



Managing the Risks of Telecommuting

Date/Source: Spring 2008 Personnel Peeks (Reviewed October 2009)

Archived newsletters of the Personnel Peeks publication can be found on the MCHRMA site.

Nearly 20 million people in the U.S. (almost 10% of the workforce) regularly work from home. Telecommuting can be positive for both employers and employees. Organizations with telecommuting programs often experience greater productivity and savings which are derived from decreased absenteeism and job retention costs. Employees often find telecommuting offers flexibility and work-life balance.

Telecommuting does not come without risks and does not negate an employer's responsibility for providing a safe and healthy work environment. Many telecommuting programs do not achieve the results organizations desire largely because of 1) insufficient support infrastructure and 2) oversight of potential risks associated with telecommuting. However, with careful planning organizations can manage and minimize the risks and maximize the benefits of a telecommuting program. Consider these common risks associated with telecommuting:

Computer Equipment

A recent study conducted by the American Management Association found less than 50% of telecommuters reported having the necessary equipment to conduct business from home. Before allowing an employee to telecommute,

- Identify what equipment is needed

- List what equipment will be provided by the organization

- Address how and by whom equipment will be maintained

Health & Safety

Telecommuters should have a work space that meets the same safety standards as employees' work spaces in the office. According to OSHA, employees working from home are just as likely to experience workplace injuries as those working in an office environment. Therefore, employees should take appropriate steps to ensure the health and safety of employees. To minimize accidents and injuries for telecommuters organizations should,

- Conduct a risk assessment on each home work environment

Assist in the set up of the home work space

Ensure office space is ergonomically correct

Management

Successful management of telecommuters means supervisors cannot fall into a “out of sight, out of mind” mentality. It is also important to understand not every person nor every job is appropriate for telecommuting. To successfully manage telecommuters, it is imperative to,

Choose the right person (i.e. strong work ethic, highly motivated, self starter, needs little supervision)

Maintain regular contact with the telecommuter

Establish clear expectations including availability during work day, meetings, team interactions, work load, deliverables

Manage the telecommuter’s performance

Legal

Before allowing employees to telecommute, it is important to consider the risks involved and ensure policies and procedures are modified to deal with the unique aspects of telecommuting. Organizations should ensure, in writing,

Employee contracts address work hours, changes to salary or benefits

Equipment return policy exists for retrieval of equipment and property

Guidelines created to address whether the organization’s equipment can be used for personal reasons and by non-employees

Be reminded, telecommuters are subject to the same rules, policies and procedures as those working in the office. Any changes to those policies or procedures should also be communicated to your telecommuting staff. As with any policy change, seek counsel review before implementing any changes to your employment policies.

Workers’ Compensation

In an office setting, the employer can control risks by developing safety programs that minimize or remove hazards to the employee. When employees work at home, it is more difficult to control these risks not only because work conduct cannot be closely supervised, but also because of employees’ rights or private domain. Before allowing employees to telecommute, it’s important to discuss with the employee how the home work environment will be controlled since the employee may be deemed eligible for workers’ compensation benefits for injuries sustained there. The same criteria that is used to assess work injuries in the office applies to the home office as well. If the employee is within course and scope of his/her job duties and the injury arose from the work activity an injury would be compensable under workers’ compensation benefits. The use of safety checklists or home surveys

along with policies and procedures help employers to monitor and enforce safety standards in home work environments and reduce or prevent accident, illness or injury.

Before allowing telecommuting it is imperative to have the appropriate policies and procedures in place. These policies and procedures must specify the expectations of the employer regarding issues such as equipment provided, maintenance of equipment and the facility, safety and adherence to existing policies.

The viewpoints expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views or policies of MCHRMA or MCIT. Information contained in this publication is for general information purposes only and does not constitute legal or coverage advice. Duplicating this resource without the written consent from MCHRMA and/or the author is in violation of federal law.