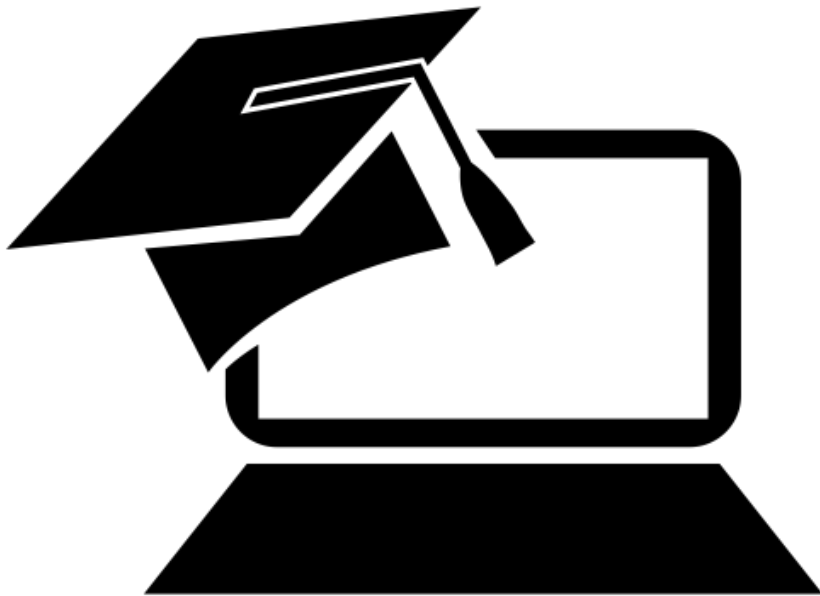


# Human Investment

**Occupational Health in the Digital World:  
A Guide for People Managers.**



# Human Investment



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In "Human Investment," the evolution of occupational health is explored as it transforms from traditional face-to-face interactions to innovative hybrid models integrating telehealth and digital platforms. Drawing on three decades of experience, I highlight how these changes have expanded access to vital services, particularly for underserved workers, while addressing new challenges in digital equity and professional services. This essential guide illustrates the profession's resilience and adaptability, positioning occupational health as a cornerstone of employee well-being in the modern workplace. This guide is for health and safety, human resources, nurses look to transition to occupational health.

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## Introduction

The landscape of occupational health has undergone a seismic transformation over the past five years. What was once a predominantly face-to-face profession, rooted in physical workplace visits and on-site consultations, has evolved into a sophisticated hybrid discipline where digital platforms, remote assessments, and telehealth capabilities sit seamlessly alongside traditional practice. This evolution has not diminished the profession's impact—it has amplified it, extending the reach of occupational health support to organisations and workers previously unable to access such vital services.

Writing this guide represents both a professional privilege and a personal journey. With three decades of nursing and occupational health experience spanning manufacturing, construction, public sector, and private organisations, I have witnessed first-hand the profession's remarkable adaptability. From establishing three national occupational health departments from scratch to developing workforce health strategies for major organisations managing up to 35,000 staff, my career has been defined by innovation, pragmatism, and an unwavering commitment to worker health and wellbeing.

My experience with organisations as diverse as the Ministry of Defence, Royal Mail, and various NHS services has provided unique insight into the universal challenges employers face: managing sickness absence effectively, ensuring regulatory compliance, supporting workers with complex health needs, and most critically, preventing health-based job loss. These challenges remain constant regardless of sector; what has changed dramatically is how we address them.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated changes that were already emerging in occupational health practice. Like thousands of colleagues across the profession, I rapidly transitioned from predominantly workplace-based consultations to delivering comprehensive occupational health services through digital platforms—video consultations, remote risk assessments, online health surveillance, and virtual case management. This wasn't simply an emergency response; it represented a fundamental reimagining of service delivery that has permanently enhanced our ability to support working populations.

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The 2025 Keep Britain Working Review (Mayfield Review) has positioned occupational health centrally within the national response to health-based economic inactivity. With 2.8 million people currently out of work due to long-term sickness, and only one in eight workers having access to occupational health support, the review's findings validate what practitioners have long understood: occupational health intervention works, early support prevents long-term absence, and digital delivery models can democratise access to expertise previously available only to large organisations.

This guide reflects the reality of modern occupational health nursing practice—a profession that has retained its core values of holistic care, professional integrity, and patient advocacy whilst embracing technological innovation that enhances rather than replaces the therapeutic relationship. It is written for people managers, human resources professionals, health and safety practitioners, and business leaders who need to understand what occupational health nurses actually do, how digital transformation has expanded service accessibility, and why investing in workforce health represents sound business strategy aligned with national economic priorities.

Drawing on evidence-based practice, contemporary research, and decades of practical experience across diverse organisational settings, this guide demonstrates how modern occupational health services—delivered through flexible, hybrid models combining digital efficiency with clinical expertise—can reduce sickness absence, support regulatory compliance, and most importantly, keep people healthy, productive, and in work.

The profession has never been more relevant, more capable, or more necessary. Understanding what occupational health nurses do, and how we do it in today's digital world, represents the first step in harnessing this vital resource for your organisation's benefit.

# Understanding Occupational Health Nursing Practice

## What Do Occupational Health Nurses Actually Do?

Occupational health nursing cannot be adequately described through a simple list of tasks or activities. The profession represents a highly complex and dynamic practice that continues to evolve in response to technological advances, changing work patterns, and emerging workplace health challenges (Royal College of Nursing, 2021). Occupational health nurses are continuously developing new competencies, adapting evidence-based practices to meet contemporary needs, and innovating solutions to complex workplace health problems.

The terms occupational health nurse, occupational health advisor (OHA), and occupational health practitioner are used interchangeably throughout this book, reflecting the varying levels of experience, qualifications, and role specifications within the profession.

This book outlines the core competencies and knowledge domains that underpin modern occupational health practice, with particular emphasis on how digital health technologies, remote service delivery, and online platforms have transformed professional practice. Critically, it situates the evolving role of occupational health nurses within the context of the Mayfield Review 2025 (Keep Britain Working Review), which identified occupational health support as fundamental to tackling health-based economic inactivity and promoting healthy, inclusive workplaces (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025). Whilst not exhaustive, this overview demonstrates the breadth and depth of expertise that occupational health advisors bring to contemporary workplace health management and their essential contribution to keeping Britain working.

# The COVID-19 Pandemic: Catalyst for Digital Transformation in Occupational Health

## The Unprecedented Shift to Remote Working and Service Delivery

The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in early 2020 represented a watershed moment for both general working practices and occupational health service delivery in the United Kingdom and globally. What had previously been a gradual evolution toward digital health technologies and remote consultations accelerated dramatically into a matter of days and weeks, fundamentally transforming how occupational health nurses practice and how employees access workplace health support.

## The Emergency Transition

In March 2020, millions of workers across the UK were mandated to work from home in an effort to slow viral transmission and protect public health (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garces, 2020). This represented the largest simultaneous adoption of remote working in history, affecting approximately 46.6% of people in employment during the initial lockdown period (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Unlike pre-pandemic telework, which was typically discretionary and carefully planned, pandemic-induced remote working was compulsory, immediate, and implemented without the usual preparation time.

Research demonstrated that Telehealth visits increased by 154% during the last week of March 2020 compared with the same period in 2019, with telemedicine encounters increasing 766% in the first three months of the pandemic, from 0.3% of all healthcare interactions to 23.6% (Koonin et al., 2020; Wosik et al., 2020). This transformation occurred not through gradual adoption but through immediate necessity.

Occupational health services faced unique challenges during this transition. A UK survey of occupational health physicians during April 2020 revealed that 51% of services offered weekend or out-of-hours provision, 21% had to employ additional staff, and 54% changed their working hours to cope with pandemic demands (Ranka et al., 2020). Critically, 90% of occupational health services continued to offer routine services despite the crisis, with 56% establishing dedicated telephone helplines and 46% creating dedicated COVID-19 query email inboxes.

### **Immediate Adaptations in Occupational Health Practice**

Occupational health nurses, accustomed to predominantly face-to-face consultations, had to rapidly develop new competencies and adopt unfamiliar technologies. The transition occurred without the 23-month implementation timeframe that previous research had suggested was necessary for successful Telehealth integration (Hare et al., 2020). Instead, services pivoted within days or weeks to maintain continuity of care.

#### **Key immediate adaptations included:**

##### **Clinical Service Delivery:**

- Transition from face-to-face to video and telephone consultations for fitness-to-work assessments
- Development of remote pre-employment health screening protocols
- Establishment of COVID-19 symptom assessment pathways and return-to-work guidelines
- Remote coordination of rehabilitation programmes for employees unable to attend workplace
- Virtual delivery of health surveillance where possible, with risk-based prioritization of essential face-to-face assessments

##### **Technology Adoption:**

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- Rapid deployment of video consultation platforms (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, specialized healthcare platforms)
- Implementation of secure messaging systems for follow-up communication
- Adoption of online referral portals enabling manager access from any location
- Digital documentation systems replacing paper-based records
- Cloud-based case management systems enabling team collaboration from dispersed locations

### **Workplace Health Management:**

- Remote workplace risk assessments for home working environments using video technology and employee-submitted photographs
- Development of digital resources on ergonomics, mental health, and wellbeing for remote workers
- Virtual delivery of health promotion campaigns and wellbeing webinars
- Online mental health support and counselling services responding to pandemic-related anxiety and stress
- Remote coordination with primary care, secondary care, and occupational physicians via teleconferencing

Telehealth became a cornerstone of occupational health service delivery, enabling providers to conduct virtual consultations, monitor employee health remotely, and offer mental health support through digital platforms, ensuring continuity of care while expanding access particularly for employees in remote or underserved areas (Recruiting Heads, 2024).

## **The Parallel Transformation: General Remote Working**

The pandemic simultaneously transformed where and how employees worked, creating new occupational health challenges while demonstrating the viability of remote work arrangements. Organizations without previous remote working infrastructure had to establish systems enabling employees to work effectively from home, often with minimal preparation time.

### **Workforce Changes:**

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- Immediate transition of office-based workers to home environments
- Rapid digitalization of business processes and communication systems
- Adoption of collaborative technologies (Slack, Microsoft Teams, Asana) for team coordination
- Virtual meeting culture replacing in-person interactions
- Blurring of boundaries between work and home life

**Emerging Health Challenges:** The abrupt shift to home working introduced new occupational health concerns requiring occupational health nurse intervention:

## **Musculoskeletal Issues:**

- Makeshift workstations using dining tables and inappropriate seating
- Prolonged static postures without workplace ergonomic equipment
- Increased prevalence of neck, back, and shoulder pain
- Need for remote ergonomic assessment and advice services

## **Psychosocial Health:**

- Social isolation and reduced team connectivity
- Difficulty maintaining work-life boundaries
- Increased anxiety related to health concerns, job security, and family responsibilities
- "Zoom fatigue" from excessive video conferencing
- Caring responsibilities for children and vulnerable family members during school and service closures
- Domestic abuse concerns with individuals confined to home with abusers

## **Physical Health:**

- Reduced physical activity and increased sedentary behaviour
- Weight gain and deterioration of cardiovascular health
- Sleep disturbance patterns
- Eye strain from prolonged screen time

Research demonstrated that many organizations were unprepared for the sudden switch to remote working, with many workers experiencing their first experience of working from home, and studies documented significant changes in health behaviours and wellbeing among remote workers (Moretti et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2021).

Occupational health nurses responded by developing comprehensive remote worker health and wellbeing programmes, including online ergonomic assessments, virtual mental health support, and digital health promotion campaigns addressing the specific challenges of home working.

### Overcoming Barriers Through Innovation

The pandemic necessitated creative solutions to longstanding barriers to digital health adoption:

**Technology Access:** Organizations rapidly invested in technology infrastructure, providing employees and occupational health teams with equipment and platforms necessary for remote working and service delivery. What had previously been considered cost-prohibitive became essential business continuity investment.

**Professional Acceptance:** Healthcare professionals worldwide abruptly shifted from in-person to Telehealth service delivery, with many doing so without advanced training or preparation (Bendixen et al., 2021). Despite initial concerns, research demonstrated that 77% of practitioners supported Telehealth as a substitute for in-person services, with 78% supporting Telehealth as a permanent option for service delivery. This professional acceptance proved crucial to sustainable adoption.

**Patient/Employee Acceptance:** Employees and patients who had previously preferred face-to-face consultations discovered the convenience and accessibility of remote consultations. Patients reported high rates of satisfaction with Telehealth, expressing interest in attending future visits remotely, appreciating the convenience of participating from home on their own devices (Cason, 2014; Powell et al., 2017).

### Long-Term Legacy: Hybrid Service Models

As the acute pandemic phase subsided, occupational health services did not simply revert to pre-pandemic practice models. Instead, the forced digital transformation catalysed permanent changes in service delivery approaches.

**Evidence-Based Hybrid Models:** Post-pandemic occupational health services increasingly adopt hybrid models combining the benefits of both face-to-face and remote consultations:

- **Risk-based triage:** Clinical decision-making frameworks determining which consultations require physical presence and which can be effectively conducted remotely
- **Employee choice:** Offering consultation format options where clinically appropriate, enhancing accessibility and satisfaction
- **Efficiency optimization:** Utilizing remote consultations for routine assessments and follow-ups, reserving face-to-face appointments for complex cases requiring physical examination
- **Geographic reach:** Enabling consistent service delivery across multiple sites without requiring practitioner travel to each location

Survey evidence indicated that occupational health services maintained routine service provision throughout the pandemic whilst simultaneously implementing innovative approaches such as dedicated helplines and digital query systems, demonstrating the profession's adaptability and resilience (Ranka et al., 2020).

**Enhanced Service Accessibility:** The pandemic demonstrated that digital service delivery could address longstanding access inequalities:

- Employees in remote or rural locations gaining access to specialist occupational health expertise
- Shift workers accessing services outside traditional office hours
- Employees with mobility limitations avoiding travel barriers
- Faster access to consultations through reduced waiting times and travel
- Reduced time away from work for health appointments

**Technology Integration:** Occupational health services emerged from the pandemic with significantly enhanced digital capabilities:

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- Established video consultation platforms and protocols
- Secure messaging systems for ongoing communication
- Digital health records and documentation systems
- Online appointment booking and management systems
- Virtual delivery capacity for training, health promotion, and group interventions
- Integration with occupational physician Telehealth services

### Challenges and Limitations Identified

While the pandemic-driven digital transformation delivered substantial benefits, it also exposed challenges requiring ongoing attention:

#### Clinical Limitations:

- Inability to conduct physical examinations remotely, limiting assessment in certain clinical scenarios
- Challenges in building rapport and reading non-verbal cues through video technology
- Technical difficulties interrupting consultations (connectivity issues, platform failures)
- Concerns about confidentiality when employees consulting from shared home spaces

#### Digital Exclusion:

- Employees with limited technology access or digital literacy facing barriers to service access
- Older workers and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds disproportionately affected
- Connectivity issues in areas with poor broadband infrastructure
- Language and cultural barriers potentially amplified in digital environments

**Professional Development Needs:** Research demonstrated that occupational therapy practitioners transitioned to Telehealth as novice users during COVID-19, highlighting the need for formal training in digital consultation skills (Breedon et al., 2023). Occupational health nurses similarly required development of:

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- Video consultation competencies and virtual rapport-building skills
- Digital assessment techniques adapting traditional examination approaches
- Technology troubleshooting capabilities
- Understanding of information governance in digital environments

### Organizational Challenges:

- Need for investment in technology infrastructure and platforms
- Development of policies and protocols for digital service delivery
- Quality assurance mechanisms for remote consultations
- Professional indemnity considerations for Telehealth practice

## Impact on Professional Practice and Identity

The pandemic profoundly influenced how occupational health nurses conceptualize and deliver their professional role:

**Expanded Scope of Practice:** Occupational health nurses demonstrated remarkable adaptability, rapidly acquiring new competencies in digital health delivery whilst maintaining core professional values of holistic, person centered care. The profession's ability to maintain service continuity during unprecedented challenges validated the essential nature of occupational health support.

**Increased Visibility:** The pandemic elevated awareness of occupational health as a critical organizational function. Employers who had previously underinvested in workplace health provision recognized its value when faced with:

- Need for COVID-19 risk assessments and mitigation strategies
- Management of vulnerable workers and individual risk assessments
- Coordination of return-to-work following COVID-19 illness
- Support for workforce mental health and wellbeing during extended crisis
- Guidance on infection control and workplace safety measures

The pandemic exposed serious weaknesses in occupational health provision, with inadequate resources to protect worker health when the crisis struck (Fishwick et al., 2023). This recognition has subsequently informed policy development, including the Keep Britain Working Review's emphasis on expanding occupational health access.

**Innovation and Resilience:** The occupational health nursing profession demonstrated significant innovation during the pandemic, including:

- Development of COVID-19 specific assessment tools and return-to-work guidelines
- Creation of digital health resources and self-help materials
- Establishment of telephone and email advice services
- Virtual delivery of health surveillance where possible
- Remote coordination of complex multidisciplinary care

This innovative capacity positions the profession well for ongoing evolution in response to changing workplace health needs and service delivery models.

## Lessons Learned and Future Directions

The pandemic experience generated important insights informing future occupational health practice:

**1. Digital Health is Complementary, Not Replacement:** Technology enhances rather than replaces professional expertise. The therapeutic relationship, clinical judgement, and holistic assessment that characterize occupational health nursing remain central to effective practice regardless of consultation format.

**2. Flexibility and Adaptability are Essential:** The ability to pivot quickly between service delivery models proves critical for organizational resilience. Occupational health services must maintain capacity for both face-to-face and remote delivery, selecting appropriate modalities based on clinical need rather than organizational convenience.

**3. Proactive Workforce Health Management Matters:** Organizations with established occupational health services and workplace health programmes proved more resilient during the pandemic, able to respond quickly to emerging health challenges. The case for preventative, proactive occupational health provision was substantially strengthened.

**4. Technology Infrastructure Requires Investment:** Sustainable digital service delivery requires appropriate investment in platforms, equipment, training, and ongoing support. Organizations cannot expect to maintain enhanced digital capability without corresponding resource commitment.

### **5. Professional Development Must Include Digital Competencies:**

Contemporary occupational health nursing practice requires integration of digital health competencies into core professional training and continuing professional development. Video consultation skills, digital assessment techniques, and information governance understanding must become standard components of occupational health education.

**6. Equity and Access Require Ongoing Attention:** While digital delivery can enhance accessibility for many employees, services must ensure that technology does not create new barriers for digitally excluded populations. Maintaining multiple access routes (telephone, video, face-to-face) remains important for equitable service provision.

## **Alignment with Keep Britain Working Agenda**

The pandemic's acceleration of digital transformation in occupational health delivery directly supports the Keep Britain Working agenda in several ways:

**Expanded Access to SMEs:** Digital service delivery models validated during the pandemic provide practical mechanisms for extending occupational health support to small and medium enterprises previously unable to justify dedicated provision. Shared services, pay-per-use models, and remote consultation capacity make professional occupational health support viable for organizations of all sizes.

**Early Intervention Capability:** Remote consultation capacity enables faster access to occupational health assessment and advice, supporting the early intervention approach that the Mayfield Review identified as critical for preventing progression to long-term absence and economic inactivity.

**Scalability:** Digital platforms enable individual occupational health nurses to serve larger populations efficiently, addressing the workforce shortage challenge whilst maintaining service quality. This scalability proves essential for achieving the Mayfield Review's ambition of universal occupational health access.

**Evidence Generation:** Digital health platforms generate data that can inform service improvement, demonstrate outcomes, and contribute to the Workplace Health Intelligence Unit's evidence base for effective interventions.

**Integration with Broader Health Systems:** The pandemic demonstrated feasibility of integrated care delivery across occupational health, primary care, and specialist services using digital communication technologies. This integration supports the Keep Britain Working emphasis on coordinated support for workers with health conditions.

### A Permanent Transformation

The COVID-19 pandemic forced immediate, comprehensive digital transformation of occupational health service delivery that would otherwise have taken years or decades to achieve. This transformation was neither planned nor initially welcomed by all stakeholders, yet it has fundamentally reshaped occupational health nursing practice in ways that offer substantial benefits for employees, employers, and the profession itself.

The hybrid service delivery models emerging from the pandemic experience combine the accessibility and efficiency of digital consultations with the clinical depth of face-to-face assessment when required. This flexible, evidence-based approach to service delivery positions occupational health nursing to meet the Keep Britain Working agenda's ambitions for expanded access, early intervention, and prevention of health-based economic inactivity.

As occupational health services continue to refine post-pandemic practice models, the focus must remain on ensuring that technology enhances rather than diminishes the quality of professional support available to workers. The occupational health nurse's core skills, holistic assessment, therapeutic relationship building, clinical reasoning, and advocacy remain as essential as ever, now delivered through an expanded repertoire of consultation formats and digital tools.

The pandemic demonstrated occupational health nursing's adaptability, resilience, and essential contribution to workforce health and organizational resilience. The profession must build on these lessons, ensuring that the digital transformation catalyzed by crisis becomes embedded in sustainable, high-quality service delivery models that extend occupational health support to all workers who need it.

# Clarifying What Occupational Health Nurses Do Not Do

## Not a Replacement for Primary Care

Occupational health nurses operate within a distinct professional framework that complements, rather than replaces, primary care services (Faculty of Occupational Medicine, 2022). Whilst OHAs may provide preliminary health advice whilst employees await GP appointments, they generally cannot prescribe medication or provide formal medical diagnoses. Consequently, scheduling an occupational health consultation as a substitute for GP appointments may inadvertently delay necessary medical treatment.

The OHA's primary function centres on assessment, triage, and appropriate referral to specialist services. Many organisations maintain private healthcare arrangements or contracts with allied health professionals—including physiotherapists, counsellors, and mental health practitioners—enabling OHAs to facilitate expedited access to treatment outside the public healthcare system through digital referral platforms and integrated care pathways.

Referrals to occupational health—whether self-initiated or management-directed—are most appropriate when health concerns relate specifically to work or when workplace factors may be contributing to health problems (Health and Safety Executive, 2019).

### Not Absence Police

Effective absence management requires robust organisational policies implemented consistently by line managers (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2023). Line managers must understand when occupational health referrals are appropriate, what triggers necessitate such referrals, and crucially, their responsibility to act upon recommendations provided in occupational health reports.

A recurring challenge in absence management involves the "revolving door" phenomenon whereby employees are repeatedly re-referred to occupational health because managers fail to implement recommended workplace adjustments or management strategies. This represents an inappropriate delegation of managerial responsibility to occupational health services.

### Confidentiality and Professional Standards

When management requests occupational health reports, they must recognise that all nurses—regardless of practice setting—operate under strict professional codes of conduct established by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC, 2018).

#### **Section 5 of the NMC Code states:**

"Respect people's right to privacy and confidentiality. As a nurse or midwife, you owe a duty of confidentiality to all those who are receiving care. This includes making sure that they are informed about their care and that information about them is shared appropriately."

Consequently, occupational health reports rarely specify detailed diagnoses, disorders, or medical conditions. Instead, reports provide functional assessments in accessible language, enabling managers to make informed decisions about workplace adjustments, work capability, and appropriate support mechanisms whilst maintaining medical confidentiality (Wynn, 2016).

## No Crystal Ball: The Limits of Prognostication

Contrary to popular belief, occupational health nurses cannot predict future health outcomes with absolute certainty. Generic recovery timelines exist for common conditions and surgical procedures, and where no complicating factors or job-specific demands affect recovery, reasonably accurate prognoses can be provided.

However, complex cases involving unknown variables—such as individual responses to new medications, progress through psychological therapies, or the effectiveness of workplace adjustments—require careful monitoring and regular review rather than definitive predictions. Recovery trajectories are frequently influenced by organisational factors, including management engagement with the rehabilitation process and the quality of implementation of recommended workplace modifications (Black, 2008; Waddell & Burton, 2006).

## Not Administrative Support

Appropriately qualified and experienced occupational health nurses represent a scarce professional resource (Royal College of Nursing, 2021). Optimal utilisation of their specialised skills requires strategic deployment. Depending on employment arrangements—whether through agencies, direct employment, full-time, or part-time contracts based on occupational health needs assessments—organisations should establish clear administrative support structures.

Just as general practitioners are not expected to manage appointment scheduling, file management, and administrative documentation alongside clinical consultations, occupational health nurses should not be burdened with non-clinical administrative tasks. With many OHAs now delivering services across multiple sites or remotely through digital platforms, establishing efficient administrative support systems and leveraging appropriate technological solutions delivers significant cost efficiencies and enhances service quality.

# Core Competencies in Modern Occupational Health Practice

## Primary Prevention

Occupational health nurses possess specialist expertise in primary prevention of occupational injury and disease. This encompasses identifying hazards, assessing risks, and planning interventions to modify working environments, systems of work, or working practices to reduce hazardous exposures (Health and Safety Executive, 2019).

The Mayfield Review 2025 emphasised the importance of proactive workplace health management across the "healthy working lifecycle"—a framework encompassing recruitment, retention, and return to work (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025). Occupational health nurses play a pivotal role at each stage of this lifecycle, identifying potential health risks before they result in absence or job loss.

Digital technologies have enhanced primary prevention capabilities through:

- Remote workplace risk assessments using video technology
- Digital ergonomic assessment tools and online ergonomic training modules
- Environmental monitoring data analysis through cloud-based platforms
- Real-time incident reporting via mobile applications
- Virtual workplace design consultations for new processes or equipment

The occupational health nurse's close relationship with workers, combined with knowledge of working environments and emerging health trends, positions them ideally to identify early warning signs of workplace health risks. By presenting findings to management objectively and independently, OHAs catalyse organisational changes that prevent work-related ill health before it occurs (Faculty of Occupational Medicine, 2022). This preventative approach directly supports the Keep Britain Working agenda by reducing the pipeline of workers at risk of health-based economic inactivity.

### Emergency Care

As registered nurses with extensive clinical experience in managing acute illness and injury, occupational health nurses may provide initial emergency care for workplace injuries, depending on their role specifications. In environments with identified hazardous conditions or where workplaces are geographically isolated from healthcare facilities, emergency care may constitute a major component of the OHA's responsibilities.

Occupational health nurses in remote locations, including mining operations, offshore installations, or regions with underdeveloped healthcare infrastructure, maintain advanced emergency care competencies, although it's more likely that a dedicated qualified paramedic will take the lead. In urban settings with readily available emergency services, OHAs typically provide supplementary support beyond first aid provision.

Modern emergency preparedness increasingly incorporates:

- Telemedicine capabilities for remote clinical guidance
- Digital emergency protocols accessible via mobile devices
- Real-time communication systems linking to emergency services
- Virtual reality training for emergency response scenarios

### Nursing Diagnosis and Holistic Assessment

Occupational health nurses employ systematic assessment processes to evaluate clients' healthcare needs, establish nursing diagnoses, and formulate appropriate care plans collaboratively with patients (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2018). Through implementing and evaluating nursing interventions, OHAs contribute to workplace health management and improve worker health outcomes.

The nursing process represents a holistic approach that extends beyond disease treatment to consider individuals' comprehensive health needs within their broader life context. This health-based model, rather than a disease-focused medical model, enables nurses to address the multifaceted health requirements of working populations effectively (Standing, 2017).

Digital health platforms have revolutionised holistic assessment through:

- Online health questionnaires and validated screening tools
- Secure video consultations enabling visual assessment and rapport building
- Digital health records facilitating comprehensive health histories
- Remote monitoring technologies for chronic condition management
- Integration with wearable health technology data

### General Health Advice and Health Assessment

Occupational health nurses provide expert guidance on diverse health issues, particularly concerning their relationship to working ability, workplace health and safety, and necessary job or environmental modifications to accommodate changing employee health status.

Many employers recognise that workplace health encompasses not only occupational diseases but any health condition affecting employee attendance or performance. Providing accessible workplace health services proves particularly effective in reaching traditionally underserved populations, including working men, younger workers, and individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Public Health England, 2016).

Remote occupational health services have significantly enhanced accessibility:

- Video consultations eliminating geographical barriers
- Flexible appointment scheduling outside traditional working hours
- Digital health information resources available 24/7 via online portals
- Multilingual support through translation services integrated into platforms
- Reduced stigma associated with accessing health support

### Evidence-Based Practice and Research Utilisation

Contemporary occupational health nurses systematically integrate research evidence from multiple disciplines—including nursing science, toxicology, psychology, environmental health, and public health—into daily practice (Aveyard & Sharp, 2016). Digital access to academic databases, systematic reviews, and clinical guidelines has enhanced evidence-based decision-making.

Modern practice requires:

- Critical appraisal skills for research evaluation
- Ability to synthesise evidence from diverse sources
- Application of evidence to complex workplace scenarios
- Contribution to practice-based research and service evaluation
- Engagement with online professional learning communities and digital CPD platforms

## Specialist Occupational Health Functions

### Strategic Workplace Health Policy Development

Senior occupational health nurses collaborate with organisational leadership to develop comprehensive workplace health strategies encompassing occupational health, workplace health promotion, and environmental health management (Faculty of Occupational Medicine, 2022). Digital platforms enable OHAs to:

- Monitor population health data through analytics dashboards
- Benchmark organisational health metrics against sector standards
- Present evidence-based proposals through virtual board presentations
- Track implementation and outcomes of health interventions in real-time

### Occupational Health Assessments

Occupational health nurses conduct various health assessments, including fitness-to-work evaluations, pre-employment screening, periodic health surveillance, and lifestyle risk assessments. Digital transformation has revolutionised assessment processes through:

**Remote Assessment Capabilities:**

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- Video-based fitness-to-work consultations
- Digital pre-employment health questionnaires with automated triage
- Online health surveillance programmes with automated appointment scheduling
- Remote physiological monitoring for specific exposure risks
- Digital consent processes and electronic health records

### **Enhanced Efficiency:**

- Automated risk stratification algorithms
- Integration with occupational physician teleconsultation services
- Digital reporting templates ensuring consistency and quality
- Electronic transmission of reports to managers through secure portals

Collaboration with occupational physicians—increasingly via telemedicine platforms—ensures appropriate medical oversight whilst maximising nursing autonomy within competency boundaries (Faculty of Occupational Medicine, 2022).

## Health Surveillance

Where legal requirements mandate health surveillance for residual occupational health risks, occupational health nurses conduct routine surveillance procedures, periodic assessments, and screening evaluations (Health and Safety Executive, 2019).

Digital health surveillance systems offer:

- Automated scheduling and recall systems
- Digital recording of surveillance findings
- Electronic alerts for abnormal results requiring physician review
- Trend analysis identifying emerging patterns across worker populations
- Secure data storage compliant with data protection legislation
- Remote surveillance options for geographically dispersed workforces

Early identification of health effects enables prompt referral to occupational physicians or specialists, with the nurse providing ongoing support throughout investigation and treatment. The occupational health nurse coordinates efforts to re-evaluate working practices, protecting other potentially affected workers.

### **Sickness Absence Management**

Occupational health nurses enhance organisational absence management effectiveness through multiple mechanisms (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2023). The Mayfield Review 2025 identified that access to occupational health support significantly reduces the duration and recurrence of sickness absence, with early intervention being particularly effective in preventing progression to long-term absence and economic inactivity (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025).

Digital innovations include:

#### **Manager Support:**

- Online training modules for line managers on absence management
- Digital referral systems with clear guidance on when to refer
- Virtual consultations with managers to discuss complex cases
- E-learning resources on legal and procedural aspects
- Decision-support tools helping managers identify when early occupational health intervention is needed

#### **Process Optimisation:**

- Transparent online referral portals accessible to managers 24/7
- Automated acknowledgement and appointment scheduling
- Secure digital transmission of recommendations
- Online tracking of referral outcomes and manager actions
- Dashboard analytics identifying absence patterns requiring intervention

#### **Early Intervention:**

## Human Investment

- Fast-track digital triage systems ensuring rapid access
- Remote consultations reducing time to intervention (addressing the Mayfield Review's emphasis on early support)
- Digital signposting to appropriate support services
- Online absence trends monitoring identifying patterns requiring investigation
- Proactive health surveillance identifying emerging health issues

The occupational health nurse's relationship with workers, environmental knowledge, and awareness of ill-health trends positions them optimally to advise on absence prevention strategies. The Mayfield Review highlighted that employer-provided occupational health support represents one of the most effective interventions for preventing health-based economic inactivity, with occupational health nurses serving as the primary delivery mechanism for this support (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025).

Referral to occupational physicians—increasingly via teleconsultation platforms—typically yields superior outcomes for work-related issues compared with general practitioner referrals (Waddell & Burton, 2006).

## Rehabilitation and Return to Work

Structured rehabilitation programmes facilitate safe return to work following illness or injury (Black, 2008). The Mayfield Review 2025 identified rehabilitation coordination as a critical occupational health function, noting that structured return-to-work programmes can reduce absence duration by up to 40% and significantly decrease the risk of permanent work exit due to health conditions (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025).

Occupational health nurses serve as the cornerstone of effective rehabilitation programmes, bridging clinical knowledge, workplace understanding, and stakeholder coordination. Digital rehabilitation management includes:

## Human Investment

- Online risk assessment tools for return-to-work planning
- Digital rehabilitation templates customisable to individual circumstances
- Video-based workplace assessments and adjustment reviews
- Regular virtual check-ins monitoring progress
- Secure messaging platforms for communication between stakeholders
- Digital documentation accessible to all parties with appropriate permissions
- Integration with external healthcare providers through shared digital platforms

Occupational health nurses frequently serve as rehabilitation coordinators, working with employees, managers, occupational physicians, and external healthcare providers to develop, implement, and monitor graduated return-to-work programmes. The Keep Britain Working Review emphasised that effective rehabilitation requires coordination across health services, employers, and government support—a role that occupational health nurses are uniquely positioned to fulfill (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025).

Proactive rehabilitation strategies increasingly utilise digital health monitoring to detect early health changes before absence occurs, aligning with the Mayfield Review's emphasis on prevention and early intervention throughout the healthy working lifecycle.

Early intervention benefits multiple stakeholders—individuals, organisations, and society—by preventing costly absence and healthcare utilisation (Black, 2008). The Mayfield Review calculated that expanding access to occupational health support, with rehabilitation coordination at its core, could reduce health-based economic inactivity by hundreds of thousands of individuals over the next decade (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025). Occupational health nurses often function as employee advocates, ensuring management fully appreciates workforce health improvement value whilst balancing organisational productivity needs.

### Maintenance of Functional Ability

Proactive strategies to maintain or restore work ability represent an expanding occupational health focus (Ilmarinen, 2009). Target populations include:

## Human Investment

- New employees requiring workplace orientation and health promotion
- Ageing workers benefiting from work ability assessments and interventions
- Pregnancy-related adjustments and return-to-work support
- Long-term unemployed individuals requiring work hardening programmes

Digital platforms facilitate:

- Online pre-employment health and wellbeing information
- Virtual work ability assessments using validated instruments
- Digital exercise and rehabilitation programmes
- E-learning modules on health maintenance strategies
- Remote psychosocial risk assessments and interventions

Increasingly, workplace health challenges involve psychosocial factors that are complex and costly to address (Health and Safety Executive, 2023). Occupational health nurses, working at organisational level, provide expert guidance on strategies improving worker psychosocial health and wellbeing, increasingly delivered through digital mental health platforms and online counselling services.

## Health and Safety Integration

### Health and Safety Strategy Development

Occupational health nurses contribute significantly to organisational health and safety strategies (Health and Safety Executive, 2019). Their expertise in health risk assessment, health surveillance, and environmental health management integrates into comprehensive safety management systems.

Digital collaboration tools enable:

- Virtual participation in health and safety committee meetings
- Real-time incident investigation support via video technology
- Cloud-based risk assessment documentation accessible to multidisciplinary teams
- Digital dashboards presenting integrated health and safety metrics

### Hazard Identification

Close worker contact and environmental awareness position occupational health nurses ideally for hazard identification. Remote working arrangements have necessitated innovative approaches:

- Virtual workplace tours using video technology
- Digital incident and near-miss reporting systems analysed for trends
- Online worker surveys identifying health concerns
- Remote ergonomic assessments using employee-submitted photographs and videos
- Artificial intelligence-powered analytics identifying emerging risk patterns

Regular workplace engagement—whether physical or virtual—maintains current knowledge of working processes and practices essential for effective hazard identification.

### Risk Assessment

European legislative frameworks increasingly emphasise risk management approaches (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2018). Occupational health nurses possess training in risk assessment methodologies and, depending on expertise and assessment complexity, can conduct or contribute to risk assessments.

Digital risk assessment tools enable:

- Standardised online risk assessment templates
- Collaborative assessment involving geographically dispersed stakeholders
- Automated risk scoring and control hierarchy recommendations
- Digital audit trails documenting assessment processes
- Integration with organisational risk registers

### Control Strategy Advice

Following hazard identification and risk assessment, occupational health nurses provide evidence-based recommendations on control measures, including:

- Hierarchy of control implementation
- Health surveillance programme design
- Risk communication strategies
- Monitoring protocols
- Control effectiveness evaluation methodologies

Digital platforms facilitate dissemination of control guidance through online resources, e-learning modules, and virtual training sessions accessible to dispersed workforces.

## Research, Evidence, and Ethics

### Research and Evidence-Based Practice

Occupational health nurses synthesise research from diverse disciplines—nursing, toxicology, psychology, environmental health, and public health—in daily practice (Aveyard & Sharp, 2016). Essential competencies include:

- Critical appraisal of research literature from multiple disciplines
- Evidence synthesis and application to practice
- Service evaluation and quality improvement research
- Data analysis and interpretation for management reporting
- Contribution to occupational health nursing research

Digital resources supporting evidence-based practice include:

- Online journal access and research databases
- Digital reference management systems
- Statistical analysis software for service evaluation
- Online data visualisation tools for report preparation
- Virtual research networks and special interest groups

At organisational level, occupational health nurses produce management reports analysing absence trends, accident statistics, health promotion needs, and service effectiveness evaluations (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2023).

## Professional Ethics and Confidentiality

Occupational health professionals occupy privileged positions with access to sensitive personal and medical information (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2018). Society imposes legal responsibilities on healthcare professionals to protect patient interests, with professional bodies setting and enforcing ethical standards.

The nursing profession maintains a respected tradition of upholding patient trust. This trust enables occupational health nurses to practice effectively, as employees share information confidently, knowing it will be handled appropriately.

Digital health platforms introduce additional ethical considerations:

- Secure data transmission and storage requirements
- Clear consent processes for digital consultations and data sharing
- Cybersecurity measures protecting sensitive health information
- Transparent privacy policies regarding online portal usage
- Data protection compliance under UK GDPR legislation

The International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH, 2016) provides comprehensive ethical guidance:

"Occupational health practice must be performed according to the highest professional standards and ethical principles. Occupational health professionals must serve the health and social wellbeing of workers, individually and collectively. They also contribute to environmental and community health. The obligations of occupational health professionals include protecting the life and health of workers, respecting human dignity, and promoting the highest ethical principles in occupational health policies and programmes. Integrity in professional conduct, impartiality, and the protection of confidentiality of health data and the privacy of workers are part of these obligations."

Digital service delivery does not diminish these ethical obligations; rather, it extends them into virtual environments requiring additional safeguards and considerations.

# Leadership and Management Functions

## Department Management

Senior occupational health nurses may manage multidisciplinary teams, directing and coordinating professional activities. Management responsibilities encompass:

- Strategic service development and delivery
- Team leadership and performance management
- Stakeholder relationship management
- Organisational development contribution
- Professional governance and quality assurance

Digital management tools facilitate:

- Virtual team meetings and supervision sessions
- Online performance management systems
- Digital workforce planning and scheduling platforms
- Cloud-based financial management systems
- Remote service delivery coordination

## Budget Planning and Financial Management

Budget-holding occupational health nurses secure resources, manage departmental finances, and report on resource utilisation. Digital financial management systems enable:

- Real-time budget monitoring and variance analysis
- Automated financial reporting
- Online procurement systems
- Digital approval workflows
- Cost-effectiveness analysis of service delivery models

## Service Level Agreements

Service level agreements (SLAs) clarify expectations between service providers and users (Faculty of Occupational Medicine, 2022). Digital SLA management includes:

- Online SLA documentation accessible to stakeholders
- Automated performance monitoring against agreed metrics
- Digital dashboards displaying service delivery statistics
- Electronic feedback collection systems
- Transparent reporting of outcomes and service quality

### Quality Assurance and Audit

Modern occupational health services require robust quality assurance systems (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2018). Digital quality management encompasses:

- Electronic clinical audit systems
- Online incident reporting and investigation
- Digital patient experience surveys
- Automated compliance monitoring
- Quality improvement project management platforms

Professional audit constitutes an essential component of nursing practice. Occupational health nurses participate in departmental nursing audits and multidisciplinary clinical audits, increasingly facilitated through digital audit tools and dashboards.

### Continuing Professional Development

Professional practice continuously evolves in response to new evidence, legislative changes, technological advances, and improved practices (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2018). Occupational health nurses maintain professional obligations to update knowledge and skills regularly, ensuring competence maintenance and high-quality service delivery.

Digital learning platforms have revolutionised professional development:

- Online CPD courses and webinars accessible globally
- Virtual conferences and networking events
- E-learning modules with interactive content
- Digital portfolios documenting learning and competence
- Online professional communities facilitating peer learning
- Podcasts and video content for flexible learning

Nurse managers identify personal and team development needs, ensuring staff maintain appropriate competencies through structured digital and face-to-face learning opportunities.

## Collaborative and Educational Roles

### Occupational Health Team Coordination

Occupational health nurses often coordinate multidisciplinary teams, particularly where they represent the only permanently employed team member or consistent site presence. Digital coordination tools include:

- Virtual multidisciplinary team meetings
- Cloud-based case management systems
- Secure messaging platforms for professional communication
- Shared digital care planning systems
- Online referral and consultation platforms

This coordination role requires excellent communication, planning, management, and organisational skills, increasingly delivered through digital platforms enabling seamless collaboration across geographical boundaries.

### Education and Training

Occupational health nurses educate workers on occupational hazard protection, non-occupational disease prevention, and environmental health management (Public Health England, 2016). Digital education delivery includes:

- Online training modules accessible to dispersed workforces
- Virtual training sessions via video conferencing
- Interactive e-learning with assessment components
- Digital health promotion resources and campaigns
- Mobile applications providing health information and support
- Webinars on emerging workplace health topics

### Environmental Health Management

Particularly in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) without dedicated environmental health managers, occupational health nurses advise on sustainable practices, including:

- Natural resource conservation
- Waste minimisation and recycling
- Environmental health management integration into organisational strategy
- Identification of specialist environmental health consultants

Digital environmental health management tools facilitate monitoring, reporting, and improvement planning, with online platforms enabling collaborative environmental initiatives.

## Management and Corporate Advisory Functions

Occupational health nurses serve as expert advisors on workplace health policy development and implementation. Digital advisory mechanisms include:

- Virtual attendance at health and safety committees
- Online consultation on policy development
- Digital submission of expert reports and recommendations
- Video-based presentations to executive leadership
- Secure electronic communication channels for sensitive advice

## The Digital Transformation of Occupational Health

### Remote Service Delivery Models

The evolution of occupational health service delivery has been profoundly influenced by digital technologies and remote working trends (Royal College of Nursing, 2021). The Mayfield Review 2025 identified that only 1 in 8 workers currently have access to occupational health support, with this figure falling to less than 1 in 20 for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Digital service delivery models represent a critical mechanism for addressing this access gap, enabling cost-effective provision of occupational health support to previously underserved organisations and workers (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025).

Contemporary service models incorporate:

#### Hybrid Service Delivery:

## Human Investment

- Blended approaches combining face-to-face and virtual consultations
- Risk-based triage determining appropriate consultation modality
- Client choice in consultation format where clinically appropriate
- Flexible service access accommodating diverse working patterns
- Multi-site service delivery without requirement for physical presence at each location

### **Telehealth Capabilities:**

- High-quality video consultations enabling visual assessment
- Secure messaging for follow-up communication
- Digital document sharing for workplace assessment information
- Remote physiological monitoring where indicated
- Integration with occupational physician teleconsultation services
- Cross-regional service delivery supporting national employers

### **Online Portals and Digital Platforms:**

- Self-service health information resources
- Online appointment booking systems
- Digital pre-consultation questionnaires
- Secure access to health surveillance results
- Electronic health promotion campaigns and interventions
- Mobile applications supporting worker health and wellbeing
- Integration with employee assistance programmes and wellbeing platforms

### **Addressing the SME Access Gap:**

The Mayfield Review particularly emphasised the need for innovative delivery models serving SMEs, which typically cannot justify dedicated occupational health practitioners. Digital platforms enable:

- Shared occupational health services serving multiple small employers
- Pay-per-use models reducing cost barriers
- Rapid access consultations via video technology
- Online health resources and manager training accessible 24/7
- Collaborative purchasing arrangements reducing per-employee costs

This democratisation of occupational health access directly supports the Keep Britain Working agenda by extending professional support to the 80% of workers currently without occupational health provision (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025).

### Benefits of Digital Service Delivery

Evidence demonstrates multiple advantages of digital occupational health services (Odendaal et al., 2020), with particular relevance to the Keep Britain Working agenda:

#### Enhanced Accessibility:

- Eliminates geographical barriers for remote and mobile workers
- Reduces time away from work for health appointments (addressing productivity concerns)
- Improves service access for shift workers through flexible scheduling
- Enables consistent service delivery to multi-site organisations
- Provides health support for international and travelling employees
- **Extends occupational health access to SMEs and organisations without on-site provision** (critical to Mayfield Review recommendations)
- Reduces barriers for workers with mobility limitations or transport challenges

#### Improved Efficiency:

- Reduces administrative burden through automated processes
- Streamlines referral and reporting procedures
- Enables rapid access to specialist advice via teleconsultation
- Optimises resource utilisation across service delivery models
- Reduces organisational costs associated with employee travel
- **Enables occupational health nurses to serve larger populations efficiently** (addressing the Mayfield Review's identified workforce shortage)

#### Data-Driven Decision Making:

## Human Investment

- Real-time health metrics and analytics dashboards
- Population health trend identification supporting preventative strategies
- Evidence-based service planning and resource allocation
- Outcome measurement demonstrating return on investment
- Benchmarking capabilities against industry standards
- **Evidence generation supporting the Workplace Health Intelligence Unit** (recommended by Mayfield Review)

### Supporting Keep Britain Working Priorities:

- Early identification of workers at risk of long-term absence
- Rapid intervention preventing progression to economic inactivity
- Scalable service models enabling universal access to occupational health support
- Cost-effective delivery making occupational health provision viable for all employer sizes
- Integration with government initiatives and NHS services

### Quality Enhancement:

- Standardised assessment and reporting templates
- Automated clinical decision support systems
- Digital audit trails ensuring accountability
- Electronic quality metrics monitoring
- Continuous feedback loops enabling service improvement
- Evidence-based practice integration through digital clinical guidelines

## Digital Competency Requirements

Modern occupational health nursing requires additional digital competencies (Royal College of Nursing, 2021):

# Human Investment

- Digital consultation skills ensuring rapport building in virtual environments
- Technology platform proficiency across multiple systems
- Information governance understanding for digital data management
- Cybersecurity awareness protecting sensitive health information
- Digital health literacy to support clients using online resources
- Telehealth assessment skills adapting physical examination techniques
- Technology troubleshooting basic competence
- Digital communication skills maintaining professional standards

## Challenges and Considerations

Digital transformation presents challenges requiring careful management:

### Clinical Considerations:

- Ensuring clinical safety in remote assessment scenarios
- Managing situations requiring physical examination or intervention
- Maintaining professional boundaries in virtual consultations
- Recognising limitations of remote assessment
- Establishing clear escalation protocols

### Technological Barriers:

- Digital exclusion for individuals with limited technology access
- Connectivity issues in areas with poor broadband infrastructure
- Platform compatibility across diverse devices and systems
- Technical support requirements for users unfamiliar with technology
- Ongoing system maintenance and updates

### Regulatory and Ethical Issues:

- Data protection compliance across digital platforms
- Consent processes for digital health interventions
- Confidentiality maintenance in remote working environments
- Professional indemnity for Telehealth practice
- Cross-border practice considerations for international organisations

### Human Factors:

- Maintaining therapeutic relationships in virtual environments
- Preventing professional isolation for remote practitioners
- Supporting worker engagement with digital health resources
- Balancing efficiency with personalised care
- Managing screen fatigue for practitioners and clients

# The Future of Occupational Health Nursing

## Emerging Trends and Innovations

Occupational health nursing continues evolving in response to technological advances, changing workplace health needs, and policy imperatives such as the Keep Britain Working agenda:

### **Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning:**

- Predictive analytics identifying absence risk (supporting early intervention priorities)
- AI-powered triage systems optimising resource allocation
- Pattern recognition in health surveillance data
- Automated risk assessment supporting clinical decision-making
- Chatbots providing initial health information and guidance
- Natural language processing analysing absence and health trends
- Machine learning algorithms predicting rehabilitation success likelihood

### **Wearable Technology Integration:**

- Real-time physiological monitoring for high-risk occupations
- Activity tracking supporting health promotion interventions
- Fatigue detection systems enhancing workplace safety
- Environmental exposure monitoring through wearable sensors
- Integration of wearable data into occupational health assessments
- Early warning systems for deteriorating health conditions

### **Virtual and Augmented Reality:**

## Human Investment

- Immersive workplace risk assessments conducted remotely
- Virtual reality training for hazard recognition and emergency response
- Augmented reality supporting remote ergonomic assessments
- Virtual rehabilitation programmes for musculoskeletal conditions
- VR-based return-to-work familiarisation for anxious employees

### **Genomics and Personalised Occupational Health:**

- Genetic susceptibility assessment for occupational exposures
- Personalised health promotion based on genetic risk profiles
- Ethical frameworks for genetic information in workplace health

### **Mental Health and Digital Therapeutics:**

- Online cognitive behavioural therapy programmes
- Digital stress management and resilience building applications
- Virtual peer support networks
- Mental health monitoring through passive smartphone data
- AI-powered mental health risk assessment tools
- Integration with NHS Talking Therapies and other services

### **Supporting the Keep Britain Working Agenda Through Innovation:**

The Mayfield Review identified that technological innovation in occupational health service delivery represents a critical enabler for achieving universal access to workplace health support. The review recommended investment in:

- The Workplace Health Intelligence Unit to build the evidence base for effective interventions
- Digital platforms enabling SME access to occupational health expertise
- Data integration across healthcare, occupational health, and government support systems
- Artificial intelligence tools supporting early identification of health-related work exit risk
- Scalable digital interventions complementing face-to-face occupational health provision

Occupational health nurses must lead the adoption and evaluation of these innovations, ensuring they enhance rather than replace the therapeutic relationship and professional judgement that remain central to effective practice (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025).

### Professional Development Priorities

To effectively navigate digital transformation and respond to the Keep Britain Working agenda, occupational health nurses must prioritise:

- Digital health literacy and informatics competence
- Telehealth consultation skills and virtual rapport building
- Data analytics and interpretation capabilities
- Understanding of AI and machine learning applications
- Ethical framework development for digital health practice
- Change management skills for service transformation
- Leadership capabilities in digital innovation
- Research skills evaluating digital health interventions
- **Policy engagement and advocacy skills** (to influence workplace health policy at organisational and national levels)
- **Competence in working with diverse populations**, including individuals with disabilities and long-term health conditions
- **Knowledge of government support systems and benefits** to provide holistic advice supporting work retention
- **Business case development skills** to help employers understand occupational health return on investment

The Mayfield Review emphasised the need for workforce development to expand occupational health capacity nationally. Professional development must therefore also focus on:

- Supervision and mentoring skills to support expanding workforce
- Quality assurance methodologies ensuring consistent standards across diverse delivery models
- Collaborative working with primary care, secondary care, and community services
- Understanding of the healthy working lifecycle framework guiding preventative practice

# The Occupational Health Developer Role

## Expanding the Occupational Health Workforce

An occupational health developer need not be a trained occupational health nurse but requires comprehensive understanding of occupational health principles to assess, plan, implement, and evaluate occupational health initiatives within organisations lacking specialist personnel (Royal College of Nursing, 2021).

The Mayfield Review 2025 recognised that achieving universal access to occupational health support requires innovative workforce models extending beyond traditional occupational health nursing roles. The review recommended that organisations without dedicated occupational health provision should designate workplace health champions or coordinators who can:

- Identify when specialist occupational health input is needed
- Facilitate access to remote occupational health services
- Implement workplace adjustments recommended by occupational health professionals
- Monitor the effectiveness of health interventions
- Promote healthy working practices and early help-seeking
- Liaise between employees, managers, occupational health services, and healthcare providers

Collaborative workplace health management necessitates that health and safety managers and human resources professionals develop comparable understanding of occupational health nursing roles. This knowledge facilitates:

- Appropriate utilisation of occupational health services
- Effective collaboration in workplace health initiatives
- Informed decision-making regarding health-related workplace issues
- Monitoring of occupational health service effectiveness
- Integration of health promotion into organisational strategy
- **Implementation of the healthy working lifecycle framework** (as recommended by the Mayfield Review)

Digital platforms enable occupational health developers to:

## Human Investment

- Access online training in occupational health fundamentals
- Utilise digital tools for health needs assessment
- Implement online health promotion campaigns
- Monitor health metrics through digital dashboards
- Collaborate virtually with occupational health specialists
- Access remote occupational health consultation services for complex cases

This model recognises that every organisation benefits from having personnel with occupational health knowledge, even without formal occupational health nursing qualifications, particularly when supported by digital resources and remote specialist consultation capabilities. The Keep Britain Working agenda emphasises that widespread adoption of this model could extend occupational health reach significantly, supporting the ambition of ensuring all workers have access to workplace health provision (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025).

## Conclusion

Occupational health nursing has evolved substantially from its origins, developing into a sophisticated, evidence-based profession operating at the forefront of workplace health management. The profession has successfully integrated digital technologies and remote service delivery models whilst maintaining the core values of nursing practice: holistic care, professional integrity, and advocacy for worker health and wellbeing.

The Mayfield Review 2025 (Keep Britain Working Review) has positioned occupational health nursing centrally within the national response to health-based economic inactivity. With 2.8 million people currently out of work due to long-term sickness, and only 1 in 8 workers having access to occupational health support, the review's findings underscore both the critical importance of the profession and the urgent need for service expansion (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025).

Digital transformation has enhanced, rather than diminished, the occupational health nurse's contribution to organisational health and productivity. Remote consultation capabilities, online health platforms, and digital health monitoring have expanded service accessibility whilst maintaining clinical quality and professional standards. These innovations represent the primary mechanism through which the Mayfield Review's ambition of universal occupational health access can be achieved, particularly for the 80% of workers in small and medium enterprises currently without provision.

However, technology serves as a tool to enhance, not replace, the professional judgement, clinical expertise, and therapeutic relationships that remain central to effective occupational health nursing practice. The integration of digital competencies with traditional nursing skills positions occupational health nurses uniquely to address contemporary workplace health challenges, including:

- Supporting increasingly dispersed and remote workforces
- Managing complex psychosocial health issues (the leading cause of health-based inactivity)
- Preventing work-related musculoskeletal disorders in diverse settings
- Promoting health and wellbeing across diverse populations
- Contributing to organisational resilience and productivity

**Coordinating the healthy working lifecycle from recruitment through retention to return-to-work**

**Reducing the pipeline of workers at risk of health-related job loss**

**Supporting the national economic agenda by keeping Britain working**

As the profession continues to evolve, occupational health nurses must maintain commitment to lifelong learning, embracing technological innovations whilst upholding ethical principles and professional standards. The unique perspective that highly trained and experienced occupational health professionals bring to organisational leadership proves increasingly valuable in recognising that healthy, trained, and motivated employees constitute the foundation of successful organisations.

## Human Investment

The Mayfield Review calculated that expanding access to occupational health support could reduce health-based economic inactivity by hundreds of thousands of individuals over the next decade, generating economic benefits exceeding £10 billion annually whilst improving countless lives (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025). Occupational health nurses represent the professional workforce that will deliver this transformation.

The shortage of qualified occupational health nurses, combined with growing recognition of workplace health importance, necessitates innovative approaches to service delivery and workforce development. Digital technologies, remote service models, the occupational health developer role, and collaborative partnerships across healthcare sectors all contribute to meeting this challenge, ensuring that organisations of all sizes can access high-quality occupational health support.

The Keep Britain Working agenda provides both validation of the occupational health nursing profession's critical societal contribution and a roadmap for future development. Occupational health nurses must embrace this opportunity to expand their reach, demonstrate their value through rigorous evaluation, and lead the transformation of workplace health provision that will keep Britain working for decades to come.

### Final words

A word of encouragement to future occupational health specialists. No doubt in another 20-30 years the occupational health landscape will have changed, evolved and adapted. One fundamental element will not. We invest our time, knowledge and compassion in humans and that is worth the human investment. Take care. Craig Page.

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