

Working Remotely

How to navigate remote working arrangements

Why working remotely works – in a nutshell

Working remotely is a flexible work practice that enables employees to work a certain number of days or hours per week from a location other than the workplace. In most cases this means working from home.

Working remotely can form part of a formal flexible work plan, whereby an employee has set working-from-home days, or it can be offered to all staff on an ad hoc basis according to need; for example, to attend an appointment or care for children.

Benefits of working remotely include:

- the potential to be offered as an alternative or additional flexible work option to allow employees to meet family and other non-work commitments, helping organisations attract and retain quality staff
- supporting employees to respond professionally and flexibly to client needs out of the office, and to accommodate tasks that occur at irregular hours (eg. international phone calls)
- cost and environmental benefits to the employee and the organisation
- the potential to boost productivity by enabling employees to perform intellectually taxing work without workplace distraction
- a possible reduction in absenteeism, by allowing employees – who may otherwise be absent due to caring responsibilities or other life issues – to continue to work
- fostering a culture of loyalty and trust
- enabling organisations to meet work/life balance targets, lowering staff burn-out and turnover.

How to implement good remote working practices

Employees and management need to be committed to flexible working practices and have a clear understanding of mutual expectations and outcomes. Ideally, management should provide all employees with integrated remote access technologies, to ensure that employees can work effectively and efficiently wherever they are.

Working remotely can include:

- where suitable to the job, allowing employees to work from home on set days as agreed
- equipping all employees to work from home and other remote locations on an ad hoc basis
- enabling employees to attend meetings using teleconferencing facilities.

The employer and employee should agree on the following points as part of a remote working plan, regularly reviewing the arrangement.

- Will the arrangement be temporary or ongoing?
- Should it be formalised as part of the employment contract/partnership agreement or be allowed at the discretion of the employer? If formalised, the agreement should acknowledge that the employee may occasionally be required to be present in the office on remote working days (eg. for important face-to-face meetings).
- How many days per week will the employee work remotely? Should the arrangement be limited to certain kinds of work only? Should there be a set time/day that the employee is in the office?
- How will completion of tasks and achievement of responsibilities be recorded? This will vary depending upon the employee's level of seniority.
- What sort of equipment, technology and training (including OH&S) should be provided to facilitate working from a remote office?
- Who will meet the expenses of working remotely (eg. equipment, consumables, energy)? Liability for any company property should also be considered.
- How will information security and confidentiality be protected when working remotely?

Tips for employees working remotely

Employees who work remotely must perform the inherent requirements of the job and meet employer, client and colleague expectations.

Before requesting to work remotely, employees should think about the type of work they can confidently perform away from the workplace. If it will meet the needs of the employee, clients and the employer, the employee should consider including that type of work as part of a flexible work proposal.

Additionally employees should:

- think about how working remotely best fits their working style – do work habits need to be adapted to support remote working?
- use communication skills to remain visible and earn trust
- create a dedicated work area at home, free from distraction
- remember that working at home costs money – employees should ensure they include in their annual tax statement working from home expenses

– such as home office expenses and power costs. Costs of working at home are offset by money saved on transport, lunches and other work-related expenses.

Tips for employers

Employers should have a written flexible work policy that supports all employees in working remotely on an as-needs basis, and sets guidelines for ad hoc arrangements. This may include providing a pool of laptops, specialised assistance and other tools that staff can access as required. The policy should also include guidelines for working remotely on a more formal or regular basis.

Additionally employers should:

- promote remote working arrangements and provide equipment and training to facilitate working out of the office
- support administrative staff to maintain communication with remote employees
- promote transparency with clients and colleagues regarding a remote employee's work arrangements
- understand their occupational health and safety obligations in respect of employees who work remotely
- schedule meetings when the employee can attend or arrange teleconferencing
- maintain the status of employees who work remotely, ensuring they are offered quality work, promotion and business development opportunities, and continual professional development.

Benefits of working remotely

A 2012 University of Melbourne study found that:

- employees who work from home up to three days per week are more productive than those who don't
- working remotely is particularly suited to time costed models of work, as productivity can be tracked by simply recording hours worked, rather than hours in the office
- employees working remotely reported feeling more 'in control' of their work, and less work-related stress, and in supporting working from home arrangements employers could confidently invest in employee wellbeing.

And some of the challenges ...

- Employers and employees need to take steps to ensure working remotely does not lead to a sense of isolation from office culture or the work team, or loss of organisational identity. Employees who work remotely need to remain 'visible' and included.
- The home environment can have its own distractions. Employees working from home need to be disciplined and keep track of hours worked.
- There is a risk that employees working remotely may end up working longer hours than they would if they worked in the office. This needs to be carefully managed.
- Working remotely can lead to an expectation that employees should be able to complete all tasks out of office hours. Expectations should be realistic and workloads monitored.