Working at home

Staying safe, connected, healthy and productive

Contents

Introduction

*The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the working circumstances of almost half of Ireland's workers, with more than a third now working from home. And it's clear from the Government recently-announced '*roadmap for reopening society and business*', that many of us will continue to work remotely for some time.*

This extended period of home working is a new experience for most of us and, while some have now established a productive and rewarding remote working routine, it can also be a struggle at times.

With tips on health and safety, setting up a workspace, communicating and lots more, this short Fórsa guide will help you navigate home working for an extended period.

You may be out of the workplace, but you can still rely on certain legal protections – and look to your employer for the supports you need to do your job well.

Fórsa members who are managers or line managers also have responsibilities to their staff, which are rooted in health and safety legislation.

This document outlines some of the responsibilities your employer has to support you when asking you to work at home. And your union is at hand if problems arise.

Contact us **here** *or, if you're not yet a member,* **JOIN FÓRSA NOW.**

A new routine

It's sometimes hard to draw a line between work and home life when both are taking place in the same space. So, for the sake of your health, your family and your productivity, it's important to establish a working routine that separates the two.

Try to:

- Have set times for working – and stick to them
- Maintain your normal morning routine by showering, getting dressed (no ties or heels, please), and having breakfast
- Set aside a separate workspace if you have the room. If not, clear away your work things at the end of the working day, and set up again in the morning
- Try to stop for tea or coffee from time-to-time, and resist the temptation to always drink it at your workspace
- Log off for a lunch break
- Have breaks together if others are working at home too
- Go into another room or out to the garden from time-to-time
- Give your eyes a break for a few minutes every hour. Move around and take your eyes off the screen
- Exercise outside at least once a day if you can
- Eat healthy foods – especially when snacking
- Don't drink too much alcohol
- Try to limit your social and news media intake
- Keep in touch with colleagues by phone or video call
- Schedule leave as you normally would – and don't work on leave days.

Staying safe and healthy

You and your employer

The legislation that protects your health and safety in the workplace also places duties on your employer when you're working from home. You and your employer should:

- Agree temporary remote working arrangements
- This should include regular communication with your line manager
- Clearly identify the work you're expected to do at home
- Identify a suitable safe space for working
- Agree what equipment you need to work safely and effectively (this depends on the work, but might include IT equipment, a phone, a headset, and adequate stationery)
- Agree plans and contacts to be used if there's an emergency.

Your employer

When working remotely, your employer should check with you to ensure that:

- You are aware of any specific risks when working from home
- Your work activity is suitable to home working
- Your temporary workspace is suitable
- You have suitable equipment to do the work (for example, the necessary applications and systems should be installed on your computer).

The general provisions of the legislation that protects your health and safety in the workplace also applies when you're working from home. These include:

- Managing work activities to ensure, as far as "reasonably practicable*," the safety, health and welfare of employees
- Providing safe work that is planned, organised, and maintained
- Assessing risks and implementing appropriate control measures
- Providing safe equipment
- Giving you information, instruction, training and supervision about safety and health
- Having plans in place for emergencies.

There are additional protections for staff with disabilities, young workers and pregnant employees. If this is you, your employer should consider your suitability for home working in the context of your remote working space, and ensure that work tasks and working conditions don't harm your health. You can get more information about that **here** and **here**.

Your responsibilities

The legal protections also mean that you have responsibilities, as an employee, regarding your own health and safety. These apply when you're working at home. You have a responsibility to take reasonable care of yourself, and other people who may be affected by the work you're doing. Under the law you must:

- Cooperate with your employer and follow their instructions
- Protect yourself and others from harm during the course of your work (for example, you should take care of your equipment and report any problems to your employer)
- Report any work-related injuries to your employer as soon as they occur
- Follow any procedures put in place by your employer (for example, instructions to check in regularly)

Read more about the responsibilities of employers and their staff **here**.

If you have questions or concerns about your own situation, you can contact Fórsa here.

A suitable workspace

It's not always easy to identify a suitable space for work during an extended period of home working. Here are some of the things to consider:

- Try to find a space with enough light
- Try to ensure there's adequate heat and ventilation when you need it
- Keep your work space tidy
- Make sure the floor is clean, dry and free from slip, trip and fall hazards
- Try to place electronic equipment close to power sockets and internet access to avoid trailing cables
- Don't overload sockets

You can get more information on good positioning of your workstation here.

*"Reasonably practicable" is a legal phrase that broadly means that, once your employer has put necessary protective and preventive measures in place, they're not obliged to take further measures that are disproportionate to the risk of accident or injury.

Staying in touch

Remote working shouldn't become too remote. It's important to have good communications with your line manager in order to maintain clarity about what's expected of you, get feedback about your work, and discuss any difficulties or queries that arise. It's also important that you get the updates on work-related issues that you'd expect to get in the workplace. Your employer should:

- Arrange regular contacts with you (these should include phone or video calls – not just emails)
- Give you clear instructions and feedback on your work
- Give you regular updates on what's happening and planned in your organisation, including plans for ongoing remote working or returning to work
- Tell you to make immediate contact if you have an accident at work or if your work equipment is faulty or needs maintenance
- Have emergency contacts and procedures in place

Taking a break

The lines between home and work life have become more blurred during the Covid-19 crisis and studies are already showing that, on average, we've been working longer hours after migrating to remote working. But the Organisation of Working Time Act – which limits working time and sets out rights to rest, breaks and holidays – still applies in the context of home working.

The law limits the maximum average working week to 48 hours, and defines working time as any period when you're working, at your employer's disposal, and carrying out work duties (including dealing with emails and phone calls). You are also due a rest period of at least 11 consecutive hours in each period of 24 hours during which you're working.

Get more information on rest periods and breaks **here**.

*If you have questions or concerns about your own situation, you can contact Fórsa **here**.*

Balancing childcare and work

A lot of parents have had to adjust to remote working just as schools and crèches closed because of the coronavirus. Looking after the children obviously adds to the pressure of working at home, but you can take steps to manage the situation.

First of all, tell your line manager and colleagues if you are minding children while working at home. At the start of phone or video calls, say there's a possibility of interruptions (use the mute button wherever possible) and don't hesitate to reschedule the call if your child needs attention.

Operate a shift system with your partner if you can, and keep in regular contact with your child's school regarding lessons and classes. Tell your children that this is not a holiday or a weekend, and you still have to work. Let them know when you'll be available to spend time with them – and plan those one-on-one times throughout the day.

Having a structure around the day will help you, while creating the sense of consistency and normality that makes children feel secure. Setting the alarm for the same time each morning, encouraging regular mealtimes, and maintaining normal school-night bedtimes creates a strong framework.

Try to ensure that the children get plenty of exercise. The HSE Healthy Ireland guidelines suggest 60+ minutes a day for children aged between two and 18. And zoos, aquariums, museums and many more cultural institutions are now offering **virtual tours** for children to experience and enjoy.

Minding your mental health

Lots of people are experiencing stress, anxiety, fear, sadness and loneliness during the pandemic. For some, an extended period of remote working will heighten these feelings.

Accessing mental health supports may be more challenging at this time, but help is available.

*The HSE has this **advice**.*

Keeping it personal

The Data Protection Commission (DPC) has issued comprehensive **guidance** on protecting personal data while working remotely. Its guidance covers devices, emails, cloud and network access, and paper records.

In summary, it says:

- Follow your employer's policies
- Keep a written account of records and files you take home
- Ensure devices have the necessary software and antivirus updates
- Keep all devices and paper records secure in a safe location
- Use strong passwords and encryption where necessary
- Send emails to the correct person and protect attachments that contain sensitive personal data
- Stick with your organisation's networks and cloud services, and comply with their rules and procedures on access, login and data-sharing
- Use work email accounts, rather than personal accounts
- Ensure any locally-stored data is adequately backed up securely
- Watch out for phishing emails or WhatsApp messages
- Take care not to lose devices, including USBs. If you do lose them, report it to your data protection officer immediately
- Log out of devices and email accounts when you're not working and turn devices off when they're not in use
- Tidy away paper records
- Contact your data protection officer if you have questions or concerns

The DPC says data processing done in the context of preventing the spread of Covid-19 should be carried out in a manner that ensures data security, particularly if health information is concerned. The identity of affected individuals should not be disclosed to any third parties, including their colleagues, without a clear justification.

Cybersecurity

Rapidly and massively increased remote working has presented staff with cybersecurity challenges on a significantly larger scale than previously experienced. The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has produced **guidelines** to help you your home workspace against cyber-related threats.

Monitoring software

While it is reasonable for your employer to monitor your work performance and output, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) has raised concerns about the use of surveillance software to monitor staff working remotely. This followed some reports of employers using programmes that can ensure that the PC camera is always on, and to measure the response rate to emails.

If you have questions or concerns about your own situation, you should contact Fórsa here.

Remote working and tax relief

If you are working from home, you may be eligible for tax relief on expenses like light, heat, telephone, and internet usage. You can make a claim for tax relief at the end of the year.

Any refund of tax is based on the number of days you worked from home, the cost of the expenses and Revenue's agreed rate for calculating the cost of running a home office, which is 10% of the total cost. This means that, for the days you work from home, you can claim 10% of the total amount of allowable utility bills against your taxes, although this doesn't include times when you work at home outside your normal working hours.

Get more information here.

More information

- *Fórsa members can seek information and advice about their own working circumstances (including working remotely) here.*

- *If you're not yet a Fórsa member, you can join here.*

- *Fórsa members receive regular e-bulletins with all the latest news and advice about coronavirus-related issues and other workplace developments. Make sure we have your current contact details by updating them here.*

- *Read the Health and Safety Authority's advice to employers on remote working here.*

It's never been more important – or easier – to get the protections and benefits of union membership. Join together with over 80,000 Fórsa members here or contact the union here.

forsa_union_ie

forsaunionie

Fórsa Trade Union

Fórsa trade union

forsa_union

forsa.ie

FÓRSA