Global Risk Solutions

Guidelines for managing employees working from home

Managing employees who work from home has always posed challenges. Unlike an office environment, a manager and employee working from home have limitations in face to face meetings and interactions. It may even be compounded when both the employee and manager are working from home. Recent events related to the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified the difficulties for managers of employees working from home, especially for employees who rarely or never worked from home before. These guidelines offer some thoughts and references to assist managers of employees working from home, especially if they are new to this working arrangement.

Communication

When everyone is in an office together, communication is relatively easy. You see each other and know if a person is available to talk, you can join each other in a conference room, etc. If a manger and employee are working from home, you don't know when to contact the other person and too many contacts by the manager may seem like micro-managing from afar. Means of communication can also be an issue as we may have multiple phones and multiple on-line means of accessing each other. This can lead to being "on the job" continuously with no breaks or time to do uninterrupted work leading to stress and potential errors in our work. Equipment malfunctions or lack of proper equipment can also be a problem. Lastly, communication or lack of communication can make a worker feel isolated and de-humanized. Here are some thoughts for consideration:

- Use a common system for scheduling communication such as Outlook and allow everyone to block time that restricts over booking and lets a person work uninterrupted.

- Make sure that communication systems are working properly and that employees working from home have access to IT assistance and equipment that is right for the job and working properly, e.g. comfortable headsets with microphones, not cheap earbuds.

- Schedule regular contact calls and if possible, use video links to see the person to whom you are speaking

- Any injury or illness, no matter how small, that occurs while an employee is working remotely, should be reported to human resources or claims management the same day.

- Have backup systems in place in case of system or internet failures or power outages at a person's home e.g. using a cell phone, another internet access or a land line.

- Ensure that cyber security protocols established by your company are being followed by those working remotely.

- Try to integrate some lighthearted time in business communication like you would have in the office to make virtual communication more personable e.g. a movie trivia question and answer session.

Home workspace

One of the most difficult tasks especially for new work from home employees is to set up their home workspace. Unless a person has a home office, most people will try and find whatever space is available to work. This is a real problem for people in small apartments or houses where there are no physical barriers from distractions. Distractions can be other adults, children, pets or even TV and internet/phones. Although we do need to have breaks from work and meetings, constant distractions from barking dogs or people interrupting the employee can make doing the job very difficult. In most cases the manager can't see or hear what is happening at an employee's home, so they assume that the employee is in a spot conducive to doing a good uninterrupted job. In reality, the employee is probably wishing he was back in the office and not being bothered by the home distractions. Here are some thoughts on how a manager can help.

- Talk with your employees about where they plan to work and how they can separate themselves from distractions.

- Some means of separation could be setting up a specific space that is always dedicated as a workspace and not converted back and forth into a "home" space. This way when the worker is in the "work" space he is "at" work.
- Try to separate adults, children, pets, etc. from the workspace both physically and for sound.
- Headphones that cancel noise but allow the employee to participate in calls may be helpful. Use of the mute button is also a good way to limit home noise.

Ergonomics

Once the employee has a dedicated workspace, the layout of the workspace needs to be set up in a manner that will reduce ergonomic stress points such as repetitive motion and poor body positioning. There are many good guides to provide to workers on how to set up their workspace with proper desks, chairs, keyboard, mouse, monitor, etc. The QBE ergosolve information is a very good resource. Some basic management considerations may include:

- Information and possibly financial support for desks, chairs, computer equipment, etc. to assure proper ergonomically designed equipment.
- Additional considerations must be made for workers with disabilities and other special needs for equipment.
- Proper lighting to reduce glare and allow good visibility in the workspace.
- Continue to monitor the employee to assure any ergonomic adjustments that are needed are corrected.

General Health and Safety

In addition to a properly selected workspace that has good ergonomic controls, the employee working from home does not have the benefit of an office that is designed to protect workers from injuries or catastrophic events like fires. Since this is the worker's home, a manager has limited influence on any safety controls but, it is still the manager's responsibility to do whatever is reasonable in assuring the worker is in a safe and healthy environment. Here are some basic health and safety considerations for managers of people working from home.

- Have the employee keep the workspace clear of papers, files, and other items that could cause a fall or similar injury.

- Make sure all electrical connections are secure and not overloading the electrical system. All wires need to be out of the way to prevent tripping or similar hazards and the wires need to be checked regularly for problems with the covers so arcing or fires will not result.
- The work area needs proper ventilation and temperature controls to make it comfortable.
- Exit paths from the workspace should be clear and the exits themselves clear to a safe area outdoors.
- Limit food items in the workspace that could spill or cause burns. Eating outside of the workspace is recommended.

Regulatory and Legal responsibilities

Just because an employee is working from home may not eliminate a company's responsibility to provide the person with a safe workspace. The employee may still be covered by workers' compensation and any other related business insurance programs just like the employee would be in the office. Regulatory and insurance policy requirements may also apply to employees traveling for business. Managers may want to consider the following:

- Make sure that employees working from home are properly informed of the company rules on safety/health, travel, and Human Resources requirements and services as well as any federal, state or local regulations just like they would be if they were in the office.
- Check with Human Resources and your legal department to see if there are any company rules or requirements for managers of employees working from home.
- Document all information provided to employees working from home including company rules, government requirements and any support on equipment, ergonomics, health and safety and communications.

References

Public domain

https://www.telework.gov/federal-community/telework-employees/safety-checklist/

https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/standardinterpretations/1999-11-15

https://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show_document?p_table=directives&p_id=2254

https://www.eeoc.gov//facts/telework.html

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