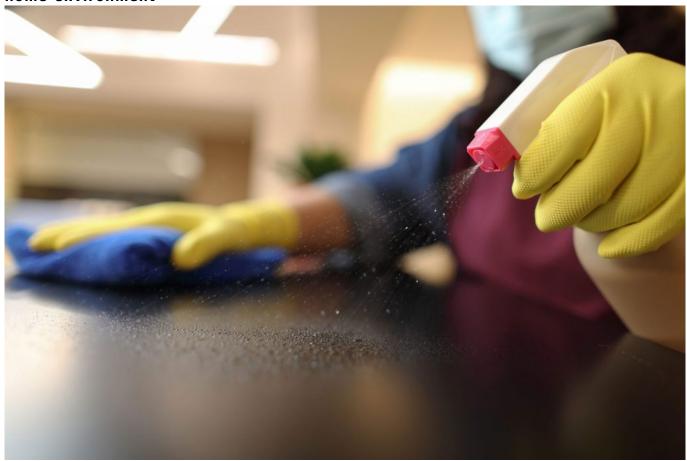**Employee health and safety remains the employer's responsibility in a work from home environment**

With many organisations now looking to adopt more flexible working hours on a permanent basis, the Work from Home (WFH) trend is here to stay. While this offers numerous benefits, there are certain considerations organisations must bear in mind. Not least of which is the fact that they remain responsible and liable for the health and safety of their employees when staff are working at the office, at home or remotely. Businesses need to understand the implications of WFH from a health and safety perspective and engage with the right partner to ensure they have the policies and procedures in place to protect themselves and their staff from harm.

The workplace from an OHS perspective

The Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act defines the workplace as any place where a person performs work for the employer. By extension, this now includes many people's homes. Employers therefore have a legal obligation, as far as reasonably practicable, to ensure that the home office environment is safe and without risk. The same requirements apply to the home working environment as to the formal office space, and organisations need to keep this in mind when it comes to their WFH strategy.

Risks versus benefits

For many employees, WFH has been incredibly beneficial. It has permitted a greater degree of work/life balance, significantly cut down on commuting costs, improved productivity and enabled more flexibility in terms of working hours. It has resulted in higher employee retention, and employers can recruit

candidates form outside of a specific geographical area.

However, there are also risks involved in the WFH environment. Often, employees may have difficulty in adjusting to this new working environment, avoiding distractions, and remaining motivated. There is also the risk of overwork because the geographical boundaries between work and home have been removed. The elements of stress and fatigue come into play, as well as feelings of isolation resulting from lack of in-person interactions with co-workers.

Aside from these 'softer' challenges, organisations also need to ensure that the equipment staff are using, including computers, desks, chairs and so on, meet the same specifications as those in a formal office. It is the responsibility of the employer to provide ergonomically safe equipment and ensure that employee environments are conducive to productivity.

The implications of WFH on OHS

The duties of the employer remain the same regardless of where the workforce is performing their jobs. They need to provide safe workplaces that have sufficient light and ventilation, that are ergonomically sound, and that meet all the criteria specified in the OHS Act. In addition, if an employee is injured at work, regardless of whether work is in an office or at home, they may be entitled to compensation. This becomes complex in the WFH scenario, as it is difficult to define which parts of the home are considered 'work'.

To cover these scenarios, a WFH policy needs to be developed, defining a scope of boundaries along with requirements for a safe working environment. It is imperative that businesses consult with employees who are working remotely to ensure that they have the equipment and resources required to perform the scope of work required. It is also important to compile a risk assessment covering all elements of potential harm, from fire hazards and proper use of equipment to the possibility of burnout and fatigue. Employers must have policies and guidelines in place on their expectations for home workplaces, defining the parameters required to manage potential risk and liability. The WFH policy needs to be drawn up by a partner who has the necessary Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) expertise.

The right partner is essential

Employers have both a moral and legal obligation to create safe workplaces, but WFH adds a layer of complexity to managing employee health and safety. Collaborating with an experienced specialist partner that understands the potential implications and liabilities is essential.

Not only will the right partner be able to identify the risks of a WFH environment and develop policies that mitigate them but they will also help to ensure that employees are happy, healthy and safe. This includes physical health and mental wellbeing.

In this changing environment, health and safety considerations need to evolve. The key is to identify risk, put the right controls in place, create awareness around the issues, and continuously monitor and review to ensure they remain relevant.