

Guide

Prolonged, mass teleworking during a pandemic

by the WorkLife HUB



INTRODUCTION

Driven by the current coronavirus pandemic your organisation may have to jump from occasional, or regular but small-scale teleworking into the **prolonged remote working** of the entire workforce, perhaps without any formalised structure or policy for it.

As you read this guide, **more and more companies are letting their employees work from home as a result of the escalation in the coronavirus outbreak.**

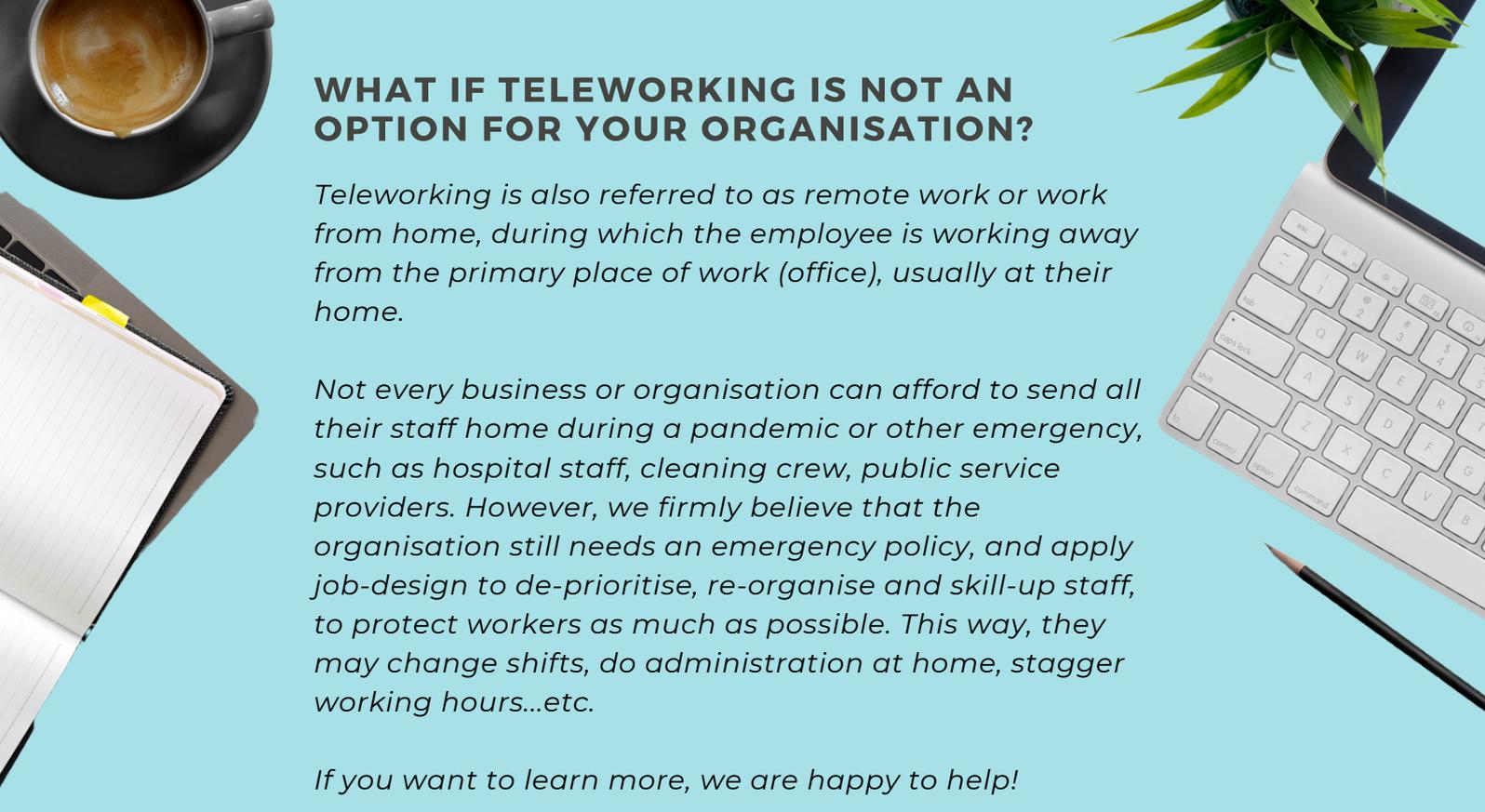
Teleworking is one of the most effective ways to reduce the infection risk from people gathered in one single place and when social distancing is ordered by the government.

Teleworking can also help ensure that the **essential functions of organisations continue** during emergency situations, including a potential pandemic outbreak.

Recent studies have shown that employees working from home can be even more effective if a number of conditions are being met.

Interviewed companies in the most affected regions by the coronavirus reported, that they were grappling with the organisation and management of a remotely operating workforce, as many of them do not have flexible working know-how, the technology prepared to allow people to work from home, or teleworking policies in place.





WHAT IF TELEWORKING IS NOT AN OPTION FOR YOUR ORGANISATION?

Teleworking is also referred to as remote work or work from home, during which the employee is working away from the primary place of work (office), usually at their home.

Not every business or organisation can afford to send all their staff home during a pandemic or other emergency, such as hospital staff, cleaning crew, public service providers. However, we firmly believe that the organisation still needs an emergency policy, and apply job-design to de-prioritise, re-organise and skill-up staff, to protect workers as much as possible. This way, they may change shifts, do administration at home, stagger working hours...etc.

If you want to learn more, we are happy to help!

WHY ARE WRITTEN POLICIES AND TRAINING VITAL?

Unless the organisation, team-leaders and employees are briefed and prepared, a prolonged period of remote working may indeed have catastrophic consequences for your organisation. Loss of information, miscommunication, uneven distribution of tasks can all lead to loss of productivity, whereas role ambiguity may lead to confusion and anxiety, not to mention limited human interaction that may result in an increased sense of isolation.*

How to address the above concerns? What to include in a swiftly assembled teleworking policy? How to empower team-leaders and team-members in such uncertain and challenging times?

In this guide, we summarise the most important roles and responsibilities** organisations, their employees and team leaders need to follow when getting ready for an emergency teleworking situation.

(*). Digitalisation brings its own set of opportunities and challenges for remote working employees as we have found in our latest research [report](#)

(**) Employment regulation, working time law, social partner agreements and health and safety directives may impact your teleworking policy, and this will be different in each country. Make sure the policy is compliant with the national legislation.

TO MAKE SURE THAT YOUR ORGANISATION IS NOT CAUGHT OFF-GUARD BY A CITY-WIDE QUARANTINE, YOUR ORGANISATION SHOULD:

- Set up a specific **emergency teleworking policy** - that can be part of the continuity plan
- The emergency teleworking policy should firstly include a categorisation of workers concerning their role and teleworking instructions and whether they are authorised to work remotely (emergency teleworkers, non-emergency teleworkers etc.).
- Make sure that every employee receives and understands the policy, what it means for their role, their pay, and what exactly they need to do, once the plan is activated.

TELEWORKING AND CONTINUITY

Teleworking policies are essential parts of any contingency plan. In the case of an unforeseen event (extreme weather, terrorism, pandemic) that withholds employees from taking up work at their regular offices or workplace, the possibility of teleworking allows them to perform work offsite while keeping the organisation running.

- Include information on what is expected of teleworkers and team leaders (supervisors, managers ...) during the time they telework, as well as provide continuous information during the emergency situation.

TEAM LEADERS HOLD THE KEY

Team leaders and direct supervisors play a particularly important role during crisis events and the ensuing teleworking period. Research shows that employees look for the communication, behaviour and role-modelling of their direct supervisors to understand the expected norms and the culture of the organisation. If team-leaders manage to remain calm, communicate transparently, be fair and available, employees will strive to do the same.

Therefore training up and building confidence in direct supervisors ahead, or in the worst case, during the emergency teleworking is critical. This will ensure the successful implementation of the emergency teleworking policy and business continuity.

What is the specific role of Team Leaders? Let's take a look:

TEAM LEADERS AND MANAGERS SHOULD:

- Be familiar with contingency plans and their specific role in executing them. They have to foresee and make available essential documents, information and databases during the emergency teleworking.
- If not recommended centrally by the organisation, select and test **communication and project management tools** (Slack, Zoom, Skype for Business, Trello, Asana) through which all employees will be able to connect to team members and access work resources.
- People are usually afraid to admit, they don't know how to use the tools, so provide regular guidance and support to employees on the use of such platforms.
- Determine how the **performance** of employees is going to be measured while teleworking.
- Keep their calm, acknowledge and manage the anxiety or nervousness of staff caused by the situation.
- Establish a set of rules and guidelines, on which everyone can agree while teleworking. These new team guidelines or norms should cover, for example, **meeting etiquette** (frequency, platform, form, camera use and dress code, the question of multitasking, preferred device, working with sensitive information etc.), **communication etiquette** (greetings, status messaging, privacy settings, humorous comments and jokes etc.).
- As a general rule of thumb, it is always recommended to address questions in the "grey zone", and discuss them together. Agreed solutions must be re-shared with the entire group so to keep up transparency and trust within teams.
- Inform staff members, as to when they can reach out to managers and team-leaders virtually and discuss any pressing issues or any other business.
- Set-up **weekly-check-ins** with employees teleworking to gauge their experience and improve the policy. In particular, the first weekly-check-in call has huge importance as it can swiftly address concerns, problems and set the tone for the teleworking situation for the weeks to follow.

TIP 1.

Set up a regular morning or lunchtime 15-minute-call-ins for employees to connect informally. Many employees may feel disconnected or isolated, especially those, who are teleworking for the first time in their career. This virtual "water-cooler moment" or "coffee-break" can boost morale and get the conversations going, vital to ensure smooth collaboration.

- Importantly, managers need to show their presence in an emergency situation and be available for one-on-one meetings.

They might feel already overwhelmed by the number of meetings they need to attend, but in situations such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is recommended to provide extra space and time for employees to connect, share information, ask questions and discuss concerns.

THE ROLE OF TELEWORKING EMPLOYEES

IN PARTICULAR, EMPLOYEES SHOULD:

- Become familiar with contingency plans and the expectations of team leaders for how telework is going to be organised during such events.

- Be made aware and prepared, that they might need to perform additional tasks assigned to them outside their usual work roles, during an event of an emergency.

- Establish ground rules for themselves. Devise a daily routine, keep hours consistent, eliminate any potential distractions and leave communication channels open.

- Consider that teleworking is not a substitute for dependent care. Caring for kids, or dependent elderly, while teleworking is not realistic.

Therefore, it is recommended that employees with care responsibilities plan their care solutions in advance. Enlisting nannies, paid carers, extended family during emergency situations when schools or childcare facilities could be equally closed - will be crucial to getting work done.

TIP 2.

Audit your IT system and technology to know, whether it will handle a big spike in the remote use of online systems, access to cloud and other platforms. Employees should be informed as to where they can get support with the technology when working remotely, and check that your IT provider has the necessary support staff on hand to help potentially many people at the same time.

WHAT YOU MUST DO TODAY?

- 1) Write and distribute your emergency teleworking policy.
- 2) Check with your technology providers, IT departments for the capability of the system to accommodate potentially all employees teleworking at the same time, with the adequate support staff at hand.
- 3) Ensure that all employees have the **equipment** and **know-how** on connecting to their work remotely.
- 4) Run a **remote working test day**, when everyone is asked to work from home, no exceptions.
- 5) **Empower your line managers**, not only by helping them de-prioritise workload to only the business-critical tasks, to free up some of their time to manage the remote team members.
- 6) Explore **emergency childcare and elder-care** solutions and their costs, in case of school closure. Alternatively, employees may take turns watching over the children in the team, on full pay.
- 7) **Train your line-managers** in communication, IT, job-design and other important management skills that are required when working with a remote team.

TAP INTO OUR EXPERIENCE:

In-person and online training

Our trainings are focused on **skills-building and knowledge development of mid and senior managers** while removing existing bias and cultural barriers with regards to teleworking and other forms of flexible working. Our mission is to help you become fully proficient in managing a remote workforce.



Research and international best practice

Having worked with, and researched hundreds of organisations, we can support you with a **quick turnaround draft emergency teleworking policy**. The policy would be tailored to the size, sector and needs of the organisation.

Already have an emergency teleworking plan?

Our team can support managers and employees with **practical tools, coaching sessions and webinars** to anchor the policy and accelerate the adoption of the new behaviours and norms it will require from the organisation.

the WorkLife HUB is a training, consultancy and research company helping organisations through change, be it to improve gender equality, implement work-life balance and flexible working policies or change the workplace culture and adapt to the new world of work.

For more information please visit: www.worklifehub.com

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