

# Telework and OHS: Managing Ergonomics, Psychosocial Hazards, and Employer Duties When Home Becomes the Worksite



Five years ago, most Canadian OHS programs treated working from home as an exception. A short-term accommodation. A perk for senior staff. Something handled quietly between HR and a manager.

That world no longer exists.

Telework and hybrid work are now embedded in how Canadian organizations operate. According to Statistics Canada, nearly one in four employed Canadians worked most of their hours from home in 2023, and even as some employers pushed for office returns, hybrid work remained dominant in professional, administrative, technical, and knowledge-based roles. For OHS professionals, this shift has quietly but fundamentally changed what a workplace looks like.

When work moves into kitchens, basements, spare bedrooms, and shared living spaces, the hazards do not disappear. They change shape. Ergonomic risks increase. Psychosocial hazards become harder to see. Reporting lines blur. And employer duties become less intuitive, but not less real.

This article explores what telework means under Canadian OHS law, how regulators and courts are treating injuries and mental health claims arising from home-based work, and what practical steps OHS professionals should be taking to manage risk when the worksite is no longer a place the employer controls physically.

## **Why Telework is an OHS Issue**

One of the most persistent misconceptions about remote work is that it sits outside occupational health and safety. That it is a productivity issue, a people issue, or a policy issue, but not a safety one. Canadian regulators and adjudicators have made it clear that this view is outdated.

Across jurisdictions, the core principle remains consistent. If work is authorized by the employer, and if the injury or illness arises out of and in the course of employment, OHS and workers' compensation obligations apply. The physical location does not erase the duty.

This has been reinforced repeatedly through workers' compensation decisions involving home based injuries. Claims involving trips, slips, repetitive strain, and mental health have been accepted where the connection to work duties was established.

For OHS professionals, this creates a practical challenge. The workplace is no longer standardized. Risk varies dramatically from one home to another. Yet the duty to take reasonable steps to prevent harm remains.

## **Ergonomics: The Most Visible and Most Underestimated Telework Hazard**

Ergonomic injury is the clearest and most documented risk associated with telework. It is also the risk most organizations underestimated during the rapid shift to remote

work. During the pandemic, many workers improvised. Dining chairs replaced office seating. Laptops sat on coffee tables. Workdays stretched longer without natural breaks created by commuting or meetings. The result was predictable.

Workers' compensation boards across Canada reported increases in musculoskeletal disorder claims linked to home based work. While aggregate national data is still emerging, provincial boards have confirmed that neck, shoulder, and lower back injuries related to workstation setup are among the most common telework claims.

The issue is not just equipment. It is duration and intensity. A workstation that might be tolerable for an hour becomes injurious over eight or ten hours a day. In office settings, ergonomic assessments and standardized furniture mitigate this risk. In home environments, variability is the norm.

Canadian guidance from Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety has emphasized that employers are not required to control every aspect of a home, but they are expected to provide information, training, and reasonable support to reduce foreseeable ergonomic harm.

The organizations that struggle most are those that treat ergonomic guidance as optional or purely educational. Regulators increasingly expect evidence that employers assessed telework risks and took steps proportionate to the risk.

## **Psychosocial Hazards**

While ergonomic injuries are easier to see, psychosocial hazards often carry greater long-term cost.

Remote work has changed how stress, workload, and interpersonal conflict manifest. Isolation, reduced social support, and the erosion of boundaries between work and personal life have all been linked to increased psychological

strain.

Statistics Canada surveys conducted between 2021 and 2023 consistently found higher reported stress levels among employees working primarily from home, particularly among those with caregiving responsibilities or limited workspace. Younger workers and new hires were especially affected, reporting higher levels of anxiety and lower perceived support.

From an OHS perspective, psychosocial hazards are not abstract. Canadian jurisdictions increasingly recognize workplace stressors as hazards that must be identified and controlled. Several provinces have explicitly integrated psychological health into their prevention frameworks.

Remote work amplifies existing psychosocial risks. Performance monitoring can feel more intrusive. Communication gaps increase misunderstandings. Workdays lengthen because the physical signal to stop working disappears.

In several accepted workers' compensation claims, employees successfully argued that anxiety, burnout, or depression arose from sustained workload pressure and lack of support in remote environments. The fact that the work occurred at home did not defeat the claim.

## **When Injuries Happen at Home**

One of the most uncomfortable questions employers ask is whether they are responsible for injuries that occur in a private residence. Canadian adjudicators have drawn a relatively clear line. The question is not where the injury occurred. It is whether the activity was reasonably connected to employment.

Claims have been accepted for injuries sustained while reaching for work materials, standing from a desk during work hours, or performing assigned tasks. Claims have been denied

where the activity was clearly personal and unrelated to work duties.

In one often cited decision, an employee who tripped while walking from her home workstation to retrieve work related documents was granted compensation. The adjudicator found that the movement was incidental to employment, like walking within an office.

For OHS professionals, these cases underscore the importance of clarity. If telework is authorized, structured, and ongoing, the home becomes a worksite for the purposes of risk assessment and prevention, even if the employer does not control it in the traditional sense.

## **Employer Duties**

Canadian OHS law does not require employers to redesign employees' homes. What it requires is reasonableness. Reasonableness in a telework context typically includes identifying foreseeable hazards, providing guidance and resources, training workers to recognize and report issues, and responding when concerns are raised. Inspectors and investigators are increasingly focused on process rather than perfection. They ask whether the employer considered the risk, communicated expectations, and followed up when problems emerged.

For example, if an employee reports ongoing pain linked to workstation setup, doing nothing is increasingly difficult to defend. Similarly, if an organization mandates full time remote work without providing any ergonomic guidance, that absence may be viewed as a failure of due diligence.

Psychosocial risks carry similar expectations. Employers are not expected to eliminate stress, but they are expected to manage workload, provide reasonable support, and address known issues such as excessive hours or unclear expectations.

# Telework, Supervision, and the Challenge of Visibility

Supervision has always been a core element of OHS. In remote environments, supervision looks different, but it does not disappear. One of the emerging risks in telework is the assumption that adults working from home require less oversight. In practice, the opposite may be true for safety related issues.

New hires working remotely often receive less informal guidance. Early signs of strain or disengagement are harder to spot. Minor ergonomic or psychosocial issues can escalate without anyone noticing. Several internal investigations into remote work-related incidents have found that managers assumed employees would speak up if something was wrong. Employees, in turn, assumed their discomfort was normal or not serious enough to report.

This gap is an OHS issue. Effective supervision in telework contexts requires intentional check ins, clear reporting channels, and manager training that includes recognizing nonphysical signs of risk.

## Regulatory Approaches Across Canada

While there is no single telework regulation in Canada, OHS obligations apply through existing frameworks. How explicitly telework is addressed varies by jurisdiction, but expectations are converging. Below is a practical overview of how telework and OHS are currently treated across selected Canadian jurisdictions.

Jurisdiction	Telework Explicitly Addressed	Key OHS Expectations for Remote Work	Enforcement Focus
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Jurisdiction	Telework Explicitly Addressed	Key OHS Expectations for Remote Work	Enforcement Focus
Federal	Indirectly through general duty and guidance	Ergonomics, psychosocial hazards, reporting	Due diligence and risk assessment
Ontario	Guidance issued by regulator	Ergonomic assessment, mental health obligations	Orders under general duty
British Columbia	Explicit guidance on working alone and remote work	Hazard identification, supervision, ergonomics	Proactive inspections
Alberta	No specific telework regulation	Employer responsibility extends to authorized work locations	Documentation and training
Québec	Telework addressed through CNESST guidance	Prevention program adaptation, mental health	Inspector discretion

The trend is clear. Telework is no longer treated as an edge case. It is part of the normal risk landscape, and expectations are becoming more explicit over time.

## Practical Steps OHS Professionals Should Prioritize Now

The organizations managing telework risk most effectively are not those with the longest policies. They are the ones with clear, practical systems. Start by explicitly recognizing telework as part of your OHS program. If it is not mentioned in your hazard assessments, training materials, or reporting processes, that gap will be noticed.

Ergonomic risk should be addressed proactively. This can include self assessment tools, access to virtual ergonomic

evaluations, and clear guidance on minimum workstation standards. The goal is not perfection, but risk reduction.

Psychosocial hazards require structure. Define expectations around working hours, availability, and response times. Train managers to recognize signs of overload or disengagement. Normalize conversations about mental strain as part of safety, not performance management.

Incident and injury reporting processes must clearly include home based work. Employees should know when and how to report discomfort, near misses, or injuries, and managers should know how to respond.

Finally, document your approach. In telework related investigations, documentation often determines the outcome. Evidence that risks were considered and addressed carries significant weight.

## **Looking Ahead: Telework as a Permanent OHS Reality**

Telework is not a temporary disruption. It is a permanent feature of the Canadian workplace landscape.

For OHS professionals, this requires a mindset shift. Safety programs built around fixed worksites must evolve to manage distributed risk. Ergonomics and psychosocial hazards must be treated with the same seriousness as physical hazards in traditional workplaces.

Regulators and adjudicators are already adapting. The organizations that struggle will be those that cling to outdated assumptions about where work happens and who is responsible. When home becomes the worksite, OHS does not stop at the front door. It follows the work. The question is whether your prevention program has kept up.