

# WHAT EVERY EMPLOYER AND EMPLOYEE SHOULD KNOW FOR THE DIGITAL ECONOMY



**employment & labour**

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## 1. Aim

The aim of the document is to **provide employers and employees with information on how to identify and control occupational health and safety related exposures in the digital economy.**

## 2. What is the digital economy?

The digital economy can be defined as the digitalisation that has creep into almost all sectors of the economy and has encompassed a wide range of new ways of incorporating data and the internet into production processes and business models. For this guideline, examples of the digital economy include, but are not limited to; telework, call centres and platform work.

Telework can be defined as work that is fully carried out at a location other than the employer's premises and the use of electronic devices such as a computer, tablet, telephone or smartphone to perform work. Alternative terms for telework include remote work and e-work. Hybrid work refers to a combination of telework and working at the employer's premises.

Call centres provide customer services through telephone or computers and may be either telework, hybrid work or at the employer's premises.

Platform work can be defined as work performed on an online platform which is provided through, on or mediated by online platforms.

## 3. What are some of the hazards employees in the digital economy may be exposed to

The table below lists some of the hazards digital economy employees may be exposed to.

Hazard	Examples
Biological	Viruses, bacteria, moulds
Chemical	Carbon dioxide Carbon monoxide Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) Cleaning products, photocopier toner Other pollutants
Ergonomics	Sitting for long hours Repetitive movements Awkward postures Small workspaces
Physical	Poor indoor air quality or ventilation Exposure to acoustic noise or an acoustic incident through the headset (e.g., crackles, whistles, hisses or high-pitched sounds, feedback, or phone receivers being slammed or dropped) Inadequate illumination (e.g., glare, low levels, high levels)
Psychosocial	Exposure to threats of violence, harassment, or verbal abuse, cyberbullying Workplace stress Work pace Longer working hours Interference with work–life balance Isolation and detachment
Safety	Slips, trips, and falls Electrical hazards Fire hazards

#### 4. What should the employer do to protect their employees

The Occupational Health and Safety Act, Act 85 of 1993 defines a workplace as “any premises or place where a person performs work in the course of their employment”.

Section 8 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act, Act 85 of 1993, requires an employer to provide and maintain a workplace that is safe and without risk to the health of his or her employees. In order for the employer to provide and maintain the safe workplace, that is without risk to the health, the employer needs to manage the risks associated with the workplace. This risk management is a systematic approach of identifying, assessing, controlling and monitoring the hazards identified.

##### 4.1 Risk Assessment

The first step in the risk management process is conducting a risk assessment of all hazards to which an employee may be exposed to in the workplace. This assessment includes;



**Figure 1:** Risk assessment process.

When assessing the hazards, consider the following;

- where the work is being done, i.e. the environment;
  - space, ventilation, temperature, illumination, noise levels (both ambient and acoustic incidents), sources of pollutants (both chemical and biological), etc.
- the type of work and equipment;
  - workload
  - working periods
  - performance-based work/pay
  - complex and difficult tasks requiring concentration
  - desks, chairs, equipment required to perform tasks, etc.
- the individual employee;
  - individual characteristics
  - processing characteristics
  - vulnerable employees

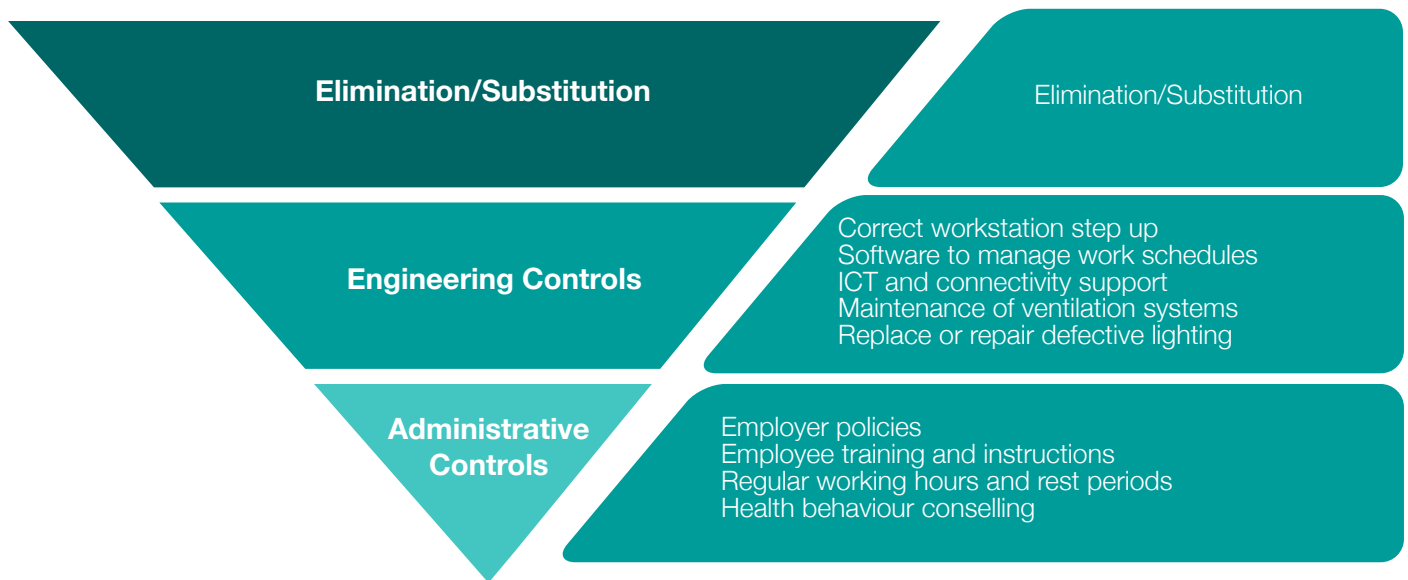
Employers are also required to ensure that persons who are not their employees, but who may be affected by their activities from or at the workplace, are not exposed to hazards which may affect their health or safety.

Two checklists have been provided at the end of the document to guide both the employer and employee in assessing hazards in the workplace.

## 4.2 Risk Control

Exposure to a hazard resulting from the digital economy should be mitigated to the lowest reasonably practicable level by implementing a progressive combination of the hierarchy of controls.

The hierarchy of controls is a step-by-step approach to eliminate or mitigate workplace hazards. It ranks controls from the most effective level of protection to the least effective level of protection. When choosing a control method, start from the top of the list below. Assess the feasibility of the first layer of controls (elimination) before moving on to the second layer (substitution). Continue this process until you reach the bottom of the list and have identified as many controls as possible to adequately protect the employee from the hazard.



**Figure 2:** Hierarchy of controls of occupational hazards in the digital economy.

Some additional control measures the employer should implement include, but not limited to;

- providing supervisors with training on effective risk management, distance leadership and workplace health and safety promotion. This training should cover how to mitigate risk and respond to employees' health and safety issues.
- providing employees with:
  - information, recommendations and training on how to setup and adjust workstations;
  - clear communication on tasks, responsibilities, decision-making authority, autonomy and results to be achieved, adjusting workload and work assignments where necessary;
  - defined, regular working hours and rest periods; and
  - clear direction on maintaining confidential information.

Once specific control measures have been identified, an action plan should be developed by the employer, detailing the implementation timelines, as well as person or persons who will be responsible for actioning the control measures. Once the control measures have been implemented, inspections should be conducted, at intervals determined by the health and safety committee or health and safety representatives, on the control measures to determine if the control measures are working correctly and employees are using them correctly.

Some of the issues which may affect occupational health and safety in this situation include, but not limited to:

- will the employer or the health and safety committee/representative have access to the workplace for inspections? or, will alternative arrangements be made such as the employee using checklists or submitting photos or videos, etc. of the workplace?
- what parts of the alternative workplace will be considered the 'workplace'? For example; the bath room and/or kitchen included?

- for the employee to immediately report any incident to their supervisor (just as they would at the employer's premises)
- how will incidents be investigated?
- who purchases and maintains equipment such as the desk, chair, computer, accessories (including software and updates), general office supplies, etc.
- if remote access to the employer's main computer systems is available outside of the defined work location or not. If possible, how and what type of software or equipment is necessary?
- what expenses will be reimbursed, for example; telephone lines, internet access, business telephone calls, office supplies, etc.
- the work hours, overtime and availability of the employee

#### 4.3 Record Keeping

Regulations under the OHS Act provide guidance as to what records must be kept, as well as for how long a period. Some of the records which need to be kept, and for how long, are:

- for 40-years:
  - risk assessments
  - occupational exposure monitoring
  - medical surveillance
- for 3-years:
  - control measures implemented
  - maintenance of control measures implemented
- for the length of time an employee is employed for:
  - training of employees

Due to the extended period between exposure and diagnosis of an occupational disease, the long period of retention of records is necessitated. The format on how records should be stored, i.e. electronically or hardcopy is not specified. However, whichever method of storage the employer chooses to use, the records should be easily accessible and in a manner that allows the person accessing the records to be readable.

#### 4.4 Review

The risk assessment should be conducted and reviewed at least every 24-months and recorded. Shorter review periods may be necessary if new information becomes available or there has been a change in task or control measures. The risk assessment should also be reviewed if an incident occurs or if an employee suffers an adverse health effect as a result of exposure.

### 5. What should digital economy employees do to protect their health and safety

Section 14 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act, Act 85 of 1993, imposes duties on an employee while they are at work. These duties include:

- looking after their health and safety as well as their colleagues;
- cooperate with the employer in performing their duties;
- carry out any lawful instruction given to them;
- obey health and safety rules; and
- report unsafe or unhealthy situations or incidents.

Some additional measures employees can take when performing digital economy work include, but not limited to;

- have a specific area within your defined work location;
- begin and finish at the same time every day;
- maintain contact with the your employer or supervisor;
- attend meetings and gatherings virtually or at the defined work location if possible;
- determine what interruptions are okay and what is not and inform your friends and family what the ground rules are; and
- make arrangements for leave as if you were at the employer's workplace.

Employees should also get involved in health and safety issues affecting themselves and their workplace. If they are nominated and appointed as a health and safety representative, also perform those duties, to the best of their ability.



## Resources and additional reading

1. Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS). Canada. <https://www.ccohs.ca/> . 2025
2. Department of Employment and Labour. Ergonomics Regulations. South Africa. [labour.gov.za/Pages/Default.aspx](http://labour.gov.za/Pages/Default.aspx). 2025
3. Department of Employment and Labour. Occupational Health and Safety Act, Act 85 of 1993 as amended. South Africa. [labour.gov.za/Pages/Default.aspx](http://labour.gov.za/Pages/Default.aspx). 2025
4. European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OHS). European Union. <https://osha.europa.eu/en> . 2025
5. International Labour Organization (ILO). <https://www.ilo.org/> . 2025
6. Safe Work Australia. Australia. <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/safety-topic/managing-health-and-safety/working-home> . 2025



## EMPLOYEE'S CHECKLIST TO ASSIST IN ASSESSING DIGITAL ECONOMY WORKPLACES

This checklist may be used as a guide of identifying hazards and existing controls in the workplace, in order to improve the workplace. The checklist should be used to facilitate support and improvement, not simply as a 'tick-the-box' exercise.

The checklist is also not exhaustive and employees should therefore source additional information and tools to assess their workplaces. Employers may also use this checklist as a form of assessing workplaces.

If "YES", no further actions are required. If "NO", action required.

	Statements (situations to be reached)	Yes	No
1.	Workplace environment		
1.1	The workplace is large enough to set up the workstation comfortably?		
1.2	The workplace is properly cleaned and maintained?		
1.4	The temperature in the room is comfortable?		
1.5	The lighting (i.e. daylight, including additional artificial light if necessary) at the workplace is sufficient to perform tasks efficiently and accurately?		
1.6	The room has a window with an outside view?		
1.7	There is light protection? (i.e. curtains or blinds, etc.)		
1.8	There is no annoying noise that disturbs concentration and attention during your work activities?		
1.9	The electrical wiring, plugs and sockets are safe (not damaged) and in good working order?		
1.10	There is no danger of slips, trips or falls because of electric cables and obstructed walking spaces?		
2.	Chair, sitting posture and desk		
2.1	Do you have an office chair that is in good condition and stable?		



	(i.e. seat height, seat depth and support in the low back are adjustable, seat and back can move and the movement mechanism is adjustable).		
2.2	The chair supports a good sitting position? (i.e. both feet support flat on the ground or footrest, hips are positioned slightly higher than the knees, the front edge of the seat does not push against the knee pit or lower legs when sitting properly against the backrest of the chair, the backrest supports well the lower back).		
2.3	The chair is adjustable and has a movement mechanism: the backrest is unlocked and smoothly follows your movements?		
2.4	The forearms are well supported by the table and/or armrests in a horizontal position (90° angle to the upper arms)?		
2.5	The table height is at the same height as the elbows (from a good sitting position)?		
2.6	The table is large enough to set up the monitor, keyboard and mouse correctly and, if necessary, to perform tasks other than computer work.		
<b>3.</b>	<b>Hardware (screen, keyboard, mouse) and set-up</b>		
3.1	The screen is large enough and have good quality according to the applications you need to use? (i.e. no shiny screens and, the contrast and brightness are adjustable).		
3.2	Do you have sufficient screens according to the tasks you need to perform? (e.g. simultaneous use of Microsoft Teams, Outlook, Word, Excel, etc.).		
3.3	When using only one screen: the screen is positioned right in front of you, so you don't have to turn the head and/or neck to see it?		
3.4	When using two screens (e.g. laptop and fixed screen or two fixed screens): both screens are positioned so that from an upright posture you can see on both screens with minimal head movement?		
3.5	The top edge of the screens are at eye level and slightly tilted toward you?		
3.6	There is no inconvenient reflection or light on the screen?		
3.7	In your horizontal field of view (i.e. next to and above your screen), you do not look directly into bright light such as daylight, a lamp, etc.?		
3.8	Do you use an external keyboard in the case of laptops or tablets?		
3.9	The keyboard is in good condition and works properly? (i.e. the keys are easy to read, smooth to touch, etc.)		
3.10	The keyboard is positioned right in front of the screen?		
3.11	Do you use an external (separate) mouse?		
3.12	The size and shape of the mouse fits well in the hand?		
3.13	The mouse is located next to the keyboard, so you avoid stretching to use it?		
<b>4.</b>	<b>Accessories</b>		
4.1	Do you have a laptop stand available when working on a laptop or use a detachable screen?		
4.2	When working with a tablet, you use a tablet holder (possibly supplemented with an external keyboard)?		
4.3	Do you have a document holder when typing up notes or text from paper documents?		
4.4	Do you use a footrest when the feet are not fully supported on the floor? (e.g. when the height of the desk is higher than elbow height)		
4.5	Do you have a headset available if needed? (e.g. during meetings, when there is a lot of background noise, during a phone call)		
<b>5.</b>	<b>Internet, software and support (helpdesk)</b>		
5.1	Do you have a good internet connection at the alternative workplace?		
5.2	The software is suitable to perform your tasks efficiently?		

5.3	Technical support is provided in case of problems with the computer software?		
<b>6.</b>	<b>Work organisation</b>		
6.1	Are your tasks, responsibilities and expectations clearly defined?		
6.2	Does your employer, supervisor and colleagues respect the agreed working hours?		
6.3	Can you organise your work in such a way that you can take regular breaks?		
<b>7.</b>	<b>Psychosocial factors</b>		
7.1	Is there a good balance between working at alternative workplace and working in the office and, you stick to normal working?		
7.2	Is your workload mostly acceptable?		
7.3	Do you feel isolated?		
7.4	Do you have sufficient balance between formal and informal contact moments with your colleagues and supervisor?		
7.5	Do you feel valued by your supervisor and colleagues?		
7.6	Can you ask your colleagues and/or supervisor for help when needed?		
7.7	Attention is paid to breaks during long-duration online meetings or online training sessions?		
<b>8.</b>	<b>Healthy lifestyle</b>		
8.1	Do you rarely sit for more than 30 minutes at a time (e.g. by using a timer to tell you when to take a micro-break)?		
8.2	Do you spend a maximum of 8 hours sitting during a day (this refers to sitting while working, in private time, in the car, etc.)?		
8.3	Do you alternate between postures (e.g. by sitting, standing, walking, etc.)?		
8.4	Do you do some exercises during a short break (e.g. forward/backward rotation of the shoulders and wrists)?		
<b>9.</b>	<b>Information, training and support</b>		
9.1	Do you receive information or attend training about data protection regarding working at alternative workplace?		
9.2	Do you received information or attend training about the ergonomic design of the workplace with regard working at alternative workplace?		
9.3	Do you received information or attend training about the psychosocial factors with regard working from alternative workplace?		
9.4	Do you received information or attend training about a healthy lifestyle with regard working at alternative workplace?		
9.5	Do you received information or attend training about the software programmes with regard working at alternative workplace?		
9.6	Can you contact an employee wellness programme, arranged by your employer, to report symptoms of burnout, conflicts with colleagues or supervisors, being bullied, being harassed, etc.		

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The checklist is also not exhaustive and employers should therefore source additional information and tools to assess their workplaces, in order to ensure that the workplace is safe and without risk to health of employees.

If "YES", no further actions are required. If "NO", action required.

	Statements (situations to be reached)	Yes	No
1.	There is a clear vision and policy.		
2.	There is a written agreement with employees who perform digital economy work.		
3.	The organisation focuses on connecting relational leadership with attention to appreciation and focus on results (based on trust).		
4.	Digital economy work is included in the employer's risk assessment. Self-assessments (checklists) are made available to employees so that they can assess digital economy work in all its aspects. The information collected is incorporated (anonymously) into the employer's risk assessment.		
5.	The employer may visit the alternative workplace with the employee's permission. If permission is not granted, risk assessment could be carried out on the basis of the information collected from the employee, in accordance with the operating instructions.		
5.	The organisation provides information and/or training for employees on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ ergonomic design of the workplace</li> <li>○ psychosocial factors</li> <li>○ a healthy lifestyle</li> <li>○ the use of ICT and software programmes</li> </ul>		
7.	Employees can report symptoms of burnout, conflicts with colleagues or supervisors, being bullied, being harassed, etc.to the employer.		



