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Safe Working Environments

Home Working for Call Handlers During the COVID-19 Crisis

Home Working for Call Handlers During the COVID-19 Pandemic



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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the main part of 2020, the COVID-19 virus has proven to pose a health threat to TEC monitoring service staff, and the people they come into contact with. This guide, which forms part of a suite of documents for Safe Working Environments, aims to provide additional advice to help manage the risk.

During pandemics or outbreaks of disease, when infection can pass quickly between members of a call handling team who work in close proximity to each other, the ability of staff to handle calls from home may be a practical step in managing a crisis

An increasing number of monitoring centre staff are likely to be carers, or they will have responsibilities that make it difficult for them to be away from home at work for most of the week; an opportunity to work at home on some days may be attractive to them. They may also be classed as vulnerable themselves and need to be “shielded”, but this does not necessarily mean that they are unable to work.

Travel difficulties make home working a practical alternative to working from a set location, especially during holiday periods and at times of poor weather and road conditions are bad. Staff working from home can be more flexible in providing additional call handling capacity at times of peak demand.

Improvements in telecommunications infrastructure, virtual private networks and call handling platforms, have enabled home working to become a viable option for telecare monitoring centres. Some organisations are developing virtual call centres that allow home workers to handle all incoming calls. People with special counselling, clinical or language skills may increasingly work from home on an “on-call” basis

Many responder and installation services, already operate “on-call” functions by utilising home working, which can be extended to the normal working day, minimising the need to attend the office other than a for specific reasons, such as to collect equipment.

Staff with physical disabilities may have excellent interpersonal skills enabling them to empathise with service users, but may be unable to travel to a monitoring centre on a daily basis, so home working becomes a convenient option for them.

Home workers may help service users to accept the use of national (or international) monitoring centres by providing some local knowledge and accents.

The effects of working from home needs to be considered holistically, so that the home working environment does not adversely affect the health and well-being of staff, their families, or causes disruption for neighbours.

HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELLBEING IN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

Employers cannot specify the type of property or location that an employee lives in, but they have a legal obligation to provide ongoing assessment, advice and support to their staff.

During pandemic's such as the COVID-19 crisis, it has been difficult and in many cases impossible to make home visits. Video call facilities have become common place and it is now possible to assess and confirm the suitability of home working arrangements through this medium. A risk assessment must be performed to cover issues such as electricity supplies, the use of a computer monitors and general fire safety.

During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it may have been necessary to implement home working quickly to ensure service continuity and home risk assessments may have not been undertaken. However, it is important that this action is addressed, now that more normal working practices are in place and safety measures are available. A checklist is attached as Appendix A.

Employers have specific Health and Safety responsibilities for home workers who are pregnant, who have recently given birth, or who are breast feeding and these should be taken into consideration with respect to the range of duties that are required of the home worker.

Working from home removes from staff the opportunity to interact and socialise with colleagues and to receive informal instruction on recent news and activities. It can also be more difficult for inter-team communication with regard to ongoing incidents, so special arrangements need to be put into place to alleviate this problem.

Feelings of staff isolation can be reduced by:

- Requiring home workers to interact with colleagues every day through video calls
- Arranging for training and feedback sessions to be performed in groups using virtual meetings
- Regular contact with Supervisors, whenever concerns arise and especially at the start and end of shifts. As a result, it may be necessary to increase the number of supervisors, or team leaders, to ensure that these additional duties and responsibilities to staff can be maintained
- It is important that employers provide regular on-going assessment either by telephone or video conferencing
- It may be necessary to hold more frequent performance reviews, or one-to-one's with staff, to ensure that they are supported and performing to the expected levels

Where shift workers are involved, it is important that the home working measures implemented to support staff, span the complete range of shifts throughout the day and at weekends, or public holidays. Special arrangements may need to be made for staff to conduct religious activities, such as prayers etc.

Additional services may be required to support staff, such as counselling advice, where staff deal with difficult situations and may need to help to cope.

If a home worker is going to be alone for all or much of the day, then the employer should be made aware of any illness that they have (such as asthma or epilepsy) which could lead to an attack during a working shift and should also ensure that appropriate lone-worker contingencies can be put into place

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT

Suitability of Home Equipment

Employers who provide home workers with equipment to carry out their work have a duty to ensure that:

- the equipment is correct and appropriate for handling alarm or routine calls in a professional manner with access to support materials and documentation
- information and training are given on how to connect the equipment to a communications system and to use it in a safe and secure manner while performing their TEC duties
- provide information on first level fault finding, in the event of IT equipment issues, perhaps in the form of a checklist
- the equipment being used is checked and kept in a condition that does not cause harm to either the homeworker, or to others. This will require special arrangements for handling and cleaning whilst there is a risk of transmitting any virus, please check current guidance on this topic on the TSA and Government websites.
- the equipment is capable of being used in such a way that it does not pose health and safety risks (see Appendix A)
- dependent on the applications being used, access to head office systems and applications being used, home workers may need more than one screen, or laptop, to be able to access essential information. They may also need multiple access channels to head office servers.
- home workers have access to appropriate IT and telecoms support in the event of a technical or system failure, at the times for which they work.
- Additional support arrangements will be needed for shift workers and for those staff that work outside normal daytime core hours.

Connectivity of Voice and Access to Software Applications

To ensure that staff have the necessary access requirements, the IT sections of service provider organisations, will need to liaise with the various application providers, to assess the level of licencing that will be required. In many cases, additional licences will be required for remote access to head office systems and call handling platforms. Additional communication channels, or increased capacity will be required for remote call handling for monitoring centres.

There are various options for providing voice calls, including use of the call handlers' own phones, dedicated mobile phones and digital voice connections through the home terminal. Employers should take advice from the supplier of their alarm monitoring system to establish which of these options are best suited, so that important voice call functionality is maintained where possible, including:

- Basic call handling
- Voice recording
- Conference calling (e.g. where used for translation or health support services)
- Putting calls on hold whilst requesting assistance
- Call controls (volume up/down, speech direction control)

- Simple guidance should be provided to call handlers on how best to use home phone devices to manage alarm call functionality

Employers should also consider the impact of the home environment to determine the most appropriate phone call options, such as:

- Is there an existing home phone line that is readily available? A busy household may find it difficult to commit the phone line to telecare alarm use.
- Is there good mobile phone coverage?
- Can a suitably private and quiet location be made available in the home? It is important that there is not too much disruption to the other members of the household and neighbouring properties, especially during the night-time hours.
- If staff are required to employ their own private telephone and/or broadband connections, then the employer must be responsible for ensuring that adequate filters, security and other practical measures are available to ensure that the system performance is not compromised

Access to the alarm monitoring system will require a data connection that is secure and provides performance that is sufficient for system operation. Here too, employers should consult with their alarm monitoring system provider to ensure that the necessary data connectivity is provided.

Commercial Considerations

Employers should be prepared to make a suitable financial contribution to the maintenance and upkeep of systems that are used to enable specific data traffic and calls to be handled by a home worker.

The cost of additional hardware, connectivity and licencing is likely to require significant investment for implementation and ongoing support of the systems in use.

SECURITY MEASURES

It is recommended that the home equipment being used should NOT be used to store any data or software applications that relates to alarm handling. Instead, the systems should employ web-accessible monitoring applications, or intermediate technologies that enable remote access and control of machines (e.g. Remote Desktop Server, Citrix etc.). The supplier of the alarm monitoring, or other system to be used should be consulted to determine which technology is most appropriate.

The employer should perform a risk assessment (a 'Data Privacy Impact Assessment') to determine the necessary measures to be applied to home working in relation to data and cyber security. As a minimum, such measures should include:

- Preserving best practice in relation to system access and authentication (inc. passwords)
- Network security (inc. use of firewalls, anti-malware, secure connections)
- Technology updates (inc. operating system updates to provide latest protection)
- Clear policy on any allowed use of a home workers own devices (PC, smartphone etc)

In the same way as access to monitoring centres needs to be restricted, a certain level of control needs to be applied to the home environment though this needs to be consistent with the perceived level of risk especially as the home is used by other members of family including children

In addition, lower levels of restriction may be appropriate when home working is performed only as an emergency measure to deal with unexpected circumstances such as illness and situations that lie outside the usual disaster recovery procedures. Specific measures are provided in Appendix B.

OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The employer needs to maintain and continually update a contingency plan, to cover the possible loss of home connection or unplanned loss of home worker availability. The essentials of this plan need to be communicated to home workers.

During a shift, the bandwidth available for communication with the monitoring centre should not be shared with other processes, or devices that can consume bandwidth including computer gaming equipment and other Internet services

Call handling both for alarms and for proactive services should be performed without the distraction of other audio sources such as a television, radio or music player; children and pets should not enter the room if they are likely to distract the home worker

Other distractions such as the use of social media and visitors during working periods should be discouraged.

To ensure optimum sound performance and for confidentiality, call handling should be performed using a dedicated head set and microphone.

Recognising that some shifts are performed during quiet periods of the night, mechanisms should be put into place to allow home workers to take a break as appropriate.

During periods of high demand, home workers need to be aware of their responsibilities to answer calls quickly and to close them down as soon as sufficient information has been obtained, or if another procedure has been started.

General and individual call handling performance should be monitored, in line with the requirements of the Quality Standards Framework, Measures of Excellence. These standards also require services to evaluate and analyse exception reports, with a view to correction.

Appendix A: Home Safety Risk Assessment Checklist

- Electrical connections:
 - There must be sufficient and appropriate electricity outlets to ensure that all the electrical appliances that are needed can be plugged in simultaneously without presenting a fire or safety risk
 - Plugs must not be damaged or show signs of burn or overheating and should be correctly wired and maintained
 - The outer covering of cables should not be damaged and should be gripped where they enter the casing of a plug (or a socket)
 - Trailing cables need to be eliminated or routed so that the risks of trips and falls are reduced
- Staff should be immediately contactable by phone, mobile phone and e-mail at all times
- There should be easy access to a door in the event of a fire, and also access to a window that opens fully in case the door exit is blocked or unavailable due to an emergency incident.
- Safety devices, where appropriate, should be installed including:
 - A fire extinguisher (one for electrical fire and others for other types of fire)
 - A storable safety ladder for emergency exit from the window
 - Smoke alarms in the work room and elsewhere in the home
 - A comprehensive first aid kit
 - A thermometer to display the temperature in the work environment
- Instruction should be provided on how to employ the safety equipment above
- Ensure that all telecommunications and computing equipment provided for the home worker is fit for its purpose, and properly and regularly tested (including PAT testing), certified and maintained
- Computers should be positioned such that they can be used comfortably and where the monitor screen can be viewed in such a way that:
 - It is clear and readable, and without flicker
 - It is free from glare and reflections
 - the 'brightness' and 'contrast' controls are properly adjusted to prevent eyestrain
 - It is clean and placed at the right angle on the desk to allow work to be done
 - Both artificial and natural lighting levels need to be appropriate to allow the fine detail displayed on the screen to be seen
- In addition, the keyboard and the mouse controller of the computer should be placed in the correct position to allow the home worker to work comfortably
- The chair to be used while working from home should be adjusted to the right height so that work can be performed comfortably over an extended period of time
- There should be enough space in general so that the staff member does not have to sit in an awkward position, and sufficient space beneath the desk to allow free movement of the legs
- Staff need to have received appropriate training to ensure that they can work safely
- Accurate records need to be kept of any serious accidents, illnesses or injuries experienced by home workers
- Employees may be entitled to an eye test paid for by the employer because their work will necessarily involve looking at a computer screen for extended periods of time
- If a home worker is going to be alone for all or much of the day, then the employer should be made aware of any illness that they have (such as asthma or epilepsy) which could lead to an attack during a working shift and should also ensure that appropriate lone-worker contingencies can be put into place

Appendix B: Home Working Security Checklist

- Ideally, the room used for home working should be upstairs so unwanted entry through a window is less likely
- Ideally, windows should be covered by blinds or net curtains so that a screen containing sensitive data cannot be seen from outside
- When working at night, curtains should be drawn to avoid the computer screen being viewed from outside
- While working on-line, external doors should be locked where appropriate or other security measures applied to ensure that intruders cannot gain access to the computer
- Each time the home worker leaves the computer, the system should either be switched off or the system locked so that the data may only be observed after typing in a password
- The computer used for home working should be restricted for use by the home worker and should not be used by any other member of the household
- Staff should be made aware that no data should be downloaded and kept locally on the machine, or measures put in place to prevent this
- Staff should be instructed not to print off any data
- Staff should be made aware of data protection legislation.