



Hardfacts

Norwich Union Risk Services

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Homeworkers

There are increasing numbers of workers for whom the office is not the usual place of work. What is commonly known as homeworking is growing and managing the health and safety of such employees present new challenges for employers.

Definitions

There are four types of work that come within the scope of homeworking. They can be described as follows:

- Home based workers: whose home is used as their main office base, but who may only spend part of their time working at home.
- Homeworkers: whose home is used as their office and who spend the majority of their time working from home.
- Teleworkers: who use sophisticated technological equipment, and can be connected to a call management system.
- Outworkers: undertaking light industrial work at home, such as component assembly and home clothing manufacture.

The definitions cover the sales representative, the maintenance technician or others who may operate most of the time from home only attending their office for reporting and briefing purposes. They also distinguish between teleworkers and homeworkers whose jobs might be more traditional, though aided by telecommunications, such as journalists. Teleworking is most common in the finance and service sectors.

Employers Responsibilities

The responsibilities of an employer are no different for homeworking employees than for those based in the office. However, there may be some additional risks that arise from the nature of the work or from the fact that it is carried on outside of a factory or office environment.

Common Risks

Outworking (light industrial work at home) has all the risks of the industrial tasks undertaken, along with the special risks of the home environment. This may involve the use of machinery or potentially hazardous substances away from the usual business premises, in the domestic environment.

Any employees working from home (e.g. sales reps) have the additional risks of travelling to and from their destinations. For all of these the common risks are those of working away from the employer's normal business premises, usually at home, and the normal risks that occur as part of their job function that would be the same wherever they occurred.

The Law

The employer is responsible for the health, safety and welfare of employees which includes both the physical and the mental health of the employee.

The duties of both employer and homeworking employee are defined in the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and its subordinate legislation [with the exception of the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992, which do not apply to domestic premises, even when used by homeworkers].

The employer can best discharge this duty by carrying out a risk assessment and then taking the appropriate actions to eliminate or control the risks.

Health and Safety

The work:

Is the work suitable for homeworking?
Although a wide range of activities are carried out by workers at home, a risk assessment may show that, for example, control measures cannot be adequately applied or are inappropriate for use in the home. This is likely to be the case where hazardous substances are used, for example, chemicals, flux fumes from soldering, work on live electrical equipment or tasks requiring heavy lifting.

The workplace:

The work area designated in the home must be suitable for the task. There must be adequate room for any equipment which must be installed correctly. A separate, lockable room provides security for the equipment and delineates between "work" and "home" areas of the house.

The work equipment:

Work equipment has to be suitable, whether it is provided by the employee or the employer. Ideally, all the equipment should be provided by the employer, to the same standards as that provided for works-based employees. In particular, IT users must have an adequate workstation, including chair and display screen. The equipment should be given the same checks, maintenance and calibration attention as similar to works-based equipment.

The people:

The Homeworker: In addition to being able to competently perform the task, the homeworker has to cope with working alone, with little supervision and less contact with colleagues than the works-based employee. This does not suit everyone, and so a careful assessment of the prospective homeworker is necessary at the pre-employment stage. Extra care needs to be taken to engender team spirit and loyalty of those who work remotely.

The Manager: Management styles may have to change to reflect the different circumstances of employing homeworkers. The absence of direct supervision shifts the emphasis from "management by attendance" to "management by results".

This will require the setting of objectives, goals and quotas for work. There will also have to be a more conscious effort from management to establish a regular communication with the worker, and is kept up to date with work-based information.

Training:

The homeworker will need the same training provided to a works-based employee as well as additional specific instructions related to working alone at home, such as dealing with equipment faults, or other problems. Management itself may need special training to recognise and accommodate the needs of homeworkers.

Consultation:

The employer's legal obligation to consult employees extends to homeworkers.

Insurance

The employer should check that the insurance covers loss of equipment, data, etc. in homeworking. The homeworker should check that property and contents insurance on the home is not invalidated by homeworking. Similarly, the mortgage lender and local council may need to be consulted regarding mortgage conditions and council tax implications when homeworking is being undertaken.

Key Actions

- Identify home workers
- Carry out suitable and sufficient risk assessments of their work and make a record of assessment
- Provide suitable equipment

References

Homeworking – Guidance for employers and employees on health and safety
INDG 226 1996.

Working alone in safety – controlling the risk of solitary work
INDG73 (rev)
Available from HSE Books

(Norwich Union Risk Services Hardfacts No 5010 - Conducting Risk Assessments.)

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Norwich Union Risk Services operates a Risk Helpline during normal business hours for the cost of a local telephone call. The telephone number is:
0845 366 66 66
www.nu-riskservices.co.uk