Guidance for Teleworking Amid COVID-19

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Purpose: To educate National Apartment Association (NAA) members on the challenges associated with teleworking and provide guidance for solutions that lead to successful outcomes. The Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) commitment to safely and effectively meeting the public health challenge presented by COVID-19 (commonly referred to as coronavirus) includes the recommendation that employees work remotely where possible.

Teleworking (or telecommuting or remote work) arrangements are not new, but because they may be unfamiliar to some employers and managers, this best practice document should be used as a resource to help individuals and teams navigate prospective teleworking scenarios. Included is guidance for supervisors, employees and business units designed to aid in the quick and successful set-up of temporary remote work arrangements.

Applies to: Human resource personnel, executive level leadership, regional managers and all other NAA members who are in a supervisory role.

Overview: Employers may require or encourage employees to work remotely in light of the outbreak and spread of COVID-19. According to the CDC, remote work arrangements are considered an effective infection control strategy. The CDC is encouraging employees whose job duties can be performed through telework to do so. Employees who are in high risk groups might request remote work as a reasonable accommodation to reduce their chances of infection. Not all positions will qualify for remote work, so it is best for each company to decide which positions are eligible and what the specific criteria will be for each. The CDC is encouraging employees whose job duties can be performed through telework to do so. Contact your supervisor to determine whether this is feasible given your job responsibilities, as well as to evaluate alternative options. Employees who telework often learn that working remotely is different than expected and that it requires specific skills and habits. The following guidance will assist in the transition to temporary remote work for both the employer and the employee.

Guidance:

1. **Define Your Workspace —** Create an area of your own to work, separate from distraction. Avoid working from the couch and preferably in a room with a door to separate yourself from outside-of-work considerations. Establishing a workspace, even if it is a kitchen table, gives your brain a cue that it is time for work. Items to consider are a computer, reliable internet connection with the option of using a network cable instead of Wi-Fi, a webcam, a headset, a desk and a good office chair. You should pursue a dedicated space that promotes concentration and creativity with a barrier to keep diversions at bay. Use the home office space only when you're working to help preserve a feeling of separation between work and home.

2. **Master the Basics** —— Once you have selected your designated office space and determined needed equipment and resources, it's important to ensure the tools required to perform your job are accessible. Below are basic tools you will need to consider for proper set-up:

   - Set-up call forwarding and ensure you understand how to access your voicemail and email from home.
   - Know how to remotely connect to regularly used documents and company networks.
   - Use Skype, Microsoft Teams and other messaging and communications platforms to stay connected to colleagues.
   - Plan for video calls/meetings by familiarizing yourself with the operations of your computer's camera and microphone, as well as maintaining an awareness that your surrounding environment likely will be visible.

3. **Set Daily Goals —** It is necessary to set daily goals and share your progress. Start each telework day of telework by writing down what you need to achieve and tracking progress. Pay attention to how long tasks take and start adjusting your daily goals to match the pace of work. Communicate with your supervisor and/or colleagues if you think your telework plan requires adjustment.

4. **Eliminate Distractions —** When teleworking, the distinction between home and work can easily blur. This can mean pets, children or a favorite hobby are only a few feet away, adding distraction around every corner. Depending on your living arrangement, you may need to hang a "do not disturb" sign to ensure uninterrupted time. Pets may need a closed door to keep them away and you might need headphones to block outside noise. Having a set schedule that allows for breaks will assist with making the most out of dedicated work time.

5. **Prioritize Privacy —** Whether in a home or a common area, take five minutes to assess the privacy of your workspace. Can someone standing behind you read your computer screen? Are your windows open so a neighbor can hear your phone call? What information do you need to secure before grabbing a cup of coffee or heading to the restroom? Personal privacy matters, too; ensure there is nothing around you that you would not want visible during a video conference. In addition, employees should have a clear understanding that work-issued device(s) are for their use only and should not be shared with family and friends.

6. **Stay Connected —** Accommodating remote work will mean organizations will have to change the way they operate. It will push structural and systemic change to accommodate different ways of working and maintaining productivity. Resources such as Slack and Microsoft Teams allow for additional channels of communication between colleagues. Communication is a priority in continuing seamless, daily operations. It should be assumed that each employee is available during normal business hours.

7. **Technology Resources —** Communication tools allow a team, regardless of location, to work together as if they're in the same office. Project management tools help teams coordinate while enabling individuals to work more effectively on their own time, and helps managers handle project prioritization and documentation. Secure data access, meanwhile, offers employers greater assurances that sensitive information won't leave the company without a data trail to track.

8. **Dress for Work —** While working from home does allow for a more casual dress code, deciding how to dress may determine the level of productivity of your workday. Just like sitting on the couch can make us feel a little too relaxed, wearing pajamas all day makes it more difficult to get into work mode. In today's increasingly digital world, it's always best to assume that your supervisor, co-workers and clients may request a video conference at a moment's notice. In those cases, it's always

best to be properly dressed and ~~prepared~~ ready, rather than needing to ask for additional time to get ready.

9. **Avoiding Loneliness —** According to the <u>2018 State of Remote Work</u>, loneliness is the largest challenge related to remote work. Although being alone is not the only cause of loneliness, it can be a significant contributor. Connect with colleagues and find creative ways to encourage a higher level of engagement to overcome this challenge. Daily check-ins with your team/supervisor are recommended.

10. **Preventing Burnout —** Burnout is harder to diagnose with remote employees because you can't see changes in their personality on a day-to-day basis. Ensure there is a process of checking-in. Because some employees find it difficult to separate work and home life, it is important to encourage balance. Ways to combat burnout include project management by the supervisor to stay aware of daily workload, as well as promoting a policy of limited or no emails after normal business hours.

11. **Health and Wellness —** Investing in your own health and wellness is critical in successfully working remotely. As mentioned above, it is important to find balance and make sure you have some way to physically and psychologically transition out of work mode. In an office, your transition would normally be the commute home. It's important to set a schedule that includes taking breaks. Because you're not in an office, you have more options to do what makes sense for you. Attempt a healthy meal, go for a walk on your break or take an online fitness class in the morning to replace your daily commute.

12. **Managing Conflict —** Because so much communication happens electronically in a remote environment, it's easy to misinterpret tone and sentiment through tools like email and chat. There are a few things that you can do to embrace conflict and leverage it to your advantage in a remote setting:

    - Watch your tone when sending email or chat messages.
    - Ask questions for understanding.
    - Don't make assumptions.

    Conflict often is about a lack of communication or miscommunication. Because you cannot always see each other when you are working remotely, you must be careful and intentional about how you interact with colleagues if not using video chat.

Related Links and Forms

[CDC Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers](#)

Sample Telework Agreement

NAA Flexible Scheduling Best Practice

Communication Tools

Collaboration Tools

About NAA

The National Apartment Association (NAA) serves as the leading voice and preeminent resource through advocacy, education and collaboration on behalf of the rental housing industry. As a federation of more than 150 state and local affiliates, NAA encompasses over 82,000 members representing more than 10 million apartment homes globally. NAA believes that rental housing is a valuable partner in every community that emphasizes integrity, accountability, collaboration, community responsibility, inclusivity and innovation. NAA thanks its strategic partners Maintenance Supply Headquarters and Yardi. To learn more, visit www.naahq.org.