

Remote working is here to stay: what businesses must now consider

By [Dr Richard Malkin](#)

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When Covid-19 became a global pandemic in 2020, businesses had to adapt very quickly, sending employees home to work.



Source: Supplied. Dr Richard Malkin, chief executive officer of Workforce Healthcare.

Businesses quickly implemented remote work policies to regulate employees' productivity and adherence to their terms of employment.

More than two years down the line, with the national state of disaster now over and Covid reaching endemic status, how do businesses and employees navigate the changed world of work?

Dr Richard Malkin, chief executive officer of Workforce Healthcare, says: "Remote work is definitely here to stay. Employers are still encouraged to have staff on rotation and working remotely to reduce numbers in offices and minimise risk.

"Employees realise that they can work from home, spend less time in the traffic, save the costs of transport and even if they don't feel well, they can still put in a productive day at home.

"Employers now face several issues that they need to tackle to ensure fairness in the workplace and protect their businesses. Grey areas must be addressed to clarify the terms of the employer-employee relationship."

When Covid-19 arrived, the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Hazardous Biological Agents Regulations, were implemented in accordance with the Disaster Management Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the Labour Relations Act. But this legislation did not necessarily extend to the remote office and was overlooked by many companies trying to survive the crisis.

Issues facing employers who allow remote work include that of fairness, data protection and legislation, among others. When it comes to fairness, while some employees can work remotely, others cannot. A receptionist, for example, who is expected to be at the office will not have the privilege of saving on transport costs, but her colleague who works remotely will.

Must employers provide a travel allowance for the receptionist to ensure pay parity? They may have to.

Speaking of data protection, can the company information and intellectual property be regulated properly at the employee's remote workplace? Businesses must assess, measure and mitigate all risks, and also deal with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA).

Legislation

The Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Hazardous Biological Agents Regulations, Labour Relations Act and PoPIA extend to remote work and therefore employers should conduct inspections, location approval and risk assessments and audits should take place. The practical rollout of this will be extensive yet companies and the state will need to deal with it. Australia, for example, amended legislation such as labour law, tax law, income law and social security law to deal with home-office work.

Costs of the remote office

There has been a debate about whether it would be fair for an employee working remotely to expect the employer to pay for setting up a home office. Some believe that the most logical argument is that, if the law permits and you are able to work at the office but choose to work remotely, the cost should be for your own pocket.

Malkin adds: "There is an obligation on the employer to facilitate an environment and if possible, a remote working environment for employees with comorbidities who face poor health outcomes with Covid-19. As time goes by, this may be the only scenario in which set up and running costs of a remote office are warranted."

Mental wellbeing

“Isolation does not work for everyone and can have a negative impact on productivity,” Malkin warns. “Collaboration and team effort also take a back seat when working remotely, and meeting virtually has its limits for team spirit.”

Workforce Healthcare has seen that working from home has had the following impacts on mental health:

- Isolation: Being physically disconnected from peers and colleagues has left some feeling like they have nowhere to turn when feeling anxious or stressed because there is a sense of loss of support networks.
- Increased workload: Many face an increase in workload which may lead to burnout and frustration. Lines are being blurred between work and home life especially because the workplace has now been brought into the home. People are also doing more and taking on more because they feel like they have to prove that they are in fact productive which leads to anxiety for some.
- Fatigue: Many are feeling the strain of constant back-to-back virtual meetings. There is no longer time to switch off while driving to the next meeting. Many employees complain that they are also working longer hours as there is no need to drive home and therefore, they start earlier and work until later.

Companies need to assist their employees to navigate these issues. This can be done through education and awareness around mental health, and implementing an employee-wellness programme so that employees have support. Companies should consider certain days which are meeting-free. This may look like no internal meetings on Wednesday afternoons, for example.

Mentoring and training

Physical presence during training and mentoring has huge value. “I am not convinced that this can be replaced by a no-contact approach, but the younger generation may just prove me wrong,” Malkin says.

“As we continue to adapt and become accustomed to a changed way of working and running profitable businesses, it is important to get it right.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Richard Malkin is the chief executive officer of Workforce Healthcare.

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