

How to maintain health and safety while working from home

What obligations and responsibilities do employers have towards their employees while they're working from home and what does the law say they should be doing to guarantee their wellbeing?

Maddy Ness met Alexandre Long, co-founder and Managing Director of Agilea, experts in ergonomics to find answers.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Over the last few years, more and more people have developed mental health and musculoskeletal issues in the workplace, especially in the services industry. It is only since the '90s that MSK problems have started to be identified, prompting regulators to legislate.

However, since the day we started using screens (PC, laptop, tablets, smartphones) that have become essential tools in our life, either in our professional or personal life, these health issues took a turn that can't be ignored. When you combine the use of screens with the possibility to work anywhere (at the office, open-space, co-working space and more recently from home), MSK issues grow. Quite often, it is possible to link MSK issues with mental health issues and they're major problems for companies and society.

The cost of mental health and musculoskeletal issues in the workplace

According to the [Centre for Mental Health](#), each year £35B is lost to mental health care. The cost of workplace injuries [is estimated to £5.2B](#),

however, this cost doesn't cover the non-reported injuries, which can be calculated from the number of days of absenteeism and presenteeism. Overall, these costs represent around £60B per annum.

Post-lockdown, with the lack of correct setups and the impact on mental health, those numbers are set to increase, companies, therefore, face a real need to tackle these issues to maintain the wellbeing of their employees and teams in the workplace.

What the law says when working from home

The population has been forced to work remotely, socialisation is therefore reduced and mental health issues can show if employees aren't taken care of, even if they're working from home in their comfort zone.

According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), employers have the same health and safety responsibilities for home workers as for any other workers and suggests that when someone is working from home, permanently or temporarily, they should consider these questions:

- How will you keep in touch with them?
- What work activity will they be doing (and for how long)?
- Can it be done safely?
- Do you need to put control measures in place to protect them?

Lone workers with no direct supervision or anyone to help them if things go wrong may be more exposed to these types of issue which may affect their work and impact their productivity. If contact is poor, workers can feel disconnected, isolated or abandoned, and this can affect stress levels and mental health. HSE states that employers should keep in touch with their workers, including those working from home, and make sure they contact them regularly to guarantee their health and safety.

Mandatory actions from companies

In the '90s, the government instated regulations obligating companies to inform and train their staff on health and safety in the workplace and the associated risks. In the UK, there is a need to assess and audit the workplace through a process called DSE Assessment.

Companies generally use a *tick the box* approach for their DSE assessment, which is often handled by the Health and Safety Department, through a regulatory approach and the regulation has been designed for 1 person, 1 desk, 1 screen, 1 chair. Some companies chose to support these initiatives such as experts in ergonomics Agilea with a solution adapted to the New Ways of Working (NWOW).

Working with display screen equipment (DSE)

For those who are working at home on a long-term basis, the risks associated with using display screen equipment (DSE) must be controlled. This implies employees to conduct workstation assessments at home. There is no increased risk from DSE work for those working at home temporarily. In that case, employers do not need to ask their employees to carry out home workstation assessments.

However, employers should provide workers with advice on completing their own basic assessment at home. There is a practical workstation checklist (PDF)- Portable Document Format that may help them.

To reduce the risks associated with excess screen time, here are some simple steps people can take:

- Breaking down long spells of DSE work with regular rest breaks (at least 5 minutes every hour) or changes in activity

- Avoiding awkward, static postures by regularly changing position
- Getting up and moving or doing stretching exercises
- Avoiding eye fatigue by changing focus or blinking from time to time.

This video provided by HSE will help you assess the quality of your workspace at home.

It is essential to address the current health and safety challenges:

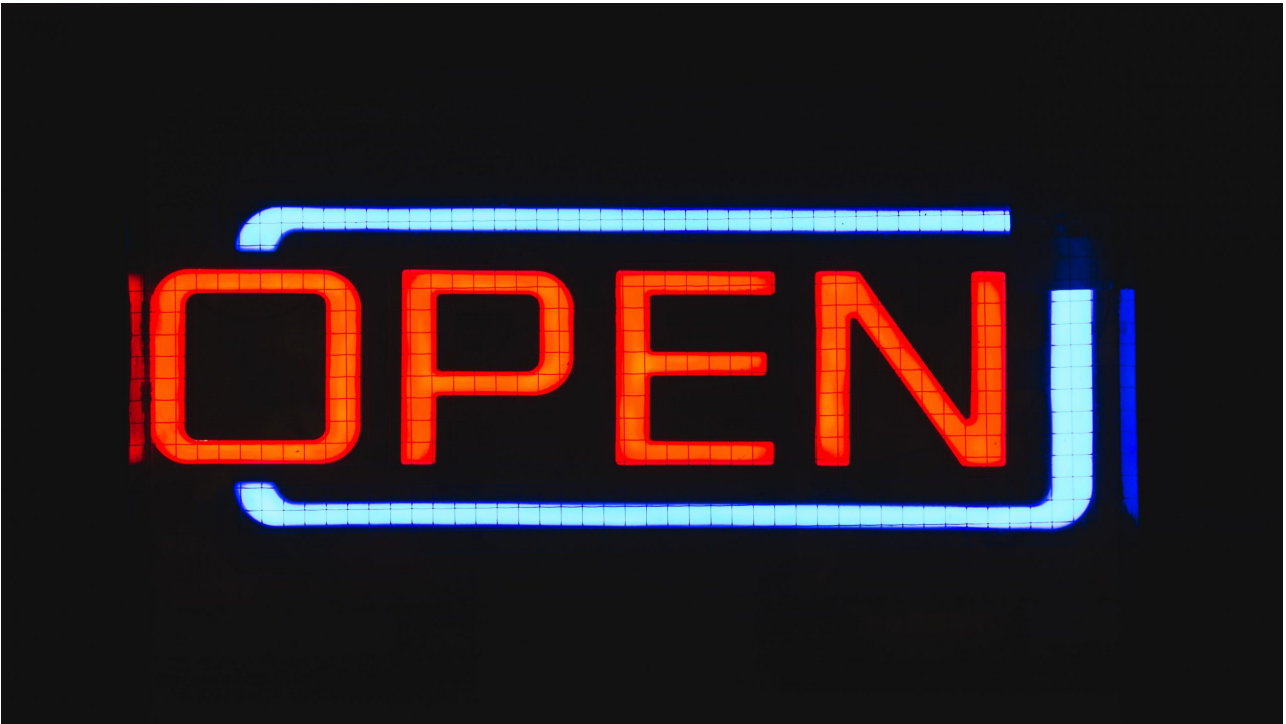
- Screen use is rising massively
- MSK issues and associated mental health issues are rising
- Clinical treatment is limited due to lack of resources (medical staff, insurances cover...)
- Prevention is the only way to limit the costs to society
- Companies have a legal obligation to take care of these issues
- Companies also have a moral duty, and an economical interest to look after their staff
- The current approach is not adapted to NWOW and Ways of life, especially post-lockdown
- All departments involved in looking after Staff members (HR, H&S, FM) tend to not communicate with each other.

To address the above, ergonomics experts [Agilea](#) have designed compelling software to help companies by putting the employee at the core of any action taken in relation to wellbeing, by:

- Breaking down communication barriers between departments
- Allowing the employee to be trained, and informed on all environments used for his work;
- Allowing the employee to access and modify all information related to

their profile

- Allowing the employee to report issues to the relevant person
- Allowing the employer to focus on.



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Article by Audrey Langevin