GUIDE ON
WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Everything you need to know

about work environment: From the mental and physical consequences of both poor and proper setups to rules and laws.

contour

The working environment has a significant impact on our health and well-being.

Fortunately, it is something that policymakers, employers, and workers have been aware of for a long time. Actually, there is a description of working conditions and occupational diseases in the baked goods industry dating back to the 17th century. It was written by an Italian doctor and could have been formulated in the 1990s.

Table of Contents

What is the work environment?

What does the work environment cover

The concept of work environment includes a vast array of conditions which all together set the health and safety-related terms that your job must respect. It covers the full spectrum of physical and psychological factors that affect you in your daily work.

Since the specific conditions depend on your work, there can be a significant difference across various organizations but similarly inside an individual business. You will different regulations apply to a warehouse worker versus an accountant.

For some, physical factors are the most important ones as there is a more significant imminent threat due to apparent hazards. A scaffolding worker needs proper security versus this risk of falling and collapse, while an electrician needs more focus on the risk of shock. All in all, an accountant sees minimal risk of both.

However, it is not always a clear and present danger that needs to be addressed. An office worker can be at risk to develop either passing or chronic suffering due to poor ergonomics and inappropriate working positions.

Additionally, psychological conditions such as working hours, stress, social life, and general organizational structures can significantly affect mental wellbeing. A boss or co-worker misbehaving or bullying the other employees creates a potential problem for the organization.
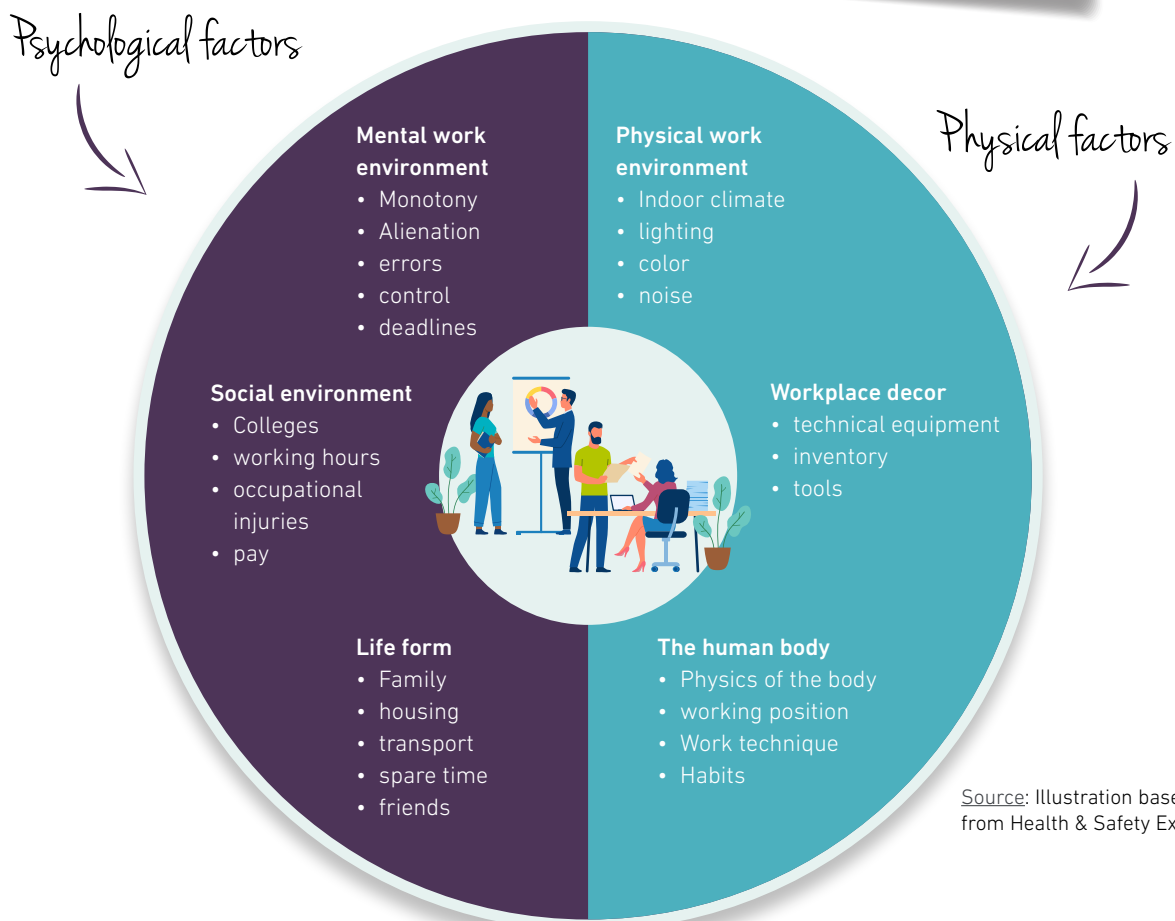
The two sides of the working environment

To fully address a good working environment, it is required that a business understands the different factors affecting workers. On one side, you have the physical characteristics such as workplace design, facilities and other aspects covering physical needs. On the other half, you will find the psychological factors such as social aspects, working hours, people management, etc.

Physical factors:

- Physical work environment
- Workspace design
- The human anatomy

Psychological factors:

- Psychological work environment
- Social environment
- What happens outside work

Psychological factors

Physical factors

Mental work environment
- Monotony
- Alienation
- errors
- control
- deadlines

Social environment
- Colleges
- working hours
- occupational injuries
- pay

Life form
- Family
- housing
- transport
- spare time
- friends

Physical work environment
- Indoor climate
- lighting
- color
- noise

Workplace decor
- technical equipment
- inventory
- tools

The human body
- Physics of the body
- working position
- Work technique
- Habits

Source: Illustration based on inputs from Health & Safety Executive

Physical factors

Physical working environment
If you wonder what makes up the physical working environment, it covers all the conditions that affect you physically, even though you are not in direct contact with it. The indoor office climate includes noise levels, lighting, ventilation, and spacing.

Workspace design
The interior design and decoration cover everything related to equipment and furniture. This is where your desk, office chair, computer, keyboard, and mouse enter the frame.

Human anatomy
Imagine how you use your equipment and how your body is positioned at work in this section. What are your habits, work technique, and body strain affecting your health?

Source: Health & Safety Executive

Psychological factors

Psychological working environment
The typical factors in this category can be related to repetitive, monotone work versus varied tasks, how mistakes are noted and corrected, how work-life balance is set up, how your time is managed, and how management treats deadlines. It can be defined as the organizational and structural framework for your work.

Social environment
Your colleagues and the social dynamics in the office are critical in the workplace. Naturally, we all have individual social needs and ways of realizing ourselves through interpersonal connections. As part of the social environment, working hours and compensation also play a crucial role alongside any work-related injuries due to mental strain.

What happens outside of work
Here, we talk about everything that happens in the private sphere that can play a significant role in your work. It covers family matters and social relations, leisure time, and transport to and from work – just to name a few.

Together, these factors make up the working environment. How an employer and employees should act regarding them is part of The Workplace Health, Safety & Welfare Regulations act that came into law in 1993. This includes a series of minimum standards for workplaces.

Source: Unison

The Working Environment Act

Working environment regulations

The different regulations and laws related to the working environment are defined in the Health and Safety at work etc. Act 1974. The legislation contains the fundamental rules and general rules regarding health and safety protocols for the working environment. Additionally, the demands for employers and businesses are defined to secure proper and safe working conditions for workers.

It is also through the Health and Safety at work etc. Act 1974 that employees can challenge their working conditions in the workplace and expect their requests and questions to be met with seriousness from management.

The working environment law explains what is included in securing a good working environment and who is responsible for achieving it. The law grants the Authorities the responsibility to ensure these conditions through guiding and monitoring businesses to meet the criteria.

I arbetsmiljölagen redogörs för vad som hör till arbetsmiljön och vem som ansvarar för att goda förhållanden säkerställs.

Health and Safety at work etc. Act 1974

1   The provisions of this part shall have effect with a view to—

    a.   securing the health, safety and welfare of persons at work;

    b.   protecting persons other than persons at work against risks to health or safety arising out of or in connection with the activities of persons at work.

    c.   controlling the keeping and use of explosive or highly flammable or otherwise dangerous substances, and generally preventing the unlawful acquisition, possession, and use of such substances.

    d.   controlling the emission into the atmosphere of harmful or offensive substances from premises of any class prescribed for this paragraph.

2   The provisions of this part relating to the making of health and Safety regulations F3. . . and the preparation and approval of codes of practice shall, in particular, have effect with a view to enabling the enactments specified in the third column of Schedule 1 and the regulations, orders and other instruments in force under those enactments to be progressively replaced by a system of regulations and approved codes of practice operating in combination with the other provisions of this part and designed to maintain or improve the standards of health, safety and welfare established by or under those enactments.

3   For the purposes of this Part risks arising out of or in connection with the activities of persons at work shall be treated as including risks attributable to the manner of conducting an undertaking, the plant or substances used for the purposes of an undertaking and the condition of premises so used or any part of them.

The Authority's guidance

The Health & Safety at Work act is not necessary enough on its own, as it only describes regulations regarding the general working environment. Terms and conditions vary significantly between industries, while new amendments are consistently written to cover unique aspects.

By not being too specific in its phrasing, the authorities provide leeway for continuously mitigating the regulations they publish as guidelines. An example of this can be found in section 2, part 1:

"It shall be the duty of every employer to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all his employees."

Source: Health and Safety at work etc. Act 1974.

Example:

Digital Screen Equipment

As mentioned above, the regulations are broadly phrased, why you need to know what is standard in your specific industries. If you work with computers – also known as Digital Screen Equipment (DSE) – your employer must protect you from the health risks of daily performing in front of a screen. This law applies to working from a PC, laptop, tablet, or mobile phone.

Employers must ensure proper equipment and the workstation to cover the entire spectrum, including furniture, equipment, and body positioning.

Below, you will find a few examples from the DSE guidelines to ensure safe working practices:

1. Secure good posture
2. Provide adjusting chairs and other furniture
3. Inform on arranging desk space and the possibility of ergonomic equipment.
4. Provide adjusting screens and lighting to avoid reflections and glare
5. Enable breaks and changes of activity
6. Conduct consistent risk assessments
7. Describe how to report problems

Additionally, employers should inform about various arrangements for health and safety in their DSE work and how to apply for, e.g., an eye test.

Source: Health & Safety Executive

As an employee, you can use these guidelines to ask your employer to provide safe and appropriate conditions if your equipment or workstation is not living up to the standard required by law.

A proper working environment

What is What is an ideal work environment?

Fundamentally, a stable working environment ensures that you do not fall ill from going to work – neither physically nor psychological. Your body can experience numerous strains such as muscle- or tendon injuries, while a psychological overload can lead to stress or depression.

Ideal work environment – how?

A sound operating environment helps ensure higher efficiency and reduces sick leave. In other words, there are both costs to save and profits to gain from creating a better working environment.

This is an essential aspect of preaching a stronger focus on reducing and removing physical and psychological strains in the workplace. A robust working environment often requires more than purchasing the right equipment, as workers also need instructions on how to use it properly.

Regarding psychological conditions, the workers' influence becomes even more critical. They play a significant role in ensuring good workplace dynamics in setting a socially inclusive setting at lunch and in the break room.

Source: Good Work: A Response to the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices

A poor working environment

What is a bad work environment?

If there are factors at work that hurt your mental or physical health, you are unfortunately employed in bad working conditions.

You can tell in many ways, but typical-ly some standout indicators appear. This can be physical pains in the neck, shoulders or wrists, mental aspects such as depression or stress, or you may experience an actual work injury.

Numerous UK workers experience different kinds of stress, harassment, or bullying at work, while others deal with physical ailments after a typical day's work.

These conditions are clear indicators of an unhealthy working environment

Bad working conditions: What to do?

If you work in an unhealthy environment that causes physical or mental challenges, you should never forget that you are not alone.

Find help:

1. **Management**: Your manager should always help create the best working conditions possible. In case of challenges, they will usually listen and find ways to improve. If your manager is part of the issue, that is different.

2. **Health & safety reps**: You consult with your work environment representative appointed by your employer and raise your issues directly with them. They will be able to help you take the appropriate next steps.

3. **Union**: Your union representatives ensure that your working environment is healthy and safe. They can assist you in investigating and raising health and safety issues with your employer.

4. **Authorities**: The last resort is speaking to the authorities to provide input on how to change the working environment and ultimately help command that these changes are implemented.

Source: Acas, Unison, CIPD

Contour Design är marknadsledare inom forskning, utveckling och design av ergonomiska datormöss och tillbehör som RollerMouse, Unimouse, Contour Mouse och Balance Keyboard.

Contour Design Inc. grundades 1995 av Steve Wang och har sitt huvudkontor i Windham, New Hampshire, USA, och hanterar produktutveckling och den dagliga verksamheten i Nordamerika.

Huvudkontoret för Contour Design Nordic, som importerar och marknadsför sina produkter via dotterbolag i Danmark, Norge, Sverige, Finland och Storbritannien, ligger i Ballerup. Contour Design Nordic har även partnerskap med distributörer av ergonomisk kontorsutrustning i Tyskland, Frankrike, Nederländerna, Österrike och Schweiz.