



Teleworking hints and FAQs

A Guide for Managers

What is the difference between teleworking and working from home?

Nothing - the two terms are interchangeable. But sometimes 'teleworking' (or 'telecommuting') is used to refer to formal, long term arrangements while 'working from home' refers to an irregular or one-off arrangement.



Common features of a formal ongoing teleworking arrangement:

- It is ongoing and long term
- An Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) assessment is carried out by a qualified person
- Telecommunications equipment (e.g. laptop, mobile phone) is loaned to the employee
- There is full network access from the alternate workplace.

Common features of a one-off or ad hoc arrangement:

- It is irregular and project driven
- Specific tasks are completed outside the workplace
- A self-assessment checklist of the home office may be used (note: the remote office must still meet OSH requirements)
- Remote access to work email account only – not to the network.

How do I know what my employees are doing when they are not in the office?

Research indicates that the greatest barrier to successful teleworking is the mindset of management. The key to overcoming this mindset is that managers need to feel comfortable knowing that deadlines are being met and tasks completed by the employee working outside of the office.

If an employee is physically based in the office, there are still periods of absence e.g. attending meetings, having lunch or liaising with other employees, so it is unlikely that you will be aware of every task they are working on at every minute of the day.

However, if there are real concerns that an employee will not be as productive at home as they would be in the office, a higher level of supervision may be required, e.g. a detailed schedule of tasks, timeframes and outcomes.

What if I am unhappy with the employee's current performance?

Underperformance is not necessarily a reason for refusing a teleworking application. For example, if an employee's performance issues are related to work-life conflict allowing them to work from home may result in improved performance.

However, if there is a formal process in place to address the underperformance, it may be better to postpone a decision on the teleworking application until the employee's performance meets the required standard.

Will other employees be affected as a result of a colleague teleworking?

The level of access to the workplace's network will determine the level of work that can be completed away from the office, hence minimising the impact of extra workloads on other employees.

Most employers allow email access at a minimum, however, there are additional methods that can be implemented to ensure the work can be completed away from the office, including:

- Full remote access to the network
- Storing information and documents on local drives using an organisational laptop
- Loading documents and information onto a USB storage device
- Taking home hard copies of documents
- Forwarding the employees' work phone to a mobile phone.

As with any absence (due to leave, lunch breaks, meetings) there will be times when other employees need to answer telephone calls, deal with customers, etc. It is important to foster a supportive environment so that resentment does not develop as a result of teleworking.

If one employee wants to telework, will everyone want to?

If teleworking is supported in the workplace it may be an attractive option for employees and you may receive multiple requests. This does not mean you have to say 'yes' to all of them.

You first need to determine if the particular job is suited to teleworking. Be realistic about how many requests can be approved – keeping in mind costs, service delivery requirements and team cohesion.

At the same time, be aware of the benefits of teleworking, such as the opportunity for 'hot desking' (several employees using the one workstation at different times), and longer service delivery hours as employees may be able to start earlier or work later because they don't have to commute.

What happens if an employee wants to telework full-time?

Generally it is a good idea for employees to spend some time in the usual workplace as this helps with team work and communication. The availability of teleconferencing and Skyping may make it feasible for employees to spend more time at home or another remote office without losing important face to face time.

What if an employee wants to telework so they can care for a family member?

Teleworking should not be used as a substitute for childcare or dependent care except in exceptional and occasional circumstances. Any such arrangement should be approved by the manager.

What should I consider when assessing a teleworking application?

- Does the application fall within any workplace policies?
- Can some or all of an employee's tasks be performed away from the usual workplace?
- What is the basis of the arrangement - ongoing or ad hoc?
- How will the employee be contacted while away from the workplace?
- How will items that need approval be processed?
- How will the work flow through to the employee remotely, e.g. urgent same-day requests?
- What technological capabilities and equipment are required?
- What are the costs associated with teleworking?
- Are there any OSH issues?
- What are the requirements for WorkCover/insurance purposes?

Implementation tips

Planning is crucial to:

- Identify the tasks that can be performed away from the central workplace
- Establish the most suitable type of arrangement
- Provide ready access to work documents and
- Make certain that equipment for teleworking is available
- Ensure OSH and WorkCover requirements are met
- Communicate and advise colleagues and clients of teleworking arrangements
- Provide ongoing access to training and promotional opportunities for teleworkers.

Task Review

To determine the extent to which teleworking is viable for an employee, their job role needs to be broken down into individual tasks or groups of tasks – involve the employee in this process.

The next step is to identify the tasks that require the employee to be in the workplace (e.g. certain client contact) and the tasks that can be done from home (e.g. report writing, research, telephone contact with clients).

Type of arrangement

The task review will help you decide if ongoing or short term teleworking is most appropriate:

- For regular, recurring tasks that can be performed on a specific day(s) every week/fortnight/month, an ongoing arrangement would be suitable
- For tasks that only come up sporadically (e.g. writing a report at the end of a project), an ad-hoc arrangement may be preferable

Technological capabilities and equipment

Technological and equipment requirements for teleworking are dependent on the type of arrangement and the tasks to be undertaken. For example:

- An ad-hoc arrangement may only require a USB storage device to store a particular document, plus e-mail access
- An ongoing arrangement whereby the employee works a set day from home would need greater access to work documents through, for example, remote access to the network or a work laptop with information stored on its local drives.

Costs

First investigate relative costs before deciding on the best method of providing remote access to information and equipment.

Costs can be reduced by using technology and equipment that is already available. For example, the employee may already have a blackberry device, a mobile phone, a USB drive, or a home computer with internet access.

Occupational safety and health (OSH) requirements

Under OSH legislation, employers have a duty of care to ensure that their employee's work environment is safe and they are covered by relevant insurance in the event of injury or illness. An OSH assessment of the remote work space is highly recommended - factors that need to be assessed include lighting in the work area, ergonomics of the work station, safety of equipment including computer and electrical cords, noise levels and airflow.

WorkCover requirements

Check with Workcover to ensure that employees are covered when teleworking - <http://www.workcover.wa.gov.au/Employers/Default.htm>.

Practical tools for teleworking

Meetings

- Schedule regular catch-up meetings with the employee to discuss status of projects/ tasks, work load, and developments in the workplace
- Regular team meetings will help ensure adequate information flow to everyone. If multiple employees are teleworking, aim to have some time every week or fortnight where everyone attends the workplace.

Work scheduling

Employee work arrangements (e.g. start and finish times; when in and out of the office; days off) should be recorded and clearly outlined in a work schedule and be distributed to all team members.

Calendars and email

- Calendar system - this could be a shared electronic calendar or a communal calendar in an easily accessible location in the workplace, displaying when people will be in the office
- Group distribution email lists - send out group emails so that everyone stays informed about what is going on in the workplace, even if they are not physically present
- Signature blocks in emails - to show when and how employees can be contacted.

Teleworking for managers

Management jobs can also be done on a partial telework basis– teleworking does not change the manager’s role; it merely changes the location in which the work is performed.

The ability of a manager to telework depends on your particular job and responsibilities. The arrangement can work well if there are good communication and workplace processes, using the same tools described for all teleworking employees. But there are some extra issues for managers to consider.

Approval processes

Workflow and approval processes need to be smooth and timely, despite the manager’s absence from the usual workplace. You can achieve this by:

- Establishing efficient processes for transferring information from the workplace to the manager’s home office or other remote location
- Delegating authority as much as possible to other employees.

HR issues

Most HR issues can be scheduled around manager absences from the workplace. Matters requiring immediate management attention can be dealt with as long as you are readily accessible by phone or email.

Supervision

Face to face supervision of employees is rarely necessary all of the time. Most work issues can be resolved if there is:

- Manager-employee contact by telephone, email, messaging or chat rooms
- Back up from another manager or senior supervisor.

However, if you are a manager who needs to be physically available at all times for supervision, teleworking may not be a suitable option.

Point of contact for urgent ad-hoc work tasks

Generally there will be content experts within the team who are able to deal with each work task as it arises. If you are the content expert, make sure you are easily contactable and able to quickly deal with urgent matters.

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