

The New Way of Working Report

Key European findings and insights from Fellowes Brands

Has the enforced move to working from home had a detrimental effect on employees?

The answer that came back from our survey of 7,000 office workers across Europe, working from home for the last few months, is a resounding “yes.”

Research by Fellowes Brands among employees in **France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain** and the **UK** – all working from home for at least four months due to Covid-19 - paints a worrying picture of the issues faced by many over recent months.

The responses from those interviewed suggests that too many employers are falling short in their duty of care. From workstation risk assessments and office equipment, to taking breaks and understanding their workplace rights, it seems many employees do not yet have what they need to thrive in their home office set-ups. Unless employers take steps to address this, the physical and mental health of employees could be at serious risk.

Among our research findings across the seven countries, we've identified:

- A third of home workers (35%) have experienced stress and anxiety
- Over one in three (37%) have suffered a sore or aching back
- More than two thirds (71%) have bought home office equipment with their own money

With most participants believing that employers care more about productivity, results and making money than employee welfare, organisations need to do more to show that health and wellbeing is a priority for their business. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen the shift to working from home accelerate and, despite the issues raised, most employees do not expect to return to a traditional or wholly office-based way of working.

Whether this is because they prefer working from home, or are concerned about returning to the workplace, over four in five respondents hope to work from home in the long term. Another 35% predict a blended working approach in the future.

For this to become a successful long-term transition, employers and employees will need to communicate and collaborate so employees can work productively and healthily. Improving employee welfare, in every setting, has to be a bigger priority.

These are the core areas that need to be addressed to prevent home-based work-related illness and injury becoming an even more substantial problem in the months and years to come:

Physical comfort

Home comforts seem a long way off for many people working from home, with a significant number experiencing pain and discomfort caused by their work set-up.

41% of people have suffered with strained eyes, while over one in three (37%) have reported sore or aching backs, another 30% have had stiff necks and 39% have dealt with headaches.

With over half (52%) of those surveyed saying that their home workstation caused more aches, pains and strains than their corporate office workstation, it seems that not enough has been done to help workers' home set ups meet health and safety standards.

Over half the workers experienced more aches and pains working at home than in the corporate office

Aches, pains and strains are reported most often in Spain, where 61% of participants experience these conditions while working from home.

Poles are the most likely to suffer from strained eyes, with 61% dealing with the issue compared to 41% of all respondents. A very high number (56%) of Polish home workers are dealing with sore and aching backs, compared to 37% across the survey as a whole.

Home workers' rights

When it comes to home workers' rights across the European region, the legislation and guidance appears to be outdated and does not reflect the circumstances of millions of people working from home during a pandemic.

Although people may be working from home temporarily, due to the current pandemic, health and safety legislation still applies to home working, and employers have health and safety responsibilities for employees working from home. Employees also have an obligation to look after their own health and safety and to do what is reasonably practicable to enable their employers to meet their overarching health and safety duties.

Employers also have a duty of care to their employees' mental health and wellbeing, whether they are working at home or in the office. Home working can cause work-related stress and affect mental health and wellbeing, as it can be difficult for employees to get proper support.

While 45% of respondents state they understand their rights for a safe and healthy home working environment, another 42% are aware but do not fully understand their, or their employer's, obligations. A significant 13% of participants do not understand the need to maintain a safe and healthy home working environment.

When it comes to how the home working environment should be managed 65% of all respondents believe that governments should be responsible. Indeed, four in five Spanish workers think that it's important for the government to regulate home working.

52% of workers have not had their home workspace risk assessed

Under EU Directive 90/270/EEC, it is a legal requirement for employers to undertake regular risk assessments of office-based workers and permanent home-based workers, but the guidelines around temporary home workers are less clear.

Over half of our respondents (52%) have not had a risk assessment in their home working environment. A workstation assessment may seem like a luxury, but it can make all the difference to the health and safety of workers.

By checking that people are working safely and comfortably, a **workstation risk assessment** can help to prevent work-related illness or injury and improve employee health and wellbeing. This assessment also establishes if employees need ergonomic tools to work safely and effectively, such as a height adjustable office chair, back support, monitor or laptop riser.

Brits appear to be the most likely to have a workstation risk assessment, with 55% saying they have had one. This still leaves nearly half of British employees working at home without any checks in place. Just 43% of workers in Germany have been given a workstation risk assessment, leaving over half working without this safeguard.

Matters of the mind

It may come as no surprise that the year that brought Covid-19 was also one that created mental health pressures for employees across Europe.

Around a third of home workers (35%) dealt with stress and anxiety, with 43% feeling tired or lacking energy, and another 36% saying they were lonely or isolated. Indeed, 52% of Spaniards and 42% of Italians working from home report stress and anxiety. Employees should be encouraged to engage with mental health resources and support.

Being at home may also have made it harder to bring an end to the working day, as 52% of people said that they worked longer hours from home during the pandemic.

When working from home, 40% of respondents said they felt they needed to be available at all times, while 32% felt that they could not separate home and office. Another 30% believed they were too busy to take a break.

Three quarters (74%) said that a better home working environment would help them feel more motivated and productive

While many of our respondents said that home working is best for flexibility and a work life balance, most agreed that the corporate office is more likely to help them feel motivated and productive.

Taking a break

Taking regular breaks is part of a healthy working day and would normally be encouraged in an office environment.

Around two in three of our respondents said that their employer had, at some point, encouraged them to take breaks away from their home working area during the day, but only one in five (19%) reported that their employer frequently gave this encouragement.

Brits were the most likely to be often encouraged to take breaks, with 25% saying they were aware of the need for these.

Across our survey, people working from home took an average of 66 minutes away from their workstations, with 51% saying they had more opportunities to take a break and get exercise when working at home.

Helping hand

Many home workers have dipped into their own pockets to make home working more comfortable and productive, with 71% of respondents saying they made personal investments in home office equipment.

Just over half (53%) of our respondents said that their employer supported them in establishing a healthy home working environment, and 59% were provided with office equipment to help them deal with the shift to working from home.

Dutch employers appear to have been among the most supportive in the move to home working, with 62% of Dutch home workers saying that their employer supported the transition, and 68% using equipment provided by their employer.

For some however, the picture has not been quite so positive, with 13% never receiving a reply after requesting equipment and 8% having their request rejected outright.

Over one in five home workers have had their request for office equipment ignored or refused

While most respondents (74%) believe that their employer cares about their physical and mental health and wellbeing, they do not think that this is a top priority for their organisation. Most respondents said that their health and wellbeing was lower on the list for their employer than productivity, results, making money and working well as a team.

Of all the workplace equipment that home workers appreciate most, the office chair appears to be top of the list. A quarter of respondents said their office chair is what they most miss from their corporate offices, with 34% of people hoping to get a new one.

Another 33% of respondents would like better back support while sitting down. **Back supports**, which attach to office chairs with an elasticated or adjustable strap, are designed to help eliminate aches and improve back posture by supporting the whole back or the lumbar region.

Being able to stand up more often is the wish of 28% of home workers, who would prefer to spend less time sitting down to work. **One solution to this is a sit-stand desk converter**, which can quickly transform a desk into a dynamic workspace, helping people to remain active at work.

What next?

Looking to the future for home working, 88% of those interviewed say they would like to work from home long term, although 51% of these hope to work from home just a couple of days a week.

Describing the way ahead, 35% of respondents predict a blended working approach where people spend part of the week working from home and part of the week in the office.

Around a third (33%) of employees foresee a greater reliance on technology and virtual set-ups and another third expect greater flexibility from employers.

Senior level employees place greater flexibility at the top of their list (35%), followed by a blended working approach (32%) and a greater reliance on technology (30%)

With a pandemic-prompted shift to working from home looking likely to become a more permanent feature of working life, it seems clear that employers need to do more for the health and wellbeing of home workers. This is also likely to become increasingly important in retaining and attracting the best talent in the months, and years, to come.

Ergonomist and physiotherapy expert Emma Crumpton, says: **“The Fellowes Brands research supports the idea that employers should engage with their employees to help them work safely at home. Without this, they may face long term problems such as reduced productivity, lower morale and increased absenteeism. This action should start with a workstation assessment, which will help to identify and reduce many of the risks associated with poor working practices and workstation set up. From helping people to sit with the right posture to positioning their monitor screens at the right height and supporting good mental health at work, employees and employers need to work together to prevent a range of long-term health conditions.”**

Kizzy Augustin, Health & Safety Partner at Russell Cooke Solicitors says: **“Employers have always had responsibilities to look after the health, safety and welfare of its employees and the Covid-19 pandemic has simply highlighted these issues, particularly in the context of home working. Having a suitable and sufficient risk/workstation assessment is key to achieving legal compliance. Moving forwards, employers should continue to communicate and consult with employees in order to identify dynamic risks whilst employees work from home. Employees also need to do what is reasonable to assist their employers in meeting their respective legal obligations. Both need to maintain a proactive and preventative approach to look after not only physical safety issues, but also the occupation health and wellbeing of its employees.”**



For more information and ideas on safe working at home, Fellowes Brands offers a quick and free workstation assessment. Visit [Workstation Assessment - Fellowes®](#)

The Fellowes Four Zone Approach is a useful way to assess the needs of employees in their home workspaces. This addresses the four main issues that can stop people from working at their best - back tension, wrist pressure, neck strain and inactivity.

Products that can help to reduce these issues include foot supports, back supports, wrist supports, monitor arms, laptop supports and sit-stand desk convertors.

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