

Review Article

Occupational Mental Health in the Post-Pandemic Era: A Narrative Review of Remote and Conventional Workspaces

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24321/2581.5822.202603>

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How to cite this article:

Koitiya S, Nageswaran K. Occupational Mental Health in the Post-Pandemic Era: A Narrative Review of Remote and Conventional Workspaces. *J Adv Res Psychol Psychother.* 2026; 9(1&2): 23-26.

Date of Submission: 2026-05-16

Date of Acceptance: 2026-06-25

A B S T R A C T

The work environment plays a crucial role in shaping employee mental health. This narrative review synthesizes recent (2024–2026) literature comparing work-from-home (WFH), office-based, and hybrid work arrangements. WFH is associated with greater flexibility, autonomy, and reduced commuting stress, which together improve work–life balance and job satisfaction, but it is also linked to social isolation, blurred boundaries, and burnout.^{1,6} Office-based work promotes social interaction, structured routines, and collaboration, but it introduces stressors such as commuting, workplace pressure, and reduced flexibility.⁹ Mental health outcomes ultimately depend on individual personality, job type, and the level of organizational support available.^{5,12} Across the reviewed literature, hybrid work models are consistently reported as the most balanced approach for sustaining both productivity and well-being.^{1,10}

Keywords: Work-From-Home, Office Work, Mental Health, Burnout, Work–Life Balance, Hybrid Work

Introduction

Work patterns have shifted substantially since the COVID-19 pandemic, with the expansion of work-from-home (WFH) and hybrid models significantly influencing employee mental health in recent years. Post-pandemic research conducted between 2024 and 2026 consistently indicates that the work environment plays a central role in psychological well-being.^{1,4}

A synthesis of hybrid-work research indicates that hybrid workers consistently report better mental health outcomes than employees working exclusively from home or exclusively in the office, underscoring the advantages of flexible work arrangements.¹⁰

Further, recent studies suggest that nearly 60–70% of employees perceive improved work–life balance in WFH settings.¹ while about 30–35% report increased loneliness and social isolation due to reduced interpersonal interaction.³ In contrast, office-based work enhances collaboration, with over 65% of employees reporting improved communication and team support.⁹ but nearly 50% experience stress related to commuting and workplace demands.^{4,6}

These findings demonstrate that the relationship between work setting and mental health is complex and influenced by multiple factors, including organizational support, job demands, and individual differences. Consequently, hybrid work models are increasingly recognized as an effective

approach to balancing productivity and psychological well-being.^{1,5}

Methods

Review Design

This paper is a narrative (non-systematic) literature review, not a systematic review or meta-analysis. It synthesizes and thematically compares findings from peer-reviewed sources on work-from-home (WFH), office-based, and hybrid work arrangements and their relationship to occupational mental health. A narrative approach was chosen because the underlying literature spans heterogeneous study designs (cross-sectional surveys, diary studies, rapid reviews, and systematic reviews) and outcome measures that are not suited to quantitative pooling.

Inclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they were: (i) peer-reviewed; (ii) published in English; (iii) published between January 2020 and March 2026; and (iv) reported empirical findings or a review-level synthesis on the relationship between work location (WFH, office-based, or hybrid) and a mental health-related outcome — such as stress, anxiety, burnout, work–life balance, isolation, or job satisfaction — in adult, employed populations.

Exclusion Criteria

Sources were excluded if they were: (i) editorials, commentaries, or opinion pieces that did not present original data or a review-level synthesis; (ii) non-English-language publications; (iii) published outside the January 2020–March 2026 window; or (iv) unrelated to occupational settings (e.g., studies of student or unemployed populations rather than employed adults).

Time Period

The search and eligibility window covered publications from January 2020 (encompassing the onset of pandemic-driven remote-work adoption) to March 2026, with particular

emphasis on sources published in 2024–2026 to capture the post-pandemic, hybrid-era literature that is the primary focus of this review.

Key Elements Affecting Mental Health (WFH vs Office)

Table 1 summarizes the domains most consistently discussed in the reviewed literature as differentiating mental health outcomes between WFH and office-based work.^{2,4,5,10}

Taken together, these domains show that WFH’s greatest strengths — autonomy, flexibility, and a personalized environment — are also the source of its greatest risks, since the same lack of external structure that boosts focus for some employees can allow isolation and digital fatigue to accumulate unchecked for others. Office work shows the inverse pattern: its structured routines and face-to-face support reduce loneliness and clarify expectations, but the same structure removes the personal control that limits commuting stress and workplace pressure. No single arrangement is therefore superior in all respects; each carries trade-offs that must be weighed against the specific job, individual, and organizational context.^{2,4,5,10}

Work Mode and Occupation Type

The suitability of a given work mode is also shaped by occupational characteristics, as summarized in Table 2.^{1,5}

The pattern in Table 2 suggests that the suitability of a work mode is driven less by industry and more by whether the core tasks of a role can be completed independently and digitally. Roles built around independent, digital output — such as software development, writing, and data analysis — transfer well to WFH. Roles that depend on physical presence or direct, in-person contact, such as healthcare delivery, teaching, and retail service, remain better suited to the office. Roles that combine both demands, such as project management, engineering, and consulting, are the ones for which a hybrid schedule tends to fit best.^{1,5}

Table 1. Differentiating mental health outcomes between WFH and office-based work

Domain	Work-From-Home (WFH)	Office-Based Work
Autonomy & Control	High — employees set their own pace and environment	Lower — schedules and workflows are structurally set
Social Interaction	Reduced face-to-face contact; risk of isolation	Regular in-person contact; stronger peer support
Work–Life Balance	Improved for most, but boundaries can blur	Clearer separation, but commuting reduces personal time
Stress & Anxiety	Digital fatigue, blurred boundaries	Commuting stress, workplace pressure, distractions

Productivity & Satisfaction	Higher focus for independent tasks; depends on self-discipline	Higher for collaborative tasks; immediate support available
Organizational Support Access	Depends on digital infrastructure and manager responsiveness	Direct, immediate access to supervisors and resources

Table 2. Suitability of a given work mode

Work Mode	Character	Example Occupations
WFH	Digital/independently executable tasks	Software developers, writers, data analysts
Office	In-person/hands-on tasks requiring physical presence	Healthcare workers, teachers, retail staff
Hybrid	Mix of remote and on-site tasks	Project managers, engineers, consultants

Discussion

By 2025–26, flexible work arrangements have become well established across many industries. In the U.S., about 22.8% of employees work remotely at least part of the time, roughly 52% of remote-capable workers split their schedule between home and office, and about 27% are fully remote.⁶ while the majority of the overall workforce still spends significant time in the office (Figure 1). This reflects a continuing balance between flexibility and in-person collaboration: employees increasingly favor hybrid and remote options for work–life balance and retention, even as some employers emphasize in-office presence for team cohesion and career visibility.^{5,6,11,12}

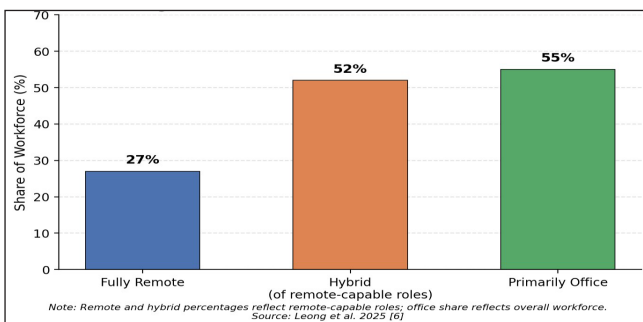


Figure 1. U.S. Work Mode Distribution, 2025-26

Why hybrid work performs best: a mechanism, not just an average

The literature does not merely report that hybrid work scores well on average — it points to a specific mechanism: WFH and office work impose largely non-overlapping costs (isolation/blurred boundaries vs. commuting/workplace pressure), so alternating between them allows each setting's recovery period to offset the other's strain rather than simply averaging two weaker options. Time in the office restores face-to-face support and clear role boundaries before isolation accumulates; time at home restores autonomy and recovery from commuting and interruption fatigue before workplace pressure accumulates. This complementary-recovery mechanism is moderated by job

type (independent/digital tasks tolerate more remote time; hands-on and highly collaborative tasks need more on-site time), by personality (individuals higher in trait sociability or lower in self-regulation benefit more from structured office time), and by organizational support (managers' responsiveness and digital infrastructure determine whether WFH autonomy translates into productivity or into isolation).^{5,8,10,12} Evidence on the precise interaction effects — for example, the optimal remote/on-site ratio by job type — remains limited, and represents a clear direction for future controlled or longitudinal research rather than an established finding.

Conclusion

The work environment exerts a substantial influence on employee mental health. WFH enhances flexibility and work–life balance but may increase isolation, while office work supports collaboration and structure but adds stress from commuting and workplace demands. Because these two arrangements impose largely complementary rather than overlapping costs, hybrid models can offset the specific weaknesses of each rather than simply diluting them, making hybrid work the most sustainable approach for many modern workplaces. The appropriate mode nonetheless depends on the nature of the work and on organizational requirements; matching work mode to job type, individual differences, and available organizational support is central to promoting employee mental health.^{1,4,11}

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