



CHRIS JONES RISK MANAGEMENT

Working From Home – Don't forget the OHS responsibilities

By Chris Jones

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For the employee there are visions of working in their pyjamas, being there for the kids, and no more commuting. For the employer there is the prospect of retaining valuable staff, cutting rental costs, and no more loafing about the water cooler. But both parties have responsibilities under the OHS legislation, and these need to be taken into account when entering into a work from home arrangement.

What is a Workplace?

The definition of a workplace is sufficiently broad to include an employee's home when they are undertaking work there.

The requirements of OHS legislation therefore apply just as firmly to an employee working from home as they would to any other employee.



A Safe Workplace

The employer has an obligation to ensure that the employee working from home has a safe working environment.

Frequently an employee is using a computer workstation from a home office. The employer has a responsibility to ensure that there is adequate provision of furniture and equipment to set up the workstation safely, without risk of strains or fatigue.

Ideally, the employee would have a dedicated work area where suitable furniture and fittings can be set up. The workplace should be well lit and ventilated, and there should be adequate provision for filing. Don't forget the need for sufficient power points to plug in the computer, printer, fax machine and desk lamp, avoiding trip hazards from power cords.

The working environment is even more important if trade work or manufacturing is to be conducted from home. While office work can usually be easily conducted from a home office, most trade and manufacturing work requires specialised equipment and a working environment that is simply not available in most homes.

The workplace should be assessed to ensure that the premises and equipment supplied is suitable to the work that is to be conducted there.

Injury Management

Just because an employee is working from home, the employer is not relieved of their responsibility for providing first aid. For office work, a basic first aid kit (detailed in the state legislation) is sufficient. However, if there are specific requirements for an occupation, then these must be met.

If the employee is injured while working at home, they are, of course, still entitled to workers compensation, and to appropriate rehabilitation. The RTW (return to work) policy and procedure may have to be amended to make provision for home workers. The employee should be provided with information on the injury reporting requirements, and on the details of the RTW programme.



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Consultation

The employer's obligation to consult with staff over OHS matters applies just as much to home workers as other employees.

Accordingly, the consultation arrangements should include provision for employees working from home. This could be as simple as attaching them to a workgroup related to their occupation, and providing for their participation in the election of their employee representative or safety committee representative.

In a workforce with a large proportion of staff working from home, it may be appropriate to treat home workers as a work group in their own right, and have an employee representative elected from their number.

In any case, all employees have a right to be consulted on OHS matters, and provision has to be made to do this. If a work from home arrangement is being considered for the first time, it would be a good idea to have the topic discussed using the current arrangements (OHS committee, representatives, or other arrangements).

Training and Supervision

Employees working from home should be included in the training programme, including induction training. They should also be provided with adequate supervision, albeit from a remote location.

Ensuring that employees working from home do not feel isolated or ignored, will go a long way to making the arrangement mutually satisfying for both parties.

Chris Jones Risk Management can provide a "Work from Home" OHS survey and report to assess the working environment of a home worker.

Chris Jones Risk Management provides a wide range of Occupational Health and Safety services and training, including:

- ✓ OHS Audits – SafetyPlan; SafetyPlan Gold; AS 4801
- ✓ OHS programme implementation
- ✓ Risk Assessments
- ✓ OHS culture surveys
- ✓ Accredited training for construction induction and consultation (NSW)
- ✓ OHS training for management and supervisors

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