Nuffield Health

How to be kind to remote workers during the COVID-19 outbreak

A guide for line managers

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Given the sudden mass migration to remote working for entire swathes of the working population, there are several actions businesses can take to support employees working remotely from the risk of burn out. As this week marks **Mental Health Awareness Week** and the theme is 'kindness' we wanted to share how employers can support their **remote workers** with a little more kindness.

Studies show that being kind plays a vital role in our **emotional wellbeing**. Kindness is a powerful remedy for many mental health difficulties. Your physical health will also benefit by boosting your immune and cardiovascular systems, neurophysiological pathways and even epigenetic profiles.

The risks and benefits of remote working for employees

Nuffield Health's latest **whitepaper** – *The effects of remote working on stress, wellbeing and productivity* – explores the risks and benefits of remote working on work-life balance, autonomy and efficiency at work.

Our research revealed that those new to remote working had the potential to thrive under the added flexibility and benefits (e.g. reduced commute times) afforded by remote working.

This however was balanced by the risks of being away from the office which had a potential negative impact on job satisfaction and work relationships.

The COVID-19 situation currently prohibits (the ideal) balance between home and office working. Nuffield Health's research revealed that the benefits of home working start to diminish and begin to be outweighed by risks after around 2 ½ days. As such employees are at greater risk of isolation and stress, as they struggle to clock-off and can't always seek immediate support or advice from a manager.

Screening and support

The research indicates that an employee's ability to be productive and maintain a healthy relationship with work outside the office are good indicators for successful remote working.

Those able to use their initiative and who are confident tackling tasks alone are better adapted to working remotely, as are employees who are self disciplined and self motivated. This is important as they'll be required to manage much of their time.

An ability to separate work from home life is also key. Just because employees are using home as a work base for the day, it doesn't mean they should be checking emails into the evening or working an unhealthy amount of overtime.

Providing tailored training to employees who are less experienced or suited to remote working can help workers adapt to the sudden change in arrangements.

Autonomy and trust

The next step is establishing a trusting relationship, where employees understand their role but are given autonomy to manage their time and tasks.

This comes down to each employee's role and seniority in the company. Senior workers may require fewer contact hours and catch-ups than junior colleagues. One size does not fill all and a tailored approach will be more effective than a blanket arrangement.

In today's gig economy, it's not just permanent staff to consider either. Our research shows 45 percent of businesses also use independent workers for short-term projects. Responsible employers shouldn't neglect the wellbeing of freelancers and should actively look for ways to provide support.

This may include negotiating deadlines that prevent overworking or extending employee benefits to longer-term freelancers to help alleviate some stresses, like healthcare.

The right environment

Traditionally, **remote working** has often been viewed as a work perk, giving employees the flexibility to manage their personal and professional lives in equal measures. However, Nuffield Health research suggests the stress and isolation of remote working can take its toll on the mental wellbeing of remote workers.

Employers should therefore take the time to ensure arrangements are working as well as they can for the individual. This should begin with assessing their working environment.

Do they have an ergonomic working set-up and if not, can you support them with equipment to make home-working a sustainable option?

Extending standard risk assessments to include the psychological risks of remote working can also help identify where further support is needed.

Out of site, not out of mind

It's also important to provide support throughout this period of remote working. Let employees know you're free to chat to if they feel stressed or point them towards a mental health champion. Schedule catch-up calls according to a schedule which best suits the individual.

Encourage everyday colleague catch-ups through the use of virtual water coolers, staff rooms, and social events. It is imperative that remote worker conversations need to go beyond task-oriented discussions when social connectivity is already a challenge for many.
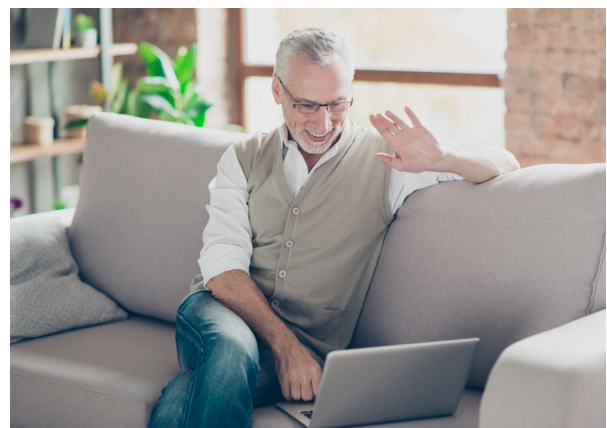
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To read more of our articles celebrating Mental Health Awareness Week visit **nuffieldhealth.com/workplace-wellbeing** to see how kindness can positively impact your wellbeing.