# Coronavirus guidance for managers and staff

## Managing in a remote environment

In light of current coronavirus Covid19 pandemic the University is asking staff to spend more time away from the University working from home. Working off site and physically away from colleagues, students and others demands a different way of working and communicating than being office based. This guidance will help you to support you and your team during this period of isolation.

## Managing a remote team

Managing a remote team can be a challenge especially if you and your team have not worked in this way before. Staying connected, motivating your staff and being productive can be achieved by following the key actions below:

- **Keep connected –** schedule regular online or telephone calls / meetings e.g. organise a Microsoft Teams meeting / Skype meeting or phone call first thing every morning or a chat late Friday to close off the week and share plans for the weekend.

- **Use technology** to collaborate on projects and discuss ideas.

- **Identify development opportunities** for your team through online learning, reading and research.

- **Create and action your own development plan** e.g. complete a range of manager specific online learning.

- **Set clear expectations for work priorities and working hours –** ensure there is a structure to yours and your team's day and work within those parameters.

- **Set aside time** where you aren't working, answering emails or taking work phone calls.

- **Where possible, complete MDC conversations** and update the system accordingly to help people stay on track.

- **Monitor people's workloads and stress levels -** offer support where possible. If you can, adjust targets for employees who remain working and be flexible with deadlines.

- **Offer coaching sessions** via Skype or MS teams (if coaching qualified)

- **Think of those who have other challenges at home** (dependants / pre-existing health conditions / isolation / mental health) – show compassion, empathy and support

- **Support and actively encourage staff, where possible, to think about ways of supporting their own communities** – through volunteering, calling isolated neighbours and offering to collect shopping etc.

- **Adjust expectations.** Those caring for others may need to work differently, at different times or in different ways.

💡 **Future learn** provides a free online learning module on [collaborative working in a remote team.](#)

# Remote working - guidance for staff

- Where you can, establish a normal workday routine – ensure a clear break between work and non-work hours.

- Check in with others regularly and stay connected through email, Skype, Teams, phone calls etc

- Flag any issues or challenges with your manager including any wellbeing or health and safety concerns

- Follow Health and Safety Guidance (see below)

- Take regular breaks – move about and get some fresh air.  Exercise in any way that you can.

- Plan your day to help provide structure

- Catch up on outstanding training or seize opportunities to develop your skills and knowledge through reading, research and online learning.

- Set your status so colleagues know when you are available or offline

- Set yourself a set of goals and enjoy ticking them off when complete

- All employment policies will still apply unless you are notified of a variation. That includes:

  1. You should report if you are sick and the reason

  2. Annual leave should be booked as usual

💡 Finding what works for you is important. One way of doing this can be through spending a couple of minutes at the end of the working day asking yourself the following three questions:

1. What worked well today?

2. What didn't?

3. What might I try tomorrow?

💡 **Future learn** offer *free elearning on a range of topics including  business and management, IT and computer skills, creative arts and media
*(Access to the course for its duration + 14 days).*

# Working at home with dependents

We realise that it may not be easy to work a regular work pattern if you have caring responsibilities for children or parents (or both). Remember it is OK to take breaks and to work different hours that accommodate your family life whilst meeting business need.

**For academic staff:**

- Continue to teach including delivery of lectures/tutorials etc.

- Continue to mark and grade students work and set appropriate assessments

- Continue to do research where you are able to do so.

- Respond to requests from your line managers in a timely fashion

- Respond to students in the same way you would if you were in the office

**For professional services/technical staff:**

- Respond to students in the same way you would if you were in the office, in a timely manner.

- Continue to provide a high quality service to colleagues across the teams, with regards to programme administration, research, REF etc.

- Continue to engage with central services to support staff and students

- Review and update delivery of and support for teaching, labs etc.

# Health and Safety for home working

Home working offers many advantages but also has common problems associated with poor equipment, lack of/unsuitable space and work-life imbalance.

Health and safety hazards range from working in isolation, to a lack of control over the work environment and pain resulting from poor ergonomics. The following guidance provides a range of solutions to address these problems.

# Addressing the risks

Managing the health and safety risks for home working will depend on a range of factors – the 'H&S checklist for Home working' (Appendix 1) will help promote healthier working practices. Managers can offer support and help find workable solutions or signpost staff to specialist support as necessary.

The main issues to consider are:

- The work environment
- The work equipment
- Mental wellbeing

# Home work environment

Where possible set a side an area in your house as your office space / desk space to reduce risk to other people at home.
Where possible make sure you have adequate lighting, remove trailing leads and don't use the floor or high shelves for storage.

# Work equipment

Where Staff have been asked to work from home on a temporary basis, it's generally fine for them to use their own furniture (chair, table/work surface) as long as it meets basic requirements for comfort and correct posture.

Digital Services provide online help ([https://solve.aston.ac.uk](https://solve.aston.ac.uk)) and support services for remote working (e.g. software queries, training etc.)

**Electrical safety tips:**

- Only use an extension lead which was bought ready-assembled.

- Extension leads should be no more than 15 metres long.

- Only use extension leads fitted with suitably insulated connectors and plugs. (Never join two lengths of flexible cable by twisting the bare ends of wires together.)

- Position an extension lead carefully to prevent any risk of damage.

- If the cable has to cross a pathway, cover it with a rubber protector strip or rug.

- Always check that leads, plugs and sockets are undamaged.

- Always check the extension lead plug contains the correctly rated fuse for the equipment being used.

- If using a cable drum extension lead, it should be completely unwound to avoid overheating.

- Avoid the use of multi-way adapter block plugs

# Mental wellbeing

Home working hazards extend beyond the physical work environment. Some employees may find it difficult to adapt to working in an environment with limited social contact, while others may find it harder to manage their time or to separate work from home life.

It is important to have a conversation between a home-worker and the manager to understand challenges at home ie. relating to childcare, whilst being able to cover business need. The pandemic raises issues of isolation of those who share a home and this may make it more difficult for workers to be available in the same way.

Managers should regularly check-in (e.g. email, phone / video calls) with their home-working staff to ensure that they are managing their work–life balance effectively and minimise any feelings of isolation.

These are also opportunities to provide updates on corporate news, ensure access to key information, enquire about the home-workers health and safety and respond to any issues or concerns (e.g. experiencing aches or symptoms of stress).

- **Visit the wellbeing intranet pages** for information, advice and guidance including protecting your mental health.

- **Mind** provide a wealth of advice and guidance.

- **PAM Assist** also provides a range of information and support including financial advice, relationships, physical and mental wellbeing.

- Talk to Aston **Mental Health First Aiders** through MS Teams, Skype, email or phone.
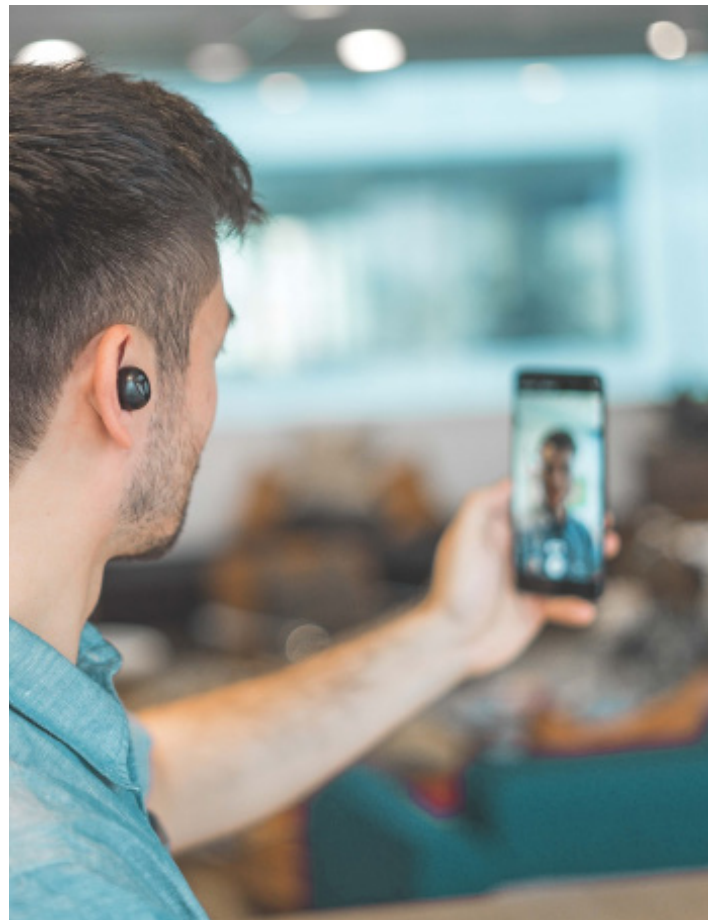
# Monitoring home workers' health and safety

Managers should monitor home-working staff and raise any concerns they are unable to resolve to the relevant support area (e.g. Human Resources, Health & Safety).

The Health and Safety Unit will monitor the organisation's health and safety arrangements for home working and their effectiveness.
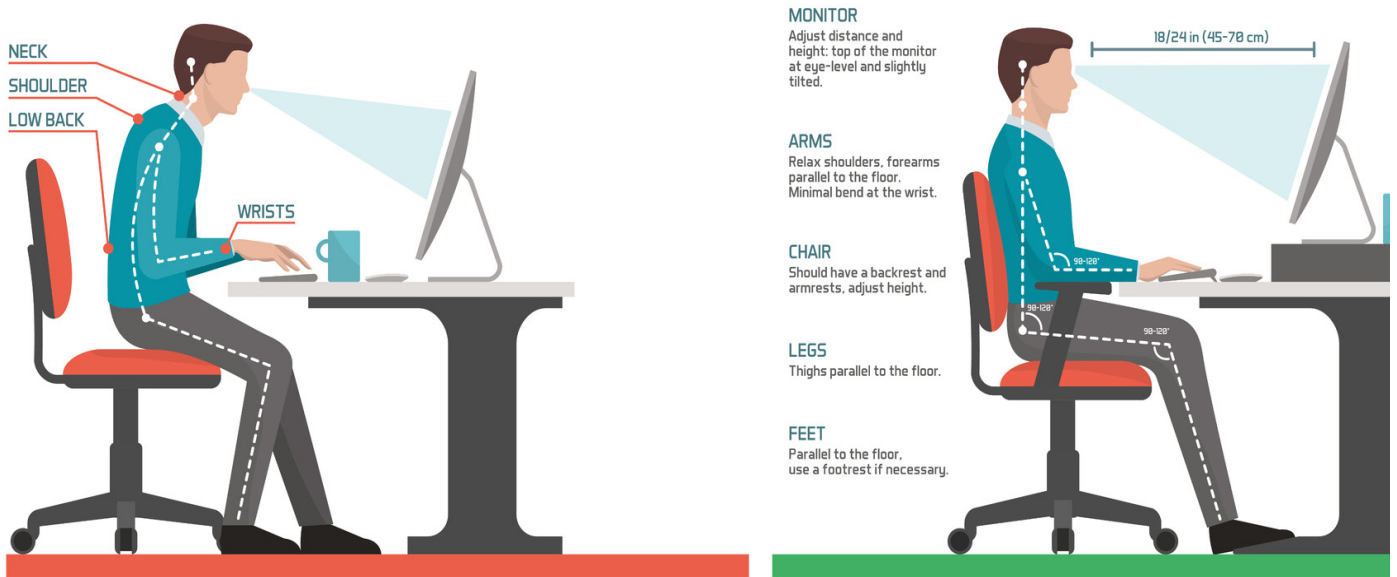
# Other sources of information

**Coronavirus for managers -** https://www2.aston.ac.uk/staff/manager-advice

**Coronavirus for staff -** https://www2.aston.ac.uk/staff/advice-for-employees

# Appendix 1 - H&S checklist for home working

- Make sure you're happy with the arrangements for communicating with your manager or other team members – be it face to face, telephone or email

- Stay in touch – make sure have good access to organisational information (e.g. by email, intranet, newsletter)

- Try to set-up and use of your workstation (including laptops) as ergonomically as you can. Good postures do not change for prolonged use – whether pc or laptop



NECK
SHOULDER
LOW BACK
WRISTS

**WRONG SITTING POSTURE**

MONITOR
Adjust distance and height: top of the monitor at eye-level and slightly tilted.

18/24 in (45-70 cm)

ARMS
Relax shoulders, forearms parallel to the floor. Minimal bend at the wrist.

CHAIR
Should have a backrest and armrests, adjust height.

LEGS
Thighs parallel to the floor.

FEET
Parallel to the floor, use a footrest if necessary.

**CORRECT SITTING POSITION**

You may find the following helpful - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBFf1NZkJKE#action=share

- Laptop stands or riser blocks in conjunction with external keyboard, mouse and monitor will help promote good posture.

- Cushions can provide a better seat height position and rolled up towels lumbar support on a chair.

- Regular breaks will reduce screen fatigue and muscular strain/pain

| Good ergonomic set-up | Laptop on table with external keyboard and mouse, raised using stand/riser device if possible | **Suitable for:** daily/long term use **Rest breaks**: 2 to 5 mins every 30 mins, or 5 to 10 mins every hour |
|---|---|---|
| Moderate ergonomic set-up | Laptop on table – no external keyboard, screen angled but not raised on stand/riser, no ext. input device | **Suitable for:** short term use (no longer than 30 mins without rest break) **Rest breaks:** 2 to 5 mins every 30 mins |
| Poor ergonomic set-up | Laptop on knees on sofa, armchair or bed | **Suitable for:** very short term use, no longer than 15 mins without rest break **Rest breaks:** 2 to 5 mins every 15 mins |

[Mobile Working Guide- Chartered Institute of Ergonomics & Human Factors]

In between longer formal rest breaks (good and moderate set-up), the use of micro-pauses help ease the strain.

Look up from your screen, pull in your chin, turn your head from side to side etc. Also remember to take your hands off the keyboard or put down the device you are using and relax your wrists and shoulders. Micro pauses can be very short, up to just 30 seconds every 15 to 20 minutes or less.

- Stand up every time you use the phone, try and do more activities away from the screen e.g. reading paperwork and change your scenery for the longer breaks (go for a walk, get some fresh air etc.)

- Make sure you know how to get IT support for Troubleshooting, software issues (https://solve.aston.ac.uk )

- Raise any concerns you have about managing your workstation/equipment, working hours, workload or work–life balance and ill-health.

Circumstances are changing very quickly and this document will evolve to reflect that.