

Telecommuting

Managing the safety of workers in home office environments

By Michelle M. Robertson, Wayne S. Maynard and Jamie R. McDevitt

ADVANCES IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY are allowing select employees to work anywhere and at any time. The work location for some employees is changing from the traditional corporate office to a virtual work location, such as the home, hotel, airport, shared and satellite office, client office and the car. This trend toward alternative work styles and the distributed workforce is likely to continue. As these work styles and virtual workplaces continue to emerge, SH&E professionals will be called on to establish new processes for managing the safety and health of telecommuters. This article provides an overview of safety and health issues associated with telecommuting. First, a macroergonomics perspective and model is presented, then a work system design approach for telecommuting programs is described. Finally, a macroergonomics process for managing the safety and health of telecommuters, and guidelines to prevent and reduce disability associated with injuries that occur at an alternative worksite are presented.

Thanks to advances in information technology, where a person works these days is not as important as the work performed. The central work location is being replaced by the virtual work location, such as the home, hotel, airport, shared and satellite offices,

client office and even the car. This trend toward alternative work styles is likely to continue.

Millions of Americans now telecommute (defined as working for an employer at an alternative work location such as the home with an electronic link). According to the International Telework Assn. and Council, more than 23.6 million people reported working as telecommuters in 2000 (ITAC). Telecommuting offers benefits to employers and employees alike; these include increased productivity, reduced overhead and operating costs, and greater job satisfaction from flexible work schedules. Environmental benefits, such as reduced traffic and air pollution, affect the public at large.

While telecommuting programs offer an attractive alternative to traditional work locations, they present challenges to both employers and employees. These include how to best manage those who work at home, and how to implement and support required information technology. Other concerns include lack of social and group interaction; changes in job autonomy; absence of mentoring and career development; balancing work and personal conflicts; extended work hours and workload; and sound risk management that addresses safety and health issues. Designing effective communication strategies that allow managers and employees to define job responsibilities, set goals and job expectations, and regularly review work and performance are just some of the issues that organizations must address. Others include establishing policies and procedures regarding appropriate technology and equipment, and training employees to manage those technologies.

These challenges can have a negative impact on employee morale, and can lead to stress and musculoskeletal discomfort such as low back pain and upper extremity disorders. To help SH&E professionals address these issues, this article provides a macroergonomic or work system design approach for telecommuting programs. This approach helps explain the impact of organizational and psychosocial risk factors on telecommuter safety as well as on traditional workstation design. In addition, the article outlines a process for managing telecommuter safety and health, and presents guidelines to prevent and reduce disabilities associated with alternative-site work injuries.

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