

Policy Brief #1

Mental Health at Work: Emerging Challenges in a Changing Labour Market

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KEY MESSAGES

- **Workplaces are undergoing profound transformations** driven by the **digital, demographic and green transitions**, together with **evolving forms of work organisation**. While these changes create significant opportunities for productivity, innovation and safer working environments, they also require organisations to anticipate and manage emerging risks to workers' mental health. **Although workplace change and adaptation have always been part of working life, the pace, scale and combination of current transitions are reshaping working environments in new ways, requiring renewed attention to workers' mental wellbeing.** Many employers are already investing in preventive measures and workplace wellbeing initiatives, although challenges and levels of preparedness continue to vary across sectors and company sizes.
- Digital technologies are reshaping the work environment. Robotics, wearable technologies, AI-enabled and digital workforce management tools can improve **efficiency, safety and job quality** by reducing repetitive tasks, and freeing up time for more strategic and/or higher-value activities. **But their implementation may also require consideration of potential challenges** such as cognitive overload, work intensification, and changing workplace relationships.
- Artificial intelligence and algorithmic management are transforming how work is planned, organised and monitored. **Human oversight, transparency, worker involvement and appropriate managerial practices** are essential to maximise the benefits of these technologies while preventing unintended effects on **autonomy, trust and mental wellbeing**.
- **Climate change and the transition towards a greener economy are reshaping working conditions** in different ways. Rising heat exposure, new environmental risks, and changes in employment patterns and skill requirements may affect both workers' physical and mental wellbeing, calling for **integrated organisational responses** that support adaptation, resilience and workforce development.
- **The European social partners' Framework Agreement on Digitalisation (2020)** provides practical guidance on digital skills, the right to disconnect, human oversight of AI and respect for human dignity, offering a **valuable basis for sectoral and company-level social dialogue**.
- **Promoting mental wellbeing in the workplace requires a proactive organisational approach** based on prevention, dialogue and shared responsibility. **Many employers are already implementing evidence-based initiatives** to support workers' wellbeing. Continued cooperation between employers, workers and their representatives remains essential to promote digital wellbeing, ensure the appropriate use of workplace technologies, strengthen leadership capabilities, and foster organisational cultures based on inclusion, trust, peer support and reduced stigma.
- **Quality work contributes positively to mental health, social inclusion and organisational performance** by supporting workers' wellbeing, motivation, financial security and sense of purpose.

WHY THE TOPIC MATTERS

Digitalisation is fundamentally reshaping how work is organised, managed and performed, creating new opportunities to improve productivity, innovation, safety and job quality while also introducing new challenges for workers' mental health. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by a period of economic uncertainty, rising living costs and workforce shortages in many sectors, has further increased awareness of psychosocial risks at work. **Mental health is now increasingly recognised not only as a wellbeing issue but also as an organisational and business concern**, influencing worker engagement, absenteeism, productivity, retention and overall organisational performance. It is also important to recognise that workers' mental wellbeing is influenced by a combination of work-related and non-work-related factors, with workplace interventions representing one important component of a broader societal response. **Against this background, many employers have strengthened preventive approaches and workplace wellbeing initiatives**, although challenges and levels of preparedness continue to vary across sectors and company sizes.

Drawing on more than 100 studies, EU-OSHA (2024) identifies five broad categories of digital technologies transforming workplaces: advanced robotics and AI, smart digital systems, digital platform work, and remote working and AI for workers' management. **These technologies offer considerable opportunities to improve productivity, safety and working conditions.** While many of these technologies have been present in workplaces for years, **their rapid evolution and wider integration continue to reshape work organisation and skill requirements.** At the same time, **if not appropriately designed, implemented and managed**, they may contribute to psychosocial challenges, including job insecurity, time pressure, cognitive overload, loss of autonomy and control, and changing job roles. Their widespread adoption also increases demand for new skills and continuous upskilling, making **investment in training and organisational support** increasingly important.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithmic management (the use of algorithms to support or automate managerial functions such as task allocation, monitoring and performance management) are further transforming how work is planned, evaluated and organised. According to the ILO (2026), AI-based systems, which operate differently from traditional management approaches, may create distinctive psychosocial risks, including intrusive surveillance, excessive data collection, work intensification and social isolation, while also raising questions about how existing occupational safety and health (OSH) approaches can effectively respond to these emerging risks. In the construction sector, for example, wearables, GPS tracking and digital scheduling can improve **health and safety, strengthen work organisation and increase operational efficiency.** At the same time, **if introduced without appropriate safeguards, transparency and worker involvement**, these technologies may also be perceived as tools for continuous monitoring and performance pressure, highlighting the importance of **responsible implementation and social dialogue.**

The twin transition also has an important environmental dimension. While the transition towards a greener economy is expected to stimulate investment, foster innovation and increase demand for new skills and specialised occupations, many of the sectors driving this transition

are also among those most exposed to the effects of climate change. **Eurofound (2025) notes that extreme weather events are becoming an increasingly significant occupational challenge**, while EU-OSHA (2025) identifies eco-anxiety as an emerging occupational safety and health concern, although evidence on its implications for workers remains limited. At the same time, **structural changes associated with the green transition** – including shifts in employment structures, occupations and skill requirements – may generate uncertainty for some workers, **reinforcing the need for organisational support, targeted training and effective change management** to facilitate adaptation.

MAIN EVIDENCE FROM RESEARCH AND POLICY

Current evidence suggests that occupational risks are evolving alongside the digital, green and demographic transitions, although physical risks remain significant across many sectors. According to the European Working Conditions Survey 2024 (Eurofound, 2025), improvements in physical working conditions have been accompanied by the emergence of new challenges, including heat exposure, prolonged sedentary digital work and evolving psychosocial risk factors. **These developments reinforce the need for integrated approaches to occupational safety and health** that address both physical and mental wellbeing.

Evidence also suggests that the impact of digital technologies depends largely on how they are designed, implemented and governed. The European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS, 2026) notes that excessive or poorly designed use of AI in the workplace may contribute to anxiety, sleep disruption, sedentary behaviour and social withdrawal. At the same time, **the same technologies can improve working conditions, safety and job quality when introduced with appropriate safeguards.** EPRS highlights that the best outcomes are achieved when human expertise and AI work in tandem, supported by meaningful human oversight. Similarly, EU-OSHA (2024) promotes a human-in-command approach, ensuring that workers retain meaningful control over the use of digital technologies and that innovation supports, rather than replaces human decision-making.

Within this evolving landscape, employers play a central role in creating healthy workplaces through preventive, evidence-based organisational measures. Across Europe, **many organisations are already implementing initiatives to strengthen mental wellbeing and address psychosocial risks.** The literature highlights the importance of integrating mental health considerations into organisational and management practices by promoting digital wellbeing, supporting work-life balance, strengthening mentally healthy leadership, ensuring the transparent and proportionate use of monitoring technologies, and fostering organisational cultures based on inclusion, trust and peer support. **Together, these measures can reduce psychosocial strain, strengthen workforce resilience, and contribute to healthier, more productive and sustainable workplaces.**

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that the impact of technological and organisational change on workers' mental health depends less on the technologies themselves than on how they are introduced, governed and embedded within workplace practices.

FROM THE FIELD: PROMISING PRACTICES EMERGING FROM THE MIND@WORK PROJECT

A selection of promising practices emerging from the first round of stakeholder interviews conducted within the Mind@Work project.

Sweden – Prevent's Organisational and Social Work Environment (OSWE) Toolbox

The Organisational and Social Work Environment (OSWE) Toolbox is an evidence-based resource designed to help organisations strengthen employee wellbeing, psychological safety and sustainable work practices. It was developed by Prevent, a non-profit organisation jointly owned by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) and the Council for Negotiation and Co-operation (PTK).

The toolbox covers key organisational topics such as digital work, remote and hybrid work, stress management, leadership, crisis preparedness, harassment prevention, rehabilitation, safety culture and sustainable working life. Rather than responding only after problems emerge, it helps organisations identify risks early, foster workplace dialogue and support continuous improvements in working conditions through surveys and structured discussion tools.

A distinctive feature of the toolbox is its strong focus on psychological safety and prevention. By encouraging organisations to identify risks early, engage employees in workplace dialogue and continuously improve working conditions, it helps create environments where workers feel confident to report concerns, share knowledge and learn from experience. Evidence suggests that such environments contribute not only to better wellbeing but also to stronger organisational performance and workplace safety.

Developed jointly by Swedish employers' organisations and trade unions, the OSWE Toolbox illustrates how social dialogue can translate into practical, evidence-based solutions that support healthier, safer and more resilient workplaces.

France – Sector-Based QVCT Strategies for Workplace Wellbeing

France has promoted the integration of **Quality of Life and Working Conditions (QVCT)** strategy (developed by the French National Agency for the Improvement of Working Conditions - ANACT) into workplace prevention through sector-based approaches, that move beyond a predominantly medicalised focus on stress towards a broader sociological understanding of work and working conditions. The **2022 collective agreement on workforce planning and skills management** explicitly recognises the sectoral level as the most appropriate framework for developing guidance and preventive measures that reflect the specific characteristics of different industries.

Building on this framework, companies can adopt QVCT tools tailored to their sector, replacing generic approaches with practical guidance jointly developed by employers' organisations and trade unions. A concrete example is provided by the French employers' organisation for the MET and technology-based industries (UIMM), which, together with the trade unions, has developed a participatory guide specifically designed for the sector's 45,000 companies. Accompanied by a number of practical tools, the guide enables small companies to develop their own approaches to promoting workplace wellbeing and managing psychosocial risks, reducing reliance on external consultancy while strengthening internal capacity and organisational ownership. This enables organisations to address psychosocial risks through concrete organisational measures focusing on work organisation, employee autonomy, skills development and professional identity.

A distinctive feature of the French approach is the central role assigned to human resources in promoting mental wellbeing and preventing psychosocial risks. Rather than relying primarily on external consultants, HR departments are encouraged to develop practical solutions together with managers and employees, embedding prevention into everyday organisational and managerial practices. This reflects **a broader understanding that improving workers' mental wellbeing requires more than enhancing material working conditions alone.** Increasing attention is therefore being paid to factors such as **professional recognition, respect, work organisation and employee participation as key determinants of psychological wellbeing.** A concrete example is the **training of *secouristes* (workplace first-aiders):** employees who volunteer to receive additional training to identify psychosocial risks among their colleagues and provide a first, decentralised line of prevention and support.

By combining sectoral social dialogue, tailored guidance and strong organisational ownership, the QVCT approach illustrates how prevention can be integrated into everyday business processes, strengthening employee wellbeing, recognising professional expertise, and fostering healthier, more resilient and sustainable workplaces.

SUPPORTING HEALTHY WORKPLACES: POLICY POINTERS FOR EMPLOYERS AND SOCIAL DIALOGUE ACTORS

- **Promote social dialogue to support the responsible introduction of digital technologies.** Encourage dialogue between employers, workers and their representatives to facilitate the implementation of digital technologies, strengthen digital skills, promote meaningful human oversight, and safeguard workers' dignity.
- **Ensure transparent, proportionate and trustworthy use of workplace monitoring, evaluation and workforce management technologies.** Develop clear and transparent organisational policies, in line with applicable national legislation and collective agreements, on the use of monitoring technologies and how related data are collected and processed.
- **Integrate emerging psychosocial risks into occupational safety and health management.** Include climate- and digitalisation-related psychosocial risks – such as extreme weather events, eco-anxiety where relevant, and the psychosocial implications of digital work – within existing OSH risk assessment procedures and sectoral guidance.
- **Invest in skills, participation and human-centred innovation.** Strengthen digital and green skills, ensure access to continuous learning opportunities, and involve workers and their representatives from the earliest stages of designing and implementing new workplace technologies.
- **Further promote organisational cultures that support mental wellbeing.** Build on existing initiatives by encouraging preventive leadership, work-life balance, inclusive workplace practices, peer support and early dialogue on organisational change to strengthen workers' wellbeing, organisational resilience and sustainable organisational performance throughout the digital and green transitions.

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