

Renewed calls to protect workers' wellbeing in pandemic as home-work arrangements drag on

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Workers working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic are having varying experiences, and some, like those simultaneously home-schooling their kids, are likely to be struggling, a workplace researcher says. She says employers must be on top of the personal factors affecting remote workers' health.

Dr Caroline Knight from the Curtin University Centre of Transformative Work Design is leading the Thrive at Work at Home study, launched last week to track the factors influencing workers' wellbeing and productivity in the pandemic, and the strategies organisations are using to help them adapt and cope.

Knight told *OHS Alert* the results from the study survey will help the Centre identify how work designs can be adapted to help workers thrive while working at home in novel situations beyond their control.

Currently, there is little specific research on, for example, whether struggling workers' wellbeing will increase over time and how they can overcome problems like loneliness, lack of social contact with colleagues, lack of belonging and role clarity issues, she says.

With many workers having worked from home for more than a month now, it can be expected that some are feeling more and more isolated if they have been unable to connect with their colleagues, such as through online meetings, Knight says.

"They might be experiencing a dip in their general moods or starting to feel a bit lonely or disconnected from the rest of the organisation," she says.

Individual workers' experiences will vary significantly depending on their personal circumstances, Knight stresses.

Employers need to be aware that workers like those taking care of their children might need a bit of space, and that "things might not be the same as when they're in the office in terms of what they can achieve", she says.

On the other hand, the study might find there are advantages and new possibilities created by working from home, like workers not having to commute every day and having more time to pursue activities like exercise, she points out.

Knight says she believes most employers are trying their best to help workers through this time, and that to maintain momentum it is important to keep connecting with them and regularly communicate what is happening in the organisation and what is being done to manage the situation.

She recommends employers conduct pulse surveys of their workers and use the results to drive action. They should ensure managers regularly check in on their teams to make sure they understand what they are doing in their work and what they are trying to achieve.

It can be helpful for isolated workers to participate in online social meetings like a virtual morning tea to replace "water cooler" chats, and to be given permission to have general conversations about how they are going and "talk about nothing too much", Knight says.

The Centre for Transformative Work Design has a range of online resources for working from home.

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