

LIVING THE DREAM OR IS IT A NIGHTMARE?

The increasing practice of working from home, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, may be turned into a catalyst that will deliver a culture where we will all more actively care for each other, as Ireland's economy gets back on track and people return to what will be a very different working environment, writes safety consultant Tom Beegan.

Over the last 20 years, we have experienced some major global adverse events such as the World Trade Center attack (2001) the SARS outbreak (2002-2004), the global financial crisis (2007) and the H1N1 flu (2009).

The impact of these events were never foreseen or believed could happen with such devastating effects. With the passing of time and the resilience of the human spirit, recovery was achieved and some lessons were learned.

These events, unlike Covid-19 pandemic, had disastrous effects on people near their origin and then the ripple effect impacted on the rest of the world. Covid 19 is having a truly global effect. Navigating through a pandemic in a safe manner requires more than guarding one's physical safety by staying at home.

During any type of uncertainty, it is natural for people to experience stress and potential mental ill health issues as the society we live in faces many different challenges, not just on the work front but also on a personal basis. This is exacerbated due to the lack of choice on being isolated during Covid-19. When we have no choice, we do not feel free.

When you choose to work from home (WFH) it is very different from being told you have to. Of course, the idea of working from home can seem like an appealing choice. The joys of not having to commute, the freedom and reduction of supervision, less out-of-pocket expenses and more time with partners/children/family.

It is also possible that some people have an easier time than others when it comes to working from home. Some employees still have to contend with poor internet connections, children



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out of school and looking for attention, while others may have their partner also working from home in a space just adequate to meet the non-work requirements. Tensions can build and trying to keep a loving and caring environment while you juggle home, schooling and work is almost impossible.

PERSONALITY TRAITS

David Zweig, Chair of the Department of Management at the University of Toronto, has reviewed research into the relationship between personality traits and remote working. Using two personality types – introverts and extroverts – he has tried to understand

why some people can adapt better to working from home than others.

Introverts: Zweig states that introverts generally do not have a problem working in isolation. They are generally people who prefer quieter activities and they are not the people who look to be the centre of attention. He states they tend to be shy and keep a smaller circle of friends and prefer to be involved in more independent activities.

Extroverts: On the other hand, Zweig says that extroverts tend to be more outgoing and expressive, enjoying other people's company more and feeling a higher need to be connected. Working from home prevents such



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people from engaging socially with their usual worker and social trends and, therefore, adapting to the change is a challenge for them.

KNOW YOUR EMPLOYEES

A 2018 study by Sarah Perry, Assistant Professor of Management at Baylor University in Texas, focused on the importance of emotional intelligence within the context of working from home. She found that those with a high level of emotional intelligence are less likely to be adversely affected by challenges that may arise, as they tend to be people who find ways of resolving such challenges.

For the employer, therefore, it is of vital importance to ensure you know or get to know your employees, by practising meaningful communications and offering accessible and realistic supports. One test to check if your level of communication and supports are adequate is to ensure employees feel comfortable talking to you about their concerns and seeking you out for advice.

My advice to employers is to devise a framework of policies and procedures that can be relayed to employees who are working from home, to ensure that everyone is on the same page and know the expectations. This should be part of your current safety policy and statement and risk assessment process and must involve the employees in its creation.

The downside of not having a 'Working from Home' policy is confusion, worry and ongoing questions, or indeed queries associated with ergonomics,

from employees; 'How often do I report to my manager? What happens if I injure myself at home? I have back pain from working on the kitchen table, so what can I do?'

Rather than starting from scratch, it is better to build upon your current practices and the many free resources available on my website www.ipu365.com in addition to the HSA website www.hsa.ie/eng/.

CLEAR ROLES AND OBJECTIVES

Employers should ensure that policy and procedure objectives are listed with clear roles and responsibilities, and also to revise induction training and other relevant training and audit programmes to reflect these requirements.

The following five components may be considered as part of your working from home policy:

- 1. Work Scheduling:** Provide clear direction about hours of work, duties, expectations, deadlines and overtime or time in lieu, while remaining flexible. Employees working from home may have children at home or elderly parents/grandparents to take care. So, replicating directly what was the norm in the workplace environment may not now be possible. Home and work are so fluid and intertwined right now that patience and flexibility is needed to make this work for everyone.
- 2. Communications:** Set up a routine for managers, supervisors and peers to stay in touch with those working from home on a regular basis to discuss progress or to work through challenges which are presenting. Provide etiquette guidelines for conducting virtual meetings with colleagues, clients or customers, such as wearing appropriate clothing, being mindful of your background in use while on video and communicating with respect. Include platforms to connect through, guidelines around instant messaging and tips for setting up successful meetings (e.g. providing agendas,

minimising interruptions, sticking to time and muting your line).

- 3. Office/Workstation Set-Up:** Many of those employees working from home have had to set up home offices and workstations without the necessary time to plan. Their home, when designed or purchased, was not necessarily intended for use as an office. It is a legal requirement and a good practice that all such places of work must have been risk assessed. Without adequate set-up it could be laying the ground for musculoskeletal disorders (MSD). The employer must have a plan for home office equipment; it should be provided by the employer and be informed by the risk assessment and the needs of the employee. For reliable free resources visit www.hsa.ie/eng/ and www.ipu365.com.

- 4. Work Environment:** Using the risk assessment relevant to the employees home ensures good practice is in place for fire protection, emergency procedures



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and electrical safety, Internet security, and how to report an injury. Satisfy yourself by asking probing questions on risks such as have extension cords been in good condition, sockets not overloaded and carbon monoxide detectors in place. One way to assess hazards is to have each employee complete and (virtually) sign off on the company's home office workstation checklist.



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5. Mental Health and Wellness: Combined home and work obligations, plus the worry about Covid- 19, can take its toll on these employees' physical and mental health, so have conversations about these matters during your regular check-ins. Provide tips on meaningful communication channels, the need to staying active, maintaining work-life balance, eating properly, taking breaks, and keeping mentally fit. Ensure each employee has a confidential access touch point to professional support if they think it's necessary.

We are at a time when we are besieged by daunting societal problems. Thanks to our 24/7 news services, the internet, smartphones, tablet devices, we know more than perhaps we would like about the nation's economic



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performance, healthcare and the struggles within our society. We live in a time of significant adversity.

We need to commit to being more intentional at actively caring for others. Our world brims with islands of caring and interpersonal compassion that goes untapped until adversity, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, strikes.

As we get ready to reopen our economy and get back to work in a very changed workplace, perhaps we can turn the increasing practice of working from home into a catalyst that delivers a culture where we are all actively caring for each other.

The views expressed in this article are informed from my own experience, spanning many years of managing, advising and consulting within diverse workplaces in private, public service and not-for-profit organisations in Ireland, the UK and Canada.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Beegan is an internationally experienced senior executive with a 40-year successful track record of achievement within the private sector, government and non-for-profit organisations. He has unique European and Canadian senior management expertise in transforming the potential of organisations, teams and individuals to achieve high performance.

Tom has facilitated executives and their teams surmount their most important risk management challenges by focusing on getting to understand why people behave as they do and then coaching them become a high performance team. Tom is an in demand knowledge exchange expert speaker and trusted advisor to many International and National organisation's.

A qualified psychiatric nurse, he graduated with an Advanced Management Diploma and MBA from University College Dublin. He has attained a professional designation of Chartered Directorship in Corporate Governance and Accountability from McMaster University, is trained as an arbitrator with the UK Institute of Arbitrators and has studied Strategic Thinking with the Schulich School of Business, Toronto.

He was the Deputy CEO of a healthcare authority in Ireland for five years until 2001. He then became the CEO of the Health and Safety Authority in Ireland until 2006 prior to becoming the Chief Prevention and Strategy Officer for Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) in Toronto, until January 2012 when he returned to Ireland.

Tom is Managing Director at Tom Beegan and Associates, which specialises in behavioral-based approaches to managing risks, and also serves as a Director on a number of Boards.

