CPNI
Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure

Remote Working, including Working from Home, during of COVID-19

PUBLISH DATE: December 2021

CLASSIFICATION: Official

Personnel Security

This guidance provides advice on the key Personnel Security considerations for Remote Working, including Working From Home, during COVID-19.

Introduction

During the global COVID-19 pandemic many organisations have introduced arrangements for their workforce to work remotely. In December 2021 the UK government introduced new measures to tackle the rise of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 and asks people to work from home if they can. This guidance describes the key personnel security actions organisations should take to ensure that staff working remotely, including those Working From Home, are supported and personnel security risks are mitigated.

The pandemic has provided opportunities for organisations to look at the personnel security risks and vulnerabilities they face and to find new holistic solutions to organisation-wide problems. This guidance is aimed at stakeholders responsible for an organisation's Insider Risk Mitigation Programme (Security Managers, IT Security Managers, HR professionals) and, additionally, anyone responsible for input into Remote Working policies and procedures, such as Legal Advisers, Communications Teams and Occupational Health.

Key Per Sec advice contained in this guidance

- Conduct a **risk assessment** on roles now being carried out remotely to identify specific issues that may need additional mitigation.
- Ensure that Remote Working policies, including those covering Working From Home, are appropriate for the current situation and reflect new working practices.
- Provide appropriate **secure IT devices and the associated technical support** for all remote workers.
- Provide **security awareness refresher training** for all remote workers to avoid accidental security breaches and mechanisms for **reporting security concerns**.
- Consider the **physical and mental well-being** of all staff working remotely for extended periods during COVID-19.
- Ensure that there are mechanisms in place to **communicate clearly** to all staff to maintain trust and minimise disaffection.
- Encourage good working practices and a **secure environment** for remote workers during COVID-19 either in a shared hub or working from home.
- Provide **Line Managers training** for dealing with all remote workers to specifically mitigate the risk of insider threat.

1. Conduct a Personnel Risk Assessment for new remote working roles in your organisation.

A Per Sec Risk Assessment can identify specific posts with a heightened security risk which may not be suitable for Remote Working during COVID-19 or need additional security measures in place. Further advice on Personal Security Risk Assessment can be found at www.cpni.gov.uk.

2. Update Remote Working policies

Following a Per Sec Risk Assessment, organisations must ensure that any new COVID-19 security measures are included in security policies and communicated to all staff. Topics for inclusion in Remote Working policies may include: prohibited remote working roles, information security, financial arrangements, prohibited locations for remote working (including outside of the UK).

3. Provide remote working employees with appropriate IT equipment, guidance and training.

- **Define a workspace**

Ideally an employer or the remote worker should identify a suitably defined and secure area to carry out remote working during the pandemic. This may be a shared working hub provided by the employer, or this might be a dedicated space at home, which will separate work/home life. Appropriate furniture and IT equipment should be made available and, if necessary, organisations should provide secure storage containers for the storage of sensitive data and portable devices when they are not in use. The location of Smart devices within the home should be considered and technical security advice sought from the organisation's IT security team.

Home workers should educate family, friends and neighbours about their new Remote Working arrangements during COVID-19 and should be encouraged to consider using a system whereby others understand when they can and cannot be disturbed.

- **IT equipment**

During the Pandemic organisations and remote workers should ensure that all IT equipment (including portable devices) functions properly. Organisations should also ensure that all IT equipment is provided with adequate encryption and security software to reduce the threat of electronic attack or theft of information. Remote workers should receive appropriate training in the use of all IT equipment allocated to them, and easy access to IT support to avoid accidental security breaches. Remote workers should be encouraged to report any IT concerns to the organisation's IT security team at the earliest opportunity.

- **Reporting security concerns**

In addition to reporting IT concerns, remote workers should have mechanisms for reporting security concerns relating to their own vetting, behaviour of colleagues, physical and personnel security concerns they may encounter whilst working remotely.

4. Consider welfare issues for remote workers in your organisation.

Managers have the same duty of care towards remote workers as they have for all other workers during COVID-19. However, there are some additional challenges for the manager to identify and resolve welfare issues quickly for those working remotely, especially where the need for Remote Working arrangements has continued for longer than most people originally envisaged at the start of the Pandemic. For many people Remote Working is an enjoyable experience, but some people do report feelings of social isolation and disconnection with the organisation. Managers should be able to identify the signs and symptoms of employees with personal issues, in particular isolation or lack of contact with colleagues by having regular one to one online meetings. Remote workers who believe that isolation is having a negative impact on their well-being should discuss with their manager how to overcome their difficulties; for example, this could include more frequent visits to the workplace where is it safe to do so. Sensitive handling of such cases will go a long way in ensuring that such problems do not escalate unnecessarily. Remote workers should have access to an organisation's welfare support mechanisms and Occupational Health Team.

During the Pandemic remote workers may need to work flexibly to fit around unusual circumstances such as childcare, self-isolation, ill-health or others in the household Working From Home too. This information should be shared with the Line Manager. Working hours should be monitored by both the remote worker and the line manager to identify instances of under- or over-working. Managers should ensure that remote workers are aware of the need to take regular breaks just as they would if they were on site. Managers should also ensure that remote workers take sufficient leave or time off in lieu for extra time worked.

Remote workers should inform their managers of absence from work due to sickness or other reasons as appropriate (e.g. compassionate leave) in accordance with the organisation's sickness and absence policies. Remote workers should also report any change in circumstances to their manager (e.g. change of address or working environment).

Online health and safety and ergonomic assessments should be undertaken as required. Home workers can be more inclined to work through their illnesses because they do not need to commute; nevertheless, employers should ensure that employees take sufficient time off to recover from sickness.

5. Managing remote working: personnel security considerations.

Good management is always key to reducing the risk of employee disaffection and the potential for an insider act occurring, and the same high standards must apply to managing remote workers during COVID-19.

Line Managers must be accessible to remote workers during the Pandemic so issues can be identified at an early stage and discussed and resolved as appropriate.

Managers must be able to trust their remote workers to complete their work without the need for constant supervision or micro-management. Being too controlling may cause resentment amongst staff and will erode trust in the manager. CPNI have produced guidance for organisations in developing trust during a pandemic: https://www.cpni.gov.uk/system/files/documents/93/4c/Organisation%20Trust%20factsheet%20v3.2.pdf.

The following actions are recommended to support the Line Managers of remote workers:

- **Set SMART job objectives**

During COVID-19 managers and remote workers are still advised to meet to set and record SMART job and development objectives (this should include agreement on the collation of evidence of work completed). This will reduce the risk of remote workers over- or under- working. If duties or responsibilities change, this must be recorded.

- **Agree schedule for meetings**

Agreement should also be reached on the number and frequency of meetings to be held throughout the year to discuss matters such as objectives and target setting, performance reviews, organisational and welfare matters. These meetings can be a mixture of the formal and informal. Consideration should also be given to the means of communication, i.e. regular face-to-face contact (particularly if discussing sensitive issues), e-mails, instant messaging or video-conferencing.

- **Feedback**

Managers and remote workers should actively seek and offer feedback on their respective performances throughout the Pandemic. Feedback must be fair, consistent and proportionate to be of value to both the manager and the remote worker. Feedback should be sought from a variety of sources including management, colleagues and clients on subjects including performance and behaviour. For example, this could be achieved by conducting 360-degree appraisals.

- **Training and development**

Personal and career development for the remote worker should be no different from that of other workers during COVID-19. The manager should assess the needs of the remote worker and of the team to determine the most appropriate form of training, be it face-to-face, web-based or by video-conferencing.

- **Disciplinary issues**

Managers should take appropriate action if remote workers fail to meet job objectives or targets, not work contracted hours, or behave inappropriately (e.g. misuse IT equipment, lose company equipment or information) but taking into account the extenuating circumstances that employees face during COVID-19.

6. Communicating with remote workers

Communication is a two-way process: both managers and remote workers have a duty to maintain effective means of communication during the Pandemic. Managers should contact their staff regularly, even if it is just to provide assurance that the remote worker is not encountering any problems.

Clear communications across the organisation during times of change, such as we are experiencing at the moment, are crucial to maintaining a strong sense of trust in the workplace. CPNI have published a tookkit to help organisations measure the effectiveness of their communications at this time : https://www.cpni.gov.uk/system/files/documents/b3/59/Communicating%20Organisational%20Change%20-%20an%20assessment%20toolkit%20v.5.pdf.

A number of organisations have set up company intranets or internal social networking sites during COVID-19 in order for staff to keep up to date with company news or changes, and development opportunities. Cyber cafes and chat rooms allow day-to-day interaction with colleagues, corporate networking and socialising. Company intranet sites can be used to provide practical help and advice on remote working issues; staff can share experiences of remote working by writing blogs on the subject.

Team engagement should be encouraged as this reduces feelings of isolation, promotes a common purpose within the team, and provides an opportunity for social activities. Remote workers should be encouraged to keep in contact with colleagues throughout COVID-19 by sharing diaries, e-mails or instant messaging (which is handy for small talk and to replicate the 'water cooler' moments).

Useful websites and further guidance

CPNI COVID-19 webpage

CPNI Remote Working Guidance – Personnel Security guidance for organisations considering remote working policies and structures.

National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) - https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/guidance/home-working. Cyber security advice for organisations with staff working from home.