Beyond the office: Considerations and practical approaches for working safely at home

An Abridged Summary

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*An abridged summary of the literature. Read the full literature review: Beyond the office: Considerations and practical approaches for working safely at home.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its wide-ranging ramifications including the rapid shift to working from home (WFH) has permanently changed the working landscape for most office-based workers, with hybrid arrangements now the norm across many industries.

Both workers and managers report multiple benefits associated with working from home including increased productivity, improved work/life balance and an increased sense of autonomy. Conversely, there are also important safety considerations to factor in to working from home arrangements. According to the research there are seven key issues employers should consider when formalising work from home arrangements. They are:

1. Work-life balance

The blurring of boundaries between work and home can increase the potential for work-family conflict, particularly for those with caring responsibilities – though the evidence to date in this area is still developing.

Organisations can have a proactive approach to mitigating risk by setting clear work expectations around work hours and expected outputs, and supporting individual preferences in how, when and where they work.

2. The physical environment

The physical environment is as important at home as it is in the traditional office set up.

Workers should have a dedicated workspace, ergonomic equipment, and suitable indoor environment, including good air quality, and comfortable temperature and lighting.

3. Organisational support

Strong support networks and good organisational support can help to mitigate some of the potential risks of working from home including loneliness and isolation.

Organisations should consider embedding informal catch ups, peer buddy systems and regular wellbeing check-ins.

4. Work demands

Having more time back in their day with no commute to the office means workers may feel they need to spend more time online to compensate, taking fewer breaks. Research suggests some workers report feeling the need to be "always available" in response to feelings of being monitored when not physically present in the office.

Organisations should implement a management approach focused on delivering outcomes rather than time spent at the computer.

5. Health behaviours

Away from the structure of the traditional office and the social norms it brings, workers may adopt poor habits such as excessive alcohol and tobacco consumption.

Employers should promote healthy behaviours when working from home, consider sharing resources and encourage short activity breaks.

6. Incivility and violence

WFH can increase the likelihood of workplace incivility online between colleagues and the potential for family and domestic violence (FDV) to occur, with more time spent inside the home physically distanced from colleagues, which can be a catalyst for poor behaviour to go unchecked and escalate.

Employers may be limited in their ability to address such issues if they are unaware of their occurrence.

Prevention and education activities can help alleviate potential issues by empowering employees to look out for each other and detect early warning signs, and by providing support services for workers who have experienced or witnessed incivility or violence.

7. Inequality and discrimination

Working from home and hybrid working arrangements have the potential to worsen existing inequalities for vulnerable groups in society including women, younger workers, junior workers, and workers on low wages.

Organisations should strive to implement inclusive practices, such as ensuring equal access to working from home arrangements, redesigning reward and recognition systems to ensure equal opportunity regardless of work location and establishing viable options to overcome work-life conflict, lack of home office equipment and isolation when working from home.

Research on this topic is evolving. As organisations and their workers navigate the risks and benefits of these arrangements, research will be needed to examine when, how, and for which workers and work contexts hybrid work arrangements can be most effective.

This is a summary of the latest available research and does not reflect an official Comcare position or policy.
It is intended to assist employees and employers with general advice.