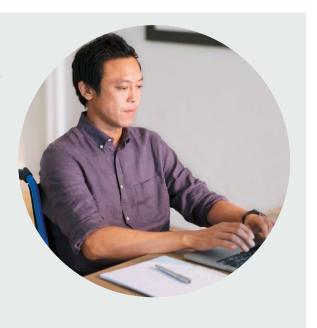# Managing the health, safety & wellbeing of agile workers

Introduction

During recent years we have seen a gradual shift to agile ways of working, as organisations have sought to provide maximum flexibility and minimal constraints, empowering employees to work where and when they choose to. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this process for many, as normal working environments were required to close and remote working became a necessity.

Many organisations have identified potential benefits to this way of working and plan to continue with agile working practices in the longer term. It is essential that managers are supported to help their teams embrace flexible working arrangements. Remote working can offer many advantages for both employers and employees, however it can also present health, safety and wellbeing concerns if such change is not managed effectively.

Discussion

This guide considers some of the key issues and effective management principles that can be applied when implementing agile working arrangements, to ensure a positive and healthy work environment for employees.

Health and Safety

The legal requirement for employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees continues to apply in agile working situations. A key part of this is ensuring that the employee's workspace is suitable and that the necessary work equipment is provided to enable the employee to set up their workstation correctly.

Remote working arrangements that were introduced at speed in response to lockdown may have seen employees working at kitchen tables and breakfast bars, and this approach will not be sustainable for permanent remote working situations. As with other work environments, display screen equipment should be risk assessed to determine home working suitability, with guidance provided on how to set up the DSE workstation correctly for the agile work environment.

It is important that remote workers are aware of the potential health risks associated with failing to take suitable breaks from the screen. Unlike an office environment, for example, there may not be natural breaks and changes of activity from screen work during the working day, so employees need to be mindful and actively encouraged to build these in, to change posture regularly during the day and to exercise.

General health and safety hazards that could present a risk to agile workers also need to be considered, for example housekeeping, slip/trip hazards and electrical hazards, with employees advised of the standards that they are required to adhere to.

Communication

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a huge increase in the use of video-conferencing applications for meetings, work calls and maintaining contact between employees. Maintaining virtual communication links with agile workers is essential, allowing employees to remain connected with colleagues so that they do not feel isolated in situations when they may not meet in person for significant periods of time.

Effective communication from managers with agile workers is also key so that they can provide feedback on organisational developments and work priorities. Holding regular, structured discussions in relation to employee welfare and workload should be introduced. Some employees may not be familiar with virtual ways of working and may need additional support to set some structure and routine to managing their work. It is important that additional direction and training is provided for those who require it.

Working remotely does not always provide the same opportunity for employees to raise concerns with colleagues and managers. Therefore, it is important for employers to consider what methods will be used to maintain employee relations, the frequency of meetings (both formal and informal), and the wellbeing strategies that will be required to meet the needs of a remote workforce.

Whilst video calls can be an important part of maintaining contact and communication with employees, it is important that employees do not become overloaded with excessive virtual meetings that do not allow for breaks or changes of activity. Recent research has flagged the potential fatigue caused by excessive amounts of video calls, highlighting the unusual combination of prolonged eye contact with colleagues, constantly seeing yourself in real time, restricted mobility and trying to compensate for an absence of non-verbal cues, which can all contribute to increased feelings of fatigue and affect concentration.

There are a range of basic steps that can be taken to reduce video call fatigue, however this will often require leadership and managers to endorse and actively display these practices for employees to take a similar approach. Such steps include avoiding back to back calls, limiting the length of meetings, assigning part(s) of the day to video calls, rather than having calls scheduled all day, and taking regular breaks away from the work environment. Where virtual meetings do not require a formal approach, undertaking calls whilst outside, or walking, can help to introduce screen breaks and encourage employees to take exercise during the working day.

Taking breaks & work structure

When working from home, there is the potential for boundaries between personal time and work time to become blurred. Employees should be encouraged to keep workspaces separate to help reduce the risk of this. Some people find that being able

to close the door on the workspace can help them to switch off at the end of the working day.

Whilst some people may thrive in a home working environment, others may miss the formal structure and routine of going into the workplace. The routine scheduling of workload and work activities will help employees to develop a structure to their daily routine, something which can help them stay focused and motivated in a lone working environment.

As people adapt to remote working, they may utilise different types of activities to help get them through the working day, from listening to music to going out at lunchtime or exercising when they feel they need to. People managers should familiarise themselves with the different work choices of their teams and support the strategies that people adopt, ensuring that there is time for these natural breaks and changes of activity throughout the day.

Mental health & wellbeing

The recent large-scale shift to remote working has taken place against the hugely uncertain backdrop of a global pandemic, with people juggling the responsibilities of work and home life, coupled with concerns about the health of loved ones. Clearly this can have a significant impact on employee health and wellbeing, and considerations in respect of mental health and wellbeing have been at the forefront of many organisational responses to the pandemic.

Longer term, there is the potential for mental health and wellbeing concerns amongst remote workers to go unchecked and it is important that managers are equipped with suitable training to enable them to manage mental health amongst an agile workforce. The provision of formal training, such as Mental Health First Aid, is one way of achieving this and managers should feel confident in holding regular conversations about mental health and wellbeing with team members, with the opportunity for concerns to be raised at an early stage.

Clear leadership is essential, with senior managers talking openly about mental health issues and the support available to employees should they have any concerns and how to access this.

Leaveism

Flexible working has removed some of the distinctions between work and home and can allow employees to create a work pattern that supports their own personal circumstances and lifestyle, often leading to improved health and wellness. However, leaveism has been identified as an increasing risk associated with remote and flexible working.

The term "leaveism" is used to describe situations in which employees feel unable to 'switch off' from work and can lead to an 'always on' culture'. It can occur when people choose not to take allocated time off or undertake work outside normal working hours, such as weekends and evenings, and when work is carried out when employees are supposed to be on leave or holiday. The risks associated with leaveism include increased work-related stress, negative impacts on employee morale and potential mental exhaustion and burnout.

To reduce the risk of leaveism, employees should be encouraged to avoid accessing their work at times when they aren't required to work, for example weekends or evenings, and to take their annual leave allocation and use this time to 'switch off' completely from work, avoiding accessing emails and work requests during these times. Managers should actively support

this and look to identify potential signs of leaveism (e.g. working late at night, sending emails whilst on holiday or on days when they would not normally be required to work), so that workloads can be managed accordingly and adjusted if necessary, supporting employees who might need help as a result of increases in workload.

Presenteeism

Presenteeism occurs when employees work despite being unwell and are consequently less productive. Presenteeism and absence from work are closely linked, since individuals have the choice between taking time off work or attending work when ill.

Sickness absence numbers continue to fall but the incidence of presenteeism has risen significantly. There are a number of factors that have contributed to this and some are linked to changes to flexible and agile ways of working. For example, greater connectivity has made it possible for people to work from home as an alternative to taking 'sickness' absence from work. It also appears that young people are more likely to present themselves at work rather than taking time off.

The risk of employees failing to take time off when they are unwell is longer recovery periods for ill health conditions, potentially exacerbating ill health and leading to issues such as burnout and work-related stress.

Employers who switch to agile ways of working should seek to raise awareness of the issue of presenteeism, so that managers can take steps to identify potential issues and encourage employees to take sickness absence when they are ill.

Technostress

A further risk associated with the shift to remote and agile working is the potential impact of new technology upon employees.

"Technostress" is the term used to define the negative health impacts which can occur when an employee is unable to cope with increases in digitalisation and the new technology that they are required to use in the workplace, potentially leading to performance issues and sickness absence.

As with other risk factors associated with agile working, training and support are key to ensuring that employees can cope with the changes introduced by new technology.

Along with guidance on its implementation and how to use new technology, training on time management is also key, with meetings kept as concise as possible and the avoidance of using technology or sending emails outside normal working hours. Regular one to one meetings are essential, as they provide the opportunity for remote workers to raise any concerns that they may have in relation to the new technology that they are required to use.

Lone working

Agile working may involve employees not only working in isolation, but potentially also undertaking visits to sites away from their normal workplace. Employers have a responsibility to assess the potential risks associated with the type of lone working activities that are to be undertaken and to implement suitable precautions to keep lone workers safe.

A range of control measures may be implemented to reduce lone working risks, including;

- Training for lone workers
- Providing details of locations to be visited and the duration of planned visits
- Means of maintaining contact with lone workers, e.g. mobile phones
- Arrangements for raising the alarm in the event of any concerns
- Specific arrangements for any higher risk activities
- Avoidance of lone working outside normal office hours
- Consideration of any health conditions which could place employees at increased risk
- Provision of first aid equipment.

This list is not exhaustive, and a risk assessment should be carried out to determine all the necessary precautions.

In summary

Recent trends towards agile working were accelerated during the pandemic and many employers have identified the potential benefits of a permanent change to agile and flexible working practices, for both the organisation and employees. Careful management of this change from traditional working arrangements and the implementation of effective agile working systems and procedures will help to ensure that this is a positive and sustainable solution for organisations.

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