Telework/Remote Work/Working From Home



What is telework, telecommuting, or working from home?

It is becoming more and more common for people to do at least some of their regular work from home or another location instead of going into the office. Technology has made it possible for a worker to stay at home but be connected to the office by telephone, computer, and internet. This type of arrangement is known by many terms, including telework, telecommuting, remote work, or working from home.

What are some of the potential advantages and disadvantages?

Advantages	Disadvantages	
Individual	**• less distractions from co-workers • more flexibility with organization of daily tasks (better personal time management) • savings in time and commuting costs • higher job satisfaction • better work-life balance**	**• isolation • lack of separation between home and work • more distractions from family • potential for excessive working hours • less awareness of changes in company • fear of being under-managed or "out of sight, out of mind" • fear of being over-managed because they must account for time while out of the office setting**

Company	**• improved employee retention • often higher productivity • less lost hours due to traffic problems • reduced absenteeism • savings in energy, office space requirements, maintenance and housekeeping. • increases number of potential candidates for a job • maintain business continuity during emergencies**	**• difficulty maintaining contact and open communication with the employee • difficulty maintaining adequate communication between other employees or with customers • possible delay in customer service • risk of injuries if home office is not setup properly**
Community	**• less traffic congestion • lower levels of pollution • better neighbourhood security • provides more opportunities to accommodate employees with disabilities**	**• possible reduction of business for stores and restaurants in city core areas**

What are some issues surrounding a telework or work at home arrangement?

Ideally, the employer and employee would create a written agreement that outlines the expectations of both parties.

Note that for employees who are asked to work from home or work remotely due to emergency circumstances such as severe weather or public health orders (e.g., due to a epidemic or pandemic), there may not be a formal agreement in place. Consult with your employer about what options are available. This information can also be added to the organization’s business continuity plan.

From a health and safety viewpoint, employers and employees should consider a few important points when agreeing to a telework or work at home arrangement. These considerations include:

- workstation design and arrangement (ergonomics and home work environment)
- work scheduling and distribution
- working alone
- who will provide what items (e.g., chairs, desks, computer, monitor, office supplies, etc.)
- who will pay for utilities (e.g., hydro, water, home or cell phone, Internet, etc.)
- any impact to or from workers compensation and occupational health and safety laws.

What are some ergonomic tips for setting up a home office?

A home office should meet the same health and safety requirements as those available at work where possible. For example:

- Your desk, chair and other accessories are of a comparable (equal) quality to that in the office. For example: the desk should be appropriate height and sturdy enough to handle the weight of any peripheral equipment that you may place on it (e.g., computers, printers, scanners, etc.).
- Your employer may provide or allow you to borrow equipment such as an ergonomic chair, footrest, or technology that will help to setup a safer work environment. Alternatively, household objects can be used creatively to improve the ergonomics of a temporary workstation.
- Your chair or workstation are adjusted properly: the keyboard is at the right height (wrists are in a neutral position), and the mouse is placed nearby (reachable without arm or wrist strain). Note that, generally speaking, the kitchen table is not an ideal work surface as the table is too high and doesn't allow for proper positioning of the wrists in relation to the keyboard and mouse.
- The workspace is tidy and organized to reduce reaching and twisting motions, and has been cleared of potential slip-trip-fall hazards.
- Lighting is properly arranged: there should not be reflections on or glare on the computer monitor, and light levels do not cause eye strain.
- Noise levels can be controlled, either by isolating the work area or using noise-cancelling headphones or hearing protection.
- Ventilation and air quality in the workspace are adequate.
- Temperature is comfortable and can be adjusted as needed

What are some tips for work scheduling (work load) issues?

Duties, expectations, and deadlines should be clearly outlined and agreed upon by both the supervisor and the teleworker. Be careful not to "over work". There are natural breaks in an office environment that will not occur when at home. Discussions with co-workers or a quick walk to the printer offer opportunities for a change in body position that may be missing in a home office. Extended hours in the same body position or repeated motions can lead to various musculoskeletal injuries.

Are there any safety or security issues to working at home?

A home office should offer the same level of safety and security as the employee would receive at the regular work office. When an employee is working at home, they may be working alone. While working alone in itself is not a risk, it can present a unique situation should something unexpected happen. It is important to keep to a contact schedule even if there are not "work" details to discuss.

What is an appropriate home office environment?

An appropriate work space at home may include:

- a space or room where it is easy to concentrate – preferably separate from other living areas and away from distractions
- level of security as required by the workplace
- telephone lines or cellular service (separate from family line if required)

and answering machine or voice mail, if necessary
- cable, satellite, or other receiver for Internet connections, as necessary
- control over temperature, light and sound
- household members who will understand you are working and will not disturb you unnecessarily

What are some additional items for a home office safety checklist?

In addition to those tips mentioned above, the following should be considered.

Fire Protection

- Is there a smoke alarm in the office?
- Is there clear access to a fire extinguisher?
- Is there a carbon monoxide detector in the home, especially near areas where people sleep?
- How many exits are available and where are they?
- Does telework space meet safety requirements of local building and fire codes?

Emergency Procedures

- Has an evacuation plan been established?
- Are the first aid supplies adequate?
- Are emergency contact numbers posted near the telephone?
- Has a periodic contact schedule been established?
- Does your office contact know how to reach someone near you in the event of an emergency?

Electrical Safety

- Are extension cords in good condition and positioned properly?
- Are cords and cables causing a tripping hazard?
- Are outlets grounded and not overloaded?
- Is there surge protection for electrical equipment?
- Is there sufficient ventilation for electrical equipment?

What are some tips for the employee who is working at home?

While you may not have to drive to get to work that day, it is still important to keep to a ‘work day ritual’. Some tips for working at home include:

- Have a specific location where you work. This location may be a room, or just a corner of a room, but it is always the place where you do your work.
- Begin and finish at the same time every day you are working at home. Have a beginning and end of day ritual. Since there is no longer a ‘break’ between waking up and going to work, some people find it helpful to actually leave the house and walk around the block before starting work. You may want to end the day the same way. Schedule breaks during the workday to stretch and eat, as appropriate.
- As you would for working in the office, set a schedule and stick to it. Make a ‘to do’ list and check your accomplishments at the end of the day.
- Maintain contact with the office. Establish a routine for contact with your supervisor, or co-workers. Keep your supervisor informed of your progress and any difficulties encountered. This contact includes the need for

overtime to complete projects.
- Attend meetings and gatherings virtually, or at the office if possible. This interaction helps keep you from becoming ‘invisible’.
- Determine what interruptions are okay and what is not. Tell your friends and family what the ground rules are.
- Be honest with yourself. Teleworking is not a substitute for child or elder care, nor is it a way to simply save money on commuting costs. Too much compromise on the part of either the employee or employer can lead to problems and possible failure to meet the terms of the agreement.

What issues should be considered when offering a telework arrangement?

One of the most important health and safety questions that should be answered when working at home is who will be responsible for health and safety issues and worker’s compensation if the employee is injured. To avoid complications, there should be a written agreement between the employer and the employee clarifying these matters. Where possible, aim to maintain appropriate health and safety standards at home.

Health and safety issues include:

- Will the employer or the health and safety committee have access to the house for safety inspections? Or, will alternative arrangements be made such as the employee using checklists or submitting photos or the videos of the work area?
- What parts of the house will be considered the ‘workplace’? Is the bathroom and/or kitchen included?
- That employee must immediately report any incident or injury to their supervisor (just as they would at the office).
- How will incidents be investigated?

This policy could also outline:

- Who buys and maintains the equipment such as the desk, chair, computer and accessories (including software and updates), general office supplies, etc.
- If remote access to company’s main computer systems are available outside of the office or not. If possible, how and what type of software or equipment is necessary.
- If information security is a concern, consult with your IT department and do not allow other household members to use your workstation or work equipment.
- What expenses will be reimbursed (dedicated telephone lines, Internet access, business telephone calls, office supplies)?
- What hours the employee will be available or how will the completion of accomplishments be determined?
- How will overtime be approved?
- When and how often the employee will check for messages?
- Will the primary contact method be by telephone, e-mail, or other methods?
- What number to call to reach employee at home. Is there an alternative number?
- Who will have access to home-office phone number?
- Listing of work assignments, due dates, work expectations, etc.

Do occupational health and safety laws in Canada cover teleworking arrangements?

Occupational health and safety or compensation laws related to teleworking or working remotely arrangements may be different in each jurisdiction. In many situations there is little or no formal guidance available. Having a policy or agreement between the employer and employees may be beneficial, and will assist the employer with their role of due diligence when duties are not specifically outlined in legislation.

It is important to contact your local government department responsible for occupational health and safety to find out what laws apply to your situation.

You may also want to check with your union, other labour or employment contracts, or your Health and Safety Committee or member as well as company policies.

What is an example of a checklist for teleworking agreements or policies?

The following issues or points can be used as a checklist for a teleworking agreement or policy:

- Is there a statement which outlines what types of jobs or tasks may be done at home, or will each application be handled on a case by case basis?
- Is there a statement that indicates that except where outlined in the policy that the employee's regular conditions of employment remain the same?
- Have arrangements been made for normal supervision of the employee to continue (including frequency of contact between employee and supervisor, ongoing feedback, performance appraisals and career development)?
- Has the exact location (full street address) and contact details for where that employee will be working from been recorded in case of an emergency?
- Does having a home office violate municipal zoning regulations?
- Is there a statement that the employee will follow all of the company health and safety policies when establishing and working in a home office area?
- Will business meetings be held at the employee's residence, a third location, or at the regular office? If meetings may be held in the home office, a statement that the employee will keep the home office area safe for themselves and others who may enter it may be necessary.
- Is there a policy detailing how communications between the employee, co-workers and customers will function?
- Is there an agreement about travel time and mileage allowance, if any, between the employee's home and the regular work location? What arrangements are needed if the employee is sent away from the home location on work business (but not to report to the office)?
- Is there agreement on how the workload will be assigned? How will overtime be approved?
- Is there a need for company (proprietary) information to be stored in a locked room, desk or file cabinet?

How do I evaluate the telework agreement?

The policy should clearly state what criteria will be used to evaluate the agreement. Evaluation may include the following items:

- meeting deadlines
- overall and/or employee productivity
- progress of individual or team assignments
- availability to receive and return calls
- impacts on the employee at home as well as other staff in the office
- customer service delivery
- the ability to attend meetings, even on short notice

In some cases, only changes to the telework arrangement may be necessary, while in others the arrangement may be ended. Keep all involved up-to-date if changes to the overall policy occur.

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