The fine art of remote working

Duncan Ferris takes a look at how working from the cosiness of our homes might lead to some professional discomfort

Coronavirus is the talk of the town, with the pandemic having forced huge swathes of the nation's employed population to adapt to working from home.

Some issues, such as attempting to avoid the myriad distractions offered by Netflix, Spotify and 12 months' worth of pasta, have rather simple solutions, but what are some of the more complex difficulties that might be caused by remote working?

One of the primary causes for concern must be the way in which communication will be affected by not being able to speak with colleagues and other people face to face.

Aon has offered advice that focuses on the challenges presented by virtual meetings, but urges trustees to embrace the form of communication during the isolation period.

The professional services firm recommends holding trial runs of important meetings, breaking discussions down into bite-sized chunks, holding regular web-based video conferencing meetings with clear objectives and giving people ample time to prepare.

Aon partner, Susan Hoare, says: "The Pensions Regulator (TPR) has just underlined the importance of business continuity for schemes – and trustee meetings are a key part of that and need to happen. They are essential for enabling trustees to keep on top of matters and in ensuring that there remains appropriate governance and monitoring in a fast-changing situation.

"Deferring meetings for what could be an indefinite period is no way to run a pension scheme's business. So, in the circumstances that we now find ourselves, we need to get used to meetings happening in a different way – but still as effectively as normal."

Another major pothole for trustees is that of access. Back at the office, employees not only have access to each other, but also to the right software, hardware and paperwork with which to do their jobs.

A checklist released by Buck warns that trustees need to consider ensuring advisers have the right technology to contribute to remote meetings, agreeing alternative processes to 'wet signatures', such as accepting instruction by email, and communicating with employers to ensure contributions can be maintained amidst staff shortages, loss of supply and delays to sales.

Other key steps include making sure payments can be done remotely so that scheme members can be paid on time and the testing of business continuity plans with banking and payroll providers so key activities can continue uninterrupted.

Buck UK managing director, David Piltz, comments: "This is an unprecedented time for everyone, and it's expected that pension scheme trustees and sponsoring employers are concerned about the impact on their scheme."

Piltz adds that responding quickly and effectively to change could provide "the tools needed to help minimise the impact of Covid-19 for all pension schemes", while adding that a plan of action can "ensure schemes are prepared for what lies ahead".

While these measures might help schemes deal with the pressures that being out of the office could place them under, trustees still need to know how to proceed in the face of extreme disruption caused by remote working or staff shortages.

TPR advice states: "You should make it clear which activities should be prioritised in the event of under-resourcing, such as pensioner payments, retirement processing and bereavement payments. Confirm this priority order with your administrators or providers and work with them if there are any issues with these activities."

Written by Duncan Ferris