

# HUMANKIND

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## Top 5 health and safety considerations when your team is working from home

For many of us, COVID-19 has turned our homes into our place of work. Many employers are scratching their heads about what this means from a health and safety perspective. Are they now responsible for every employee's 'workplace' even when they have no control over the employee's home?

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act, if an employee is working from home, their home is considered to be their workplace which means their employer (PCBU) is responsible for eliminating or minimising health and safety risks, so far as is reasonably practicable. Those last 6 words are critical as it means, as an employer, you can take into account the current circumstances and the level of control you have over that 'workplace' when thinking about what is reasonable and what is practicable. Employees also have a duty to take reasonable care of their own health and safety, and given they have greater control over their home, they are best placed to make any necessary changes to their work environment to ensure it is healthy and safe.

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So, for employers, what are some reasonably practicable things you can do to support your employees' health and safety?

### Top 5 things to think about:

# 1

## Workstation set up

As a nation, we had to respond quickly to the announcement that we would be going into Alert Level 4. This means that many people will be working from home without their usual tools and equipment. While purchasing restrictions have eased slightly, and some online stores are able to sell home-office equipment, it is unlikely we will all have access to the workstation we once enjoyed in the office.

Have you spoken with your team about their workstation set up? It's not going to be perfect, because we're living in imperfect times, but there are a few things we can all do to make our new 'offices' a little more comfortable, and safe. Be inventive! It's about what's practical, not what's perfect – employees can make do with things that are around their home, such as using old text or reference books as a monitor stand or a footrest.

# 2

## Work environment

It's time to get your people look at their home a little differently... is there anything around the house that has the potential to cause harm? What about the cables dangling down from the kitchen table, along the floor, and into that power socket overloaded with cell phone and laptop chargers? That's a potential fire, electrocution, and tripping hazard right there! Loose cables can be tied together with old bread ties and secured to the floor with packing tape. It might not be featured on the next episode of Grand Designs, but it's about making your team's environment safer any way they can. Obviously, you can't break the bubble and drop round for an inspection, but you can, and should, encourage your people to make sure their environment is as safe as they can practicably make it.

## 3 Mental health and wellbeing

It is likely that the pandemic crisis will be affecting your team's personal and work lives in ways which can lead to an increase in stress, anxiety, and potentially even burnout. It will affect people in different ways, and maybe even differently on different days. Your people may also be working more, finding it more difficult to unplug from work or struggling to juggle work and family commitments. To combat this, encourage them to take control of this new way of working and make a new routine. Ensure employees remain connected to their team-mates and continue with regular team meetings, albeit via video conference. To help reduce the risk of loneliness or isolation associated with working

remotely, you could create a 'buddy system' where team members buddy up to connect on a daily basis.

It's important leaders think about other ways you can support your people's wellbeing during this time. There are a lot of great resources available online but fundamentally, humans are inherently social beings; we survive and thrive together so it's important to create and enable two-way communication with each other. Be prepared to show vulnerability and share your emotions and encourage your people to reach out for support, practise self-care, and acknowledge that it's OK and reasonable not to feel 100% all of the time. We are certainly in trying times, but it won't last forever.

## 4 New co-workers

Chances are your employees will be sharing their workspaces with others in their homes; this could be children, other family members, flatmates, or pets. They may need to care for others while also working from home (which can create added stress), or maybe they have to share their working space with others who are also working. Where possible, it's good for employees to have a delineated workspace separate to others in their house and to come up with a plan around how this is practically going to work. In our house, there are two of us, and one of our workstations is slightly better

equipped than the other, so we alternate throughout the day! It means we move regularly and there's no arguing over who has the better home office.

Working in close quarters with those we live and are sharing our lockdown bubble with can put extra pressure on relationships and increase stress for everyone. It's important that as a leader, you enable honest and safe conversations about co-working with bubble-mates and identify if there are any measures your people can put in place to ensure a smooth co-working environment.

## 5 Move it, move it, move it

It is likely we have all reduced our incidental movements throughout the day – those movements we often take for granted such as walking to the bus stop or to work, taking a flight of stairs, getting up your desk to go to the photocopier, the kitchen or to attend meetings. These movements are critical for your wellbeing and a reduction can have significant impacts on your health.

Talk to your employees about finding ways to get more movement in their day. They can take phone calls while standing, or alternate sitting in different locations of their house. Remind employees to reward their hard work with microbreaks outside throughout the day even if it's a cup of tea in the garden, or a short walk to check the letterbox for the 5th time today.