ERGO BULLETIN

Safety Considerations for Telecommuting

Statistics show that employers are increasingly moving toward telecommuting work arrangements as a benefit to both themselves and their employees.

Statistics for the work-at-home/telecommute population in the United States, based on a recent analysis of American Community Survey (US Census Bureau) data conducted by GlobalWorkplaceAnalytics.com, show that regular work-at-home has grown by 140% since 2005. That is nearly 10x faster than the rest of the workforce and nearly 4.3 million employees (3.2% of the workforce) now work from home at least half the time.

Benefits of Telecommuting

In addition to reduced office based costs such as utilities and parking, employers have reported the following benefits from telecommuting:

- **Improved Employee Retention**
  For many employees, eliminating or reducing the number of days commuting can keep them happy enough to stay with the company for the long term.

- **Improved Productivity**
  Telecommuting employees report logging in early and signing out later due to the lack of a commute, and there tends to be less distractions versus working in the office where idol chit chat can take away from work time.

- **Finding and Keeping Talented Workers**
  Setting up an infrastructure to support telecommuting employees allows managers to hire the best person for the job, regardless of location. Telecommuting options can also help employers retain top talent if an employee needs to relocate.

See the *Policies and Practices for Telecommuting* on the reverse side of this bulletin.

Disadvantages of Telecommuting

While there are many benefits to telecommuting, there can be some disadvantages as well:

- **Isolation**
  Managers must know each employee's personality and how often to keep in contact with each person. Most telecommuting employees start off in the office and are evaluated for the move to working from home. Employees should come into the office at some preset intervals for department meetings, training programs, and to attend corporate or social events.

- **Micromanagement**
  Telecommuting can fail if employees require constant supervision, which is much more difficult, if not impossible for supervisors dealing with remote employees.

- **Accountability**
  The biggest impediment to managing a remote workforce is accountability. It's imperative to ensure accountability by setting up processes to monitor performance.

Policies and Practices for Telecommuting

To implement a successful telecommuting experience, employers need to develop thoughtful policies and procedures to ensure the safety, health, and productivity of their employees. The home environment must be set up in a way that allows the employee to work safely and efficiently while meeting all productivity goals. It should be established in the telecommuting policy, who will provide the furniture including desks and chairs along with computers, monitors, printers, and accessories.

Home Office: Working from home does not mean that employees are immune to injuries and workers' compensation laws do cover employees while they are "on the clock".

Employers have many things to consider when establishing a telecommuting program. Here are a few keys to implementing a successful program:

1. Identify job descriptions where employees can successfully work from home. Not all jobs are made for working outside of the office due to frequent meetings, working as part of a team or the need for face to face interaction with managers, co-workers, or vendors.

2. Identify employees who have the right skills to work from home. Some employees thrive in a "lone wolf" scenario while others may lose focus easily.

3. How will you measure productivity? Be clear in your policy and with the employees who have been selected to telecommute on how their productivity will be measured and what disciplinary action will be used, if productivity is not met.

4. Set a schedule for some mandatory work at the office. Office visits for meetings, training programs, or at least some time to meet face to face with a manager or supervisor help the employees transition to home-based work and to also keep them on track and in touch with company news.

5. Employers should be clear about which home office expenses will be covered and those which the employee will be expected to pay. In addition, if the employers requires the employee to provide all of the furniture, minimum expectations should be set for quality and adjustability.

As you can see, many factors go into developing a successful telecommuting program. It requires a well thought out policy, evaluation of job descriptions and employees, along with equipment and productivity monitoring. When it all comes together, it can be a win/win scenario!

Employees should consider the following things to ensure a safe and productive work at home experience:

1. Employees must have a defined work space with proper lighting, heating, cooling, and ventilation to keep comfortable at all times of the year. Think positive work environment!

2. Employees should establish an evacuation plan, have easily accessible emergency numbers, a working fire extinguisher(s) and carbon monoxide detector(s), and at least two exits that are clear and lead to a safe place.

3. If there is a staircase leading to the work area, it must have at least one (1) hand rail, and the surface should not cause an employee to slip or fall. Keep the treads free and clear!

4. Home offices typically require several items to be "powered up". Make sure the workspace has adequate electrical and phone service to meet the needs of the equipment such as monitors, printers, scanners, lighting, and phone systems.

5. Power strips and extension cords should only be used if needed and should be inspected for proper use and condition. All products should be UL listed.

6. Ergonomics: Providing the proper furniture, or creating a list of acceptable products, is a must so that employees are not working on the couch or at the dining room table. Adjustable seating, a work surface that is large enough to support all computer and phone equipment, ample lighting, and a hands-free telephone headset are important in reducing ergonomic risk and providing a comfortable and efficient work environment.

7. Working from home is still working, and employees must understand how their performance will be evaluated.

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