Healthy Workplaces
**SAFE AND HEALTHY WORK IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

Healthy Workplaces

# Remote and hybrid work: managing safety and health anywhere

## Key points

- Remote work, in particular home-based work, has been boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Hybrid work, which combines work performed remotely and at the employers' premises, has become increasingly common in the aftermath of the pandemic.
- Even though it has several advantages, remote work may also negatively affect workers' health due to the extensive use of digital technologies.
- It is crucial to identify and address occupational safety and health (OSH) risk factors related to remote and hybrid work.
- A clear policy that sets out provisions on remote and hybrid work combined with education and training of employees and managers are key for safe and healthy remote and hybrid working conditions.

## Safe and healthy work in the digital age

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) is running the 2023–2025 Europe-wide Healthy Workplaces Campaign (HWC) to raise awareness of the implications of the use of digital technologies for safety and health at work. If designed, implemented, managed and used in line with a human-centred approach, digital technologies can be safe and productive. As the use of these technologies at work continues to increase and their impact on work and workplaces is still not fully understood, it is important to gain an understanding on how to fine-tune strategies that promote and protect workers' safety and health.

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## Embracing the remote and hybrid work era

Digital technologies (e.g. personal computers, smartphones, laptops, software packages and the internet) allow people to work remotely, meaning away from the employers' premises for most or part of their working time. When remote work is carried out at home, it is also commonly referred to as telework. During the COVID-19 pandemic, telework became more widespread, while hybrid work, which is the combination of working remotely and at the employer´s premises, gained popularity after the emergency related to the pandemic.

In 2022, 18 % of workers in the EU27, Iceland and Norway worked mostly from home. In addition to teleworkers, people working remotely also includes those working at clients' premises (6 %), at an outdoor site such as a construction site, on the streets of a city or in agricultural fields (5.5 %), in a car or other vehicle (3.5 %) and in public spaces such as coffee shops or airports (2 %). While the vast majority (65 %) worked at the employers' premises, remote work was a reality for one third of the workforce in those countries.

## Implications for workers' safety and health

Remote and hybrid work have several advantages. Work performed from home, for example, saves time and stress because of reduced commuting time to the office, enables a better work–life balance, and drives higher productivity and better concentration.

Nevertheless, telework is also associated with an increase in prolonged sitting and time pressure, longer working hours and social isolation. This can lead to a negative impact on workers' health and contribute to the development or exacerbation of musculoskeletal disorders, such as pain in the neck, wrist and fingers, due possibly to a wrong set-up of the equipment. Moreover, poor lighting conditions may give rise to eye strain and other adverse effects. Working from home can also have different effects on workers with in-house care responsibilities – often women – who, depending on their personal situation, may either see an improvement or a worsening in work–life conflicts.

Digital technologies are crucial for conducting work remotely, but their use has been associated with several psychosocial and physical risks. These risks are exacerbated when exposure to digital technologies is prolonged due to long working hours and excessive workload that prevents people from taking breaks. In terms of psychosocial risks, the use of digital technologies has been connected to a phenomenon called technostress. This means people find it difficult to adapt to constantly evolving technologies, leading to states of anxiety and tiredness.

Working with digital technologies may also contribute to episodes of virtual presenteeism. That is, when workers tend to continue working even in periods when they feel unwell, avoiding taking sick leave. This especially happens when working from home, and may lead to a burnout in the long run. Other potential dangers are connected to prolonged exposure to screens, which have been associated with headaches and digital eye strain, also commonly called computer vision syndrome.

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## A focus on hybrid work

Research shows that a hybrid model has fewer negative effects on workers in terms of work–life balance and stress. However, besides sharing most risks with home-based remote work, hybrid work also has some specific risks. For example, the development of this work model often leads to a reduction in office spaces at the employers' premises, with increased pooling (flex-office) and hot-desking.

These flexible workspaces no longer designate workstations to specific people, groups or departments. In the hot-desking model, users usually need to book a desk to work during certain periods of time at the office. Smaller office spaces mean that organisations cannot accommodate all the teams at the same time. This can weaken work activities on-site, preventing people from carrying out tasks at the office due to noise pollution or lack of suitable spaces, and imposing forced teleworking on certain members of the team. When not properly managed, the presence of people at the office at different times can result in a prolonged feeling of isolation of the individual hybrid worker, also affecting team building and teamwork.

## Risks stemming from the virtual work environment

Finally, the use of digital technologies generates a virtual work environment where geographically dispersed workers interact and collaborate. Specific OSH risks are connected to this virtual sphere, such as being victims of cyberbullying or cyberattacks, especially if there is a lack of training on the safe use of technology tools. Phishing attacks and scams are examples of risks that can also be detrimental to the mental health of workers, increasing their stress levels.

## Safety starts here: risk assessment of remote workplaces

Organisations have a crucial role in preventing risks related to remote and hybrid work. The first step to do this is through a mandatory risk assessment, which should cover remote work in line with EU and national legislations. When work is carried out away from the employer's premises, workplace conditions and related OSH risks are more unpredictable and out of the company's direct control. Therefore, the participation of the employer and employees in the risk assessment process is very important. Apart from providing key information on taking the next steps towards an action plan, the risk assessment process creates awareness among remote workers and the organisation's management.

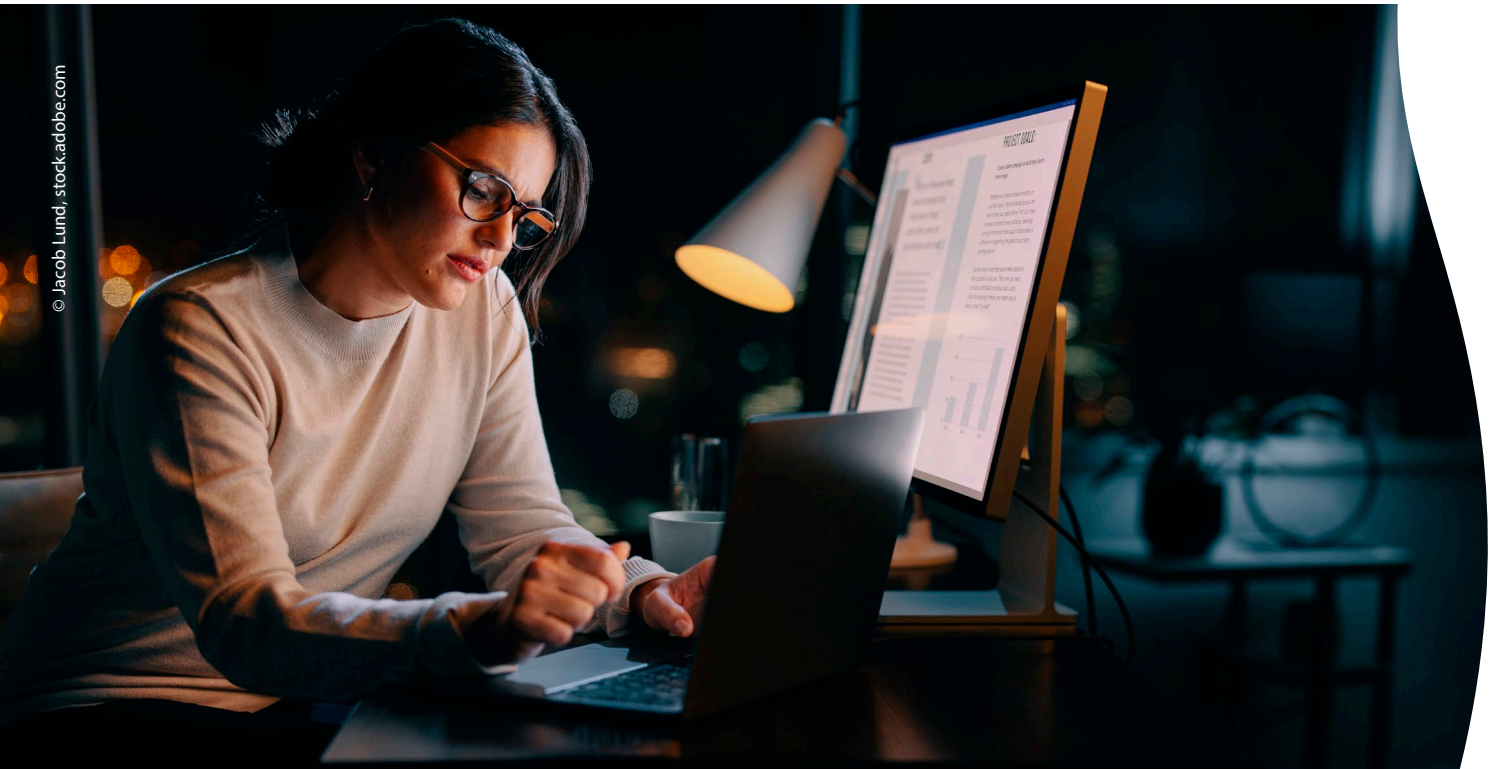
Interactive body mapping and hazard mapping methods ([1]), combined with online tools ([2]) or checklists ([3]), are a good way to identify and understand workers' home-based workplace and related OSH risks.

A risk assessment should also consider the mobility level of workers, that is, the number of locations they work at. Remote workers are increasingly doing their job in multiple locations, such as on the move while travelling for business or leisure. They are using fewer standard workstations. Any public space could potentially be used as a place of work, such as parks, public transport, airports, train stations, libraries and so on. Traditional places where local communities come together, such as cafes, bars and restaurants, are also being used as workplaces. Although accessible, these spaces are unpredictable since their conditions do not depend on the workers or the employers. Depending on the location, the number of physical risks may vary. For example, working from an open-air space may have implications from the exposure to UV light, widely recognised as a cancer risk factor, or have negative consequences on the eyes given the inappropriate lighting conditions when working with laptops and smartphones. Long and frequent work carried out on a train or an airplane may lead to greater exposure to noise and vibration.

1 https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/body-and-hazard-mapping-prevention-musculoskeletal-disorders-msds.

2 https://oiraproject.eu/en.

3 https://oshwiki.osha.europa.eu/en/themes/risk-assessment-and-telework-checklist.



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## How to achieve safe and healthy remote and hybrid work

Both workers and employers can make a difference in making remote and hybrid work safe and healthy. After carrying out a risk assessment of remote workplaces, organisations should provide workers with equipment, digital technologies, technical support and guidance on how to safely use them and how to set up a home workstation. Employers can also practise active listening to understand workers' needs and reduce isolation. Additionally, they can provide training and education activities to raise awareness about safe work anywhere and introduce a clear policy on remote and hybrid work. This should include provisions on how to assess and manage occupational risks, ergonomic equipment, hours of availability and expected results.

Remote workers can optimise their workplace ergonomics and environment, move, change posture, stay active, take regular breaks and stay connected with colleagues and managers throughout the working day. A safe and healthy work–life balance should be pursued, especially by those working from home.

For detailed lists of tips for employers and remote workers, see:

https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/musculoskeletal-disorders-related-telework-tips-employers; and

https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/musculoskeletal-disorders-related-telework-tips-teleworkers.

## Resources

Check out all related content under the priority area 'Remote and hybrid work': https://healthy-workplaces.osha.europa.eu/en/about-topic/priority-area/remote-and-hybrid-work

Consult all publications on the topic: https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications-priority-area/remote-and-virtual-work

EU-OSHA's thematic section on digitalisation of work and its implications for OSH: https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/digitalisation-work

Napo film clips – resources for workplace discussions

Teleworking: https://www.napofilm.net/en/napos-films/napo-teleworking-stop-pandemic

Adjust your home office: https://www.napofilm.net/en/napos-films/napo-back-healthy-future/positive-position

Resources for the workplace: https://www.napofilm.net/en/learning-with-napo/napo-in-the-workplace

Online interactive risk assessment – free sector-specific solutions for employers: https://oiraproject.eu/oira-tools/eu/eu-teleworking/preview.

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