



## Health and Safety

### The hidden hazards of homeworking

Many of the health and safety issues that affect homeworkers are similar to those faced by workers in a factory or office environment. However, there are also a number of specific health and safety issues that relate to working at home. It is therefore important that both homeworkers and their employers are aware of the particular health and safety risks homeworkers may face, and the actions that should be taken to minimise them.

#### Reasons for concern

There are several reasons why the health and safety of homeworkers is of special concern.

**Most homes have not been designed with work in mind** so, unlike a factory, the environment is unlikely to incorporate any features which minimise health hazards, such as a separate work room, extractor fans, machine guards, specialised storage facilities for hazardous substances, or temperature control. The environment is also likely to be cramped with work materials jostling for space alongside household furniture, children's toys and even food.

**Any work-related hazards which are present do not just affect homeworkers, but also all other members of their households**, including young children, the elderly and the sick – many of whom may be much more vulnerable to any potential hazards than the healthy male adults on whom products are normally tested to establish safe exposure levels.

**The presence of children**, pets and visitors to the household who are not familiar with the processes involved is likely to increase the risk of accidents.

**The isolated, scattered and unorganised nature of the homeworking population** makes it much less likely that they will receive information about safe working practices or that the Health and Safety Inspectorate will be able to ensure that employers and suppliers of work are acting within the law.

**Under reporting of incidents** is common amongst homeworkers. NGH's research and that of the Health and Safety Executive suggest homeworkers are unlikely to report accidents in the home if they consider it to be 'their responsibility' and not therefore of interest to the

employer. This is also the case with health problems related to work, which some homeworkers do not report for fear of losing work or because they do not consider it to be their supplier's 'problem'. This means the full extent of occupational risk is not well understood, and this information cannot then be applied to improve safety for others.

## **Health and Safety – the facts**

In 2002 NGH conducted a survey on the health and safety needs of homeworkers. The workers surveyed were questioned in detail about health and safety concerns and hazard issues, and the results were published in the NGH report *Out of Sight, Out of Mind*. A wide range of homeworking types were represented in the sample, including sewing, electrical/ electronic assembly, rubber trimming, packing, assembly of gifts/ novelties and more.

### **Health problems experienced by homeworkers**

The study identified a number of common health problems caused by home working (percentages in brackets).

- Headaches (29%)
- Backache (51%)
- Eyestrain (25%)
- Breathing difficulties (6%)
- Skin irritation (12%)
- Dizziness (10%)

## **Environmental hazards and risks**

Homeworkers and their families are also at risk from accidents caused by the use of poorly maintained or dangerous machinery or materials in their homes, and from environmental problems created by carrying out industrial processes and storing goods in the home.

When asked about the environmental problems of homeworking, the following concerns were reported (percentage of homeworkers in brackets)

- Noise problems (7%)
- Mess (over 50%)
- Smells (29%)
- Dust/ fibres (36%)
- Lack of space (58%)
- Electrical dangers (4%)
- Fire hazards (10%)

## **The psychological effects of homework**

It is not just the physical health of homeworkers and their families which is put at risk from homeworking. There is also evidence of damaging effects to mental health. 50% of those questioned suffered from stress, 40% felt fed up or depressed and 19% suffered a loss of confidence as a result of working from home.

## **Health and safety advice and risk assessments**

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH)

Regulations both state that workers should be given information about possible hazards and risks, and given advice and information about the possible risks or hazards they are working with. In our survey, only 20% of homeworkers said that they had been given information by their employer, or supplied with any equipment. In addition, the advice they were given often proved unsatisfactory. None of the homeworkers questioned were provided with a full risk assessment.

### **Health and Safety – Whose responsibility?**

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 all employers have a duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees, including homeworkers. More recent legislation outlines specific measures for dealing with work-related hazards such as monitoring controlled substances, providing personal protective equipment and conducting risk assessments etc.

However, employers and homeworkers are still uncertain about their rights and responsibilities. Whilst in principle employers have a duty of care towards all those who work for them under the Health and Safety at Work Act, the HSE guidance for homeworkers refers only to those homeworkers who are 'employees'. This leaves the many homeworkers who have unclear employment

status equally unclear about their rights to health and safety protection.

Employers also need more guidance and clarity on their responsibilities towards all workers. The most common request from employers who contact NGH is for information on their health and safety responsibilities towards their homeworkers.

*Last updated May 2008*

### **Further information**

*Out of Sight.. Out of Mind: A report on the health and safety needs of UK homeworkers.* Emily Gilbert, NGH 2002

*Health and Safety of Homeworkers: Good practice case studies,* Health and Safety Executive, 2004

*Homeworking. Guidance for employers and employees on health and safety,* Health and Safety Executive, 2005

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