



REMOTE WORKING AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR LAW FIRM

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The coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) which began in the UK on 31st January 2020 and quickly worsened, culminating in government guidelines to avoid public spaces – including workspaces and offices unless essential - has changed the way we think about work.

For the first time since the advent of the internet, an unprecedented number of people have elected or been forced to work from home.

Before COVID-19, many employees had the choice of remote working, and some chose to do so. Be that on certain days of the week, whenever they needed to, or less often.

Of course, not every legal employer has the option to allow employees to work from home. At the time of writing, the government has enforced closure of public spaces and non-essential businesses, meaning schools, many shops and stores have shut their doors. Meanwhile, food and drink suppliers, chemists and some public services remain open.

For law firms who do have the option to allow employees to work from home, and who are implementing these changes – how will this affect your law firm, and how can you make the transition as smooth as possible?

In this guide, we cover remote working guidelines and offer help and advice to law firms making the transition to virtual working.

What We Know About the Outbreak

While the information is subject to daily change, at the time of writing the official guidelines from the government regarding COVID-19 are as follows:-

- Businesses and workplaces should encourage their employees to work at home, wherever possible.
- If someone becomes unwell in the workplace with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature, they should be sent home and advised to follow the advice to stay at home.
- Employees should be reminded to wash their hands for 20 seconds more frequently and catch coughs and sneezes in tissues.
- Frequently clean and disinfect objects and surfaces that are touched regularly, using your standard cleaning products.
- Employees will need your support to adhere to the recommendation to stay at home to reduce the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) to others.
- Those who follow advice to stay at home will be eligible for statutory sick pay (SSP) from the first day of their absence from work.
- Employers should use their discretion concerning the need for medical evidence for certification for unwell employees. This will allow GPs to focus on their patients.
- If an employer requires evidence, those with symptoms of coronavirus can get an isolation note from NHS 111 online, and those who live with someone that has symptoms can get information from the NHS website.
- Employees from defined vulnerable groups should be strongly advised and supported to stay at home and work from there if possible.

The government's message aims to limit the amount of human-to-human contact, as this is how the virus spreads.

In any workplace, there will be a certain amount of human interaction, and this should now be avoided, or minimised if you are one of the essential services the government has permitted to remain open. The World Health Organisation has released guidelines for 'social distancing' which includes staying one metre away from other people at all times.

As an employer, it is now essential that you allow everyone who can work from home to do so. But what about those public workplaces where it is not possible for employees to work from home – the next section has more advice.

What if Employees Need to Attend the Workplace?

As mentioned above, social distancing should now be a part of your everyday routine. For those who work with the general public, the advice is as follows:–

- Avoid contact with anyone displaying the symptoms of COVID-19, such as a high fever or continuous cough.
- Avoid non-essential use of public transport and vary your travel times to minimise contact with others.
- Limit face-to-face interaction with others where possible.
- Stay 2 metres away from others as far as it is possible.
- Regularly clean and disinfect objects and surfaces that are routinely touched, such as desks, keyboards, taps, door handles and handrails.

Additionally, make sure you have in place stringent hand washing policies and make sure that the handwash stations are stocked with paper towels, rather than hand towels.

For law firms who can, employees should now be instructed to work from home – there is advice below on how to implement this best.

Managing a Virtual Team for the First Time

It can be enough of a challenge to manage your own working from home arrangements during this period of lockdown. Added to that now is the task of managing a legal team who are all working remotely – something that many managers may not have had an experience of before. It can be daunting.

In little over a week, businesses across the UK have had to ask employees to work from home without any preparation, adding to the pressured conditions and heightened uncertainty of the situation. Your role, as a manager, will be more complicated than usual and you may need to reset your expectations of how work gets done and adapt your management style to deal with this new way of working successfully.

So, before we look at how you can help your employees with the practicalities of working from home, let's take a look at some guidance for managers who find themselves in this novel and slightly daunting situation.

Adjust Your Expectations

Inevitably, there will need to be some readjustment of expectations. From being flexible on deadlines to confirming who is doing what, you must let your team have a degree of autonomy.

For some, this may mean starting work earlier or later to fit in with family commitments such as home-schooling or reprioritising more complicated work tasks for times when they can accomplish most work without interruption.

Additionally, some of your own clients will have altered schedules and new priorities, and you may have to rethink deadlines and tasks that need to be completed for them.

Some team members will work faster than others – sometimes due to Internet speeds or technological awareness – this is almost certain in the early days. Show patience and understanding as your team gets to grips with a way of working that may be entirely new for them. If some are working faster than others, let them take on additional tasks where possible.

Remember – focusing on the results is critical; so, allow some flexibility.



Support Virtual Learning

Lifelong learning opportunities shouldn't stop because your employees are no longer in the workplace. While it might not be possible to hold group training sessions, encourage your employees to continue with training and learning online or via training manuals.

Many law firms have opted to include a 30-minute 'freestyle' training time at the beginning of each day. This means that employees can choose something to learn online that will expand their industry knowledge and add to their skillset.

To make this a more cohesive experience, you could ask the team to take a turn in sharing a learning experience with their colleagues as part of your online catch-up. Not only does this ensure useful knowledge is shared, but it is another opportunity for bonding the group.

Consider a Buddy System

If you manage a large team, you may wish to consider assigning work buddies.

As well as ensuring you are not overwhelmed with dealing with all your teams' wants and needs, having a buddy system means there is an extra layer of moral support available for everyone. And if people are having a bad day and just need to let off steam, they are more likely to share and get the support they need from a colleague, rather than approach a senior manager.

Embrace Resilience

Showing great leadership at times like these will reflect positively on your employees. If they trust you know what you are doing, it will build their confidence and help dampen doubts about the future.

Maintaining your resilience and demonstrating confidence in the future will enable your legal team to find purpose in their work. Additionally, remember that humour is a wonderful relief valve; it's not all doom and gloom.

Communicate Constantly

Over-communication is the key to maintaining a sense of team spirit and support while your employees are working in isolation. So, stay in touch with your legal team – even if there's not much to say. Individuals may become anxious if there is a lack of information, and this can lead to second-guessing, so regular daily updates are must.

Additionally, maintaining transparent communication demonstrates empathy and a genuine concern for your team, which will heighten their morale and boost productivity levels.

Keep Mentally Healthy

On this note too, remember to check on each individual's mental health frequently. This should take place on a one-to-one call for discretion. You could ask how they are feeling on a scale of 1-5, with five being very stressed.

Also, take the opportunity to ask them how they are coping with their workload, and if they have (or need) additional support. Doing this will allow you to gauge how each team member is coping, demonstrate much-needed empathy and support, and can help prevent employees from starting to become overly stressed.

There are many charities offering assistance if you or your team are feeling stressed, as well as suggestions for maintaining wellbeing, so do take advantage of these, if necessary. Seeking help, if needed, in this extraordinary situation, should be encouraged.

Having the above strategies in place to know how you can set up and support your virtual team and stay sane yourself, it's now time to consider the practical arrangements you need to make to help your legal employees work remotely.



Who Can Work from Home?

Thanks to the internet, there are many professions where working from home is possible, even if it's not the norm.

Many employers prefer their employees to be physically present in the office during the working week as it adds to the company culture and strengthens the team and the business.

However, flexible working has gained popularity in recent years, with half of all UK employees predicted to be working remotely by 2020. And with the current COVID-19 outbreak, figures have jumped dramatically as more and more employees are being told to make a move from working together in an office to working remotely to comply with new government restrictions.

Some of the more common roles in which people can work from home include:-

- Social media manager
- Virtual assistant
- Web and software developers
- Data entry
- Copywriters
- Editors
- Bookkeepers, accountants and auditors

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list. There may be roles in your law firm where special arrangements have already been made for certain people to work from home such as new parents, people with disabilities, or those with less-regular working hours.

In light of COVID-19, however, it has never been more essential for employers to recognise which roles employees can carry out from home, and to put in place measures for them to be able to do so. Having a workspace at home that replicates that of the workplace can help employees settle in more quickly – more on this later.

If your employees can work from home, but the equipment that they need is in the workplace – is there a way you can transport this equipment to their home?

If you have employees who fall into one of the risk categories, such as pregnant women or those with continuous health problems – it is of the utmost importance that you accommodate these employees to work from home.

Strategies to Help Your Employees Who Are Working from Home

Working from home can feel unusual when it is a change from the norm – the usual working day might feel as though it has been disrupted, and this can affect an employee's ability to work to their usual standard.

With that in mind, here are six steps to ensure your [sector] employees can work remotely with the minimum disruption to their working day.

1. Adapt

Firstly, your employees must accept that for the time being, working from home is the new 'normal'. Accepting the situation will enable them to avoid falling into denial, which can be stressful. It will also encourage the group to get on with work, sticking as closely as possible to their usual daily patterns.

2. Set the scene

If you are asking employees to work from home who would usually attend a workplace, you must provide everything they need to enable them to do so – they should not be expected to sort things out. So, ensure your legal team has all the equipment they need to work from home successfully. That includes everything from computers and screens, a webcam for web chats, stationery, reference books – even their desk. Setting up office space and recreating their desk at home will make them feel more 'at work.'

3. Stay Positive

You must keep morale up in your [sector] team. So, check-in regularly – it's advisable to have a virtual team meeting with your employees at least once, if not twice, a day. Ideally, if you can, use a video chat link such as Zoom or Skype to allow a face to face contact as this will help build the team's sense of belonging. It's also easier to avoid anything being misconstrued as can happen through written communications. Many [sector] employers are choosing to have a morning meeting to discuss the day's activities, and then a close of day catch up to see how things have gone for everyone. Not only do sessions like these enable you to keep track of individuals' progress and workload, but they also help keep spirits high, instill a sense of being all in this together. They will allow you to check up on the mental health of individuals.

4. Have a Routine

Your employees should be encouraged to treat their home working day as they would an office day. There is a mental association between work and being present in the office that makes individuals productive, so recommend that they establish a routine from day one.

That means setting the alarm for the usual time, showering, dressing appropriately (smart-casual as if going to the workplace) and having breakfast. Scheduling a daily morning meeting first thing serves to ensure everyone is present and correct at their desks at the usual hour. This also helps create a sense of normality in difficult and challenging times.

As well as daily check-ins, encourage your employees to set up a regular schedule for their work tasks. Plans could include times for breaks, periods of uninterrupted work, lunch (away from their desk), exercise and a walk outside for health benefits.

Additionally, if they would usually perform certain tasks on specific days, keep that as part of the schedule. In essence, this helps differentiate the days, which can sometimes begin to merge into one when you are working alone from home.

5. Be Considerate

Remember that we are all human, and these are exceptional times. Many of your employees will be at home with other family members in a confined area. You and team colleagues need to acknowledge that some individuals may have to spend some time home-schooling children or attending to partners or an elderly live-in relative's needs. Encourage open communication and display empathy to avoid additional stress in an already stressful situation.

6. Take Breaks

Finally, encourage your employees to stay healthy while working from home. For example, they should take regular breaks to give their eyes rest from screen work.

It's common for individuals to spend more time at their desk when remote working, so it's even more crucial that they get away for five minutes. Also, making sure they finish at the same time they would in the workplace is essential to maintain home-work boundaries and ensure they get plenty of downtimes to spend with family.

In addition to this, eating well and getting a good night's sleep is vital to ensure your team can work productively and maintain mental and physical health. Fresh air and sleep also help build the immune system, so are an essential part of staying healthy.

Following these guidelines should enable your employees – and yourself – to stay positive while working from home. But if you suspect any of your team are beginning to show signs of stress, it's crucial to address it early on to avoid it becoming a more serious problem. Team camaraderie is more important than ever, and your support as an employer is critical. The NHS website has some useful information on maintaining mental wellbeing while working from home, which you can access [here](#).

Going Forward

Working from home during the outbreak of COVID-19 is a testing time for everyone. But [sector] employers can help by supporting their employees as far as possible to maintain a sense of camaraderie and team spirit throughout this unusual and unprecedented period of time.

It's safe to say that this outbreak of COVID-19 could well change the way we work forever. You may decide that allowing at least some of your staff the flexibility of working from home in the future will work better for your law firm.

Yes, remote working has its advantages: lower overheads, flexibility and a reduced carbon footprint are all valuable benefits to your business. Working remotely also frequently produces higher productivity levels; a survey found that 30 percent of staff say they get more done in less time when working remotely. So, while the initial changeover period may cause some degree of stress, the long-term benefits are clear.

Additionally, younger generations of workers value the work-life balance that remote working offer. Global workplace analytics confirm that ninety per cent of UK workers would prefer to have the option of working remotely, at least part-time, so the demand has never been higher. Therefore, when you are next looking to build your legal team, being able to add flexible and remote working options to your job spec makes for an attractive offer.

These are challenging times. But by maintaining procedures, checking in regularly with your team and remembering to be kind to each other - you, your employees and your law firm can come through this more robust than ever.

Stay safe.

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