Commission on Excellence and Innovation in Health.

Working from Home

Setting up your people and systems to maintain individual and team performance and wellbeing

Working from home
Now that physical distance is an important public health measure, more and more people are working from home. Whilst commonplace in many industries, working from home may be a new experience for SA Health employees so we must take measures to maintain wellbeing and team performance as people transition to working from home.

Setting up
Firstly, it's important to consider work health and safety principles which are relevant regardless of where you are working. These are covered in the SA Health Flexible Workplaces Policy Guideline. The guideline states "all work health and safety policies and procedures that apply to employees of SA Health will, as far as practicable, apply in carrying out work at a home-based worksite." Employers can use work-site inspection checklists to assist staff to minimise risks in their home.

Ideally you should have a dedicated space that feels more 'office' than 'home'. Working on a laptop sitting on a saggy sofa is hardly a recipe for success! Let your household know that you're there to work to help minimise distractions and interruptions.

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Consider what IT platforms and tools you will use to support team communication and collaboration. Many in SA Health are already using Microsoft Teams as a collaborative space, and Zoom for videoconferencing. Encourage team members to explore the full functionality of these platforms, perhaps asking people to nominate their 'tip of the day'. This is an opportunity to really capitalise on this technology, which will only become more a part of our working lives so we should make the most of it.

Built in cameras and microphones might not be great quality for videoconferencing so you may need to use higher quality ear/headphones and webcams. For those with wireless equipment, consider battery life and recharging time, particularly for people frequently using videoconferencing.

If time permits, trial a working from home day to help identify any IT systems or access issues. Be aware that internet connectivity may be an issue in some areas and times of peak use.

Structuring your day

Without the ritual of the daily commute, meetings and the morning coffee break with colleagues, some people experience a lack of structure when working from home.

In the mornings, find out what works for you to get into that work mindset. Some find it's getting dressed in office attire, others suggest heading to a dedicated space free from household distractions (the laundry can wait, it would have waited if you were still going to the office!).

However, the time saved commuting does not need to be replaced with work and you should still work your usual number of hours.

One of the benefits of working from home is that there is more opportunity to be flexible with start and finish times and for you to manage your work and personal commitments from home. It is important that you agree and document arrangements with your manager.

It is also important that you take regular breaks. We all recognise that working through lunch, cramming down a sandwich whilst bashing out another email isn't ideal, so try to avoid this at home. On the up-side, re-heating fragrant food in your microwave at home is unlikely to get any attention like it might at work! Monitor your own concentration levels, and if they're wavering, refresh. Annoy your cat, stretch, walk around the block. You shouldn't feel guilty about resting and taking breaks when you're at home.

Many people use the journey home to wind-down or debrief from the day. Consider how you can replace this (reading, podcasts, exercise etc.) so the boundaries between work and home don't become blurred. Remember to 'go home' even if you're already there! Put your emails away and have time to yourself after work as you would normally.

Managers

For managers, it is a good opportunity to really focus on outputs and outcomes against agreed objectives rather than where people are or the hours they work. But remember to trust your team as dedicated and professional and not micromanage them because they aren't in line of sight.
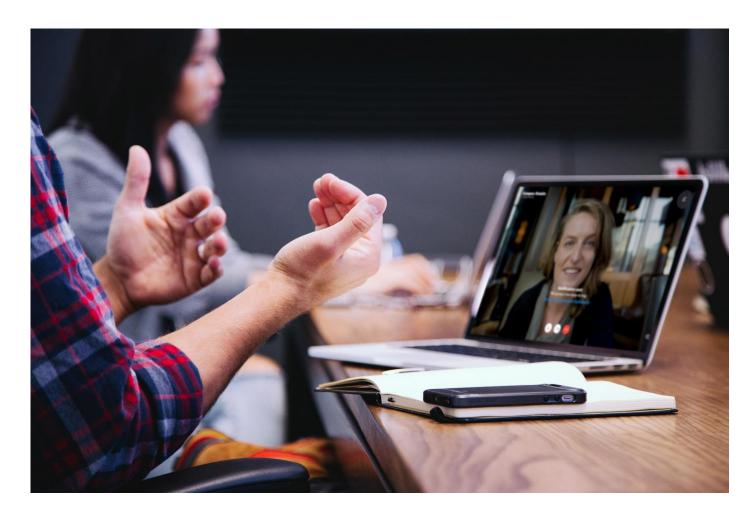
Communication

While many people find working from home ideal for solitary work, others may notice a negative impact on work that is usually undertaken as a team e.g. planning sessions and problems solving.

Build a daily structure with the team that allows people an opportunity to work autonomously as well as keeping your team together. There should be regular meetings for individuals as well as teams with clear expectations around timeliness and attendance, as there would be for in-person meetings.

Consider regular team check-ins or huddles so people know what they need from each other, who needs help, who has capacity. A shared understanding can help avoid communication gaps and may help reduce the number of questions and messages throughout the day. Flag with people when you will need to collaborate on something and organise this in advance where possible. Equally, if you need to contact someone, contact them! Working from home doesn't mean they're not available – they're just less visible.

While videoconferencing is a useful tool, it's not without its challenges and there will inevitably be IT issues which may mean that some staff miss out on key information or an opportunity to contribute to discussions - just like when someone misses a meeting due to a flat tyre on their way to work. Make sure you have ways to keep the team informed of key decisions and enable them to have their say outside of meetings too.

Body language and facial expressions are one of the most significant ways we communicate and both can be difficult to read when videoconferencing. Interruptions can be frequent as it's not clear who is trying to speak. Good meeting management is essential – ensure views are heard and give people the opportunity to ask questions. Some platforms also have a chat-box option which can be another method of communicating within meetings. Getting people to mute when they're not talking is also helpful in maintaining sound quality.

Whilst there are multiple channels for communication, sometimes people just need uninterrupted time to get on with it! Consider how this can be communicated within the team. As a team member, be understanding that sometimes people will be focussing on a piece of work, and not your message.

Wellbeing

Many people experience a sense of isolation and disconnect from their colleagues when working remotely, which can create anxiety and uncertainty about their own performance. During these unprecedented times with COVID-19 it is completely understandable that some people will also have additional concerns that could impact their wellbeing.

It's important to check-in with each other. It doesn't just have to be the manager! Many of you would have your coffee buddies, or are a mentor for someone – continue these relationships. Be aware of signs of stress, be open to having supportive conversations and follow up with them if you are concerned. Remember to simply ask how people are. If people are really struggling then they are still able to access the free and confidential Employee Assistance Program as they would if they were at work.

Many of our conversations at work are not about work at all. Consider strategies to replace the 'water cooler' conversations that help get staff through the day. Some ideas include having virtual team lunches and coffee breaks; consider having some meeting invites where work talk is not allowed. Not many of us like how we look on videoconference, but it's still nice to be able to see your colleague's friendly faces! A video call can feel more personal than an email or phone call. On your collaboration platform, create non-work channels to share stories, memes (no shortage of these!), amusing videos, whatever you like!

Recognise and appreciate

Finally, a common theme through many organisation wide staff surveys is that people want to have their work recognised and be appreciated for their efforts. Research also shows us that effective teams have infinitely more focus on appreciation and celebrating what works. Consider how to incorporate a reward and recognition element into your virtual communications – whether you start each huddle with a thank you to someone who has gone the extra mile, a team-wide email thanking someone for helping you, or just to reflect a great team effort, expressing gratitude for each other can go a long way to maintaining a sense of morale and team. We might be using virtual tools but we can still use them to maintain our human connections.