

What you need to know about employees working from home

Work health and safety is paramount and is the most obvious consideration here.

“When it comes to the physical health and safety of employees who work from home, it’s important to note that you, as an employer, bear the same responsibility as you would if the employee were in an office environment.”

Prior to going ahead with a work-from-home arrangement, employers should be sure that the work area at home meets WHS standards, which would involve a safety assessment of the work area prior to the employee working from home. Key things to consider during an assessment include the following:

- Any manual tasks the employee will have to carry out
- Tripping or falling hazards and associated musculoskeletal risks
- Electrical safety
- The general environment — things like noise, security, fire exit access, first aid, etc.

After doing such an assessment, you should come to an agreement with the employee about any controls and preventative measures that need to be put in place.

While the physical health and safety of an employee working from home is of utmost importance, don’t forget to consider their emotional health and well-being, as well. This is of particular importance if an employee works from home full-time, which would make it difficult for employers to gauge how the worker is feeling in relation to job satisfaction, workloads, potential workplace bullying (over email, phone, etc.) and stress. Furthermore, while working from home has definite benefits, some employees may find it to be quite isolating and limit social interaction, which can take a toll on emotional happiness.

Property and equipment

Many Businesses have general property insurance included in their insurance program. If you do, then typical business equipment (think mobiles, laptops, iPads, etc.) may be covered regardless of the location in which they are used. There are, however, some caveats to consider. These include:

- Monetary limits — usually, if an item is worth more than \$2,500 (this can vary), it must be specified on the policy in order for it to be insured.
- The property of the employee will not usually be covered by your business insurance, and any home and contents insurance the employee has in place will be unlikely to cover your business equipment.
- If an employee is using their own personal computer and information is lost (for example, because of hacking or a computer virus), such a loss would not typically be covered by your business insurance or their home and contents insurance.

- If an employee damages their home or property in the course of working from home, your business insurance would likely not respond.

Damage, theft or loss of property and equipment is particularly pertinent in relation to tradespeople who work from home, as such equipment is likely to be higher in number and in value. Be certain that the coverage you have in place is the right kind and substantial enough to cover you for any losses that may occur in the course of an employee working from home. Ensure you create an inventory of equipment the employee uses while working at home.

There is a lot for you to consider and there are some important practices for you to put in place, but in general, the considerations and practices aren't any different for employees who work from home than employees who work at your place of business.

“Make sure you check in often with employees who work from home and make it clear that their physical and emotional health is of importance to you to ensure that it is an arrangement that continues to work effectively for both parties.”

What are the insurance considerations?

When employees work from home, there are three main insurance considerations — injury to an employee, injury to a customer, and safety of property and equipment. Let's look at each of these individually.

If an employee is injured

While your employee may not be working on your premises, it is still your responsibility to provide a safe work environment. Therefore, if an employee sustains an injury in the course of their work while at home, it is your responsibility to ensure they are covered via your workers compensation insurance. Bear in mind that psychological injury is also claimable under workers compensation.

These considerations only add to the importance of carrying out a safety assessment and continuing to check in with employees about their mental health and satisfaction, as well as ensuring that you have appropriate workers compensation insurance in place.

If working from home is NOT a permanent offering, ensure the employee understands this before you allow it to happen.

If a customer is injured

If an employee who works from home also sees customers at home as part of their business activities, then you need to ensure that you have the required level of public liability insurance in place.

While public liability insurance is part of most businesses insurance program, it doesn't mean the insurance you have in place will provide coverage for employees who work from home. Policies will vary, so check with your Broker to be certain you are covered for all outcomes related to public liability insurance prior to agreeing to have an employee work from home.