som

Supporting occupational health and wellbeing professionals

Presenteeism during the COVID-19 pandemic

Risk factors and solutions for employers

Professor Gail Kinman and Dr Christine Grant

With contributions from Dr Noreen Tehrani and Dr Gavin Breslin

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to how people work and how business is conducted. The UK has entered a major recession, meaning there is considerable uncertainty about future employment and business continuity.

As organisations are under considerable pressure to remain productive and profitable, reducing the cost of sickness absence will be a major concern. Nonetheless, there is evidence that continuing to work when unwell (presenteeism) is not only far more common but also more damaging for individuals and organisations.

This guide highlights the costs of presenteeism and considers how the challenges of the pandemic have the potential to increase such behaviour. Also included are some suggestions and solutions to reduce the incidence and costs of presenteeism. Some solutions are also provided to help organisations reduce its damaging effects.

THE COST OF PRESENTEEISM

Awareness of the prevalence and costs of presenteeism is increasing within organisations[1]. According to an annual survey of over 1,000 people professionals conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the number of respondents who had observed presenteeism in their organisation has more than tripled since 2010[2]. A recent survey of 600 business leaders found that nearly three-quarters had witnessed presenteeism among their staff that had delayed their recovery and potentially threatened the health of their colleagues[3]. It has been estimated that the average employee in the UK spends more than two weeks a year working while unwell, with a productivity loss per head of more than £4,000[4]. For several reasons, the effects of the pandemic on health and employment are likely to create conditions where presenteeism can escalate rapidly. It is therefore crucial for organisations to be aware of the impact of presenteeism, the factors that cause it, and how they can take preventative action.

A recent survey[11] that examined presenteeism during lockdown found that:

- Nearly half of the sample (46%) feel more pressure to be 'present', with 24% feeling the need to prove they are working every day.

- More than a third (35%) have continued to work while feeling unwell, often due to fears about redundancy.

- Younger people are more likely to work while sick (41% of 26 – 34-year-olds, compared to 20% of over-55s).

- Managers feel more pressure to be present and available to employees.

- 41% of employers have introduced measures to support workers struggling with presenteeism and 25% are actively encouraging them not to work if they are unwell.

THE IMPACT OF PRESENTEEISM

Providing illness is not infectious or overly incapacitating, presenteeism can be beneficial. Work provides people with structure and meaning, builds their confidence and self-esteem, and offers them opportunities for social engagement and support. Working while not fully recovered from illness or injury can also be therapeutic, as a managed approach can enable employees to gradually return to their duties after sickness absence[6].

Nonetheless, reviews of the research show that presenteeism can also have wide-ranging negative effects on individuals and organisations [7, 8, 9]. It can delay rather than promote recovery, increase the risk of future health problems and sickness absence, and reduce productivity. Presenteeism can also lead to errors, accidents and injuries to the employee, their co-workers and the public. The effects can be particularly serious in jobs where people are responsible for the wellbeing and safety of others.

There is growing awareness that presenteeism is a health and safety risk that should be carefully managed[10]. This guide highlights the individual and work-related factors that encourage presenteeism and considers how the pandemic may intensify the risks. Some strategies are provided to help employers foster a 'healthier' sickness culture during the pandemic and beyond.

THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF PRESENTEEISM

Research findings indicate that people tend to alternate periods of presenteeism with absenteeism[5]. Employees experiencing chronic health problems may initially take time off sick but, for several reasons (such as work demands, job insecurity or lack of sick pay), return to work too soon or continue working during subsequent bouts of illness. This exacerbates the existing health problems and can lead to other difficulties such as exhaustion and burnout over time.

Burnout / Exhaustion / Ill health	→	Sickness absence
↑	Presenteeism	←
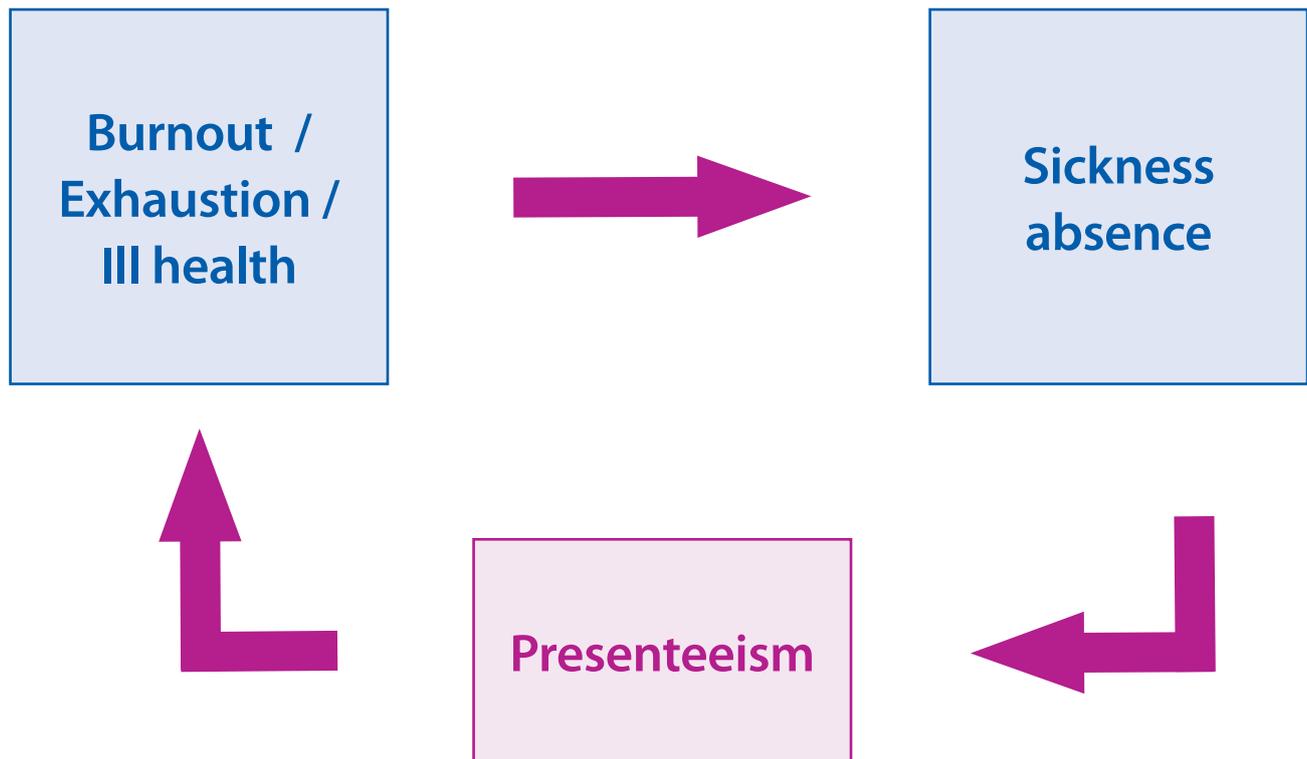
RISK FACTORS FOR PRESENTEEISM

People often continue to work while experiencing infectious diseases, such as colds and flu, which under current conditions is a serious concern for public health. Those who believe they have a 'robust' immune system are particularly likely to continue to work through such illnesses[12]. At the time of writing this guide, people with symptoms matching those of COVID-19 should not go into work and must self-isolate at home. Advice is available **here** on the steps to take if somebody in your organisation might have COVID-19.

WHY DO PEOPLE WORK WHILE SICK?

A framework developed by Karanika-Murray and Biron (2019)[13] has identified four main reasons:

Therapeutic "It will take my mind off things and help my recovery"	**Dysfunctional** "A downward spiral, impairing future health and productivity"
Overachieving "I must maintain my standard of performance no matter how ill I am"	**Functional** "I can do _some_ work without taxing my health"

The factors that influence people's sickness absence behaviour are discussed below under three headings:

- _Personal_ (such as age, gender, and ethnicity).
- _Organisational_ (working conditions such as demands, sick leave policies, and job security).
- _Occupational_ (such as job type and mode of employment).

These factors do not operate independently, but interact to influence people's decisions about whether they should continue to work or take time off sick. Considered below is how the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath might intensify the key drivers of presenteeism and present some additional challenges. The risk factors highlighted are based on published reviews of the evidence and other research studies.

1. Personal reasons for presenteeism

Individual factors that can increase the risk of presenteeism include demographics, people's sickness record, financial worries, role in the organisation and attitudes towards the job.

- Demographic factors are likely to have indirect rather than direct effects on presenteeism. The risk of illness increases with age and older people are more likely to be in senior roles in organisations, which is a known risk factor for presenteeism. There is some evidence that women work while sick more frequently than men, but this is generally explained by other factors: for example, women are more likely to do jobs where

the prevalence of presenteeism is greater (such as in healthcare), or their role as primary caregiver may lead them to 'save up' their sick leave for caring emergencies. Few differences have been found for race/ethnicity, but people from minority groups are more likely to encounter some of the working conditions discussed below (such as high demands, long hours, and limited entitlement to sick pay) that make them more vulnerable to presenteeism.

- A poor sickness absence record, where people work while sick because they fear negative evaluations, or wish to avoid disciplinary action or job loss. During the pandemic, some organisations are using sickness absence records to select employees for redundancy.

- Financial concerns, particularly in jobs where entitlement to sick pay is limited, work is insecure, or where employment rates are high. More than one in four UK workers were furloughed during lockdown, but many did not qualify for this payment, and some were laid off entirely. Economic security has worsened for many during the pandemic[14]. Financial worries may therefore discourage people from taking time off sick when they return to paid work, especially if their job is under threat. The current recession will intensify this problem. Information is available for employers on work and financial support during COVID-19.

- Job insecurity can encourage employees to work during illness to show their value, loyalty, and commitment to their organisation. Research on the effects of the pandemic indicates that job insecurity

is on the rise and will be intensified in an uncertain job market where unemployment rates are expected to increase[15]. Some organisations are reducing their employees' working hours to enable more people to remain in work. People may work while sick to show they are indispensable to avoid this and the associated pay cut.

- Feelings of guilt about 'letting down' managers and burdening colleagues, especially if staffing levels are low or organisations are struggling to survive. People working in 'frontline' jobs may also feel guilty about letting down service users if they take time off sick.

- Feeling indispensable, particularly if other people are insufficiently qualified or otherwise ill-suited to perform certain tasks. Again, this is particularly likely where staffing levels are low, or if organisations are having difficulties coping with the workload, or are struggling to survive.

- A strong work ethic where people feel they should live up to their personal standards of behaviour. The risk of presenteeism is greater among people with 'workaholic' tendencies, where their identity and self-esteem are based on their job role or on maintaining their high standard of performance. Workaholics also find it difficult to trust others, to delegate and work as part of a team, particularly if their colleagues are less visible or are perceived by them to be less skilled.

- Concerns about being judged by others, where people may fear that managers and colleagues do not believe they are sufficiently unwell to be off sick[11]. They may also feel under pressure to return to work before they are fully recovered. There is growing evidence that many people who have had what may be considered a 'mild' case of COVID-19 are having difficulties with daily activities and experiencing symptoms such as chronic fatigue, weakness, and cognitive difficulties several weeks or months later [16, 17]; this may encourage sickness presenteeism during and after the pandemic.

- Escaping from personal problems, where people use work to distract themselves from personal worries related to the pandemic, such as financial concerns, fear about job loss, or anxiety about personal or family health.

- Positive attitudes towards work, such as engagement, satisfaction, and involvement, can make people excessively committed to work and reluctant to disengage from it, meaning they typically work long hours and recuperation time is limited.

Nonetheless, people need to be encouraged to pace themselves, prioritise self-care and take time off sick if required.

Sickness absence and mental health – major stigma

Rising presenteeism has been linked to increased stress, anxiety, and depression. Taking time off sick for a physical health problem is widely considered to be 'more acceptable' and there is evidence that such attitudes are growing. A survey of 1,000 workers[18] found that:

- 29% thought it was 'easier' to take time off for physical illness.

- 21% were more likely to work when feeling unwell from mental health problems due to shame or embarrassment.

2.   Organisational reasons for presenteeism

Organisational factors that can encourage presenteeism include sickness policies, workload, feelings of pressure and stress, lack of cover and poor working relationships.

- 'Hard-line' sickness absence procedures, or financial penalties for absenteeism can discourage people from taking time off. Sick pay varies considerably across sectors and organisations; some people have a limited entitlement, but workers on zero hours contracts have none. Nonetheless, organisations who are struggling may revise their sickness absence policies, as they cannot afford to pay staff who are not working.

- Workplace cultures that stigmatise sick leave will normalise presenteeism and increase attendance pressure.

- Workload pressure, short-staffing, and lack of support. In a recent survey, more than half of the business leaders polled had observed an increased risk of presenteeism among their staff during periods of stress or workplace change[3]. Workload pressure and working hours have increased in many organisations during the pandemic as many struggle due to loss of markets, inability to adapt and the need to reduce costs to survive. Greater flexibility is now required, as staff may be expected to extend their availability to meet the needs of customers or to make the organisation more competitive. Short staffing will also increase workload, along with the need to cover for

sick or vulnerable colleagues and accommodate their domestic responsibilities. Lack of cover for sickness absence can also encourage people to work while sick as they wish to avoid an accumulation of work when they return.

• Having too many roles at work (role overload), means that the demands and responsibilities attached to each role are likely to clash (role conflict), increasing workload and attendance pressure. The potential for role stress has increased for many during the pandemic, as new responsibilities and expectations (such as the need to learn new skills rapidly) driven by structural changes and reduced resources are additional sources of workload pressure.

• A lack of compassionate leadership, where operational demands are considered more important than employee wellbeing. It is acknowledged, however, that the pandemic means that it will be challenging to balance the organisation's requirement to remain operating with the need to ensure a healthy, satisfied, and motivated workforce. While employees may tolerate this in the short term, businesses may find they lose staff to more people-focused and compassionate organisations.

• The quality of working relationships can have a strong impact on sickness absence behaviours. Poor working relationships and experiences of bullying and harassment can understandably make people fearful about being targeted for taking sick leave. Positive working relationships with managers and co-workers can reassure people that it is appropriate to take time off to recover from illness, but feelings of loyalty may make people reluctant to 'burden' their colleagues with additional work if they go off sick, particularly if they are struggling with their own workloads.

• Working at home has led to many employees working longer and more irregular hours than they would do in the office. Many are currently feeling pressure to respond more rapidly and to be available online for longer than they usually would [19, 20]. Many struggle to balance the competing demands of their job and domestic life, often in environments that are not conducive to 'business as usual'. Under such circumstances, the pressure to continue to work while sick can be intensified. Disconnecting from work can be more challenging if people's living space is also their office. Presenteeism can also become less visible when staff are working at home, as managers may find it difficult to spot health problems among their staff to trigger referral for occupational health assessment.

• Resources to help managers support homeworkers are available **here**, **here** and **here**. Guidelines for employers and employees on how to work at home in a healthy and sustainable way can be found **here**.

People are often reluctant to take time off sick because they are concerned about the negative reactions of others.

Recent research[11] has found the following:

How would you be perceived by others if you were to take time off for a short-term illness?	% of employees
Weak	*19*
Sensible	*17*
Genuine	*17*
Lazy	*17*
Honest	*15*
Inconsiderate	*15*
Practical	*14*
Undedicated	*14*
Considerate	*13*
Dishonest	*7*

3.   Occupational reasons for presenteeism

The occupational causes for presenteeism include job type and mode of employment.

- Occupation or job type is a common risk factor for presenteeism, particularly in the so-called 'helping' professions such as health and social care, and education. Such jobs have many of the organisational risk factors for presenteeism discussed above: the work is demanding, working hours tend to be long and antisocial, staffing levels are often low, and roles are frequently specialised. Moreover, employees typically have a strong sense of duty and responsibility for the welfare of others and find it difficult to say no to additional work, which can increase the risk of presenteeism, especially if sickness absence rates are high. The risk of COVID-19 in some types of helping work, such as health and social care, and among other frontline staff is also considerably greater, meaning that cover for colleagues who are absent or shielding will be required. The risk of work-related stress and burnout is also high in such jobs, and people often continue to work (and may be expected to work) when they experience such conditions. Healthcare workers have been widely seen as 'heroes' during the pandemic and, although this conveys gratitude for their actions, it can promote a culture of self-sacrifice and further increase the expectations of staff[21].

- Management responsibilities, where people in more senior roles feel obliged to set an example to their staff. Leaders and managers may be under pressure to role model 'desired' behaviour when organisations are struggling to survive or feel they must be available to always support their staff.

- Short-term contracts, where people may wish to make a 'good impression' in order to gain permanent status, particularly if there is competition with others to do so. Widespread job insecurity and lack of job opportunities resulting from the pandemic is likely to intensify such concerns.

- Self-employment, as this has many of the risk factors highlighted above, such as long and irregular working hours, high pressure and stress and limited access to sick pay. Many 'self-employed' people work in the gig economy, where work may be scarce and low-paid, and there is no right to sick leave or healthcare benefits. The number of people doing precarious work is expected to rise during the pandemic and its aftermath. The growing evidence that gig workers are particularly vulnerable to contracting the virus gives additional cause for concern[22].

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO TACKLE PRESENTEEISM IN ORGANISATIONS?

The wide-ranging costs of sickness presenteeism highlighted in this guide means that preventative action is required. It is important for employers to take a long-term view that balances concern about the immediate costs of sickness absence with a recognition of how presenteeism can undermine the future health and functioning of employees during the pandemic and beyond.

To reduce presenteeism, organisations should:

- Identify the RISKS and CAUSES.

- Undertake a REVIEW of absence management policies and practices.

- ENSURE that the organisational culture values and promotes employee health.

- CONSULT staff about their experiences of presenteeism and INVOLVE them in decisions about how to manage it.

- MONITOR their workload and working hours to ensure they are not overloaded.

- IDENTIFY the support they need.

- ENABLE staff to take sick leave when required.

- IMPLEMENT an employee wellness programme to highlight the importance of self-care.

Some more specific guidance for organisations

- Assess the risks and identify the problem. Employers have a duty of care to protect the wellbeing of their staff. Organisations should carefully assess the risks of presenteeism and identify the factors that encourage it. Workload, working hours, leadership, job insecurity etc. should be assessed so interventions can be precisely targeted. The long-term nature of the COVID-19 pandemic means that such assessments should be done regularly to capture reactions to what can be rapid change in organisational practices and employees' personal circumstances.

- Recognise the real costs of sickness presenteeism. Remember that any savings are likely to be short-term and will be more costly over the longer term.

- Re-evaluate sickness and absence policies. Undertake a critical review of sickness management policies to ensure that, wherever possible, employees are not penalised for taking sick leave. Consider extending the policy to explicitly recognise the risks of presenteeism. Processes such as back to work interviews can be done online to expedite return to work safely, identify whether employees are fit to return and ensure that any support needs are identified and implemented. Employers should avoid implementing incentives or bonuses for good attendance, as this can discriminate against people who are sick as well as encourage presenteeism. Guidance on absence management can be found **here**.

- Identify and reduce barriers to accessing occupational health. Only half of the UK working population has access to occupational health[23]. This is essential for supporting employees back to work and helping them work safely during these challenging times. Occupational health professionals are also ideally placed to advise on 'healthy' absence management policies and practices. As demand for their services has increased due to the challenges of the pandemic[24], it is crucial for occupational health provision to be adequately resourced. As mentioned above, consultations can be done online if appropriate to expedite assessments and return to work.

- Work closely with occupational health to identify the most appropriate way to manage sickness absence and to rehabilitate staff back to the workplace. A more effective use of 'fit-notes' would be helpful, where managers and occupational health professionals collaborate with employees to identify whether they can do 'some' work if, for example, they are self-isolating, waiting for test results, or recovering from illness. Phased approaches to return to work are needed to support people who are struggling with their wellbeing, but managers are sometimes reluctant to implement recommendations for reasonable adjustments from occupational health.

- Staff wellbeing surveys can help organisations gain insight into trends in health complaints and associated attendance behaviours (both absenteeism and presenteeism). Such surveys can also use risk assessment procedures such as the **UK Management Standards Approach** to assess the organisational factors that can underpin work-related stress and presenteeism, such as high demands, long working hours, low control, and low support.

The HSE's '**Talking Toolkit**' can also be used to help employers have conversations on preventing work-related stress with individual employees.

- Establish cultural norms that encourage people to take enough time off sick to recover from illness. It is possible that fears of transmission of COVID-19 will encourage more 'healthy' sickness absence cultures where taking time off sick is considered the safest and most considerate action.

- Lead compassionately and by example. Facilitate compassionate approaches to management that help employees keep work in perspective and appreciate the need for self-care. Send employees home if they are visibly sick in the workplace, but notice if they are continuing to work from home when you check in.

- Invest in training for supervisors and managers to help them identify and address the early signs of stress. The **Health and Safety Executive** provides a framework to help managers identify and develop the competencies required to support the wellbeing of staff. Training is also needed in coaching techniques to help managers have critical wellbeing conversations with staff. Guidance for line managers on using individual Wellness Action plans to support the wellbeing of their staff can be found **here**. Consider how to support people who are working remotely, with regular 'check-ins', discussions of workload and communication of wellbeing initiatives. Wellness Action Plans for people who are working from home are also **available**.

- Provide guidance on managing technology in a healthy and sustainable way that highlights the need for boundaries to withdraw from work communications when off sick. Guidance can be found **here**.

- Introduce flexible working. Although it is a legal requirement for organisations to consider requests to work flexibly where feasible and supportive of business needs, the benefits are greater when staff have choice and control over their working patterns. People who can self-schedule their working hours tend to report lower levels of presenteeism, but it is important to monitor working hours to avoid over-commitment. Introducing flexible working can be particularly helpful as it can accommodate the limitations of people with long-term conditions. Guidance on flexible working during the pandemic and beyond is available **here**.

- Introduce an employee wellbeing programme. Carefully developed health promotion and wellbeing initiatives will reduce presenteeism by supporting mental and physical health and enhancing their resilience. Involve staff in co-producing solutions to discourage presenteeism and build a healthier sickness absence culture. Create wellbeing ambassadors and mental health wellbeing support groups that can discuss and address issues surrounding presenteeism. Guidance on introducing an organisational approach to employee wellbeing is available **here** and **here**.

CONCLUSION

Managing presenteeism and ensuring people are fit for work will reap many benefits for employers and employees. It is particularly important for organisations to take steps to tackle presenteeism during the pandemic and beyond, as business continuity and economic conditions are very uncertain. A balance is needed, however, to reduce damaging presenteeism while ensuring that rigorous absence management processes are in place.

As we enter a major global recession, jobs will become more sought after and the wellbeing of employees may be seriously compromised. Managing presenteeism is an investment in the long-term wellbeing of employees; it will enable them to feel more supported and perform at their best. A systemic, proactive approach that is designed with the input of employees to reduce presenteeism also has many benefits for employers in terms of increased employee wellbeing, productivity, and retention.

REFERENCES

1. https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/consultancy/deloitte-uk-mental-health-and-employers.pdf

2. https://www.cipd.co.uk/about/media/press/020518-health-wellbeing-survey#:~:text=86%25%20of%20over%201%2C000%20respondents,and%20just%2026%25%20in%202010

3. https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/three-quarters-leaders-witnessed-presenteeism

4. https://www.ntu.ac.uk/about-us/news/news-articles/2017/10/employees-spend-2.5-weeks-a-year-working-when-ill-costing-businesses-4k-per-employee-in-lost-productivity

5. https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/01409170810892163/full/html?skipTracking=true

6. http://www.re-integrate.eu/resources/recovery-rehabilitation-and-retention---maintaining-a-productive-workforce-a-guide.pdf

7. https://academic.oup.com/bmb/article/129/1/69/5288253?login=true

8. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26550958/

9. https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/presenteeism-review-current-thinking

10. https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUC-MENTAL_HEALTH_WORKPLACE.pdf

11. https://www.canadalife.co.uk/news/redundancy-fears-causing-increase-in-presenteeism-during-lockdown/

12. https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-019-7138-x

13. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0018726719827081

14. https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy-report/2021/february-2021

15. https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/IES%20briefing%20-%20Labour%20Market%20Statistics%20November%202020.pdf

16. https://www.som.org.uk/covid-19-return-work-guide-recovering-workers

17. https://www.ons.gov.uk/news/statementsandletters/theprevalenceoflongcovidsymptomsandcovid19complications

18. https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/one-in-five-workers-embarrassed-to-take-time-off-for-mental-illness

19. https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/ies-working-home-wellbeing-survey

20. https://www.linkedin.com/news/story/the-mental-strain-of-wfh-5194634/

21. https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/news/archive/2020/04/title-231554-en.html

22. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/gig-workers-hardest-hit-coronavirus-pandemic/

23. https://www.som.org.uk/universal-access-occupational-health-oh

24. https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/five-ways-occupational-health-needs-to-scale-up-post-pandemic/