Guidance for Setting Up and Supporting Remote Work Arrangements

Scope

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

McMaster recognizes that its employees continue to need **flexibility, support and understanding**. This document is meant to support supervisors and employees with guidance and principles to consider when implementing temporary remote working arrangements.

Table of Contents

Content updated as of June 10, 2021

Setting up a Remote Team

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:

1. Determine if the arrangement is viable:

   - review the [Leader Decision Guide](#) to help with planning for Fall 2021 work arrangements.
   - complete the [working remotely templates](#).

2. Determine [the remote work office set-up](#).

3. Review the Health and Safety considerations in setting up a [home work station](#) (below).

4. Review and educate your team on the [technological supports available](#) to help facilitate working remotely, or to enable connectivity.

5. Review the financial [guidelines for reimbursing employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.](#)

Key Considerations for Supervisors

Trust is the foundation of a successful remote team, some research has found that 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.

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.

Content updated as of June 10, 2021

o 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

o 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 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.

- 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.

Content updated as of June 10, 2021

Health and Safety Considerations

McMaster University is committed to provide and maintain healthy and safe working and learning environments per RMM 100 Workplace and Environmental Health and Safety Policy. If you have question or concerns, contact Environmental and Occupational Health Support Services at eohss@mcmaster.ca or the Faculty of Health Sciences Safety Office at fhsso@mcmaster.ca. The Health and Safety websites can be found on the EOHSS webpage or the Faculty of Health Sciences Safety Office webpage.

As with working onsite, to ensure compliance with the reporting requirements of the Occupational Health and Safety Act and Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, if an incident occurs while working remotely or working from home, employees have the responsibility of reporting incidents promptly. Follow these steps to report an incident:

- The employee and the supervisor must fill out an injury/incident report form and the employee, supervisor and department chair, manager or director must also sign it.

- The supervisor is responsible for investigating the incident and for ensuring corrective action to prevent a recurrence of the incident for due diligence purposes.

- If personal injury is involved, all appropriate procedures must be followed (please refer to RMM 1000 and RMM 1002).

- The completed reports must be forwarded immediately to Environmental and Occupational Health Support Services by email to eohss@mcmaster.ca or for areas in the Faculty of Health Sciences, the Faculty of Health Sciences Safety Office by email to fhsso@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.

Content updated as of June 10, 2021

- 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:

    o 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.

    o Experiment with different schedules. If you try something one week that does not work for your team, adjust the following week.

Content updated as of June 10, 2021

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, many private schools and daycares have done the same. We understand the challenges this may create with childcare.

- 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.

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