

Positive Position

The H&S risks of employees working remotely from their office are increasing as the numbers of home and mobile workers grows. Ian Fletcher-Price examines the key H&S issues that arise and suggests some strategies for FMs to follow

NO ONE REALLY KNOWS HOW MANY PEOPLE now work from home. According to the Office for National Statistics last year 3.1m work 'mainly' in their own home or use their home as their work base. It doesn't include occasional home workers – those who spend a day or two per week at home – or people who are based in a separate building in the grounds of their home. Neither does it take in the fast-growing population of 'nomadic' workers who sometimes work from home but more often carry their work with them, making use of drop-in, hot-desking facilities as they move around.

The chances are, therefore, that the home-working population is currently in excess of five million. By next year, it could well be upwards of six million as more companies come to recognise and embrace the economic, ecological and societal benefits of remote working. By 2020, if an Institute of Directors forecast proves accurate, one in four employees will be working remotely.

The whole phenomenon – the biggest change in working patterns for generations – has, of course, been driven by the massive improvements in communications technology that have made it possible for people to have full access to and contact with their office, their colleagues and their customers without physically having to be there. As convergence becomes the norm, people's working location becomes less and less relevant. It's what they do, not where they do it that really matters.

It's a brave new, and exciting, world. But it's one that is strewn with potential pitfalls for facilities managers and other professionals charged with ensuring that companies continue to meet their legal responsibilities on health and safety issues. So what needs to be done?

First, of course, it's important to know the size of the task. How many people work remotely? What do they do and where and how do they do it? Until you're clear about the modus operandi, you won't be able to identify potential hazards and put controls in place to rectify them.

Managing the risk

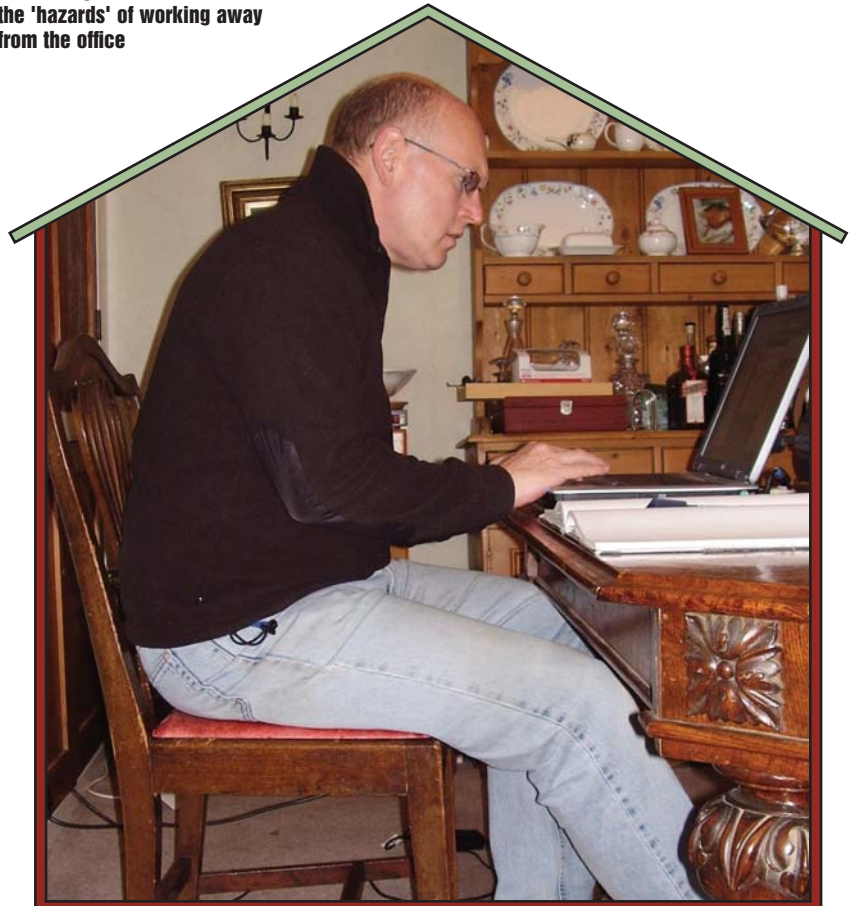
In the eyes of the law – in this case, the 1974 Health & Safety at Work Act and its subsequent various regulations – there is no distinction to be drawn between the responsibilities employers have to protect the health and wellbeing of their office-based staff to those associated with people working at home or nomadically. So risk assessments will need to be carried out for each individual, whether they're operating from

home, from a client's site or here, there and everywhere.

The 1992 Display Screen Equipment Regulations, amended in 2002, laid down minimum standards to which all work stations must conform, whether in the office or at home. The method of assessing and managing the risk and ensuring compliance is up to you. Visits to individuals' homes are time-consuming and expensive. Better surely to provide the employee with the necessary computer-based training so that they can do the assessments themselves and file their findings on an electronic form.

One guaranteed way of ensuring almost complete compliance with the DSE regulations at home is to provide the employee with all the workstation furniture, equipment and training just as you would for someone based in the office. If possible, this should include ergonomic seating to minimise the risk of back problems,

Risk assessments, training and self monitoring should be used to reduce the 'hazards' of working away from the office



sit/stand desk to encourage movement, and accessories such as adjustable writing slopes and document holders to ease workday aches and pains. However, some people are very particular about the type of furniture they have in their homes, especially if they don't have a dedicated study or work room. Can you insist? Who has the final say? This is one of several areas that remain up in the air while both employers and employees get used to the new working arrangements.

If you do supply a complete work station for the home, what happens to the furniture if the employee leaves? You may not want it back because it's not suitable for re-allocation or its removal would be uneconomic. On the other hand, if you allow the employee to keep it, it could create an unwanted taxable benefit.

Insurance is another consideration. Do your office policies extend to insuring equipment in someone else's premises? If not, is your company prepared to pick up any additional premium required to be paid under the home owner's domestic insurance?

There's nothing here that can't be overcome with a bit of forethought and give-and-take. More tricky is how you ensure that off-site employees are using the training and equipment they've been given. Would asking them to supply a photograph of the work station or work area be considered a reasonable request? You certainly need to be sure because the HSE, which enforces the Health and Safety at Work Act, has the right to visit workers' homes to check that any health risks and hazards are being properly managed. Those risks don't extend to such things as electrical sockets which remain the responsibility of the householder but the company has a duty to maintain any electrical equipment it supplies.

Of course working from home is just one of many options for remote working. With technologies such as laptop and tablet computers, handheld devices and the increasing availability of wireless access, people can work from wherever is the most effective place to get the job done. This expanding, highly mobile workforce presents its own problems, not least in assessing risks and ensuring proper management of them. Most people will carry their laptop with them to use wherever they find somewhere that allows them internet access. That could be a touch-down point in one of the company's offices, a table at Starbucks or in an airport lounge.

Computer-based training programs can again play an important part in ensuring that people are aware of the correct ways to use their



Checklist

- Identify the groups of workers or individuals who may work away from the office, be clear about how they work, identify recurrent hazards and put in place control measures to rectify them
- Include a specific section in your health and safety or management procedures to cover these areas
- Decide how to ensure the risks are assessed and managed – self-assessment training could be the answer
- Have clear procedures for getting further assistance from, for example, a health and safety adviser if risks are identified
- Lay down clear guidelines about the supply of equipment such as chairs, desks, lamps, first aid kits and so on
- Ensure all managers, particularly those responsible for drawing up contracts for people to work off-site, are aware of the company's obligations
- Have a system in place to constantly review and monitor

● **Ian Fletcher-Price is MD of Posturite (UK) Ltd**



laptops so that they don't strain their eyes or backs. But you should also supply height-adjustable stands and a separate keyboard and mouse, with an advice leaflet every time a new laptop is issued. Even if someone only works remotely occasionally, they should be supplied with the training and accessories that will ensure they have a suitable set-up. The training should include a risk assessment to help them identify and report shortcomings if they are found. As with other remote workers, there should also be a clear guidance about how to resolve problems if and when they arise.

The employer's duty of care extends equally to staff that operate out of clients' premises. It's important, therefore, to satisfy yourself of the client company's health and safety protocols at contract stage. In most cases, a questionnaire review should be sufficient, but if the risks are higher a site visit might be necessary. Once your staff member is installed at their work station, an assessment similar to that for a home worker will be required. Again, this is probably best done by training employees to do it themselves. It will certainly be less onerous than paying personal visits.

Remote working may be still in its infancy, but it is here to stay. If methodically planned and implemented, it can have big benefits for the employer, employee and society at large.

How FM professionals rise to meet the challenges that will become increasingly apparent will determine whether it is also a safe and healthy option.