FLEX

Family Friendly Employers

HOW TO MAKE HYBRID & HOMEWORKING WORK

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WHAT IS HYBRID WORKING?

Hybrid working combines working at an employer's premises with a remote location, typically involving office and home working. It should also offer flexibility as to when and how staff work their hours. With sensible planning and management, hybrid working should be a "win-win" option for employers and employees alike.

Although different types of hybrid working have been around for years, the term has entered everyday language as employers grapple with how and where their staff will work now that the government has removed most COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, including the requirement that staff should work at home wherever possible.

Some employers will be looking to extend or make permanent hybrid and homeworking arrangements that have evolved since the start of the first pandemic lockdown in March 2020; others will be wanting their staff to return to the office. All will be aware, however, that the need to self-isolate and the potential return of restrictions and even lockdowns mean that even the most office-centric of organisations may need to embrace hybrid working arrangements in the future.

2.
THE BENEFITS OF HYBRID WORKING

Employers can benefit from hybrid and homeworking through:

• savings on office space and running costs;

• the ability to take on staff without extra office costs;

• flexible service provision beyond core hours;

• the ability to select staff from a wider, more diverse and differently skilled pool;

• a happier and more productive workforce;

• reduced sickness absence rates;

• improvements in staff retention; and

• reductions in recruitment costs.

Staff are able to:

• work flexibly at times that are convenient and that balance work and family demands;

• take on work that they would not otherwise be able to; and

• avoid journey time and costs.

3.
THE BASICS

Hybrid working will provide employers with new challenges in addition to those with which they are already familiar from office-based and home-based working. It will also eliminate some of the issues that can arise from working in an office. All of the challenges are easily addressed through good management, and involving and communicating with staff. Employers should:

• think about the work that needs to be done;

• plan, implement and monitor the hybrid working arrangements that will meet these needs;

• ask their staff for their views on potential hybrid working arrangements. Explain the needs of the organisation and ask staff what they would like and how this might be achieved. This will help secure "buy-in" to the arrangements, while the staff will often be best placed to know what needs to be done; and

• communicate clearly and regularly with hybrid workers and homeworkers. It does, however, require different types of arrangements to those used for on-site workers.

4.
LINE MANAGERS AND SUPERVISERS

The success of hybrid working and homeworking almost invariably hinges on the worker's line manager or supervisor. Research consistently finds that the main problems arise where they lack the experience and training to manage workers outside of the employer's office, even if they are good managers with a physically present workforce. The problems usually stem from a failure to think through the differences between office and remote working, and involve communication and involvement, and monitoring and evaluating performance.

5.
SELECTING HYBRID WORKERS

Many parents will want to work from home. Not all staff may be suitable to work at home or on a hybrid basis.

• consider whether the person is self-motivating, self-sufficient, mature, flexible and disciplined;

• homeworking and hybrid working can allow organisations to employ highly skilled workers who might otherwise be lost to the organisation because of mobility or mental health issues or have a disability.

• medical conditions should not rule out homeworking or hybrid working, but they might necessitate some adjustments to the arrangements, for example diabetics working alone and at home would need more frequent contact; and

Employers should stipulate clearly that they retain the right to require a worker to return to its workplace should performance become unsatisfactory as a result of home or hybrid working.

6.
HOME NOT ALONE

No matter how great the potential benefits for employers and hybrid workers, managers should be aware that employees who are working on a hybrid basis or solely at home will have fewer opportunities to meet their managers and colleagues formally and informally in person. Poorly managed, this can:

• make it difficult to learn on the job from colleagues and also to understand how the organisation works in a wider sense;

• make supervision and training harder to implement and monitor; and

• leave workers feeling isolated, uninvolved and unhappy.

Employers should also ensure that their staff are not overworking or feeling stressed. This can arise because homeworkers and hybrid workers:

• often feel that they are unable "to leave work behind" in the way that they would when leaving an office;

• will be less likely or able to talk informally to their colleagues about any issues that that are facing;

• are likely to want to show their employer that the arrangements work well and that they are productive; and

• may find it difficult to separate their working and home lives.

These problems are easily addressed. Hybrid working will mean that staff will be present at the employer's office for some of the time, which should reduce isolation. While formal meetings and reviews online can help counter an involvement deficit, they are less likely to address the lack of social opportunities and informal learning. Employers could:

• set up discussion threads specifically for hybrid staff as well as threads for all staff;

• consider requiring new workers to attend the office for a specific period before working from home, or gradually reduce the proportion of hours spent in an office once satisfied the worker is ready for hybrid working;

• require in-person attendance at some team meetings;

• put on social events;

• ensure line managers and supervisors "do their bit" by keeping in touch with their homeworkers through the likes of Skype and Zoom, email and phone;

• ensure that systems give the hybrid workers as much control over their working process and hours as possible, with the focus on output rather than working at specific times;

• monitor the amount and quality of work that is performed (although intrusive computer-based monitoring is usually counter-productive);

• provide a simple system for homeworkers and hybrid workers to report an illness or injury (they are often more likely to work through illnesses or not to report in as sick than office-based workers).

7.
COMING TO THE OFFICE

Employers should consider how often they will want their hybrid workers to come to the workplace, and whether attendance will be on a regular basis or as and when needed. This can be for various reasons, including team and client meetings, assessments and training, as well as for building team spirt and reducing social isolation.

Hybrid workers are likely to bring their laptops into the office, so employers should ensure they have communicated clear requirements that hybrid workers should:

• save and back up information to the cloud or servers regularly and before travel;

• if using memory sticks, carry these separately from the computer;

• use bags that do not make it obvious they are carrying valuable equipment; and

• if carrying heavy equipment, use appropriate bags, preferably rucksack style with two straps.

In most cases, hybrid workers would be expected to pay their own travel costs to the office (as they would normally do if the office was their only workplace). In some cases – particularly where an employer needs the employee to work on a hybrid basis – a contribution towards costs could be considered.

Employers should also consider whether they will contribute towards travel expenses for when they require homeworkers, as opposed to hybrid workers, to attend the employer's workplace. This is because a homeworker's normal and only place of work is the home.

8.
MEETING CLIENTS

One of the most significant hazards arises from the risk of violence and aggression when hybrid workers and homeworkers have to meet clients and others in person. Employers should:

• prohibit their staff meeting clients etc in their own home;

• consider whether the meeting can take place virtually using an online platform; and

• provide meeting rooms in the employer's premises.

9.
DATA PROTECTION AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Employers should consider whether any data protection issues arise from homeworking and from hybrid workers travelling between their home and the office.

Employers are required by law to keep personal data secure, so they must ensure the data is not lost, damaged or inadvertently destroyed. Data should also be available to staff only when they need to have it.

Where the data is in paper form and is personal or confidential, the workers must be clear about how to store it securely at home and transport it securely between the home and office.

Employers must also make sure that staff know what to do when the information is no longer needed; potential solutions include the provision of a shredder for the home or returning the documents to the office for destruction.

Homeworkers may need training or instructions on data protection compliance. This might cover:

• using only those video conferencing platforms that are suitable for business use;

• not using a speakerphone or conducting work-related conversations in the presence of smart speakers or virtual personal assistant AI technology (such as Alexa);

• the positioning of screens and papers so that they cannot be read by others; and

• locking away papers and devices when work is finished for the day.

It is vital that the use of computers, firewalls and anti-virus software conform to the employer's requirements, particularly where a home computer is linked to the employer's own systems.

10.
INSURANCE

Employers should check that their employer liability insurance and public liability insurance arrangements cover homeworking (they usually do), as well as any damage, theft or loss that may occur when hybrid workers are moving between their homes and the office.

Employers should remind their employees to check with their insurer whether homeworking will have any impact on their house and contents insurance.

11.
CONTRIBUTING TOWARDS COSTS

There is no general legal duty on employers to contribute towards increased bills that employees working from home may face. They may, however, think it fair to contribute towards the likes of heating, water, mobile phone and broadband costs. Any arrangements should be recorded in writing.

There are also some circumstances in which employers can pay their employees a tax-free allowance to cover some of the increased costs, but they should talk to their accountant before doing this.

Employers' attitudes to contributing towards costs may depend partly on whether they need staff to work on a hybrid basis (for example to avoid moving to a larger office) or whether they are trying to accommodate the needs of their staff.

12.
ADEQUATE EQUIPMENT

Employers will need to ensure that hybrid workers and homeworkers have sufficient equipment for the job. Many employers during the COVID-19 pandemic simply transferred the office equipment to the worker's home. Should workers return to re-opened offices on a hybrid basis, employers will need to make sure that there is adequate provision both in the office and in the home.

Employers are responsible in law for any equipment they provide to the worker. They should also check that their employees' own computers, if used for work, have adequate hardware, software, memory, speeds and connectivity. They should, in particular, check that the employee's home broadband package will allow the work to be carried out speedily and adequately.

13.
SAFE AND HEALTHY HYBRID WORKERS

The law requires employers to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of their employees, as well as those affected by their work, and this does not change because the employee is working from home rather than in an office.

There are, however, limitations on what employers can do to ensure that homeworking, as opposed to working in an office, is safe. This is particularly the case in times of COVID-19, when it is neither practicable nor desirable to visit employees' homes to assess the risks. The simplest method is to ask potential homeworkers and hybrid workers to complete a risk assessment questionnaire. Points to note:

• a manager should check the completed assessment and ensure that any remedial measures are implemented. The manager should have the necessary experience, knowledge and experience to be able to do this competently;

• the assessment should take particular account of expectant and new mothers, young workers, disabled people and workers with caring responsibilities;

• self-assessment questionnaires and their analysis tend to lend themselves more easily to physical hazards and risks, such as whether a chair or table is appropriate, but can be less adept at identifying psychosocial factors, such as loneliness and stress;

• avoid "kitchen sink" questionnaires – fewer and appropriate questions will elicit better responses on which managers can act than a huge checklist; and

• avoid questionnaires that result only in "yes/no" answers as they should elicit information on which to make judgments, not collect ticks.

There will always be a difference between the ideal arrangements for homeworking and the practical realities:

• A dedicated and separate room for work allows homeworker to separate work from home life, both physically and mentally. It also reduces the chances of children accessing work equipment and of accidental damage. Homeworkers may also be more willing to have "proper" work equipment in their homes if it can be kept out of sight. If a separate room is not possible, look at ways of physically separating the work, even temporarily.

• The workstation should have sufficient natural and electric lighting.

• Desks should be adjustable in height and chairs should be adjustable in back, height and tilt and have a secure base.

• Desktop computers with a separate screen, keyboard and mouse are far more ergonomic as they can be configured to fit the worker. (Poor computer ergonomics is associated with increased back pain and upper-limb disorders, discomfort and reduced productivity.)

• In practice, most hybrid workers will use laptops, which means the size of the keyboard and the configuration of the screen and keyboard in relation to the user's eyes and hands are not ideal. Where possible, employers should suggest that the laptop is used with a separate keyboard, screen and detachable mouse.

• Plan the work to ensure breaks from the computer, with short, frequent breaks preferable to occasional, longer breaks, for example a five-minute break each hour rather than 15–20 minutes every two hours. Tasks should be mixed; talking on a mobile, for example, can offer a break from data-inputting on a laptop.

14.
ELECTRICAL ISSUES

Although work-related equipment is unlikely to add major loads to a home's electrical system, wiring in the home may be old with insufficient numbers of electrical sockets. Employers should nonetheless remind home and hybrid workers to:

• check that leads and cables are not trailing;

• use only multi-socket extensions that contain circuit breakers (to guard against sudden power surges); and

• carry out a basic visual check for obvious damage. At some point, a manager should check these arrangements in person.

Employers are, however, responsible for any equipment that they supply (this includes testing, safety, repairs and insurance). Many homeworking agreements stipulate annual testing of electrical equipment. Such frequency is not required: the Health and Safety Executive recommends Portable Appliance Testing (PAT) by a competent person at a frequency of between three months and five years, depending on the type and state of the equipment and how it is used (see "Further information").

15.
SECURITY AND EMERGENCIES

Employers should also satisfy themselves that hybrid workers have satisfactory security and emergency arrangements. Although most of these measures may be present in any home, they become more important when people are working from home:

• homes must have sufficient numbers of smoke detectors and fire extinguishers;

• homeworkers should know how to use the fire extinguisher (in particular what it can, and cannot, be used for);

• front doors should be securely lockable (usually with deadlocks), windows secure, and consideration given to the need for a burglar alarm; and

• homeworkers should have a first-aid kit and, ideally, have completed a basic first-aid training course.

16.
FURTHER INFORMATION

ACAS advice on hybrid working: www.acas.org.uk/hybrid-working
Health and Safety Executive advice on homeworkers:
www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/workers/home.htm
Health and Safety Executive advice on portable electrical
equipment: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg236.pdf

17.
HYBRID EMPLOYER CHECKLIST

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

1. Have you identified the types of work that can be performed on a hybrid basis or at home?

2. What are the views of your staff on hybrid working?

3. What training and experience do your line managers and supervisors have in managing hybrid workers?

4. How have you assessed the suitability of the worker for hybrid working?

5. Have you determined whether the worker has any medical conditions or disability that might require an adjustment to the hybrid working arrangements?

6. Is the worker pregnant, or has she recently given birth or is breastfeeding?

7. Are you and the worker clear about how the work will be done (including whether there are core hours for working, contact and availability)?

8. What arrangements have you made for checking that the hybrid workers are satisfied with their way of working and are not ill or suffering from stress?

9. Have you checked that your insurance covers hybrid working, and that the worker's home insurance covers work?

STAYING IN TOUCH

1. How frequently do you contact the worker through online systems (eg Zoom, Skype), email , phone and in person?

2. How do hybrid workers keep in touch with their colleagues?

3. How frequently does the worker visit your workplace?

4. How is information provided to the worker?

5. Does the information cover work-related and social activities?

OUTSIDE THE HOME

1. What instructions have you given to workers who are coming into the office on an occasional basis relating to personal safety and the security of equipment and data?

2. What are the arrangements and instructions for hybrid workers who need to meet clients etc?

LAPTOPS

1. Is the worker satisfied that the laptop can be used comfortably with regard to screen glare, the chair, and the configuration of the laptop's screen with any separate keyboard and mouse?

2. How are you ensuring that the worker takes adequate breaks from the laptop?

3. How do you check that the worker is not working excessive hours or otherwise struggling with the work?

EMERGENCIES

1. What fire extinguishers and smoke detectors have been provided, and does the worker know how to use the extinguisher?

2. Has the worker received basic first-aid training?

3. Has a first-aid box been supplied?

INFORMATION AND TRAINING

1. Has the worker been shown how to complete a hybrid work self-assessment questionnaire?
2. Has the worker received health and safety training and information on issues related to general homeworking, the specific job, and on basic electrical equipment safety?

3. Does the worker know how to report sickness or any incident that might be related to work?

4. Is the worker aware of data protection issues and does the worker know how to handle and destroy sensitive data?

THE HOME

1. Are there any children, disabled or older people in the house who need caring for while the worker is working?

2. What are the security arrangements for the home?

3. Is the work carried out in a separate, lockable room?

4. Have you carried out safety checks on all equipment that is supplied to the worker?

5. What equipment has the worker supplied?

6. Is the size of the room sufficient for the equipment and tasks?

7. Is the lighting sufficient?

8. Has a qualified electrician checked the wiring?

9. Are there sufficient numbers of electrical sockets for the equipment?

10. When was the last time the equipment was tested?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Howard Fidderman is the editor of "Health and Safety Bulletin", and author of "Your Health at Work; An indispensable Guide to Physical and Mental Wellbeing" published by the TUC and Kogan Page.

ABOUT GROW

The GRoW is Get Ready for Work Programme that supports parents get back to work.