

Out of sight, out of mind?



Top tips for managing occupational
safety and health in distributed workers



www.iosh.co.uk/outofsight

53 million people in Canada, the USA and Europe work remotely – about 15 per cent of the combined workforces.

Distributed workers present particular challenges in terms of OSH: for example, additional risks, such as the isolation of remote working and the physical hazards associated with working outside or driving; and more difficulty getting messages across because workers are not based at a central or permanent site. Supporting OSH for distributed workers therefore requires additional abilities from their OSH practitioners over and above those needed to support OSH for a non-distributed workforce.

Useful definitions

By distributed or remote workers we mean workers who spend all or part of their week working away from a main location. Distributed workers may be found across a range of industries and occupations. Examples include:

- Public service workers (police, community nurses, social workers, local authorities (housing, street, public spaces maintenance), public sector workers (inspection and regulation)
- Utilities, Energy and Telecoms workers (engineering, construction, plant maintenance– in variable locations such as roadside, countryside, urban and remote, domestic)
- Transportation workers - people and goods (buses, trains, planes, lorries and vans)
- Service workers (e.g. surveyors, architects, consultants, sales)
- Homeworkers (fixed, flexible, casual)
- Delivery drivers and salespeople

Abilities required for OSH practitioners

OSH practitioners working with distributed workers can influence these people's occupational safety and health in two ways. They can cascade their influence either through the workers' line managers or through direct contact with the workers themselves.

For OSH practitioners working with distributed workers, the four abilities that will help support these workers' occupational safety and health are listed below.

- *Getting the OSH message across to distributed workers:* this includes being visible, approachable and available, engaging with workers in the most appropriate ways and being open and flexible about communicating with workers
- *Listening to and understanding distributed workers and their role:* this includes gaining knowledge and understanding of distributed worker roles and taking a respectful approach to worker input where workers feel safe and confident to report issues

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- *Empowering and collaborating with distributed workers:* this includes empowering workers to take ownership of their work and safety, and establishing and using collaborative working
 - *Cascading to distributed workers via managers:* this includes providing knowledge and support to managers, being in frequent communication and enabling opportunities for managers to communicate about OSH
 - *Health-specific leadership:* including taking responsibility for team members' health, discussing and involving people on health-at-work matters
 - *Safety-specific leadership:* including taking responsibility for team members' safety, discussing and involving people on safety-at-work matters

Behavioural areas for line managers of distributed workers

The behaviours identified as effective for supporting occupational safety and health in distributed or remote workers are essentially about good people management, with an emphasis on creating good relationships and taking responsibility for employee health and safety.

- *Transactional leadership:* including providing feedback and recognition for good performance
- *Transformational leadership:* including formulating a vision, being open about values, function as a role model, treating people as individuals, trust, involvement and encouraging new ways of thinking
- *Leader-member exchange:* including developing good working relationships and understanding individuals' problems and needs

A toolkit for OSH practitioners and line managers

This toolkit will be of interest to occupational safety and health practitioners and line managers with particular responsibilities for distributed workers. It will also be of interest to partners from Human Resources or those with training responsibilities in this area.

The aim of the toolkit is to provide practical awareness and guidelines to appropriate styles of management for distributed workers.

We really hope you find these materials useful and practical in improving various aspects of occupational safety and health in your particular sector.

The full research report, with details of the research underpinning this guidance, as well as further details on the types of distributed workers and key risks, facilitators and barriers, real-life examples and an overall guidance document are all available at www.iosh.co.uk/outofsite.



Test yourself:
What's your leadership style?



Using questionnaires and feedback can be a useful way to help managers understand whether the behaviours identified as effective for supporting occupational safety and health in distributed/remote workers are part of their management repertoire or not.

If a line manager is to be provided with feedback on others' perceptions of their behaviour, then the manager should be supported to understand this feedback (and plan/take action) through a development programme, for example training, coaching and/or action learning. Feel free to test these materials at www.iosh.co.uk/outofsight

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We set standards, and support, develop and connect our members with resources, guidance, events and training. We're the voice of the profession, and campaign on issues that affect millions of working people.

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