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Mental Health and Employee Well-being in the Digital World: Challenges, Risks, and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies and the accelerated shift toward remote and hybrid work arrangements — catalyzed significantly by the COVID-19 pandemic — have fundamentally transformed the contemporary workplace. While digitalization has enhanced operational flexibility and productivity, it has simultaneously introduced a constellation of psychosocial stressors that threaten employee mental health and overall well-being. This paper presents a secondary data-based review of the mental health challenges arising from digital work environments, examining key risk factors including screen fatigue, technostress, information overload, social isolation, and the erosion of work-life boundaries. Drawing on authoritative sources including the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), and peer-reviewed academic literature, the study analyses the prevalence and consequences of mental health disorders in digitally mediated work settings. The paper further identifies evidence-based coping strategies at both individual and organizational levels to mitigate these risks. The findings underscore the urgent need for organizations to adopt proactive mental health frameworks that align with the realities of the digital age.

Keywords: mental health, employee well-being, digital work environment, remote work, technostress, screen fatigue, information overload, coping strategies, occupational health

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented integration of digital technology into virtually every dimension of professional life. From cloud-based collaboration platforms to real-time communication tools, organizations have embraced digital transformation as a strategic imperative. This transition, while offering notable gains in efficiency, flexibility, and global connectivity, has concurrently produced a complex array of psychosocial stressors that have drawn growing attention from researchers, policymakers, and occupational health practitioners.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a decisive inflection point, compelling organizations across sectors to rapidly adopt remote and hybrid work arrangements. Studies indicate that work-from-home (WFH) rates surged to as high as 80 percent in certain regions during the peak of the pandemic (WHO, 2022). This seismic shift, though partly beneficial in terms of operational continuity, exposed employees to heightened risks of burnout, isolation, digital fatigue, and blurred work-life boundaries — conditions collectively undermining mental health and organizational productivity.

Mental health in the workplace has emerged as a critical dimension of occupational health. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 15 percent of working-age adults globally experience a mental health disorder, with significant implications for absenteeism, presenteeism, and economic output. The digital work environment, characterized by constant connectivity, multitasking demands, and information overload, has been identified as a significant contributor to this growing mental health burden.

This paper undertakes a systematic secondary review of existing literature and empirical data to examine the relationship between digital work environments and employee mental health. It explores definitional frameworks, identifies the primary causal mechanisms of mental health deterioration, and proposes a set of practical coping strategies for individuals and organizations navigating the digital work landscape.

Objectives Of the Study

This study is guided by the following primary objectives:

- To examine and define the key conceptual dimensions of mental health and employee well-being within digital work environments.

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- To identify and analyse the principal psychosocial risk factors — including screen fatigue, technostress, information overload, and social isolation — associated with remote and digital work arrangements.
- To investigate the statistical prevalence and global impact of mental health disorders in the context of digitally mediated work, with particular reference to the post-COVID-19 landscape.
- To evaluate evidence-based coping strategies at both the individual and organizational levels for mitigating mental health risks in digital work settings.
- To propose actionable recommendations for organizations and policymakers to build mentally healthy digital workplaces that promote employee well-being and sustained productivity.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design based exclusively on secondary data. A secondary data-based approach is appropriate for this study given its aim to synthesize and critically evaluate existing knowledge, empirical findings, and institutional data on a well-documented phenomenon. The research does not involve primary data collection; instead, it systematically draws upon published reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, and institutional policy documents to construct a comprehensive analytical narrative.

Nature and Sources of Data

The study relies entirely on secondary data sourced from reputed international organizations, peer-reviewed academic journals, and authoritative institutional repositories. Secondary data, defined as data that has been previously collected and published by third parties for purposes other than the current study, is particularly suitable for policy-oriented and conceptual research that seeks to establish patterns across a broad body of evidence (Kothari, 2004). The principal data sources employed in this study include:

- International organizational reports and policy briefs from the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA).
- Peer-reviewed journal articles retrieved from indexed databases including PubMed/NCBI, BMC Psychology, BMC Public Health, and the Cambridge Journal of Management and Organization.
- Evidence summaries and research reports from professional bodies including the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).
- Statistical data and epidemiological findings from global health surveys and workforce studies published between 2018 and 2025.

Data Collection and Inclusion Criteria

Secondary data was collected through a structured desk review of relevant literature and institutional publications. Inclusion criteria for source selection

were: (a) publication or issuance by a recognized international body, accredited academic journal, or reputable professional organization; (b) direct relevance to the themes of digital work, remote work, occupational mental health, or employee well-being; (c) recency, with preference given to materials published within the period 2018–2025 to ensure contemporary relevance; and (d) accessibility through open-access or institutional repositories. Sources that did not meet these criteria, or that lacked adequate methodological transparency, were excluded from analysis.

Analytical Approach

The analysis follows a thematic synthesis approach, wherein data extracted from multiple secondary sources are organized, compared, and interpreted according to recurring themes identified across the literature. Thematic synthesis is an established method in qualitative secondary research that enables the researcher to move beyond individual study findings to develop an integrated, interpretive account of the phenomenon under investigation (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The themes were derived inductively from the reviewed literature and deductively from the study objectives, yielding a structured analytical framework encompassing risk factors, contextual determinants, statistical evidence, and intervention strategies. Throughout the analysis, triangulation across multiple source types — international reports, journal articles, and professional body publications — was employed to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

Limitations of the Study

As with all secondary data-based research, this study is subject to certain limitations. First, the findings are dependent on the quality and scope of previously published research; any gaps or biases in the existing literature may be reflected in the conclusions drawn. Second, the absence of primary data collection means the study cannot account for context-specific or region-specific variations that may not be adequately represented in international datasets. Third, the rapidly evolving nature of digital work technology implies that some findings may require periodic updating as new evidence emerges. These limitations notwithstanding, the breadth and authority of the sources consulted lend sufficient credibility to the analytical conclusions presented in this paper.

Conceptual Framework and Key Definitions

Mental Health

Mental health, as defined by the World Health Organization, encompasses a state of psychological well-being in which an individual is able to realize their own abilities, manage the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute meaningfully to their community (WHO, 2022). In the occupational context, mental health reflects a worker's capacity to sustain cognitive functioning, emotional resilience, and interpersonal effectiveness in the face of professional demands.

Employee Well-being

Employee well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing the physical, psychological, social, and

organizational dimensions of an individual's experience of work. Broadly defined, it refers to the overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning at work, including feelings of satisfaction, engagement, and meaning (BMC Psychology, 2025). A high level of employee well-being is associated with improved performance, reduced turnover, and greater organizational commitment.

Digital Work Environment and Remote Work

A digital work environment denotes an organizational setup that is heavily reliant on digital technologies — including communication platforms, cloud services, project management tools, and data analytics systems — to perform and coordinate work activities (BMC Public Health, 2025). Remote work or work-from-home (WFH) is a specific subset of digital work arrangements in which employees perform their professional duties from locations outside the traditional office, typically their homes, facilitated by digital devices and internet connectivity.

Digital Overload

Digital overload refers to the excessive and often uncontrollable use of digital devices and platforms, resulting in cognitive and emotional stress (EU-OSHA, 2023). It encompasses both the quantitative dimension — the sheer volume of digital information, messages, and notifications — and the qualitative dimension — the expectation of rapid, always-on responsiveness. Digital overload is a recognized antecedent of burnout, impaired decision-making, and reduced job satisfaction.

The Digital Work Environment and Mental Health: Risk Factors and Challenges

Excessive Workload and Deadline Pressure

One of the most pervasive stressors in digital work environments is the amplification of workload and deadline pressure. The removal of physical boundaries between work and home, combined with the always-on nature of digital connectivity, has created an environment in which employees feel perpetually obligated to be available and productive. Research by CIPD (2023) highlights that remote workers frequently report longer working hours and difficulty disengaging from work tasks, contributing to chronic stress and eventual burnout.

The ILO and WHO (2022) jointly reported that long working hours — defined as 55 hours or more per week — are responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths annually from stress-related cardiovascular and ischemic heart diseases, underscoring the life-threatening consequences of occupational overload in digital settings.

Constant Connectivity and the Absence of Downtime

Digital work environments have effectively dismantled the temporal boundaries that once demarcated professional and personal time. Smartphones, laptops, and enterprise communication tools such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, and email create an environment of perpetual availability, wherein employees face implicit or explicit expectations of rapid response even outside conventional working hours. This phenomenon —

often termed 'always-on culture' — deprives workers of the psychological detachment necessary for recovery and restoration, culminating in heightened anxiety, sleep disturbances, and diminished well-being (Cambridge Journal of Management and Organization, 2021).

Screen Fatigue

Screen fatigue, also referred to as digital eye strain or 'Zoom fatigue', constitutes a significant occupational hazard in the era of remote work. Extended exposure to digital screens

— whether during video conferencing, document processing, or online collaboration — produces a constellation of physical and cognitive symptoms including ocular discomfort, headaches, diminished concentration, and mental exhaustion. The proliferation of video meetings as a substitute for in-person interactions has been specifically implicated in accelerating screen fatigue, as video calls demand heightened attentional effort and limit the natural communicative cues present in face-to-face interactions.

Information Overload

The digital workspace generates a relentless stream of information through emails, instant messages, notifications, and news feeds, creating conditions of information overload that overwhelm an individual's cognitive processing capacity. Information overload impairs decision-making quality, reduces task efficiency, and generates significant psychological stress. Employees navigating multiple communication channels simultaneously are particularly vulnerable to cognitive fragmentation — an inability to sustain focused attention — which further compounds feelings of overwhelm and inadequacy (EU-OSHA, 2023).

Technostress

Technostress is a specific form of occupational stress arising from an individual's interaction with digital technologies. It encompasses both the stress of adapting to new tools and software — techno-complexity — and the stress of remaining continuously connected and responsive — techno-invasion. Research indicates that technostress is positively correlated with emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, and organizational disengagement. As digital transformation accelerates, employees are frequently required to master new platforms and workflows with insufficient training or transition time, intensifying technostress experiences (CIPD, 2023).

Social Isolation in Remote Work

The physical displacement inherent in remote work arrangements deprives employees of the informal social interactions, collegial relationships, and communal experiences that constitute a vital source of psychological support in traditional office settings. Social isolation in remote work is characterized by a subjective sense of disconnection from colleagues, reduced opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, and the erosion of organizational belonging. Research consistently identifies social isolation as a significant

predictor of depression, anxiety, and reduced motivation in remote workers (BMC Public Health, 2025).

Erosion of Work-Life Balance

Perhaps the most structurally embedded challenge of digital work is the erosion of work-life balance. The physical co-location of professional and personal life in the home setting, combined with digital tools that render work perpetually accessible, has progressively blurred the boundaries between occupational and leisure time. Without deliberate boundary-setting practices, employees increasingly struggle to mentally disengage from work, resulting in chronic fatigue, relationship strain, and compromised personal well-being (Cambridge Journal of Management and Organization, 2021).

Statistical Evidence and Post-Covid Developments Global Prevalence Data

The scale of the mental health burden in occupational settings is substantial and well-documented. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 15 percent of working-age adults globally experience a mental health disorder, costing the global economy an estimated US\$1 trillion per year in lost productivity (WHO, 2022). Depression and anxiety disorders, both significantly associated with occupational stress, are among the most prevalent conditions reported in workforce populations worldwide.

The ILO-WHO joint analysis (2022) further revealed that working 55 or more hours per week — a common occurrence in digital work environments — is associated with significantly elevated risks of stroke and heart disease, with an estimated 745,000 deaths annually attributable to long working hours globally. These statistics illuminate the direct, quantifiable relationship between digital overwork and adverse health outcomes.

The COVID-19 Catalytic Effect

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated the most rapid and widespread adoption of remote work in modern history. Prior to the pandemic, remote work was a relatively niche arrangement, confined primarily to specific industries and roles. The pandemic compelled organizations across all sectors to transition to WFH models almost overnight, with some economies recording remote work participation rates of up to 80 percent (WHO, 2022).

While this transition preserved livelihoods and maintained organizational continuity, it simultaneously triggered a significant deterioration in workforce mental health. Studies conducted during and after the pandemic document marked increases in rates of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and burnout among remote workers. The normalization of hybrid work models in the post-pandemic period has made these psychological risks a permanent feature of the contemporary work landscape rather than a temporary phenomenon, necessitating sustained organizational and policy responses (EU-OSHA, 2023).

Sector-Specific Vulnerability

Mental health risks in digital environments are not uniformly distributed across the workforce.

Workers in knowledge-intensive industries — including information technology, financial services, education, and professional services — are disproportionately exposed to technostress, information overload, and the pressures of constant connectivity. Additionally, workers with caregiving responsibilities, those in junior or precarious employment positions, and individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions face compounded vulnerability in remote and hybrid work settings.

Evidence-Based Coping Strategies

Individual-Level Strategies

At the individual level, several behavioral and psychological strategies have demonstrated efficacy in mitigating the mental health risks associated with digital work:

- **Screen Break Management (20-20-20 Rule):** Employees are advised to adopt the 20-20-20 rule — every 20 minutes of screen time, look at an object 20 feet away for 20 seconds — to reduce eye strain and cognitive fatigue. Regular micro-breaks from digital devices also facilitate mental recovery and sustained attention.
- **Boundary Setting and Structured Working Hours:** Establishing and consistently enforcing clear boundaries between work time and personal time is essential for psychological detachment. This includes setting defined start and end times for the working day, disabling work-related notifications outside of hours, and creating physical separation between work and living spaces where possible.
- **Physical Exercise and Mindfulness Practices:** Regular physical activity and mindfulness-based practices — including meditation, deep-breathing exercises, and yoga — have robust evidence bases for reducing occupational stress, improving mood regulation, and enhancing cognitive resilience. Even brief daily exercise routines can yield measurable improvements in mental well-being.
- **Maintenance of Social Connections:** Remote workers should proactively invest in maintaining collegial and personal relationships through both formal (scheduled virtual meetings) and informal (virtual social gatherings, casual messaging) channels. Social support is among the strongest protective factors against work-related psychological distress.
- **Minimization of Digital Distractions:** Deliberate management of digital notifications — including the use of 'do not disturb' modes, app usage limits, and notification batching — can substantially reduce information overload and restore cognitive focus.

Organizational-Level Strategies

Organizations bear a significant responsibility in creating the structural and cultural conditions necessary for employee mental health in digital work environments:

- **Mental Health Policies and Support Structures:** Organizations should formalize mental health

policies that explicitly acknowledge the psychosocial risks of digital work and provide access to employee assistance programs (EAPs), counselling services, and mental health resources. Destigmatizing help-seeking behaviour is a critical cultural prerequisite.

- **Manager Training in Psychological Safety:** Line managers play a pivotal role in shaping the psychological climate of remote and hybrid teams. Training managers to recognize signs of burnout and distress, to model healthy work boundaries, and to foster psychologically safe team environments can significantly mitigate mental health risks.
- **Workload Monitoring and Transparent Communication:** Organizations should implement systems for monitoring workload distribution and ensuring equitable task allocation. Open communication channels that allow employees to raise concerns about unsustainable demands are essential features of a mentally healthy digital workplace.
- **Right to Disconnect Policies:** Several jurisdictions and organizations have introduced formal 'right to disconnect' policies that protect employees from the expectation of out-of-hours availability. Such policies have demonstrated positive effects on stress reduction and work-life balance outcomes.
- **Technology Design and Digital Minimalism:** Organizations can promote digital well-being by auditing and rationalizing their technology stacks, reducing the proliferation of communication platforms, and implementing 'meeting-free' periods to allow for sustained focus work.

Discussion

The synthesis of secondary data presented in this paper confirms that digital work environments, while transformative in their productive potential, have engendered a measurable and growing mental health crisis within the global workforce. The convergence of structural factors — including the obliteration of work-life boundaries, the permanence of digital connectivity, and the cognitive demands of information-saturated work — with the social and psychological consequences of physical isolation has created conditions of chronic occupational stress that traditional occupational health frameworks are ill-equipped to address.

The evidence reviewed indicates that the relationship between digital work and mental health is not deterministic but mediated by both individual and organizational factors. Employees with strong self-regulatory capabilities, robust social support networks, and organizational environments that prioritize psychological safety demonstrate considerably greater resilience against digital work stressors. This finding carries important implications for intervention design, suggesting that multi-level strategies — targeting both individual coping

competencies and organizational structural conditions — are likely to be most effective.

The post-COVID normalization of remote and hybrid work arrangements renders these issues structurally permanent rather than transitional. Organizations that fail to proactively address the mental health dimensions of digital work risk significant costs in terms of employee attrition, presenteeism, and erosion of organizational culture. Conversely, organizations that invest in evidence-based mental health frameworks stand to gain meaningful competitive advantages through enhanced employee engagement, reduced absenteeism, and sustained innovation capacity.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the complex relationship between digital work environments and employee mental health, drawing on secondary data from authoritative international sources and peer-reviewed literature. The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the digitalization of work, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has produced a constellation of psychosocial risks — including screen fatigue, technostress, information overload, social isolation, and erosion of work-life balance — that pose significant threats to the mental health and well-being of the global workforce.

Addressing these challenges requires a concerted, multi-stakeholder response. Individuals must develop and practise evidence-based coping strategies that protect their psychological health in digitally mediated work settings. Organizations must assume institutional responsibility for the mental health dimensions of digital work, embedding proactive mental health policies, manager training, and right-to-disconnect frameworks into their operational and cultural DNA. Policymakers, in turn, must create regulatory environments that incentivize and enforce the protection of worker mental health in the evolving digital economy.

The digital world is not inherently inimical to well-being; it is the conditions under which digital work is organized and experienced that determine its psychological impact. By placing human well-being at the centre of digital work design, organizations and societies can harness the transformative potential of digital technology while safeguarding the mental health of the workers who drive it.

Declarations

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Data Availability: This paper is based entirely on secondary data from publicly available sources cited in the reference list.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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