

Information for Supporting Temporary Remote Work Arrangements During COVID-19 Pandemic

McMaster University is committed to providing and maintaining healthy and safe working and learning environments for all workers, students, volunteers and visitors. The call from public health officials to increase social distancing together with the constantly changing circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic means additional measures are being taken by McMaster. More specific information and updates are available on the [University COVID-19 website](#).

As the situation continues to evolve, McMaster recognizes that its employees may need additional **flexibility, support and understanding**. Supervisors have been asked to implement remote working arrangements wherever possible, in accordance with the guidance and principles provided in the [Supervisor Guide: A Decision Matrix for Establishing Working From Home Arrangements](#).

The information contained in this document is an accompaniment to the other important information which will help supervisors and employees establish supportive practices when working remotely. When considering temporary work from home/remote arrangements:

- Review the [Supervisor's Guide for COVID-19](#) for the most up-to date information.
- Review the [Decision Making Matrix](#) to determine if the arrangement is viable and to consider prioritizing multiple working from home arrangements.
- Review the [Supervisor Information: Working from Home Arrangements](#) folder for templates and resources in setting up the arrangement.
- Review and educate your team on the [technological supports available](#) to help facilitate working remotely, or to enable connectivity without the need for group gatherings.

Key Considerations for Supervisors

Trust is the foundation of a successful remote team, and remote work typically leads to increased productivity. However, temporary remote work during a stressful time is not the same as long-term self-selected remote work. Supervisors need to manage expectations about productivity and start by trusting that every team member is working to the best of their ability during this time.

Suddenly switching employees to remote work with no clear communication, tools, or processes in place can be challenging for both supervisors and employees. During and after temporary remote work implementation, consider what was learned and whether remote work can be leveraged on an ongoing basis in new and creative ways.

- **Ownership of Remote Work Plan**
 - Supervisors, in partnership with their leadership team and Human Resources, are responsible for the remote work plan for each department/team.
- **Priorities & Essential Work**
 - Evaluate department/team priorities, considering client/partner impacts and feasibility of completing some or all of it remotely (with or without adjustments).
- **Remote Agreements & Expectations**
 - All employees and supervisors are expected to continue to take every reasonable precaution when it comes to health and safety. More information and a home workstation self-assessment checklist is available in the [Supervisor's Guide](#).
 - Supervisors are encouraged to discuss expectations with their employee. At a minimum, the supervisor should communicate agreed upon work schedules and deliverables, as well as communication approaches and expectations.

- **Fairness and Equity**

- Supervisors should avoid distributing work based on "availability" as measured by physical presence. It is also critical that supervisors avoid the pitfall of assuming that someone who is present and looks busy is actually accomplishing more work than someone who is not on site.

- **How to set up a Home Work Station**

The number of temporarily employees working from home is increasing in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19. This sudden shift can present questions regarding proper workstation set-up. The following suggestions will allow employees to continue to work productively and consider proper ergonomic set-up while at home.

- Define your workspace. Find a space or room in your home where there are limited distractions, and if possible, separate from other living areas and away from the television.
- Sit in a chair with a back. Avoid sitting on the couch as this will ultimately lead to neck and back strain.
- If you use a laptop, use a laptop riser and separate keyboard and mouse to ensure appropriate posture. You may even wish to consider setting your laptop on books or boxes as it should be at eye level.
- Try taking a break from your workstation at least once an hour to refresh your mind and body (ex. take a phone call while standing, get a cup of water, etc.). Don't forget to take micro breaks, these may last a few minutes or even seconds, by changing your position and using different muscles (ex. close your eyes for 30 seconds, flex and extend your hands, etc.).
- Practice stretching at your workstation. For ideas, refer to <https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/ergonomics/office/stretching.html>.
- If you require a piece of equipment to do your job safely, please have a conversation with your supervisor.
- For additional information regarding the set up of your home workstation, refer to the Home Workstation: Self-Assessment Safety Checklist. Please keep in mind that during these extraordinary circumstances, at this time it may not be practical to action everything in the checklist. If you have question or concerns, contact Environmental and Occupational Health Support Services at ehss@mcmaster.ca.

- **Communicating as a Team**

- Supervisors should schedule synchronous conversations with their teams, and one-on-ones as needed, to discuss expectations and provide opportunities for team members to share their concerns.
- Identify which upcoming meetings can/should be held virtually, and which should be rescheduled.
- Online collaboration and productivity tools provide opportunities for your team to connect and work together. University Technology Services provides an overview of [IT tools and services](#) that allow you to work remotely.
- Determine the preferred group communication and collaboration tools and ensure all team members have access. Determine how frequently you as a supervisor will connect with your team members.
- Don't bombard your team with messages. The medium you choose creates different demands on the time of the receiver. Using multiple mediums for the same message is ineffective. Choose your digital voice wisely.

- Remote teams need to create new norms that establish clarity in communication. Consider using acronyms for digital communications like “Four Hour Response (4HR)” and “No Need to Respond (NNTR)” that bring predictability and certainty to virtual conversations.
- **Use Meetings Strategically**
 - While sharing information is important, don't let this be the sole purpose of your meetings. Organize strategic meetings to focus time together on activities that move the team forward, such as decision making, collaboration, and connection.
 - It is possible that supervisor and/or employee availability will be more limited than usual due to COVID-19 workforce planning, so keep this in mind when evaluating the necessity and urgency of meetings.
 - Determine what information should be shared with participants in advance of the meeting, provide an agenda, and determine how decisions and follow-up will be communicate to those absent.
- **Scheduling**
 - Creative ideas we've heard from university colleagues who require some on-site staff coverage but wish to reduce the number of individuals who are required to work on campus any given day while supporting operations:
 - Consider an alternating or rotating schedule for your team where possible and re-evaluate this approach on a weekly basis. The idea is that, in general, team members could share on-site responsibilities but not all members would need to be on-site every day.
 - Experiment with different schedules. If you try something one week that does not work for your team, adjust the following week.
- **Check in on Employee Health & Well-being**
 - Remember to check in with your employees about their health and well-being and offer support as needed. If employees need support for anxiety around COVID-19, [Homewood Health](#) offers remote options for mental health support.
- **Caring for Dependents**
 - With the decision from the Ontario government to close all publicly funded schools across the province for two weeks following March Break, many private schools and daycares are doing the same. We understand the challenges this may create with child care.
 - Employees are encouraged to discuss childcare pressures and flexible work arrangement options with their supervisor. Supervisors are strongly encouraged to be open in allowing for alternative work arrangements.
 - Should an employee not be able to meet their job responsibilities due to family responsibilities, supervisor's should discuss options for time off with the employee in accordance with the applicable collective agreement, employment contract and the employee's preference. Further details related to options are available in the [Supervisor's Guide](#).