



■ Over 764700 Australian workers are now working from home at least two days each week, with a growing number of these employees working for government departments.

The pursuit of a better lifestyle balance underpins the expanding home worker workforce.

There are a number of questions that employers are now starting to ask regarding their responsibilities for home workers.

This issue gained prominence recently when a high profile home worker litigation case made headlines across Australia.

A Telstra employee, while working from home, fell down a flight of stairs and sustained significant injuries.

The employee successfully sued her employer.

Given this context, the urgent issue confronting employers is to identify what needs to be done to protect home workers and themselves.

Currently this is a grey area, however one certainty is that Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) policies will need revision to protect employers and home working employees.

At present under Section 8 (1) of the

Occupational Health and Safety Act 2000, organisations are required to provide safe premises; safe machinery and substances; safe systems of work, information, instruction, training and supervision, as well as a suitable working environment and facilities.

This policy is loose and unfortunately fails to specifically address the context of home workers.

One question that must be addressed is where the line is drawn regarding workplace hours.

Is the policy only relevant between the conventional nine to five or is it 24/7?

Most home workers do not work within the conventional time frame and tend to adapt their working hours to accommodate their individual circumstances.

Approximately 90 per cent of mainstream office workers also complete some of their work at home after their working day.

Is the employer covered for litigation issues if an employee chooses to finish work at home after hours?

The issues surrounding home workers and the associated OH&S policy are relatively new and are now attracting the attention of Australian employers.

In the UK, employers are well advanced in this area as several high profile litigation cases forced the government to change its laws to protect home workers and employers.

UK employers have become considerably more diligent in this area and Australian employers are expected to follow a similar path given the impetus provided by the Telstra litigation outcome.

Government employers, like their mainstream colleagues, are generally oblivious to the working conditions that employees have established in their own premises.

It is not uncommon for home workers to work in unsafe environments including working from the kitchen bench top, bedside table or working with the laptop on their lap.

As a direct result of such poor workplace practices and unsafe environments, workers are increasingly suffering neck and back injuries.

These subsequently impact on their productivity and eventually lead to an unsatisfactory end result for employers with higher rates of absenteeism and reduced work output.

The central issue is that home workers



are not setting up their work stations safely. This deficiency is the responsibility of employers to address.

Unfortunately most employers, including government departments, have a limited knowledge base when determining whether a home worker's environment is safe. There are several proactive measures to address this situation.

These include ensuring a well-documented home working policy, setting up home offices with the same working requirements as an office environment and engaging external OH&S consultants to undertake risk assessments.

Risk assessments for home workstations audit a number of key elements.

These include all equipment used by the employee – chair, desk, keyboard, mouse, phone, etc; the configuration of this equipment including its positioning; and the adequacy of lighting.

The location of smoke alarms, fire exits and first aid kits are also scrutinised in addition to fire extinguisher access.

Trip hazards are examined while exit routes are also considered.

Advice is provided on posture alignment as well as rest and stretch breaks.

Inevitably the number of government employees working from home will continue to increase, thereby aligning with the current trend within the mainstream workforce.

It is imperative that those responsible for government departments implement appropriate measures to provide a safe working environment for employees working from home, thereby ensuring such departments do not become litigation casualties. GN

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