

Working online under pandemic pressures

WORKING online – often at home – has seen an increase in threats to health, especially mental health.

These have become particularly noticeable during the coronavirus pandemic, quickly adopted “emergency” arrangements have either become accepted practice, but without being agreed as changes to working conditions.

Some aspects are organisational while others are more directly related to how individuals behave.

Digital: From creep to treadmill

The advent of social media was quickly followed pressures from employers either to promote material online or to publish it that way, often outside normal working hours.

Journalists who acquired a significant online following were further “encouraged” to increase their social media presence, often – as in the case of well-known sports writers – from early morning until late evening.

In 2020, with more people working from home and employers trying to attract online audiences (as print sales decreased during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns), pressure increased on journalists to use social media outside normal working hours.

Such pressures are stressors within the terms of the (UK) Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Stress Management Standards.

They come not just from the increased workload, per se, but also because they may cause or increase resentment from others in the same household – perhaps because limited working space is not being shared fairly, because family members feel you are distracted, not ‘available’ to them or increasingly distant.

These indirect pressures can be exceedingly destructive, often accelerating a downward spiral of difficulties and despair that become manifest as significant mental health problems, both for you and those around them. Repairing the damage can be a long, slow and very painful process.

Be aware that this can – and does – happen. Look out for it. And, as soon as tensions seem to emerge, try to address them. Be prepared for criticism but ask those around you “what’s the problem?”, knowing that the answer might well be “you”.

You then need to ask them “how” you have become the problem and what needs doing to end the difficulties and stop them happening again.

“Turning off” from work, especially while working at home, is essential for relaxation and maintaining a work-life balance.

Turning off electronic devices at least two hours, if not three, before bedtime can help with sleep. (The light from screens is one factor, letting our minds relax and slow down ready for sleep is another.)

If possible, have a phone specifically for work – and turn it off at the end of normal working hours. Turn on an automatic “out of office” reply saying “I’ve left work for the day and I’ll be back in the morning/after the weekend/my day off”.

If you think you could be working too many hours, keep a log for a few days, inform the NUJ – either a workplace rep, a branch colleague or an official – and then raise the concerns with your line manager.

(These threats to (mental) health are just as great for editors and managers; seniority is no protection against the damage of work-related stress. Ask them how they’re doing as a way of trying to establish some common empathy, so that your contracted working hours are respected.)

Working time

The European Working Time directive has been adopted within legislation in the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom.

▫ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2007/2079/contents/made>

The regulations cover how long someone has to work – if it is longer than 48 hours a week or 40 hours a week for young workers, this has to be agreed in writing.

They also say that working time includes travel as part of the job, working lunches and job-related training.

Specific attention is given to working at night, time off, rest breaks and paid annual leave. Exemptions exist but employers are also obliged to keep records, especially regarding night working.

▫ <https://www.gov.uk/maximum-weekly-working-hours>

Those who feel they are being pressured to work longer than agreed times should contact, initially, chapel reps, the NUJ branch or the relevant official(s) for their industrial sector.

Networking groups

The NUJ has also become aware of an increase in bullying on online networking groups.

Bullying is unacceptable behaviour in terms of Stress Management Standards set by the UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

Among the resources available to manager is a Talking Toolkit. This says workers should “not subjected to unacceptable behaviours such as bullying or harassment at work” – as these are stressors and, as such, the possibility of bullying occurring should have been risk assessed.

The HSE then goes on to suggest some reasonable precautions to minimise the risks from bullying and harassment, saying organisations should:

- promote positive behaviours;
- have agreed policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour;
- have systems in place which enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour while also enabling and encouraging people to report unacceptable behaviour.

▫ <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/assets/docs/stress-talking-toolkit.pdf>

The possibility that bullying and harassment could occur in networking groups should have been risk assessed and everyone made aware that anti-bullying policies, procedures, reporting, grievance and disciplinary systems cover such groups.

If a member suspects that bullying could occur, or is occurring, such policies, procedures and systems should be used.

However, involving the union as soon as possible is essential so that, if bullying has occurred, individuals who have been targeted or affected can be appropriately supported and, if necessary, directed towards legal assistance.

Reasonable precautions can also include ensuring that standards of behaviour are agreed, monitored and maintained – with requirements that those taking part respect one another, do not use inappropriate language and are reminded that social media and alcohol do not mix.

Contacting the union

Individual NUJ members can help protect themselves by knowing about their branch and, where it exists, their chapel. Knowing who to contact and how is essential.

Every chapel has a leader, as – to use NUJ terminology – a mother or father of chapel. An increasing number of chapels have health and safety reps or chapel officers who have had health and safety training and take on the role.

Apart from a few people overseas, everyone in the NUJ is in a branch. (Some branches are dormant, but those in major towns and cities are active and meet regularly. Details can be found on the NUJ website.)

Members who are unsure about branch or chapel affiliation should either check their personal information – profile – on the NUJ website. Alternatively, contact membership@nuj.org.uk by e-mail.

Any member who feels that any e-mail or any form or communication from a colleague or manager is bullying should contact their health and safety rep first. If someone doesn't have access to a dedicated health and safety rep, they should contact their chapel. If they don't have access to a chapel, they should go to their branch.

If a branch isn't available, then every member has access to a union official, either geographically – in the Midlands and North of England, Scotland and Ireland, both the Republic and Northern Ireland, or through the union's *industrial sectors* – freelancing, books, magazines, PR and communications, newspapers and agencies, broadcasting and new media. Contact details can be found on the members' section of the NUJ website. They can put you in touch with a member of the health and safety committee or help with the matter themselves.

Concerns will be dealt with sensitively and confidentially and no question about bullying is too stupid.

If concerns – even vague suspicions – are brought to the attention of chapel or branch officers or the health and safety, then colleagues can be aware of what is happening, can take the necessary precautions and look out for one another.

Links checked August 2021. The information is the best available at this time. Issued by the NUJ Health and Safety Committee. Please note this information is for guidance only and does not constitute legal advice. Should you require legal assistance, please contact your union official or NUJ rep.