

Health and Safety Programs

Telework / Remote Work / Working From Home

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What is telework, telecommuting, or working from home?

It is becoming more and more common for people to do at least some of their regular work from home or another location instead of going to a defined work location. Technology has made it possible for a worker to stay at home but be connected to the defined work location by telephone, computer, and internet. This type of arrangement is known by many terms, including telework, telecommuting, remote work, or working from home.

Telework is typically defined as a voluntary arrangement in which workers request to work somewhere other than at the designated worksite. Most telework arrangements have defined terms outlined in a policy or agreement.

Remote work (or working remotely) is often considered to be an arrangement where employers require workers to work somewhere other than the defined work location because of temporary unforeseeable circumstances, such as pandemics, states of emergency, or inclement weather.

What are some of the potential advantages and disadvantages?

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less distractions from co-workers • more flexibility with organization of daily tasks (better personal time management) • savings in time and commuting costs • higher job satisfaction • better work-life balance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • isolation • lack of separation between home and work • more distractions from family • potential for excessive working hours • less awareness of changes in the organization • fear of being under-managed or "out of sight, out of mind" • fear of being over-managed because they must account for time while out of the defined work location setting
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improved worker retention • often higher productivity • less lost hours due to traffic problems • reduced absenteeism • savings in energy, office space requirements, maintenance and housekeeping. • increases the number of potential candidates for a job • maintain business continuity during emergencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • difficulty maintaining contact and open communication with the worker • difficulty maintaining adequate communication between other workers or with customers • possible delay in customer service • risk of injuries if the home office is not setup properly
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less traffic congestion • lower levels of pollution • better neighbourhood security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • possible reduction of business for stores and restaurants in city core areas

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• provides more opportunities to accommodate workers with disabilities | |
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What are some issues surrounding a telework or work from home arrangement?

Ideally, the employer and worker would create a written agreement that outlines the expectations of both parties.

Note that for workers who are asked to work from home or work remotely due to emergency circumstances such as severe weather or public health orders (e.g., due to an epidemic or pandemic), there may not be a formal agreement in place. Consult with your employer about what options are available. This information can also be added to the organization's business continuity plan.

From a health and safety viewpoint, employers and workers should consider a few important points when agreeing to a telework or work from home arrangement. These considerations include:

- impacts on service or operational requirements, as well as the functioning of the work unit or team
- work scheduling and distribution
- working alone
- workstation design and arrangement (ergonomics and home work environment)
- who will provide what items (e.g., chairs, desks, computer, monitor, office supplies, etc.)
- who will pay for utilities (e.g., hydro, water, home or cell phone, Internet, etc.)
- any impact on or from workers' compensation and occupational health and safety laws

What are some ergonomic tips for setting up a home office?

A home office should meet the same health and safety requirements as those available at work where possible. For example:

- Your desk, chair and other accessories are of a comparable (equal) quality to that in the defined work location. For example, the desk should be of appropriate height and sturdy enough to handle the weight of any peripheral equipment that you may place on it (e.g., computers, printers, scanners, etc.).
- Your employer may provide or allow you to borrow equipment such as an ergonomic chair, footrest, or technology to help set up a safer work environment. Alternatively, household objects can be used creatively to improve the ergonomics of a temporary workstation.
- Your [chair](#) or workstation is adjusted properly: the keyboard is at the right height (wrists are in a neutral position), and the mouse is placed nearby (reachable without arm or wrist strain). Note that, generally speaking, the kitchen table is not an ideal work surface as the table is too high and doesn't allow for proper positioning of the wrists in relation to the keyboard and mouse.
- The workspace is tidy and organized to reduce reaching and twisting motions and has been cleared of potential slip-trip-fall hazards.
- Lighting is properly arranged: the computer monitor should not have reflections or glare, and light levels should not cause eye strain.
- Noise levels can be controlled either by isolating the work area or using noise-cancelling headphones or hearing protection.
- Ventilation and air quality in the workspace are adequate.
- The temperature is comfortable and can be adjusted as needed.

For more information on how to set up a workstation, please see the [Ergonomics](#) section of OSH Answers. When necessary, ask if your employer can assist with a home office ergonomic assessment, which may be available remotely through video.

What are some tips for work scheduling (workload) issues?

Duties, expectations, and deadlines should be clearly outlined and agreed upon by both the supervisor and the teleworker. Be careful not to "overwork". There are natural breaks in a defined work location that will not occur when at home. Discussions with co-workers or a quick walk to the printer offer opportunities for a change in body position that may be missing in a remote setting. Extended hours in the same body position or repeated motions can lead to various musculoskeletal injuries.

Are there any safety or security issues with working from home?

A home office should offer the same level of safety and security as the worker would receive at the defined work location. When a worker is working at home, they may be working alone. While working alone in itself is not a risk, it can present a unique situation should something unexpected happen. It is important to keep to a contact schedule even if there are no "work" details to discuss.

For more information, please see the [Working Alone](#) document in OSH Answers.

What is an appropriate home office environment?

An appropriate work space at home may include:

- a space or room where it is easy to concentrate - preferably separate from other living areas and away from distractions
 - level of security as required by the workplace
 - telephone lines or cellular service (separate from the family line if required) and answering machine or voice mail, if necessary
 - Internet connection, as necessary
 - control over temperature, light and sound
 - household members who will understand you are working and will not disturb you unnecessarily
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What are some additional items for a home office safety checklist?

In addition to those tips mentioned above, the following should be considered.

Fire Protection

- Is there a smoke alarm in the home?
- Is there clear access to a fire extinguisher?
- Is there a carbon monoxide detector in the home, especially near areas where people sleep?
- How many exits are available, and where are they?
- Does telework space meet the safety requirements of local building and fire codes?

Emergency Procedures

- Has an evacuation plan been established?
- Are the first aid supplies adequate?
- Are emergency contact numbers posted near the telephone?
- Has a contact list been established?
- Does your office contact know how to reach someone near you in the event of an emergency?

Electrical Safety

- Are extension cords in good condition and positioned properly?
- Are cords and cables causing a tripping hazard?
- Are outlets grounded and not overloaded?
- Is there surge protection for electrical equipment?
- Is there sufficient ventilation for electrical equipment?

What are some tips for the worker who is working at home?

While you may not have to travel to get to work that day, it is still important to keep to a 'workday ritual.' Some tips for working at home include:

- Have a specific location where you work. This location may be a room or just a corner of a room, but it is always the place where you do your work.
- Begin and finish at the same time every day you are working at home. Have a beginning and end of day ritual. Since there is no longer a 'break' between waking up and going to work, some people find it helpful to leave the house and walk around the block before starting work. You may want to end the day the same way. Schedule breaks during the workday to stretch and eat, as appropriate.
- As you would for working in the defined work location, set a schedule and stick to it. Make a 'to-do' list and check your accomplishments at the end of the day.
- Maintain contact with the organization. Establish a routine for contact with your supervisor or co-workers. Keep your supervisor informed of your progress and any difficulties encountered. This contact includes the need for overtime to complete projects.
- Attend meetings and gatherings virtually or at the defined work location if possible. This interaction helps keep you from becoming 'invisible.'

- Determine what interruptions are okay and what is not. Tell your friends and family what the ground rules are.
 - Be honest with yourself. Teleworking is not a substitute for child or elder care, nor is it a way to simply save money on commuting costs. Too much compromise on the part of either the worker or employer can lead to problems and possible failure to meet the terms of the agreement.
 - Make arrangements for time off as if you were in the defined work location.
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What issues should be considered when offering a telework arrangement?

One of the most important health and safety questions that should be answered when working at home is who will be responsible for health and safety issues and worker's compensation if the worker is injured. To avoid complications, the employer and the worker should have a written agreement clarifying these matters. Where possible, aim to maintain appropriate health and safety standards at home.

Health and safety issues include:

- Will the employer or the health and safety committee have access to the house for safety inspections? Or, will alternative arrangements be made such as the worker using checklists or submitting photos or videos of the work area?
- What parts of the house will be considered the 'workplace'? Is the bathroom and/or kitchen included?
- That worker must immediately report any incident or injury to their supervisor (just as they would at the defined work location).
- How will incidents be investigated?

This agreement or policy could also outline:

- Who buys and maintains the equipment such as the desk, chair, computer, accessories (including software and updates), general office supplies, etc.
- If remote access to the company's main computer systems is available outside of the defined work location or not. If possible, how and what type of software or equipment is necessary?
- If information security is a concern, consult with your IT department and do not allow other household members to use your workstation or work equipment.
- What expenses will be reimbursed (dedicated telephone lines, Internet access, business telephone calls, office supplies)?

- Who is responsible for paying for the costs when reporting to the defined work location?
- What hours will the worker be available for, or how will the completion of assignments be determined?
- How will overtime be approved?
- When and how often will the worker check for messages?
- Will the primary contact method be by telephone, e-mail, or other methods?
- What number to call to reach the worker at home? Is there an alternative number?
- Who will have access to the home office phone number?
- Listing of work assignments, due dates, work expectations, etc.

Do occupational health and safety laws in Canada cover teleworking arrangements?

Occupational health and safety or compensation laws related to teleworking or working remotely arrangements may be different in each jurisdiction. In many situations, there is little or no formal guidance available. Having a policy or agreement between the employer and workers is beneficial and will assist the employer with their role of due diligence when duties are not specifically outlined in legislation.

It is important to contact your local government department responsible for occupational health and safety to find out what laws apply to your situation. A list of phone numbers and addresses for these departments is available at [Canadian Government Departments Responsible for OH&S](#).

You may also want to check with your union, other labour or employment contracts, or your health and safety committee or member, as well as company policies.

What is an example of a checklist for teleworking agreements or policies?

The following issues or points can be used as a checklist for a teleworking agreement or policy:

- Is there a statement which outlines what types of jobs or tasks may be done at home, or will each application be handled on a case-by-case basis?
- Is there a statement that indicates that, except where outlined in the policy that the worker's regular conditions of employment remain the same?

- Have arrangements been made for normal supervision of the worker to continue (including frequency of contact between worker and supervisor, ongoing feedback, performance appraisals and career development)?
- Has the exact location (full street address) and contact details for where that worker will be working from been recorded in case of an emergency?
- Does having a remote or home office violate municipal zoning regulations?
- Is there a statement that the worker will follow all of the company's health and safety policies when establishing and working in a remote or home office area?
- Will business meetings be held at the worker's residence, a third location, or at the defined work location? If meetings may be held in the home office, a statement that the worker will keep the home office area safe for themselves and others who may enter it may be necessary.
- Is there a policy detailing how communications between the worker, co-workers and customers will function?
- Is there an agreement about travel time and mileage allowance, if any, between the worker's home and the defined work location? What arrangements are needed if the worker is sent away from the home location on work business (but not to report to the defined work location)?
- Is there agreement on how the workload will be assigned? How will overtime be approved?
- Is there a need for company (proprietary) information to be stored in a locked room, desk, or file cabinet?

How do I evaluate the telework agreement?

The policy should clearly state the criteria to evaluate the agreement. An evaluation may include the following items:

- meeting deadlines
- overall or worker productivity
- progress of individual or team assignments
- availability to receive and return calls
- impacts on the worker at home as well as other staff in the defined work location
- customer service delivery
- the ability to attend meetings, even on short notice

In some cases, only changes to the telework arrangement may be necessary, while in others, the arrangement may be ended. Keep all involved up-to-date if changes to the overall policy occur.

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