

#DAY7LOCKDOWNSA

A working from home strategy during the lockdown:

Guidelines for employers

by

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As a result of the regulations flowing from the Disaster Management Act, since the 27th of March South African employees deemed not essential services are working from home. Working from home is a strategy used by employers for employees if the type of job makes that possible, in particular professional, managerial and other support staff who have laptops and are therefore able to continue with their work, albeit from a distance to their physical office.

Most employers in South Africa were not ready for these new arrangements, and found themselves operating in a vacuum without the necessary policies and infrastructure in place to support their remote workers. In other countries throughout Europe, the United States, United Kingdom as well as Australia work from home practices have been popular for more than two decades. Given the worldwide coronavirus pandemic, national lockdowns have become the norm and in most countries work from home has become the norm as a temporary measure within days of their presidents ordering the lockdowns.

While the highest level of political offices have ordered these lockdowns, business leaders were forced to accept work from home as the new way of doing business for non-essential employees. Although companies responded immediately, many managers, in particular the micro managers were in shock, because they are used to the previous century management practice of micro management, i.e. that you can only trust your employees if you can see them and can look over their shoulder to see if they are really working. Most employees have responded by looking very busy when managers were watching them. Now this has changed, because you can only see your employees via online platforms.

Thus, we are entering a new regime of working from home. For people working from home, this is a wonderful time to do high quality work requiring no typical office interruptions. Here is an example of my own productivity in the key performance area of writing articles one week before the lockdown (working at the university) versus the first week of the lockdown (working from home). The increase in productivity is evident. Admittedly, this measure

represents only one area of measurement, but I think it proofs my point. In general, and in particular during normal circumstances, people working from home are more productive and achieve higher outputs, especially when doing knowledge work.

NUMBER OF ARTICLES WRITTEN THE WEEK BEFORE AND AFTER LOCKDOWN

19 March – 26 March 2020 (Week before lockdown)	27 March – 2 April 2020 (First week of lockdown)
0	9

I also accept that there may be jobs in which this may not be possible, such as physical security and manufacturing work. But the point is, I was more productive as a knowledge worker this week. I had very few interruptions and could focus on work requiring more thinking, planning and writing. I also saved more than 10 hours of not spending any time in traffic. The reality, however, is that many employees will be less productive, especially those who do not have the resources or means to perform at their optimum levels of performance.

Here are some guidelines for employers to leverage working from home strategies for their employees during the lockdown:

- Develop a clear strategy and plan on how you are dealing with working from home. Make your principles and values clear as part of the strategy, for example being a caring employer, responsible citizen, accountability, health, safety and creativity.
- Progressive employers have work from home policies in place for years, but employers responding to coronavirus instituted work from home within a week, in the absence of any coherent policy framework. Employers should develop proper policies to guide employees in terms of the expectations of employers. Develop a policy with clear guidelines for the lockdown, but do so with empathy and sensitivity to employee needs, fears and anxieties.
- Prioritise the physical and mental health of your employees. Assign this responsibility to your HR Director and Employee Wellness Manager and their service providers. Activate your wellness specialists to provide online and telephonic support to employees who need emotional support from a qualified employee assistance specialist or counsellor. Provide additional support to infected employees. If you have neglected being a caring employer in the past, here is a unique opportunity to change that in a very short period of time. Your business will reap the long-term benefits in due course.
- Have a proper and clear communication plan guided by qualified communication and public relations specialists. If too many people from different departments or sections communicate the whole time, often contradicting one another, it becomes chaotic and people will be confused about what to do. Convert text-based documents into user-friendly formats such as infographics for employees and customers.

Communicate the truth and do it quickly, even if it is bad news. Nothing frustrates an employee more than reading first about what is happening at their company in the media.

- Create a special place on your website and blog including a balance of coronavirus issues, and work related matters. Update this continuously. Create frequently asked questions (FAQs) dealing with these issues. People need a safe space to communicate their concerns, and also to share some creative ideas they may have for your company or the government for dealing with the pandemic.
- Increase your social media presence and communicate daily messages, it is very important that senior managers engage on social media, given the fact that many employees will use social media more during the lockdown.
- When connecting with your employees at their homes, always connect first at an emotional level. Realise that employees are stressed given all the current competing demands, including their fears and anxieties regarding the virus affecting themselves, their families and their friends.
- Do proper short-term workforce planning in terms of ensuring that customers can still be served where possible, and that the right people can provide the right services. Segment your workforce and pay attention to the unique needs of each segment, e.g. scientists, IT staff, administration staff etc.
- Ensure that employees have all the resources they need to do their work from home, e.g. laptops and other equipment.
- Accelerate all your online learning efforts, especially now that it may be possible for most employees to spend one or two hours a day learning from home.
- Recognise the fact that employees have different levels of proficiency when it comes to technology. Assign tech savvy coaches to your employees needing assistance.
- Orientate your managers and employees to ensure that expectations are clear in terms of business continuity, resources and support.
- Make performance standards clear so that employees know what they need to do, and where they can get help if they do get stuck.
- Ensure that employees record that they are away from the office so that the correct leave administration can be done and maintained.
- Allow employees to claim for actual expenses, or advise them on how they qualify for tax deductions from the South African Revenue Service.
- Remind employees of cyber security risks, they may be less protected at their home offices and therefore need to be extra careful.
- Managers should check in with their employees at least once a week to determine if they experienced any problems or challenges. Balance all approaches of being positive while facing the reality of a national and global crisis. You cannot expect your employees to switch-off completely from the crisis consuming their minds.
- Don't micro manage your employees during this time, remember many of them have children and other commitments to attend to. Most people are responsible and they will do what they have to do if performance expectations are clear and reasonable. Attempting to police your employees at home will not work. Rather track online

engagement and other metrics if you have a proper system and method for the purpose of data analytics and positive follow-up interventions.

- Use virtual meeting platforms if it is really necessary to have a meeting, and ensure that managers are trained to chair such meetings, and orientate your employees accordingly. Do not waste the time of employees with unnecessary and unorganised virtual meetings.
- Use other platforms and collaboration tools to share documents and information such as Sharepoint, Google Drive, Dropbox and WeTransfer. However, some applications such as WhatsApp can also be valuable, but extremely irritating and distracting if hundreds of unnecessary messages are distributed to large groups of people the whole time.
- Keep up to date with all developments from the Department of Health, the Department of Employment and Labour, and other relevant government departments such as transport and home affairs and summarise the key points for your employees and customers.
- Link your working from home strategy to your employee experience strategy and request regular feedback from employees. Provide regular, but appropriate feedback to employees, without overburdening them with unnecessary and conflicting communication.
- Continue to recognise and reward exceptional employee performance and share these achievements on all your platforms, including social media.
- Evaluate the situation on a regular basis and decide on what further actions are necessary to align current priorities and actions with new trends and developments. There are regular changes requiring immediate actions affecting your employees.

The above guidelines can be adapted to suit the unique needs of your organisation in making working from home effective at your organisation during the lockdown.

If your organisation has a positive high performance culture characterised by high trust and a high employee engagement score, and if all your managers are excellent leaders and people managers, you will experience few problems in making work from home work effectively for your company. However, you just need a few weak leaders who can cause major problems for their teams and employees. If your teamwork and culture was weak before the lockdown, don't think that Microsoft Teams will fix it for you. Building teams and a good organisation culture remotely will then be an even bigger problem for you. Overnight micro managers are now required to become macro managers. They are now expected to see the bigger picture first and then respond appropriately within their own context and environment. If anything, now is the time to invest in leadership development, albeit in an online format. This time your managers will not be able to use the excuse of not having time to go on courses. We are all learning and we are learning fast, and we now learn online.

Although working from home was implemented as a temporary measure in response to the national lockdown, also see the period as a pilot period for the future. The reality is that working from home is long overdue at most workplaces, and it is unlikely that companies will

be able to return completely to traditional office bound ways of working after the lockdown. The world has changed overnight, and it will change forever. Employers and employees should get used to this new way of remote working. The next few weeks are likely to usher in a new period of reducing the risk of spreading the coronavirus, while moving towards a paradigm shift to accepting remote work and increased flexibility as the new way of working in future.

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This article was first published by SABPP on 2 April 2020 , see www.sabpp.co.za