The following guidelines have been developed by drawing on the collective wisdom of the ways in which OHS professionals responded to the issues and challenges raised in the survey and interview responses reported in this chapter informed by the relevant literature.

In advising on and facilitating arrangements for working from home, OHS professionals should:

### *1 Promote a holistic approach*

OHS is not a standalone issue when managing workers working from home. OHS needs to be integrated into the structures, processes and arrangements for performing and managing work. OHS professionals should work closely with leaders, managers and supervisors and consider partnering with human resources, information management, procurement, finance and facilities management people in the process.

### *2 Ensure psychological health is considered*

Addressing psychosocial health has become increasingly important and complex during the wide-scale working from the home arrangements in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. For many people, working from home has been imposed on them during a period when there is also high levels of anxiety about the risk of infection and job security, together with distancing from family, social and community support networks. During this period many organisations and consultants have provided 'packaged' information in the form of webinars, online tools and wellbeing reminders as well as increased access to employee assistance programs (EAPs) and, in some cases, engaged specialist psychology advisors and counselling 'hot-lines'.

While these strategies were seen as important in the short term, in the long term psychological health in working from home should be supported by a holistic approach as outlined in section 6.1 supplemented as required with advice of psychologists.

### *3 Encourage the recognition of and respect for the diversity of the workforce*

The 'workforce' is not a homogenous group for which 'one size fits all'. Each person is an individual and when working from home these different individual needs and challenges are increased. While it may be necessary for standardised organisational

approaches to working from home conditions and arrangements, managers should actively seek out individual cases of different needs. The OHS professional has a key role in supporting managers and supervisors to consider individual personal circumstances, personality, physical and psychological health. Not everyone likes to work from home, some will thrive, whilst others might find it restrictive and confining. Everyone is different and managers and OHS professionals need to establish what works best for individuals in order to manage their OHS risks and support them in performing their role.

#### *4 Facilitate leadership commitment and trust*

Trust is an essential element in the relationship between the organisation, its individual managers and workers working from home. The more that organisations and managers trust and take care of workers, the more responsible and accountable they become.

Trust and management style are inextricably combined. Managers may have to relinquish their 'control' mindset and adopt a more enabling management style. This requires trust but can be assisted by organisational policy and executive leadership with support by OHS professionals.

The survey and interview respondents advised that rigid checklists and detailed prescriptive requirements create barriers to safe, trusting and effective working from home. OHS professionals should focus on building the capability of managers to make informed decisions and to alter work for their workers as needed to minimise OHS risks.

Managers may require mentoring and support in adapting their management and communication strategies. Drawing on the expertise of specialist advice including human resources, the OHS professional has a role in mentoring managers to adapt their management and communication style. OHS professionals and managers will need increased trust and should establish new and regular ways of communicating with each other.

#### *5 Facilitate purposeful and effective communication*

Effective communication is seen as key to productive and psychologically supportive working from home. It is important to engender a sense of 'belonging' to the work team while working from home. How communications are framed is important, remembering that it is more difficult to have easy two-way dialogue remotely than is possible in a large face-to-face team meeting environment.

Communication should be open and often, and with clear purpose using a range of technology and information sharing strategies for connectedness and communication.

There should be mechanisms to encourage feedback from all personnel so that managers and OHS professionals have real-time information on the challenges that people are facing with working from home.

## 6 *Apply risk management principles and process*

Managing the health and safety of workers working from home should be based on the same risk management principles as all worker health and safety with particular emphasis on two aspects:

- The importance of considering the context of the risk in the broadest sense, not just the work itself but the home, community and societal context in which it occurs
- Ownership by the worker of the measures to control the risk.

Many of the risks and risk control approaches associated with workers working from home will apply to other forms of distributed, isolated or remote work environments.

## 7 *Facilitate job design*

When the workplace is also a worker's home there should be flexibility to enable the worker to have some say in how and when the work is done, how boundaries are created between work and home activities and hours of work. However, job design is about much more than just tasks and time. The responses of OHS professionals supported by the literature shows that the nature of goals, the level of challenge inherent in the tasks and the feedback is vital, as is the context set by organisational policies and inclusiveness of the conversational language.

OHS professionals need to actively engage in the design of work for working from home to give workers ownership of the work and the risk controls. OHS professionals should work with managers, supervisors and workers to develop guidance that empowers workers in taking ownership of their work rather than rules or checklists that are imposed on workers. Such guidance should address working hours and routine, physical working environment, responsibilities and decision-making, flow of information and task inter-connectedness. Components of the OHS management system may need to be re-designed to be enabled in such a distributed work environment.

## 8 *Adhere to professional principles*

Advising on health and safety for workers working from home may be a new area of practice for some OHS professionals. In developing advice, it may be that the OHS professional is subject to a range of pressures arising from people's preconceived ideas and perceptions, particularly those related to control in managing people

working from home.<sup>11</sup> There may also be issues related to privacy of individuals working from their home conflicting with the workers' obligations to their employer.

It is important that when providing advice, OHS professionals hold to their professional principles of evidenced-based ethical practice. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for 'trusted advisors'. While there is little current research on health and safety associated with working from home there has been considerable media attention. It is important that OHS professionals provide objective evidenced-based information. Where there is resistance to working from home arrangements, OHS professionals should work to understand the causes of it and support their organisation to overcome that fear with objective information and evidence.

OHS professionals also need to be empowering of others. While this is an important aspect of all OHS professional practice, it is particularly important where the workforce, or part of it, is distributed. OHS professionals who traditionally spent time in the workplace performing work observations, inspections and briefings may need to establish new ways of collecting information and interacting with managers and workers. Supervisors and managers will need to be more self-sufficient and less reliant on the OHS professional to manage day-to-day risks and OHS related interactions with their workers and may need coaching and skill development to do this effectively.

OHS professionals need to be adaptable, assess the needs of the business against the needs of the workers and the greater community. There is often a number of ways in which the objectives can be achieved. As one survey respondee noted:

You cannot look at things in black and white and have no wiggle room as it will not end well.

One interviewee outlined a useful approach for engaging workers in 'owning' their health and safety while addressing management responsibility and accountability.

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### **Suggestion for discussing risk management with worker**

When planning for or implementing working from home, workers should be asked to think about the following questions and frame some answers:

- What could go wrong? How wrong?
- What can I do to make sure it does not go wrong?
- What gives you, when working from home, confidence that it will not go wrong?
- What will you do if it does go wrong

The worker is then required to document their risk control strategies and discuss them with their manager/supervisor. The 'Tell me about ...' format in the Working from Home Plan in the Appendix is

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<sup>11</sup> See Wood, P (May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020) for an example of alternative approaches that may lead to such pressures.

useful in enhancing worker ownership of this process. The supervisor/worker discussion is informed by guidelines provided by the OHS professional.

The accountability loop can be closed by including the OHS Working From Home arrangements as an agenda item in team and one-on-one meetings.

Should further input or discussion be required then the worker could take the supervisor and OHS professional on a virtual inspection (under appropriate privacy guidelines).

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The difference in a directive approach and the worker-owned approach is illustrated by the checklist and the 'Working From Home Plan' in the Appendix.

## 7 Summary

Working from home is not new. It was the development of technology in the Industrial Revolution that led to the centralisation of work and later it was technology that enabled distributed work including working from home.

Australian Fair Work legislation requires that employers provide flexible work arrangements under certain conditions and OHS legislation extends obligations of both employers (PCBUs and Officers) and workers to work conducted in a worker's home.

The advantages and disadvantages of working from home have been the subject of research and discussion over the years and especially during the current pandemic. It appears that there is no simple answer. Whether working from home is good for workers and for the organisation depends on a number of factors including:

- The individual worker – their personality and personal circumstances
- The relationship between the manager and the worker – communications and trust
- The relationships with other workers – a sense of belonging
- The job design – input by the worker, flexibility and autonomy in managing tasks and a sense of purpose in their role.

While the recent experience of workers, managers and OHS professionals of working from home has been inextricably linked with the COVID-19 threat, there are major lessons to be learned that can inform our ongoing management of health and safety of workers working from home.

A survey and interviews of OHS professionals and recent literature suggest that key factors in managing the OHS of workers working from home are:

- Leadership
- Trust
- Communications
- Risk management
- Job design.

A holistic approach informed by motivational theory is important in addressing these issues. The chapter presents a series of practice principles for OHS professionals to support such a holistic approach.

- Ensure psychological health is considered
- Encourage and support recognition and respect for diversity of the workforce
- Facilitate leadership commitment and trust
- Facilitate purposeful and effective communication
- Apply risk management principles and processes
- Facilitate job design
- Adhere to professional principles of evidenced-based, objective advice to be a trusted source of information working to empower others.

Working from home is going to be an ongoing feature of working arrangements, it is vital that the health and safety of workers working from home is addressed as an integral part of such arrangements.

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## Appendix: Working from home documents – A comparison

The two examples of working from home assessments are provided as examples of a directive approach compared with one where the worker has responsibility and flexibility for setting up the workplace and work arrangements to suit their circumstances.

In including these sample documents there is no suggestion of endorsement nor that they are complete, or address all likely issues.

## Example 1

| Work Environment            |   |   |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Workspace</b>            |   |   |
| 1                           | A clear workspace that allows full range of movement                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| 2                           | Area clear of trip hazards such as cables and mats                                      | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| <b>Work station set up</b>  |   |   |
| 3                           | Work station set-up reflects ergonomic principles                                       | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| 4                           | Regular breaks, avoid sustained posture   | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| <b>Work environment</b>     |   |   |
| 5                           | Position avoids glare on screen   | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| 6                           | Consider noise, heating and cooling   | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| <b>Electrical</b>           |   |   |
| 7                           | Equipment has current test and tag  | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| 8                           | No power boards, piggyback double adaptors or extension cords (if possible)             | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| <b>Emergency procedures</b> |   |   |
| 9                           | Smoke alarms in working order   | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| 10                          | Fire extinguisher and first aid kit   | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| 11                          | Adequate process for calling emergency assistance if required                           | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| 12                          | Emergency plan for exiting house and meeting place for others                           | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| <b>Security</b>             |   |   |
| 13                          | Adequate security measures in place such as locking doors to prevent entry by intruders | <input type="checkbox"/>  |

## Example 2

### My Working From Home Plan

As many of our teams transition to working from home it is important that we all have a personal plan to ensure we have a safe and healthy working environment. We recognise that it is your home but it will also be your workplace. It is important that you plan for how you will create a safe and healthy workplace within your home and discuss your proposed arrangements and difficulties with your supervisor /manager.

| How will you  |  |
|---|--|
| Create a safe workspace?  |  |
| Create physical and social boundaries to separate you from family, partners and others during work hours? |  |
| Manage work hours including breaks?   |  |
| Develop strategies to meet your daily/weekly objectives?  |  |
| Ensure confidentiality and security of work information and discussions (if required)?                    |  |
| Stay connected with team members?   |  |
| Maintain health and fitness?  |  |

This plan proforma would be accompanied by guidelines for the worker in completing the plan and for the manager when discussing the plan with the worker.