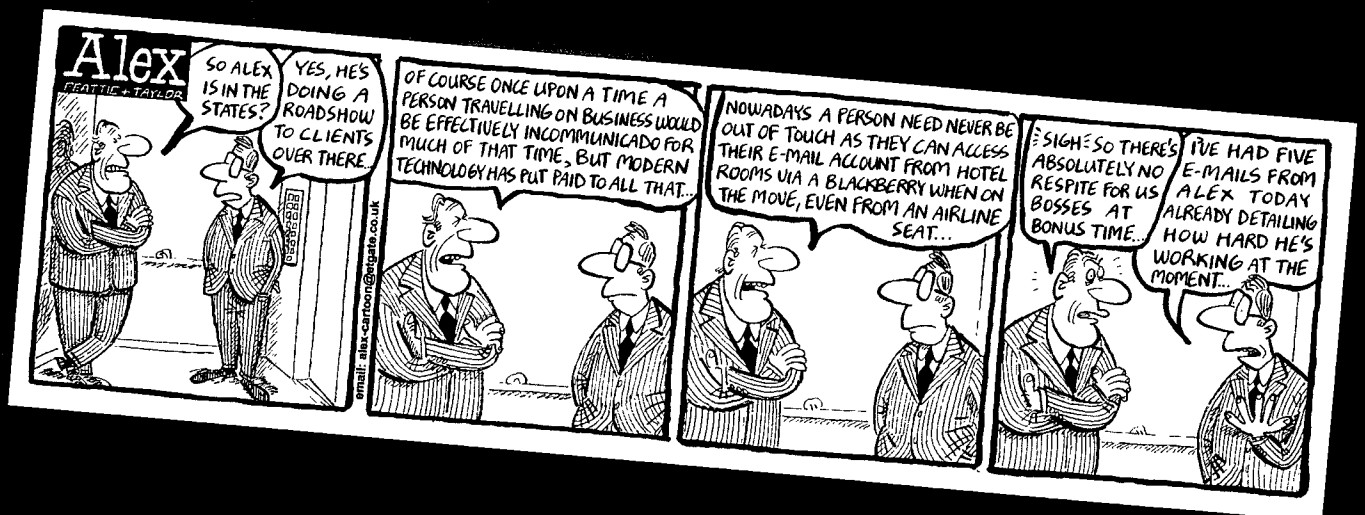


THE PORTABLE OFFICE

- a change in thinking about Safety, Health and Well-Being



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CITY OF LONDON



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CONTENTS

1. The Growth of the Portable Office	4
2. A Change of Thinking	5
3. Emerging Risks	6
4. The Legal Framework	7
5. Strategy and Planning	9
6. Managing the Portable Office	11
7. Making Better Choices: Development and Training	12
8. Assessment of the Portable Office	13
9. Safety, Health and Well-Being:	
Working on the Move	15
BlackBerries and PDAs	16
Laptops	17
Hot Desking and Touchdown Areas	18
Working from Home	19
10. Conclusion	22
Resources and References	22

1 GROWTH OF THE PORTABLE OFFICE

The portable office is evolving fast. Latest estimate:

Over 6 million people in the UK are now working away from the conventional office environment¹ DTI

How many millions more do so unreported, on an ad hoc basis?

BLACKBERRIES; WI-FI; LAPTOPS; PDA's; WORKING ON THE MOVE; WORKING FROM HOME; TOUCHDOWN CENTRES; HOT DESKING; TELEWORKING; REMOTE WORKING; HOT SPOTS; HOT ZONES

The new markets and new business working practices of the portable office offer exciting potential for businesses.

THE BLACKBERRY

In the first quarter of 2005, when companies realised the potential of wireless email, sales of the BlackBerry increased by 75%.² There are now four million users worldwide and this is expected to rise to ten million by the end of 2007.³

The importance of the BlackBerry to the working methods of the US Government in Washington was demonstrated by the patent dispute in February 2006. When the danger arose that the BlackBerry would be turned off in America, the US Justice Department intervened and sought guarantees that US Government users could be made exempt.⁴

HOT ZONES

'Hot Zones' are going live across London this year: Canary Wharf, The City of London, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Camden; allowing London workers and visitors with Wi-Fi enabled devices to access the internet on streets and in open spaces. With networks being installed in lamp posts and other existing street furniture, 'Hot Zones' will soon be covering whole regions of the country including more rural areas. How will this affect working practices? Will this also create additional risks for personal safety, theft and the security of personal and company information?

NEW STRATEGIES

These changes and possibilities for business working methods are immense. They bring new challenges, new risks and new responsibilities; use of the portable office cannot just be an ad hoc afterthought.

Companies which put the same level of planning into a strategy for working on the move and working from home that they do into planning other business strategies will be able to take most advantage of these innovative ways of working because they will have minimised the emerging risks for safety, health and well-being.

A change in thinking and approach will result in a "win-win" situation for both companies and employees.

2 A CHANGE OF THINKING

New slang for new problems is emerging as fast as the technology:

GOOSEBERRY:	ignoring the people you are with to look at every a new email
CRACKBERRY:	addiction to email (BlackBerries are even accompanying employees on holiday)
BLACKBERRY THUMB:	a strain injury of the thumbs from writing too many long emails on the tiny 'qwerty' ⁵ keyboard
WARM-DESKING:	leaving possessions on or around a hot desk to lay claim to it

£5.7 Billion per year is the cost of musculoskeletal disorders⁶

But the ergonomic standards developed for desktop computer workstations are largely ignored when an individual uses a laptop or BlackBerry.

12.8 Million working days are lost because of stress, depression and anxiety⁷

But addiction to email, 24 hour availability, isolation and uncertainty in the key pressure areas (change, control, role, demands, support, relationships), are all hazards of the new flexible and mobile working practices and all major factors in the development of stress depression and anxiety.

WHAT IS A WORKSTATION?

Coffee-bar Hotspot?
Personal office desk?
Park bench in a Hot Zone?
Ergonomically designed?
Airport / Aircraft?
Kitchen table?
Home office?
Hot desk?
Train?
Car?

Whether using a laptop in a Hotspot or a BlackBerry in an airport for any length of time (except briefly), this 'workstation' is subject to the Display Screen Equipment Regulations.⁸ The Regulations were written to be inclusive of new types of screen and computer as they developed. Consequently the name 'display screen' is not dependent on a particular technology and it can be any size; and a 'workstation' is a person's immediate working environment including accessories and peripherals (telephone, printer, chair, park bench). With the rapid developments in information communications technology (ICT), all places and equipment now have the potential to be interchangeable and evolving elements of the workstation.

Managing these emerging risks clearly requires a change of thinking about workstations and the strategies needed to manage them.

3 EMERGING RISKS

In 2005 the Risk Observatory for the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, which forecasts emerging risks, identified five emerging occupational health and safety risks, three of which all have implications for the portable office:

- Lack of physical activity
- Combined exposure to musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) and psychosocial risk factors
- Multi-factorial risks⁹

LACK OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

- Growing use of computers resulting in prolonged periods of sitting
- Prolonged periods of sitting also occur during business travel often in the relatively cramped seats of aircraft, trains and cars

Static postures reduce the blood circulation through the muscles which can lead to physical disorders and dysfunction.

The subsequent health outcomes that have been observed are neck and shoulder pain, back pain, varicose veins, deep vein thrombosis (DVT), obesity and certain types of cancer (ovarian, breast and renal cell).

COMBINED EXPOSURE TO MSD RISK FACTORS AND PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK FACTORS

This combined exposure has a more serious effect on an individual's health than exposure to one single risk factor and individuals exposed to this combination of occupational physical and psychosocial risks are more likely to report MSDs than those exposed to one or the other. Some of the psychosocial factors identified are:

- Stress from poor ergonomics of the workstation
- High job demand, complex tasks leading to mental exhaustion
- High time pressure
- Poor support from colleagues and from the hierarchy
- Fear of downsizing, job insecurity
- Harassment, violence or bullying at work

The subsequent health outcomes are low-back pain, shoulder and neck pain, and hand-wrist dysfunction.

MULTIFACTORIAL RISKS

Prolonged sitting, background noise, poor room acoustics, poor ergonomics, high time pressure and high mental and emotional demands, are multi-factorial risks that can all be identified as aspects of working with a portable office. Open-office workspaces increase the exposure to low intensity background noise this has been shown to increase the level of urinary epinephrine which is a risk factor for heart disease. They also lower the willingness to make postural adjustments to the computer workstation¹⁰ (a risk factor for MSDs) which is likely to be even lower for those using 'hot desks'. To these could be added the insecurity and uncertainties of working in unfamiliar offices or outside of the office, using non-adjustable chairs, perching on stools to 'touchdown', emails continually arriving on a BlackBerry, street/transport noise and personal safety concerns.

The subsequent health outcomes of multi-factorial risks include MSDs, (back pain, hand-wrist pain, etc.) varicose veins, fatigue, stress, and burnout.

As the use of the portable office grows what will be the accumulative effect of these risks?

4 THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

NB: The following is intended as a guide to the laws relevant to the portable office and remote working only. For specific information and advice, please contact a specialist in employment law.

Health & Safety at Work etc. Act 1974

The employers' 'duty of care' described in this Act includes remote and home workers. The Health and Safety Regulations including those listed below are made under this Act and apply to home workers and remote workers as well as to employees working at an employer's workplace.¹¹

Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999

Employers have a legal obligation to protect the health and safety of their workforce, to assess and control workplace risks, appoint competent people, arrange for appropriate information and training and to monitor and review measures.

In the context of the portable office, these hazards and risks must also be assessed for remote workers and home-based workers. For home-based workers this assessment must include consideration of others in the home such as: family members, visitors, vulnerable people, e.g. young children, the elderly and new or expectant mothers who might be affected.¹²

Display Screen Equipment Regulations 1992 (as amended) [DSE]

These Regulations require that use of equipment with display screens does not present a health risk to users. They were framed to allow for the evolution of the technology:

- "Display screen equipment" means any alphanumeric or graphic display screen, regardless of the display process involved (Regulation 1.2a)
- "Workstation" means any assembly comprising display screen equipment, any optional accessories to the display screen, any peripherals to the display screen equipment (e.g. telephone, printer, chair) and the immediate work environment (Regulation 1.2e)
- "User" means an employee who habitually uses display screen equipment as a significant part of their normal work (Regulation 1.2d)

Key Points:

- Assess risks to employees from display screen and workstation use
- Record findings
- Ensure workstations meet minimum requirements
- Inform staff about rights and what has been done
- Regular breaks from DSE should be encouraged and provided for users
- Monitor and review changes
- Provide training and information to users on hazards and safe use
- Provide an eye test if a user requests one
- Portable DSE (of whatever type) is subject to the DSE Regulations if in prolonged use, but not if only used briefly. (No guideline has been issued as to the definitions of prolonged and brief.)

Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992 (as amended)

These require that the hazards and risks from manual handling at work should be assessed and reduced for all employees. Employees should be provided with information, instruction and training in good manual handling techniques. Guidance on the Manual Handling Regulations including advice for specific sectors is available at: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/information.htm>

Electricity at Work Regulations 1989

The employer is responsible for the electrical equipment they provide. The remote worker is responsible for the electricity supply in their home. This area is also subject to employer and employee's insurance and mortgage provisions and the question of whether the domestic electrical system is adequate for the electrical equipment provided.

There are simple steps an employer can take to prevent harm to the employee working from home or other people when the home-worker uses electrical equipment at home. These include providing safe, suitable equipment with safety devices (e.g. circuit breakers) where appropriate and ensuring there are no trailing wires. In addition, electrical equipment should be maintained to prevent danger. Most faults can be identified by carrying

out simple visual inspections such as checking that plugs, leads, wires and cables are kept in a condition that does not cause harm.

Data Protection Act 1998: Workers Health Records

Two points are of particular importance in the context of the portable office:

- The security of sensitive personal information about company employees which is held on laptops and home workers' computers must be considered and action taken
- Do not record ill health or disability on the workstation risk assessment record unless you have the person's express permission and it can be kept in a secure place

Further information: Employment Practices Data Protection Code (91 pages)

http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk/cms/DocumentUploads/ico_emppraccode.pdf

Part 4: Information about workers health (pages 73-91)

The Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996

Any employees not in groups covered by trade union safety representatives must be consulted by their employer either directly or through elected representatives.

Further information INDG232 <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg232.pdf>

ADDITIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY LEGISLATION

The following may be relevant in some situations:

- Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR). A few specified kinds of work-related upper limb disorders (WRULDs) are reportable diseases. For more information see: <http://www.riddor.gov.uk>
- Health & Safety (First Aid) Regulations 1981
- Workplace (Health, Safety, Welfare) Regulations 1992
- Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH)
- Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998 (PUWER)

EMPLOYMENT LAW

Employment law is also relevant for remote workers. This will include the laws and regulations covering:

- Contracts for those working at home and for other remote workers
- Discrimination and harassment
- Lone workers
- Driving at work, e.g. use of head sets for mobile phones
- Drugs and alcohol

5 STRATEGY AND PLANNING

RESEARCH AND PLANNING

With so many possibilities developing at a very fast pace, careful research and planning is essential before a company introduces new working practices. Businesses need to give thorough consideration to which working practices will assist their company in moving forwards and which might hinder them. They will then be able to reduce costs while maintaining the energy, vitality and productivity at the heart of their business.

When companies do not research and plan appropriately, the financial COSTS can be HIGH

Too many companies either do not plan at all or plan inadequately. Two common scenarios are:

- New practices develop in an ad hoc way with employees being given laptops and BlackBerries one by one according to apparent need with little thought given to future consequences.
- A company rushes to embrace apparent money saving options, e.g. hot desking or home working, without appropriate planning or consultation and giving inadequate thought to future business consequences. (Some companies suffering badly as a result of this strategy.¹³)

THE BUSINESS AND HUMAN COSTS OF GETTING IT WRONG

- Reduction (instead of increase) in performance and production levels
- Keeping track of work becomes problematic
- Employees demoralised and disenfranchised
- Loss of employee identification with and loyalty to, the company
- High staff turnover
- Sickness absence costs increase (particularly for MSDs, and stress)
- Company information is insecure and company security can be breached

CHANGE AND RISK MANAGEMENT

The decision to change to different forms of office/non-office working and the process of managing this change is the responsibility of corporate management with human resources. It should be part of a much wider management framework with risk management as the driver of the process. Monitoring, evaluation and review are an integral part of the risk management process which tests the efficacy of the chosen practices and provides useful feedback and a strong basis for future planning.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

All levels of management have a responsibility to manage the change to flexible working and the new working practices of the portable office but line management in the era of the portable office requires new and different skill-sets. The success of the new working practices will depend in part on line managers' ability to adapt. New responsibilities may include:

- Task-orientated management systems based on trust which some managers who work in a more traditional style can find difficult to implement
- Hot desking areas can become a responsibility 'black hole'. There needs to be a manager responsible for these areas to make sure the equipment and workstations are maintained and users are monitored
- A procedure for a 24/7 contact at base may be necessary. With increased business travel, flexible working and new working practices employees can find themselves needing the availability of a 24 hour contact at base. If senior management consideration is not given to this a line manager could find himself or herself suddenly becoming responsible for wider company issues

USER INVOLVEMENT

Involving users at all levels of the planning improves the uptake, success and efficiency of the project. However, for this to be effective, it is important that this consultation is real and not cosmetic.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY (ICT)

Careful consideration given to this and the provision of appropriate training and support will save time, money, frustration and stress and improve the security of the information held. For the portable office to be effective:

- ICT needs to work smoothly; internet connections that keep collapsing and mobile phones without reception waste valuable business time, increase employees' stress and test the customers' patience
- Problems are harder to resolve remotely and when networks or telephones go down, this may cause more stress to the employee who is working alone away from the main office

- SMEs without dedicated ICT resources in particular need to consider carefully how they will resolve these situations
- The employee's level of computer skills and understanding must be considered when they are expected to troubleshoot ICT problems alone at a distance
- All home and mobile workers need to be included in the updating of hardware, software and security
- Home and mobile workers need an ICT helpdesk to be available during the hours they are working

'DUTY OF CARE'

Employers have the same legal 'duty of care' for their employees who are working on the move and working at home as they do for office-based workers. Employment Law must be considered alongside health and safety law. It is important to ensure that remote workers are not 'out of sight - out of mind'.

HUMAN FACTORS

The need for personal space and ownership are very deep human traits. These and other human factors must be considered in the planning as they can make or break the new working practices.

- Need for personal space: BA Waterside and UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) both found that people responded better to hot desking when they had personal cupboard space available in addition to storage for their work
- Human buzz and energy
 - This is an aid to creativity and can increase enjoyment of the working process. Can this be maintained in the new working practices?
 - Both gregarious and quiet people can prefer to be surrounded by human contact rather than work alone at home all day or all week
 - Isolation can be a hazard both for those working from home and those working on the move. It leads to stress, depression and anxiety
- Communication/miscommunication: There can be an increased risk of miscommunication when communications are not face-to-face. Many people feel uneasy taking part in conference calls or when all of their contact with managers and colleagues is by telephone
- Consider the needs of different teams and jobs
 - Outward/client facing teams are often the most successful with hot desking
 - Task management systems based on trust do not suit all employees or all types of work
- There may be space and family restrictions for working at home particularly if one member of the family is already contracted to work from home
- Personal, social and family needs will be factored in to an individual's choices
- Personal safety fears may arise

User involvement in the planning stages is important here, and can, together with employee development and training can assist in resolving some of these questions/situations, but not all.

SAFETY AND SECURITY FACTORS

- Personal safety when using desirable electronic equipment in the open or carrying laptops in large leather laptop case or roller bags which send out the message that the person has something worth stealing is crucial
- Consider that those who work on the move are lone workers
- Confidentiality and Data Protection and security of company and personal information including the use of Wireless networks, Bluetooth, and Company networks

CONTINGENCY PLANNING

This should include:

- ICT system/network failures
- A 24/7 contact at base who will be responsible for problems occurring among those working away from the office or travelling
- Travel contingencies

SMALL PILOT PROJECTS

Once the strategy has been planned and the details have been worked out, it is very useful to set up a pilot project first with a small group of employees in order to refine the procedures and details, to trial the new working practices. It is worth noting that employees can also be in a rush to make rash decisions about new ways of working without fully considering the reality of working from home every day which is not always as anticipated.

6 MANAGING THE PORTABLE OFFICE

The success of the portable office concept in action depends on managers and employees being able to adapt to new ways of working.

Managers who have not worked in these new ways themselves may not understand the constraints of working on the move or from home, or the realities of working in hot desking areas and touchdown centres. They will need training and development in how best to manage and support these new ways of working. Moving to a task-orientated management system based on trust can be difficult for some managers who work in a more traditional style.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- Arrange regular formal and informal meetings with both individuals and teams
- Encourage good communication and reporting of problems
- Ensure remote and home workers are included in all updates of IT hardware and software within the company
- Ensure remote employees are included in information on social and training opportunities
- Encourage best practice in the office on the move and at home in relation to health and safety
- Encourage staff to report any symptoms of discomfort that might be associated with the use of laptops, BlackBerries or new working practices as soon as they arise
- Encourage staff to change tasks regularly and to take regular short screen breaks
- Provide manual handling training for users of laptops
- Encourage peer communication and support within teams and between home workers to reduce isolation
- Be aware that going into someone's home can be seen as an invasion of an employee's privacy. It may be useful to arrange meetings in a regional touchdown centre or informally in a local café.

CASE STUDIES

UK Trade and Investment (UKTI):

When personal storage shelves were provided for their hot desking employees in addition to their mobile filing units, employee satisfaction increased.

BT:

Managers and home workers consider effective communication vital. Therefore they have a variety of different methods available to them which can be used on a daily or weekly basis: daily team updates, timetabled one-to-one telephone discussions, team conference calls, project conference calls, in addition to ad hoc telephone calls and emails.

BA Waterside:

When this building dedicated to new working practices was opened, a system of training and development passports was used to ensure that the three thousand managers and employees who would be working there made an easier transition into this innovative building and the new working practices available.

7 MAKING BETTER CHOICES: DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

USER DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Successful implementation of new working practices depends on the easy adaptation of all levels of manager and employee to the new ways of working. To achieve this, user development and training must be included at the planning and strategy stages, and also in a rolling programme for every new person who begins to work in this way for the company or when changes are made in an individuals working practices.

TRAINING FOR MANAGERS

New systems of management may be needed to which some managers who are used to more traditional styles might find difficult to adapt i.e. a task-orientated management system based on trust.

Managers need to understand the constraints that the different new working practices place on the individuals in their teams and consider how best to manage these:

- The potential for isolation and stress among those working on the move and from home
- The pressures of hot desking in unfamiliar buildings
- The vagaries of travel systems, internet connections and ICT networks

They also need

- Health and safety training relevant to portable computer use to encourage good working practices with laptops, BlackBerries and other PDAs.
- Specialist training if they are to make health and safety risk assessments in an employee's home
- Familiarity with the new technologies that their employees are using, e.g. docking stations and Bluetooth
- Training in task management applications may be useful for some situations or some projects e.g. MS Outlook Tasks or MS Project

TRAINING FOR USERS

MAKING THE BEST CHOICES

To keep as healthy and productive as possible while working on the move, people need to make the best individual use they can of the available furniture.

- Remote workers should be trained to look around and identify the most useful characteristics of the furniture around, both for them and for the work they intend doing. Most people already look around for a preferred seat in a café or on a train. They only need to extend this a little to include finding the best working position offered by the choices of table, seating, etc. available
- Only very short sessions with frequent breaks should be used if somewhere suitable and comfortable cannot be found to work and it is not possible to avoid working there
- Working in cars, is discouraged by the HSE because of both ergonomic and security issues

ICT TRAINING

- Appropriate training and support to understand the hardware, networks and software involved so that individuals can make the best use of their time
- How to use docking stations, BlackBerries etc. as this may not be immediately obvious
- Setting up security and passwords for company and personal information when using Wi-Fi hot spots and hot zones or Bluetooth at airports, stations, cafés, etc.
- Use of associated technology e.g. for conference calls, online forums and discussions, using Bluetooth for downloading larger documents
- Training on upgrades (software and hardware) and for troubleshooting

ADDITIONAL TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT POSSIBILITIES

- Lone workers' safety and security
- Journey and contingency planning

8 ASSESSMENT OF THE PORTABLE OFFICE

A company which minimises the risks to safety, health and well-being will be in the best position to gain business advantage from innovative ways of working.

Employers are required to do a suitable and sufficient risk assessment of all the work activities carried out by employees who work from home and elsewhere as well as those based in company offices¹⁴ and employees themselves have a responsibility to report all faults which may be a hazard to their own or others' health.¹⁵ The HSE's website on risk management, <http://www.hse.gov.uk/risk/practice.htm>, contains useful practical guidance for assessing risk but there is less guidance available on assessing the emerging risks in relation to the portable office.

HAZARDS AND RISKS

The portable office encompasses a wide variety of potential hazards and risks (a hazard is anything that might cause harm; a risk is the chance, high or low' that somebody might be harmed by the hazard). What turns a hazard into a risk will depend on the assessor balancing the individual and accumulative effects of:

- The type of work performed: sales, management, technical, clerical, etc.
- The places of work: car, hotel, café, airport, home office, hot desk, touchdown centre
- The technology used: mobile phone, BlackBerry, PDA, laptop, office workstation, etc.
- Individual characteristics such as height, history of back pain, etc.

THE MAIN HAZARDS AND RISKS

- The variety of places of work and 'ad hoc' workstations (café, train, car, hotel, airport, home, etc.)
- Display screen equipment which includes laptops and BlackBerries/PDAs
- Manual Handling (e.g. carrying laptops, handling equipment/samples in-out of a car)
- Isolation and stress
- Lone workers personal safety
- Equipment security and any resulting personal safety issues
- Slips, trips and falls

Additional significant hazards and risks include:

- Vulnerable employees: new or expectant mothers, those taller or shorter than the 'average' that desks and cars are designed for, people with a history of back pain
- Other employees they come into contact with e.g. delivery drivers, suppliers, agents, shops, road users
- Other people in the home worker's home: family members, visitors, vulnerable people, e.g. young children, elderly and new or expectant mothers

RISK ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

- Identify the hazards
- Assess the risks to the employee from each hazard
- Record the findings
- Inform the person of the findings and any recommendations
- Implement action, information and training as required
- Monitor and review regularly

METHODS OF ASSESSING THE PORTABLE OFFICE

A variety of methods can be employed to assess those who are working remotely, some of which are listed below. Different solutions will suit different companies and businesses.

- A full risk assessment is performed initially for each mobile and home worker followed by regular self-assessments to monitor for changes
- Regular self-assessments are completed which are reviewed and if problems are highlighted a full assessment is undertaken by a health and safety advisor. This requires initial training in self-assessment to be provided for each new employee
- Line managers visit new home workers with their permission and conduct a health and safety check of the office arrangements. This has the advantage of helping the line manager to understand their individual worker's situations better, however it can feel very intrusive to the employee
- Shadowing of a proportion of each group by the health and safety officer, e.g. sales force, to understand their particular problems

- **Problem-solving meetings:** Occasional meetings of all the people who work in similar ways to discuss the problems encountered and share problem solving and potential solutions, therefore taking advantage of each other's knowledge and experience of the actual situation

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation comprises action, information and training. It can include obtaining/changing equipment, providing relevant training e.g. for future self-assessment or postural awareness training to improve musculoskeletal disorders; actioning specialist assessments e.g. ergonomist, physiotherapist etc. and, when necessary, accessing treatment.

- Beware of quick fixes which treat everyone the same, what works for one person may not work for another, every one is individual and there will therefore be slight variations in every workstation
- Some problems cannot be solved, but it may be possible to reduce them
- If a particular mouse or short keyboard appears to tackle the problem, obtain it for a trial period in the first instance to find out whether it does have the desired effect in a particular situation
- Mobile workers will benefit from discussion/training on making better choices on the move (see section 9)

MONITOR AND REVIEW

Regular reviews of every risk assessment should form part of standard management practice. They should be carried out whenever circumstances change and also to check whether any changes have arisen, e.g. the type of work being carried out, a change in equipment used or changes in the place/places a person works.

CASE STUDY

Implementation pitfall

A consultant who was recently called in to provide an occupational health audit for a company came across a whole office of ergonomic desks which had been installed the wrong way round. Employees were working at the straight side of the desk and the ergonomically designed curved side faced outwards towards colleagues and visitors.

It is important that those who will be responsible for the implementation of solutions understand the reasoning behind them and how to use all equipment provided.

9 SAFETY, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

9.1 WORKING ON THE MOVE

Working on the move involves working in trains, cars, cafés, hotels, airports, aircraft and also at hot desks and touchdown centres. The workstation exists wherever an individual sets up his or her work. In this situation the hazards and risks are changing all the time, therefore employees need to know how to make the best choices they can in each potential working environment. Making good choices is the key to safety, health and well-being when working on the move.

KEY MESSAGES

- Make good choices about places to work (see below)
- Take regular breaks
- Minimise the use of portable computers in non-ideal locations, e.g. hotels and public transport. Working in cars is discouraged by the HSE from both ergonomic and security points of view
- If you cannot find somewhere suitable and comfortable to work, you should avoid working or make the sessions very short with frequent breaks

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

General

- Always looking for somewhere new to work
- Awkward working positions: unsuitable chairs and tables
- Adverse working environment (e.g. too hot, too cold, too noisy)
- Lighting poor and only adjustable by moving in relation to it (too dim, glare from sunlight, neon tubes, etc.)
- Laptop gets very hot when used on a lap for any length of time
- Finding compatible Wi-Fi hotspots or internet cafés in unfamiliar towns or countries
- Stress from the vagaries of transport systems
- Lone workers' safety and security
- 24 hour support available at base?

Cafés and hotels

- Small round café tables with barely enough space for a laptop, none for papers or a mouse
- Low chairs with high tables: elbows should be level with tabletop when working for more than short periods
- Low sofas at low coffee tables: These require the back to be hunched forward to work on the coffee table or twisted when the laptop is placed on the sofa
- Hotel rooms which have only low, dimmed lighting and no task lighting
- Chairs in cafés and hotel rooms do not usually adjust

Aircraft and trains

- Working with a laptop balanced on the knees whilst travelling: the legs automatically try to keep the laptop level and stable which can cause leg cramps and muscular pain
- Train tables not suitable height, width or distance away from the body (too high, too narrow and too close)
- Working at a laptop placed on the next seat: twists the back and hunches the shoulders. This leads to back, neck and shoulder pain

MAKING GOOD CHOICES: FINDING SOLUTIONS ON THE MOVE

- Modern coffee chains usually offer a variety of tables and seating, and wherever there is a selection of cafés, a choice can be made between different tables and chairs
- Square or circular table?
 - A square table is usually a better choice for paper or computer work as it enables additional papers or a mouse or to be placed beside a laptop
 - A circular table can be a good choice for meetings or presentations
- Height of chair relative to table? Every person's individual body measurements are different (knee to floor, shoulder to elbow); individuals need to learn which chair and table heights will give them the best working position. Aim to have:
 - Elbows in line with hands at the keyboard
 - Feet flat on the floor to give the body a stable base (feet can be supported on a briefcase or a book)
 - Back support

- Avoid any twist in the spine while sitting to work, particularly when using a laptop on a sofa, or working at a small side table in a hotel room
- Be aware of personal safety and security while working outside on laptops BlackBerries and mobile phones
- Individuals need to be aware of their surroundings at all times
- Plan journeys with a variety of contingencies in mind

9.2 BLACKBERRIES AND PDAS

BlackBerries and other Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) are increasingly being introduced into business life as they allow for improved communication in an easy to carry format. They are small, handheld and use wireless technology which allows easy operation anywhere.

The BlackBerry in particular has become endemic in business in a very short time. This technology enables users to receive and reply to emails directly from their office email inbox with very little delay wherever they are. It has a small screen and a very small 'qwerty' keyboard. Other PDAs vary considerably in the size of the screen and the keyboard and the functions they offer. Some, e.g. the 'Palm' range, are managed using a stylus.

The intended scope for office use of the BlackBerry device is for brief email and calendar monitoring plus basic email writing while away from the desk. This enables people to stay in touch with their workplace while on the move and it may also remove the need to carry a bulky laptop. However BlackBerries and PDAs are not a substitute for a laptop or PC when reading or writing longer emails and documents.

The small size and portability bring attendant problems. Prolonged use of the small screen and the very small 'qwerty' keyboard are associated with musculoskeletal disorders and temporary visual fatigue. Additionally, if the email system is never switched off and the device is constantly referred to throughout a period away from the office, people can find themselves in the stressful position of effectively never stopping working.

KEY MESSAGES

- Reduce the associated risks by introducing a company policy for their use and providing appropriate training
- Keep email messages brief or respond verbally by telephone
- Keep keypad use to a minimum and keep the touch light
- Sit sensibly with the spine well supported by the chair in an s-shape posture
- Hold the BlackBerry/PDA in a relaxed grip as you would a book, so that you can read the screen without undue bending of the neck
- Switch off the email function whenever possible, particularly when not at work

RISKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

STRESS OR ANXIETY

- The user can be considered available or accessible any time anywhere, and effectively may never stop working
- If the user responds to emails and messages 24/7, people are encouraged to use them this way
- For employees travelling internationally, 24/7 availability may increase the stress of jet-lag

Recommendations

- Company Policy on access and availability
- Alternate calls and emails. Do not respond to all emails in one long session
- Keep email messages brief or telephone with a verbal response
- For longer emails and documents use a laptop or PC
- Switch off the email function whenever you can, particularly when not at work
- 'Bluetooth' technology can be used to transfer large quantities of text to and from the device

THUMB PAINS

Repetition and force: The very small keypad requires small repetitive movements, usually carried out with the thumbs. The thumbs are not designed for repetitive dextrous movements; they have strong muscles and are capable of powerful force, this can result in fatigue and may lead to discomfort if not controlled.

Recommendations

- Hold the device in a relaxed grip with the thumbs lightly on the keypad and the fingers curled around the back

- Use the right and left thumbs on their respective sides of the keypad
- Keep the touch light
- Keep keypad use to a minimum
- Avoid holding the thumbs in the air when not keying, rest them lightly on the surface
- Use a stylus or your fingers to vary the load on the thumbs and wrists when inputting

AWKWARD POSTURE

The hand-held small screen can encourage poor posture, the neck and back in particular may be bent forwards.

Recommendations

- Avoid long sessions of keying, i.e. take regular short breaks to move the shoulders, arms, thumbs and fingers
- Spine: Sit sensibly; the spine should be well supported by the chair in an s-shape posture
- Elbows: Hold the device as you would a book, so that you can read the screen without undue bending of the neck

FATIGUE

- The longer BlackBerry or PDA use is sustained in one session, the more likely its use will cause fatigue
- Temporary visual fatigue is likely if the small screen and display is used for long periods at a time particularly for reading long emails or in poor light

Recommendations

- Restrict total use to no more than two hours in a day
- Avoid reflection on the screen by re-positioning yourself
- Regularly blink and refocus the eyes
- Adjust the font size
- Keep the screen clean and use in good lighting conditions

Upper limb and/or temporary visual fatigue will slow down work and increase stress.

9.3 LAPTOPS

Laptop choice is always a trade off. The weight, size, ease of use and screen clarity need to be traded against each other to find the most favourable solution for the individual. A small, easy to carry notebook is likely to have a small screen and small keys. Small screens can be difficult to read and cause visual fatigue, but a larger screen will be heavier and therefore become a greater manual handling issue. When an individual intends to work whilst travelling, it is important to make sure the pointing device (trackball, button, etc.) can cope with movement and vibration.

OPENING UP AND TURNING ON

It is well worth taking a moment each time a laptop is opened up to consider its new position in relation to body, arm and seating positions, the desktop/tabletop, light and possible glare on the screen.

WORKING POSITION

The ergonomic standards developed for desktop computer workstations are largely ignored when an individual uses a laptop. They are regularly used on kitchen tables, on trains, in cars, in hotel rooms and at unsuitable desks with limited legroom, poor seating and incorrect screen positions.

The typical body position when using a laptop is hunched shoulders and a rounded back from trying to read the low screen attached to the keyboard and cramped fingers from using the compressed keyboard for too long. These result in back, neck and hand-wrist pain. Add vision fatigue to this, together with the stress of travelling and/or working in unfamiliar surroundings and the risks mount up.

MANUAL HANDLING

How portable is portable? Laptops and their accessories are typically in excess of 5 kg. Although this is within the 'accepted normal load', it is usually carried in addition to other items often for long periods of time. A laptop bag typically contains the laptop, mains transformer, power leads, spare battery, papers, files, brochures and some personal items that would usually go in the briefcase. Then there is also the weight of the bag itself. Over a day,

this can become very heavy and hunching to stop the heavy shoulder bag slipping off the shoulder quickly develops into pain and discomfort.

VISION FATIGUE

Laptops are regularly used in environments which do not have suitable lighting. As a consequence, users may be exposed to a greater risk of developing temporary vision fatigue. The angle of the screen should be approximately 90° to the line of vision in order to view the screen clearly. Screen settings can also be adjusted for extra brightness and clarity.

The choice of background colour, font and size can make a significant difference to the ease of reading thus reducing the potential for vision fatigue. A variety of screen and text settings can be experimented with on the website of the British Dyslexia Association, <http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk>, using the toolbar at the bottom of the screen.

WORKING COMFORTABLY AND SAFELY

Using additional separate hardware items can vastly improve the working position and cut down on the amount of weight that needs to be carried. The possibility of having additional or separate items available at the most frequently used locations should seriously be considered.

- Improved ergonomic positioning may be provided at a low cost with a raised plinth and a separate keyboard and mouse available on a desk
- A laptop can be plugged in to a full desk monitor to give a larger, better positioned screen for prolonged use
- Use laptop raiser with separate keyboard and mouse
- Always plug into a docking station whenever one is available and set one up at home or wherever the laptop is used regularly
- Workstations supplied with additional leads and transformers will cut down on the weight to be carried
- Batteries and chargers: Have additional batteries and chargers available in different offices to cut down on the weight to be carried
- If the keyboard is very small, it is best to limit the data entry/word processing done with it. A separate keyboard can be attached for typing comfortably
- Take regular breaks for stretching and exercising muscles (body and eyes)
- The strains on a person's body dramatically increase when the body is twisted to work or if the laptop is operated within a cramped environment, such as while travelling
- When using a trackball or glide pad, the hand should be relaxed with the fingers moving together and wrists should be flat. The fingers should not be screwed up while working or held up in the air
- A remote pointing device e.g. mouse used in place of the trackball or glide pad can be easier to use and cause less physical tension and stress

PERSONAL SAFETY/THEFT

The risk of theft is real and steps must be taken by employer and employee to avoid personal injury by exercising caution whilst commuting with equipment. Brand name and smart leather cases should be avoided where possible as they draw attention to the value of the equipment being carried. Caution should be exercised when using a laptop in public places, e.g. railway stations, bus depots and airports. Keep items close at all times and within view.

9.4 HOT DESKS AND TOUCHDOWN AREAS

Innovative organisational practices such as establishing hot desking and touchdown areas or even soft seating areas for informal conversations are being developed to facilitate working in a mobile way. The aim is that people come in and sit down at the next available seat, plug into the network and start working. These practices have the potential to facilitate additional patterns of communication, e.g. a vice president sitting down to work next to a junior trainee. However, as with all new patterns of work, they need careful planning.

HOT DESKING - For less fatigue and discomfort take two minutes to adjust the furniture to suit you when you arrive

HOT DESKS

Refers to areas of an office where desks are not assigned. Individuals sit at whichever desk is vacant within their team's allocated area, plug into the network and start working. Hot desking is particularly successful for

outward/client facing teams such as sales teams. Employees who hot desk may work across several sites or work from home most of the time. As a term, it is also used to describe the situation of shift workers or job sharers who regularly time-share one desk.

TOUCHDOWN AREAS

Two different types of working area are currently referred to as touchdown areas:

- Areas designed for very brief laptop use e.g. checking emails. Often stools at a countertop
- Designated areas or sites that provide office support and services for remote workers such as photocopiers, binding equipment, etc. They create a 'team' space rather than a personal space and may be located on the company premises or on other business premises

PLANNING

Careful research and planning is essential before hot desking is introduced. User involvement at the planning stages increases the likelihood of success and future user satisfaction.

A common hazard of poor planning is that there may not be enough desks for those who need to work. If this is the case, people can find they need to come in especially early to get a desk. In some companies senior managers have been known to send junior staff in early to 'bag' the space and equipment they want to work with.¹⁶ In these situations 'warm desking' (leaving possessions on or around a hot desk to lay claim to it) can become rife and stress and conflict can become hard wired into a company's culture.

The provision of personal storage close by, as well as storage for work and files can assist with the very human need for space and ownership in this situation.

EQUIPMENT

- Easy and quick adjustability of all equipment is the key to safe working practice by a variety of users throughout the day
- Hot desks should be equipped with good easily adjustable chairs, footrests and document/book holders
- Either docking stations or laptop raisers with a separate plug-in keyboard and mouse will provide ergonomic DSE set-ups
- Suitable leads and transformers should be provided to reduce the weight carried in addition to the laptop
- Connections at desktop level for leads and power supplies rather than floor level are easiest to use
- Leads available for charging a variety of makes of mobile phone, PDAs and laptops can be very helpful for those who work on the move
- For shift workers and job-sharers two different mice or keyboards can be permanently plugged in to the same computer
- The provision of equipment for individuals who may have particular needs must also be considered e.g. voice activated software users or people who may be much taller or shorter than average

INFORMATION AND TRAINING

- Training and development in using the new working practices will assist employees in adjusting to working at hot desks, informal seating areas and touchdown centres
- Provide guidance on setting up and using a docking station as it may not be immediately obvious
- Provide instructions for the easy adjustment of chairs and other equipment

9.5 WORKING FROM HOME

There are pros and cons to working from home for both the individual and for the company. Reduced sickness absence, improved concentration and output need to be offset against a realistic appraisal of the job, the person, the company and its systems. This style of working does not suit everyone (e.g. very gregarious people or those who have difficulty working independently) and not every home is suitable for a home office or computer workstation.

The reality of working from home every day is not always as anticipated e.g. the blurring of the boundaries between work and home may give rise to a feeling of never getting away from work. It is good practice for a person considering working from home to talk to at least one existing home-worker before making the commitment and if possible to shadow a person who is working the same way as they intend for a couple of days.

TYPES OF HOME WORKING

- Occasional/ad hoc: The employee is based in a company office but by agreement with their employer or line manager, they may spend some of their time working from home, however there is no change in their contractual terms
- Home-based worker: A contractual arrangement whereby the employee has a home base. The employee may work completely from home or they may be mobile with a base at home in which to write reports, access email, make calls, etc.

LEGAL ISSUES

The health and safety responsibilities are the same as for office-based workers. However, there are some additional legal considerations for those working at home:

- Electricity at Work Regulations 1989: These Regulations take on a new perspective where employees are contracted to work on computers from home on a regular basis
- Employers' insurance may need to be extended to cover work equipment not kept in the office
- Employees should advise their own mortgage and household buildings and contents insurers since their home-working activities might be considered to be material facts of which the insurers need to be made aware
- Both health and safety and employment legislation will need to be considered, and in particular how the necessary risk assessments are to be carried out
- Manual handling and storage facilities need to be considered alongside the workstation and the Display Screen Regulations

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Is the necessary technical ICT support available? Will the available technology give access to the systems needed to work effectively?
- If home-working does not prove successful in a particular situation, is there a way back into the company office, another suitable job, etc.?
- An office workstation with secure storage takes up physical space in the home which may be at a premium. Is the size of room/space available big enough for workstation requirements? Will the equipment physically fit into employee's home (through doors, up stairs)?
- A dedicated secure workspace is the best solution where possible. This provides a clear work-home boundary, cuts down on domestic disturbance and provides privacy and security for company information
- If the computer provided is a laptop, either a screen raiser or a docking station with separate monitor, keyboard and mouse should be provided
- The kitchen table is not appropriate for prolonged laptop work because by its very definition it can only be a temporary workstation
- Electrical equipment layout should be planned for safety (trailing wires, etc.) as well as ergonomics
- Consider an entry phone if the office/workstation is to be some distance from the front door
- Consider the need to provide smoke alarms, appropriate fire fighting equipment or first aid
- Other members of the household need to be consulted on how they feel about these new arrangements. Their agreement is an important factor in making this work
- If one member of the family is working from home already, is there space for a second person?
- Distraction by domestic issues and interruptions from others in the household are potential hazards. When it is and when it is not OK to interrupt may need to be explained to members of the household
- Any caring responsibilities that are needed should be resolved before the new working arrangement begins
- At times it may be useful for the line manager, health and safety adviser or the ICT department to have reasonable access to the employee/equipment/working area in the employee's home and it is also possible that electrical wiring/circuits will need to be checked or smoke alarms installed. Access can feel invasive and it should therefore be subject to prior discussion and to prior arrangement

JOB AND WORK DESIGN

Careful consideration and planning given to the design of the job and the work will improve the success of home-working. It is important to:

- Agree working patterns
- Agree patterns of communication
- Agree the policy on turning off email, fax machines, etc. out of working hours in advance so the employee knows the parameters
- Ensure good communication and problem reporting procedures

- Encourage teamworking
- Provide appropriate training

HOME WORKING EMPLOYEES SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO

- Take regular planned breaks
- Set reasonable expectations for a day's work
- Keep manager informed about status of work/projects

COMMUNICATION

Good communication as well as aiding the work process can help reduce feelings of isolation. Where possible it is helpful for home-workers and line managers to use a variety of methods of communication:

- Telephone contact with manager possibly structured/timed around natural work breaks or at regular times each day?
- Regular one to one meetings should be arranged with the manager either in formal or informal settings
- Conference calls
- Meetings with colleagues/team again both formal and informal to assess needs, get feedback and discuss problems
- A team working together one day a week in the office has been found to be effective as part of the home working initiative at BT
- Company newsletters and information on company social and training events should be provided
- Online forums and discussions
- Home worker should remember to let the line manager know about work successes
- Communicate regularly with co-workers and managers by email, voicemail and telephone
- Home worker should attend all team meetings and conference calls

PRIVACY, DATA PROTECTION AND SECURITY

- Staff who use their homes for work have a right to privacy and to be able to separate their home and working lives
- Times when they can or cannot be contacted on work issues should be agreed, i.e. email and telephone can be turned off at agreed times
- A separate business postal address should be provided
- Employers and remote workers should be careful to ensure other household members do not have access to company or sensitive personal data (a separate lockable office, provision of separate computer, use of passwords, etc.)
- Lockable filing cabinet and desk should be considered along with computer passwords and document passwords
- Agree a policy on whether other household members will have access to the computer or to the internet through broadband/dial-up network connections at out of hours/office hours times

10 CONCLUSION

Companies which minimise the risks to safety, health and well-being will be in the best position to gain business advantage from these new working practices. Employers have the same 'duty of care' for their employees who are working on the move and working from home that they do for office-based workers. As the portable office grows, the accumulative effect of multiple lower intensity risks is being identified as an important emerging risk. These emerging risks require a change of thinking about workstations and the strategies needed to manage them. Businesses need to carefully research which new working practices will help their company in moving forwards and which will hinder them. This will result in a 'win-win' situation for both the company and their employees. **Minimising the risks safety, health and well-being will assist businesses to reduce costs while maintaining the energy, vitality and productivity of their business.**

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

RESOURCES

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Discusses a wide variety of methods and solutions for the planning and implementation of office working from home and includes several case studies. Further information www.incomesdata.co.uk

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Advice for those planning to work from home on all the regulatory aspects including health and safety www.businesslink.gov.uk/bdotg/action/layer?r.II=1073858799&r.s=tl&topicId=1073877897

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to those who gave time to reading and commenting on the consultation draft of this guide. The City of London Environmental Health Dept's. H&S team; the MSDs Section at the HSE; Hilary Philpot, Sharon Allaway, Beverly Cornish and Mette Lorentzen. Also to those who gave time to discuss their experiences with me Eric Le Reste; Robert Bedwell and Bob Lonnen of UKTI; Diane Murray and Anne Sharp from BA Waterside; Pam Farmer BT

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- 3 BBC Business Breakfast report by Declan Curry 24.2.06
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- 5 'Qwerty' refers to the layout out of a standard English-language typewriter keyboard. The word originates from the first six letters on the top row of letters of the keyboard.
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In addition to this guide the occupational **health** helpline has produced a series of fact sheets.

These offer practical information for business on resources, best practice and current research on current occupational health issues.

FACT SHEET TITLES:

- Managing Attendance and Return to Work (Nov 2004)
- 24/7 Health Effects: Shift and Night-working (Jul 2004)
- Tackling Violence and Abuse at Work - an employers' guide (Nov 2003)
- SARS Practical Advice for Business (May 2003)
- Practical Steps for Work-Related Stress (May 2003)
- Understanding Work-related Stress (Nov 2002)
- Substance Misuse: Drugs in the workplace (Oct 2001)
- Substance Misuse: Alcohol in the workplace (Apr 2001)
- Turn your Back on Back Pain. A practical guide to managing back pain in the workplace (Oct 2000)
- Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace (June 2000)
- Repetitive Strain Injury (Jan 2000)

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