

Managing people working from home

Working from home is a strategy that is increasingly being used by small businesses for some jobs, either on an occasional basis, as a regular component of the job or the usual way of working. Examples include winemakers, designers, policy analysts and community workers; staff carrying out research, developing proposals or managing phone contact with customers. Sometimes it is suggested by an employee, to make it easier to care for family or reduce travelling time. Sometimes it is suggested by the employer when the area the employee needs to service is closer to their home than to the office, or where office accommodation is restricted. However for it to work, it needs to suit both the employer and the employee. It needs to be voluntary, not compulsory.

The following are some of the things that are useful to consider if you are thinking about employees working from home on more than a very occasional basis.

Is it a realistic option?

For the work:

- Does it suit the type of work?
- Does the job, or the parts of the job that would be done from home, have clearly defined and agreed objectives and timeframes?
- What impact, if any, would it have on customers or clients?
- What would be the impact on the rest of the team?
- Are there confidentiality or security issues that could be compromised?
- Will they require resources that others may need to access at the same time? Could this be managed?

For the employee:

- Does this suit the employee's style of working?
- Are they self-motivated?
- Could they cope with the isolation and lack of social interaction?
- Do they have the time management skills required?
- Do they need a separation between work and home?
- Does the employee have the appropriate working environment at home such as:
 - space and lighting?
 - furniture and equipment?
 - peace and quiet?
 - the understanding of family, friends and neighbours?

For the Employer:

- Do you have a sufficient level of trust in the employee for this to work?
- Can you focus on what they achieve, rather than watching them as they work?
- Is this an option you would consider for all relevant types of work or is this a reward for trusted, high performing employees?

Agree before you start

Reaching agreement before you start will help avoid many of the problems that can occur.

- What hours do you expect them to work? Are they set, or is it at the employee's convenience so long as they get the work done? Do they need to let you know?
- How, and how often, do you expect them to be in touch with the office?
- How will you or other team members contact them?
- Are they expected to attend team meetings, training or briefing sessions?
- How can clients contact them?
- How will you be confident that their work space is safe and meets legal occupational and health requirements?
- What equipment will you provide, and what do you expect them to provide?
- What costs e.g. power, internet access, phone, will you meet and what do you expect them to meet?
- Are there implications for your insurance cover?
- What procedures will be used for handling and storing sensitive or confidential information?
- If the arrangement does not work, what process will you use for adjusting or terminating it?

Making it work

- How can you both be clear about what they are expected to do?
- How will they report progress?
- How will you make them feel part of the team?
- How will you keep them involved with social events? How much notice will they need?
- How, and how often, will you monitor that the arrangement is working for them, for the rest of the team and for the organisation?
- How will they access technical support for computers or other technology?