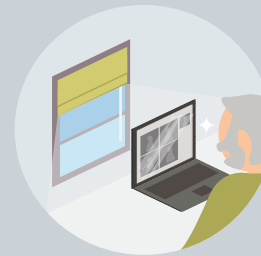


# Out of Office: guidance on working from home as we age

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Royal College of Art  
**DESIGN AGE**  
**INSTITUTE**

# Design Age Institute

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The Design Age Institute is the UK's national strategic unit for design and the healthy ageing economy.

We bring together designers, businesses, researchers and communities to help address the challenges and opportunities of an ageing society.

Based at the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design at the Royal College of Art and funded by Research England, Design Age Institute partnership brings together skills and expertise from world-leading organisations in research, design, innovation and learning - the UK's National Innovation Centre for Ageing at Newcastle University, the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, the International Longevity Centre UK and the Design Museum.



**“If there were guidelines for people working at home, it would be a very useful reminder. Because I think we all know in our hearts what they might be but it’s just so easy to forget”.**

*Female home worker, age 69, living with a number of long-term health conditions*

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The global population is ageing with many countries having around 30% of their population aged 60 or over. According to the World Health Organisation, by 2030 1 in 6 people in the world will be aged 60 or over.

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In the UK people aged over 50 make up a third of the workforce and nearly half of the adult population.

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Many people are extending their working lives with higher retirement ages.

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It is becoming increasingly important to support older adults to maintain their health and wellbeing while working.

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Older adults may choose to work more flexible hours or engage with voluntary work. Home working can be a desirable option to support this but there is limited information available to advise on ‘healthy’ home working. We aim to address this through our research and provide guidance in this report.

# Executive Summary

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Design Age Institute commissioned Northumbria University and Loughborough University to explore the challenges and opportunities of working from home as we age. The research showed that more people are working later in life, with an increase in working from home. There is currently a lack of specific guidance for older people working from home in relation to setting up a work space, particularly taking into account different health conditions that people may be living with and that may require adaptations.

The information presented here was compiled through research and interviews with older adults who work from home and health professionals who advise on home working. The quotations included are taken from our interviews with participants. The aim was to develop recommendations that allow people to remain in work for longer or develop new enterprises post retirement, while promoting health and wellbeing and minimising potential complications associated with home working.

**“I’m finding now that companies are employing people at an older age. I’m frequently working with people over 60. Over 65. Sometimes heading to 70. And there’s a lot more home working involved.”**

***Occupational Health Nurse***

**Sometimes, for some people, if they are working, that’s what keeps them going. We have got a lot of cases of people who are 80-something, and still work, and they find a purpose in life, even though they are beyond the retirement age. Because that’s what they enjoy doing.”**

***Physiotherapist***

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This document highlights the key aspects which are important in relation to health and wellbeing while working at home. The recommendations can support all of us working from home, regardless of age, as well as those who are designing work environments. The personas apply these recommendations and guidance to older people living with specific health conditions to demonstrate their value.



# Out of Office: guidance on working from home as we age

Whatever your workstation set-up may be at home there are many things that you can try to support your health and wellbeing. Here are 8 key factors for your consideration:



## Health and Exercise

Movement can be as important as posture. Try to create a workstation that factors in any existing health conditions or concerns you may have.



## Furniture and equipment

Pay attention to furniture & ergonomics; use adjustable ergonomic desks and chairs to allow flexible sitting and standing positions. Create adequate and easy to reach storage spaces with clear organisation through colour-coding or transparent cabinets.



## Noise control

If possible background noise should be kept to a minimum and adjusted to personal preferences.



## Temperature, light and airflow

Ability to control temperature and enhance legibility with ambient and natural light with access to fresh air. Ensure comfortable heating in the winter, avoiding proximity to a radiator, and easy to cool during the summer with windows for ventilation.



## Social interactions

Interactions with those around you can help as reminders to get up and move around. Social interactions via phone and video can help avoid feeling isolated.



## Location

Ideally a dedicated room for working in, preferably not shared, to promote privacy. If possible, a room with a view; it can positively impact a person's mood, as can personal effects, plants or pictures. Floor surfaces should be sufficiently rough to prevent slips and falls.



## Tasks and learning

Participate in training to improve or develop new skills, including in new technologies.



## Work/Life balance

Take frequent breaks and move often to promote active mobility and enhance wellbeing.

## Health & Exercise

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Creating healthy habits during working hours is essential for your wellbeing. Movement is key to maintaining a healthy body and small changes to a daily routine can have a big impact. Be mindful of your posture, especially if you have a musculoskeletal disorder (pain or reduced movement due to a problem of the bones, joints or soft tissues). Gentle stretching can reset your posture and ensure that your muscles get some much-needed movement. Some health conditions such as arthritis can be exacerbated by sitting in one position for too long.

Studies have shown that home workers take fewer breaks throughout the day. Try to put a system in place to avoid a sedentary lifestyle. This can range from standing at your desk for a period of the day to implementing an exercise routine which boosts your mobility and provides you with breaks.

**“I completely forget about my posture when I’m into an interesting piece of work. And then I feel it later on in the day, or in the night, on my neck. My neck is affected as I’m continuously looking down at the keyboard.”**

*Home worker, age 69, living with diabetes and osteoporosis*



## Furniture & Equipment

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Investing in ergonomic furniture can reap significant health benefits. Supportive, comfortable chairs can improve your posture and prevent long-term damage to your neck and back, especially for those with musculoskeletal disorders. Working from a sit-stand desk can also help you to avoid being sedentary and promote some movement throughout the day. There are other, smaller improvements that you can implement to make your workstation more ergonomic, such as adjusting your monitor to be at eye level and raising or lowering your seat so that your arms rest on your desk at a comfortable angle and your feet touch the floor.

Organising your workstation can also have a positive effect on your working life and your health. Try to prevent clutter and have shelves at safe heights, neither too high nor too low, to increase accessibility and to avoid over bending or reaching. Creating adequate and easy to reach storage by using transparent cabinets or through colour-coding can improve efficiency.

**“And sometimes, you know, it’s really simple. For somebody who was struggling with a space for a monitor, we came up with sitting the laptop on a whole pile of paper packs. Getting it exactly to the height they wanted, and then having an external keyboard and mouse. So, it wasn’t expensive, fancy equipment. It was what worked for them.”**

*Occupational health nurse*

## Noise Control

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Try to minimise noise disturbances throughout the day. Small sounds, which seem innocuous in domestic settings, can have a marked impact on your productivity. If possible, find a space to work in which is removed from such interruptions which may be caused by domestic appliances, alarms, television & radio or conversations between household members. Also try to limit unnecessary disturbances from your work appliances by adjusting the noise or notification settings to a comfortable level.



## Temperature, light & airflow

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Adequate temperature, light and airflow control can have a big impact on your productivity and wellbeing. These requirements can be highly personal and may change throughout the seasons, so working from a space which allows adjustment is crucial.

Good lighting can increase legibility and prevent eye strain. Bright, full spectrum lighting (lighting that emulates the optimum quality of natural light) is highly recommended, particularly for people who might be experiencing macular degeneration.

Your workstation should be in a room with central heating, avoiding proximity to a radiator, and ideally should have a window to easily cool and ventilate during the summer months.

## Social Interactions

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Social interactions are another important aspect of our health and wellbeing. A potential downside to home working is the reduced amount of contact with others compared to being in an office. If the home working role does not allow for meeting other people, it is important to consider how social time will be prioritised in other parts of life. Technology can facilitate social connection when home working, for example using video calls for meetings. Alternatively, try to schedule regular breaks to get out of the house. Going on short walks, running errands and meeting a friend for coffee are a great way to increase social interactions and consequently productivity.

**“I think, for some people, not being with colleagues is an issue. So, a lot of people say that they don’t miss the commute. They don’t miss the hot-desking, the being in busy offices. But what they do miss is the ability to just sit down over a cup of coffee and have a chat. They miss that interaction.”**

***Occupational health nurse***



## Location

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Establishing a dedicated room for your workspace offers practical benefits by providing privacy and reducing distractions and noise disturbances. A room with a window and a nice view can improve your mood, as can personalising your environment by adding personal effects like photos and plants. Try to find a space which is safe to work from - a slippery floor, limited ventilation or poor lighting can have a negative effect on your health and wellbeing.

**“If I was upstairs looking out of my little bedroom window, all I’m seeing is rooftops. Down here, I’m looking at trees, the back garden... You know, and stuff like that. I think that working in an uplifting environment has got a lot to do with being content.”**

*Home worker, age 65, living with osteoporosis*

## Tasks & Learning

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Try to diversify your workday by breaking up challenging tasks into manageable ones. Introducing smaller tasks into your work schedule which can be easily completed can provide you with a sense of accomplishment and boost your morale. Continuous professional development and learning new skills can expand your mind and have a positive impact on your work. Developing an understanding of new technologies can also increase your productivity and motivation.



## Work/Life Balance

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When working from home, it can be difficult to find an optimal work/life balance. Set the start and finish times for your working day and ensure that you take frequent breaks throughout; schedule them if necessary. In addition, don't forget to prioritise social interactions such as having lunch with your family or going for a walk. Movement and exercise are important to maintaining good health and wellbeing and should be included in your daily schedule.

**“When your home is your workplace, you need to maintain a work-life balance. When you wake up you are already at work, and when you finish you are already at home. You need to create boundaries between the two. Otherwise you can be tempted to carry on and do a bit more.”**

*Physiotherapist*





# Home working as we age applied: Harold

## Current setup

Harold is a 68-year-old man who lives with his wife in a semi-detached house along with their dog who they try to walk together twice a day, although sometimes he does not have time for this. He is self-employed, working on average 20 to 30 hours per week and tries to keep to three working days per week.

## Health conditions

He lives with diabetes and a heart condition.

## Workstation

Harold has a designated home office which is a converted bedroom, he uses a laptop computer positioned on a desk and has a comfortable office chair. His wife insists he takes a break to come downstairs for lunch as he can work long days and tends not to take breaks without being prompted.





Adjustable furniture and monitor

Control light, air flow and temperature

Avoid glare on the screen.

Increase physical activity levels

## Suggested interventions

Considering the long hours that Harold works, the furniture should be adequate. He has a comfortable office chair, which is very good. However, more must be done to set up the office correctly for him:

- An adjustable desk – stand/sit desk.
- A chair set up adequately allowing arms resting on the desk and feet on the floor.
- Additional adjustable monitor to be positioned at eye level and keyboard to correct the arm/wrist posture.
- Desk must be correctly positioned in relation to the window to avoid glare on the monitor.
- Light, air flow and temperature must be adequate for a comfortable environment.
- Harold would benefit from a system that could monitor working/sitting time and remind him to change his posture and take short frequent breaks throughout the day.
- Also, he needs to increase physical activity levels on working days, a system reminding him could be useful.

# Home working as we age applied: Anne

## Current setup

Anne is a 70-year-old woman who lives in a bungalow with her husband. She is retired and does volunteering work for a charity. She tends to work two to four hours per day most days. Her work involves using a laptop, reading reports and emails. Outside of working she enjoys attending an adapted yoga class.

## Workstation

Anne sits in a comfortable armchair in her favourite spot in the living room as she likes to feel included in conversations in the home. She works with the laptop on a tray on her lap. She feels stiff after prolonged sitting and finds it uncomfortable to sit on a firm chair, her posture is stooped.

## Health conditions

She lives with Parkinson's which makes walking difficult at times. Her posture is stooped.





An over-chair table could help place the laptop at a better height

Alternate working positions between table and armchair

Use yoga stretches regularly through the day

A system to remind the need for changing postures and regular breaks

## Suggested interventions

The armchair is comfortable but not supportive. Considering that Anne works almost every day, a more upright position with the laptop on a desk or table would be more appropriate when working.

- An over-chair table could help place the laptop at a better height to encourage a more upright sitting posture if she prefers to continue sitting in the armchair.
- It would be important to alternate working positions between table and armchair if tolerated.
- Anne could use yoga stretches regularly through the day to counteract the extended sitting position.
- A system to remind the need for changing postures and regular breaks would be helpful.

**Please note: This intervention is not suitable for full time-work. Full-time workers should consider getting adequate furniture for long hours of work - a comfortable office chair and an adjustable desk – stand/sit desk whenever possible. Setting them up adequately is important too.**

# Home working as we age applied: Sara

## Current setup

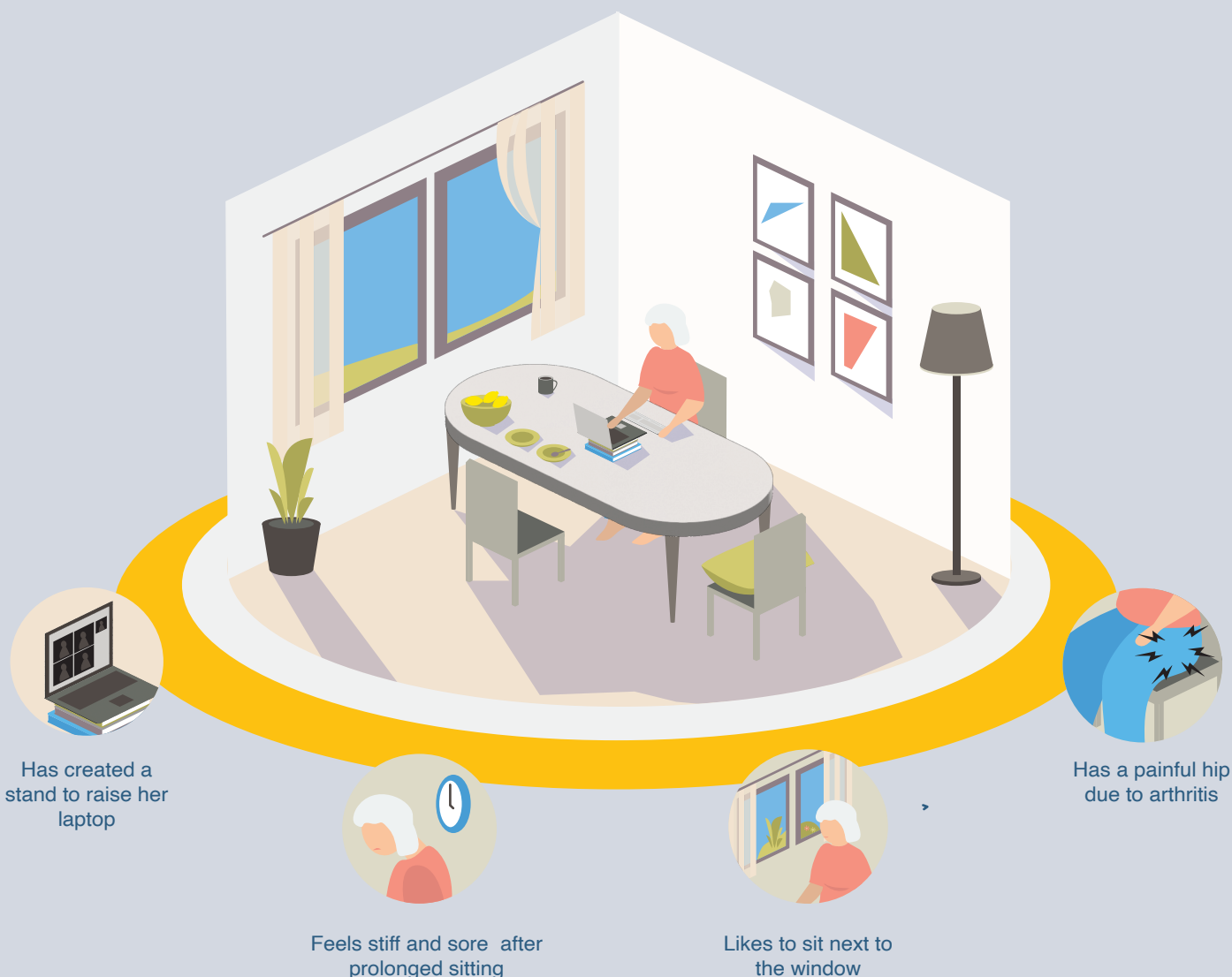
Sara is a 73-year-old woman who lives alone in a small ground floor flat. She is retired and does volunteering work for a charity, which mainly involves working at the computer, video calls and emails twice a week for up to three hours. She talks to lots of people while working but very rarely is this face to face. However, she does have an active social life and regularly spends time with friends and family.

## Health conditions

Sara has a painful hip due to arthritis and some other health problems that can impact on her energy levels.

## Workstation

Sara chooses to work at the dining table, sitting on a standard dining chair, using very portable equipment that can be packed away. She thinks it is important to feel comfortable but also to be able to tidy 'work' items away and be able to use the space for other purposes. To make herself more comfortable while working she has created a stand for her tablet which raises it closer to eye level and has added a separate keyboard which she finds easier to work on. Sara likes to sit close to a window for better light levels but also to enjoy the view of the garden. She finds she tends to lose track of time when working and can sometimes feel very stiff and sore after sitting too long.





## Suggested interventions

It isn't feasible to suggest a bespoke desk and chair due to limited space, so we need to think about making her working position at the dining table as optimal as possible. Also, considering that the work is conducted only twice a week and up to three hours, the interventions do not need to be 'radical'.

- Sara uses a separate keyboard and raises the laptop to eye level, which is good. Now she needs to look at chair height – maybe by adding cushions but keeping her feet on the floor.
- She sits close to the window, which enhances luminosity. However, heating is another aspect to consider - she needs to make sure that the work environment is comfortably warm.
- It is important to remind Sara to break up the time spent sitting, encourage her to think about breaking up her tasks, standing and walking regularly at the end of each block.
- Continue to have social contact outside of work and make use of video and telephone calls to avoid feeling isolated when working.

# Closing Summary

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Our research has shown a need for a personalised approach to home working regardless of age. We all need to be conscious of our workstation set up at home. 'One size fits all' advice does not address the specific needs of the individual, their home environment, the equipment and support they have available, and any health conditions or mobility restrictions they need to work around. For older adults in particular it seems that work-life and work spaces must be flexible.

Individuals have a range of different health and wellbeing needs and at times need to develop strategies to ensure that their work-life and environment is suitable. Mental and physical health is a priority. Some might experience agitation, visual impairment, reduced mobility, or cognitive impairment. Many individuals that we spoke to found ways to cope with health conditions that subsequently meant there was little to no impact on their home working arrangements. Many individuals also had an awareness of the 'ideal' set up solutions to achieve a suitable working space. However, this was balanced with a preference around maintaining their own home space and comfort.

For many of us, working from home will continue to be a key part of our working lives. We hope that the advice and recommendations that have emerged from our research will amplify and promote the need to provide greater support and guidance to a growing, older workforce. This will benefit us all in the future to enable longer, healthier, happier lives.

## About the authors:



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### **Dr Katherine Baker**

Dr Katherine Baker is a physiotherapist, specialising in neuro-rehabilitation, long term condition management and physical activity, with a particular interest in Parkinson's Disease. After working in clinical practice, she joined Northumbria University and has since worked in roles across research, physiotherapy education and is now a member of the Department of Sport, Exercise & Rehabilitation Leadership team as Head of Subject for Physiotherapy. She uses mixed methods research to explore the impact of living with a long term condition and ageing on wellbeing and ways of promoting physical activity, improving mobility and function.



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### **Dr Emilene Zitkus**

Dr Emilene Zitkus is a Senior Lecturer in Inclusive Design at Loughborough University with expertise in human-computer interaction, digital inclusion, user-centred and user experience design. She has been teaching at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. After her PhD (EPSRC funded) at the University of Cambridge, where she iteratively co-created inclusive design tools with practitioners, she has been using her user-centred, inclusive design and co-creation skills in research related to accessible interfaces and service design focused on healthy ageing. Emilene is a member of the editorial board of Design for Health journal; visiting Lecturer at UNESP; a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

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