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Working from Home and the Hidden Hazards

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Introduction

The number of people working from home has been steadily increasing, especially since the onset of the pandemic. According to the 2021 American Community Survey released by the US Census Bureau, the number of people primarily working from home has tripled between 2019 and 2021 – from roughly 9 million people to 27.6 million people. And while working remotely can offer many benefits, it also presents unique challenges, particularly when it comes to ensuring safety.

Workplace safety measures can help ensure the well-being of employees and protects them from potential hazards and accidents while they are on the job. But what if your employees are part of the millions now working remotely? How does workplace safety apply in a home office setting? Most organizations have done a job hazard analysis (JHA) of the potential risks that employees may encounter while at work or on specific jobsites. But what happens when employees are working from home and are no longer in a specified location where a JHA has been performed?

In this whitepaper, we will explore the many hidden hazards of working from home and the steps an employee can take to perform a JHA as well as actions organizations can take to help keep their employees safe.

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Importance of workplace safety

Safeguarding employees from risk can have many benefits to not only individual employees, but also to the organization at large. Workplace safety measures can help:

Protect physical health

Workplace safety measures help prevent physical injuries and illnesses caused by hazardous working conditions, such as exposure to chemicals, slips, trips, falls and working with heavy machinery.

Increase productivity

A safe working environment can increase employee morale and productivity by reducing the number of accidents and injuries, leading to less stress among workers and time lost due to absences.

Prevent lawsuits, fines and costly claims

Employers are legally obliged to provide a safe working environment for their employees, and failure to do so can result in lawsuits and fines. Additionally, employees who sustain injuries while working from home and within the scope of their employment are generally entitled to compensation which can increase worker compensation claims and healthcare costs. By taking steps to ensure workplace safety, employers can protect themselves from legal action, financial penalties, and costly claims.

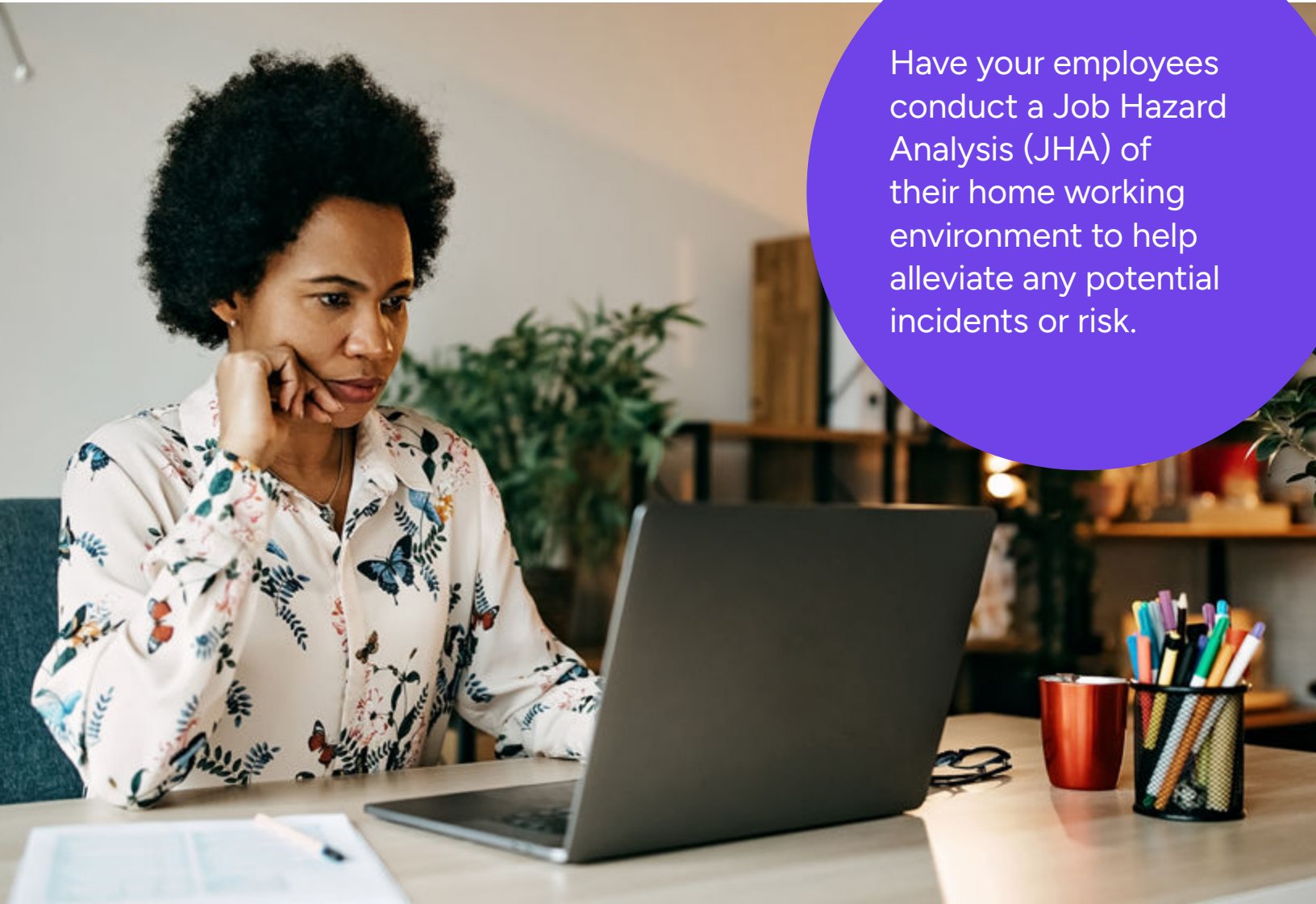### Promote a positive company image

Companies that prioritize workplace safety can promote a positive image, attracting and retaining employees, customers, and investors who appreciate a commitment to safety and well-being.

US businesses spend more than $1 billion a week on serious, non-fatal workplace injuries, with total injuries costing more than $58 billion each year, according to the Liberty Mutual Workplace Safety Index. Therefore, investments made into workplace safety not only safeguard employees from physical harm and danger but can also greatly impact an organization's fiscal performance.

The safety hazards

Employees are confronted with many possible workplace safety hazards daily, from slips, trips and fall incidents, to ergonomic issues related to lifting, pushing, and pulling. However, those hazards may be hard to recognize outside of their typical workplace, particularly in a home office or other off-site location. That is why having your employees conduct a Job Hazard Analysis of their home working environment may help alleviate any potential incidents or risk.

Navigating safety concerns around the home office can be difficult. Here are some questions for employees to consider when completing their Job Hazard Analysis, as well as some issues that organizations should be aware of when addressing safety issues associated with working from home.

Have your employees conduct a Job Hazard Analysis (JHA) of their home working environment to help alleviate any potential incidents or risk.

The safety hazards

Ergonomic concerns

Working from home can result in bad ergonomic habits due to the lack of proper office equipment and improper workspace setups. A recent study by Hinge Health found that only 33% of remote workers have a dedicated office, and 46% regularly work in shared living spaces, such as their dining room, living room, bedroom, or even laundry room.

Additionally, a 2020 Chubb study revealed 41% of Americans reported feeling new or increased shoulder, back, and wrist pain since they started working from home. Improper office set-up can result in poor posture, neck, back and wrist pain, as well as eye strain and headaches. To mitigate these issues, it's important to have a comfortable and ergonomic workspace, including a good chair with lots of support, a dedicated work area, a desk, and computer equipment.

However, access to ergonomic equipment like ergonomic chairs, sit-stand desks, and other similar items may not be available to many remote workers. Unlike in a traditional office setting where employees may access these items, remote workers often work with what they have, which can lead to inadequate working conditions and contribute to persistent or chronic pain.

Thus, it is important for organizations to help employees understand how they can best create a conducive working environment at home.
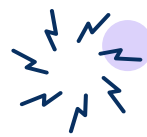
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Job Hazard Analysis

Have your employees review they're home working environment and complete an ergonomics-based JHA:

1. When sitting at your desk space, are your hips at a 90-120 degree angle with your feet flat on the floor?

2. Can the height and angles of your chair, monitor and keyboard be adjusted?

3. Can you stand and stretch throughout the day?

4. Is the top of your monitor or screen at eye level? Is it arm's length away from you?

5. Are your shoulders relaxed and can your wrist remain flat while you type?

The safety hazards

Slip, trip, and fall hazards

Slip, trip, and fall hazards can occur anywhere and when working from home these hazards can also be present. According to Injury Facts from the National Safety Council, more than 6.8 million people were treated in emergency rooms for fall-related injuries and 42,114 people died in falls at home and at work in 2020.

To reduce these risks, it's important to have a safe and organized workspace with good lightning and no trip hazards.

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Job Hazard Analysis

Have your employees review their at-home working environment and complete a slips, trips and falls JHA with these questions:

1. Do I have adequate lighting?

2. Do I have rugs or carpet that could cause a trip hazard?

3. Are there any cords, empty boxes, toys, wires or clutter that could cause a trip hazard?

4. Do I have stairs, and do I use the handrail while using those stairs?

5. Are there any animals that may cause a trip or fall hazard?

The safety hazards

Housekeeping

Working from home can also lead to a less organized and cluttered living space, which can increase the risk of slips, trips and falls as well as create fire hazards. Cluttered living spaces can also be stressful and overwhelming, which can take a toll on mental health and lead to a decrease in productivity.

To maintain a clean and organized living space, it's important to regularly tidy up and declutter, establish a cleaning routine and allocate dedicated spaces for work and leisure.

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Job Hazard Analysis

To help reduce risk from housekeeping hazards, have employees conduct a JHA analysis for housekeeping that addresses these questions:

1. Do I have a place or space for everything?

2. Is my area clean of trash, dirty dishes or leftover food?

3. Is my area dirt and dust free?

4. Are hallways and working surfaces clean and clear of debris?

5. Do I have a schedule for cleaning and decluttering my work environment?

The safety hazards

Electrical

Electricity and electrical hazards are all around us. Nearly 400 people are electrocuted each year in the US, according to the US Consumer Product Safety Commission. Injuries and fatalities due to electricity can happen anywhere – at work, at home and in public areas. By observing basic electrical safety practices, these injuries and fatalities can be prevented.

Taking some basic safety precautions such as ensuring a home electrical system can handle the increased electrical load and closely examining appliances and cords for damages or defects can help to safeguard employees from electrical hazards.

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Job Hazard Analysis

Here are some questions employees can ask as they perform an electrical JHA:

1. Do I have too many things plugged in? Am I using too many amperes?

2. Are all my cords and appliances in proper working order?

3. Am I using any extension cords and are they in proper working order? Are they faulty, frayed, or missing prongs?

4. Do I have more than one power strip plugged in within the same room?

5. Do I unplug electrical items that I am not using or that I don't use often?

The safety hazards

Fire prevention

Fires can happen at anytime, anywhere and to anyone! The National Fire Protection Association reported more than a quarter of fires reported in 2015-2019 occurred in homes. Additionally, they found 75% of civilian fire deaths and 72% of all reported fire injuries were caused by home fires.

Making sure employees know how to handle a potential fire situation, recognize potential hazards that could start a fire and know when and how to use a fire extinguisher is critical to their safety and to those around them.

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Job Hazard Analysis

Questions that can be asked to create a fire safety job hazard analysis:

1. Do I have a properly working fire alarm?

2. Do I have a fire extinguisher or fire blanket, and do I know how to use it correctly?

3. Have I checked my heating sources to make sure they are safe and functioning properly?

4. Are my electrical wires maintained and in proper working order? Have they been chewed on by pets or other animals that could cause damage?

5. Are my household cleaners and aerosol cans (hairspray or shaving cream) kept separate from any heat sources?

The safety hazards

Drugs and alcohol

There is currently a drug overdose epidemic that has drastically increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. With a 30% increase in drug overdose deaths from 2019 to 2020, overdose is the number one cause of fatalities at home. In a recent National Safety Council survey, over 75% of employers reported that opioid use has impacted their workplaces.

In a work from home setting, the temptation to consume alcohol (or to have a "liquid lunch"), misuse prescriptions or use illicit drugs can be greater. Substance abuse can impair an employee's ability to perform at their best and keep themselves and others safe.

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It is important that employers address these issues with employees to ensure a safe, productive workplace by:

1. Communicating their drug and alcohol policy to ensure employees understand the consequences of drug and alcohol use in any workplace setting

2. Providing education and training to employees and managers on the dangers of drug and alcohol use and the signs of substance abuse

Organizations can also consider offering additional support tools such as an employee assistance program to provide counseling and aid for those struggling with addiction.

The safety hazards

Psychological safety

Working from home can have a negative impact on one's psychological safety. The blurring of boundaries between work and personal life, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and difficulty separating from work can lead to burnout and other mental health concerns. In a recent CareerBuilder survey, 61% of employees reported being burned out on the job. And a study conducted by the Pew Research Center found 1 in 4 workers quit a job over mental well-being in the last two years.

To mitigate these issues, it's important to establish clear boundaries between work and personal time, stay connected with coworkers and prioritize self-care. Providing health and wellness training can help employees understand the importance of psychological safety, explain how working environments can affect their health, safety and wellbeing, and provide practical guidance on how to improve both their personal and professional lives.

These are some of the seen and unseen workplace safety issues that employees and organizations should be aware of. Raising awareness around these potential workplace hazards can greatly assist in ensuring employee safety.

61% of employees reported being burned out on the job and 1 in 4 workers quit a job over mental well-being in the last two years.

The role and importance of safety training

Providing hazard awareness safety training can play a critical role in helping employees understand the seen and unforeseen dangers that lurk in a remote work setting and how to mitigate their risks. It can raise awareness of the underlying risks of remote work, encourage safe business practices and enhance employee knowledge. Deploying hazard awareness safety training as part of a workplace safety program can:

Raise awareness	Safety training raises awareness of potential hazards in the workplace and the measures that can be taken to prevent accidents and injuries. This helps employees understand the importance of workplace safety and the role they play in maintaining a safe work environment.
Reduce risk	By providing employees with the knowledge and skills they need to identify and address potential hazards in the workplace, safety training reduces the risk of accidents and injuries, protecting workers and promoting a safe work environment.
Improve compliance	Safety training helps employees understand and comply with relevant regulations and industry standards, reducing the risk of legal action and fines and promoting a safe work environment
Increase employee confidence	Safety training can increase employee confidence in their ability to work safely and identify potential hazards, reducing stress and promoting a positive work environment.
Promote a culture of safety	Safety training helps to promote a culture of safety in the workplace, encouraging employees to prioritize safety in their daily work activities and creating a safe and healthy work environment.

Employers have a responsibility to provide their employees with hazard awareness training and to prioritize safety in the workplace, even in a remote setting. Helping to ensure your employees know how to recognize risk and hazards while in the office or in a remote setting will strengthen your organization's culture and bottom line.

Traliant insight

Working from home can present various hidden hazards that can affect physical, mental and emotional well-being.

By being mindful of these hazards and taking proactive measures to mitigate them, such as deploying hazard safety awareness training, organizations can create a safe and productive work-from-home environment.

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