

How digitalisation can support evolving occupational health



OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH IS CHANGING

Covid-19 has been a defining time for the world, not least for occupational health.

Almost overnight, occupational health professionals saw their roles elevated. Their expertise became key to keeping businesses functioning safely and in compliance with public health directives.

Occupational health practitioners have also evolved, as new ways of working have emerged. Traditional tasks have focused on the management of physical conditions, pre-placement assessments and statutory health surveillance for employers. Mental health and wellbeing are now a growing part of their responsibilities. This has been particularly prominent during lockdowns, when practitioners may have seen their tasks broadened to include the management of musculoskeletal disorders resulting from poor homeworking environments, and the emotional trauma of social isolation or grief.

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Janet O’Neill, director of professional development, iOH



The profession has traditionally preferred face-to-face service delivery – but when all but essential workers were told to stay at home, digital tools were needed to deliver appointments and keep records up to date.

“We have had to step up to the mark very quickly to support organisations, our people and, of course, ourselves,” says Janet O’Neill, director of professional development at the Association of Occupational Health and Wellbeing Professionals (iOH) and clinical nurse director at PAM Group.

O’Neill says that the pandemic has provided opportunities for practitioners to collaborate with other departments and the wider occupational health community, as well as the greater adoption of digital services – even services

practitioners never would have expected to deliver digitally in the past, such as consultations for mental health concerns and musculoskeletal disorders.

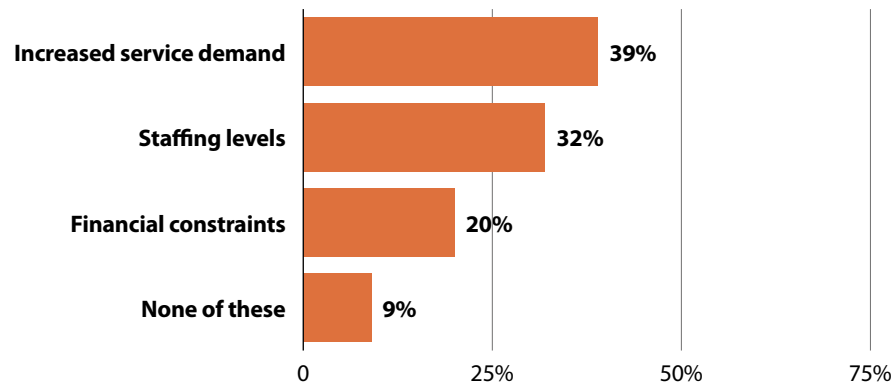
“Occupational health practitioners have shown real flexibility and innovation,” says Nick Pahl, chief executive of the Society of Occupational Medicine. “They have moved online fairly seamlessly. They have been responsible for trying to find out from the Health and Safety Executive what happens with spirometry or health surveillance, and how to meet those statutory requirements during a difficult time.”

EMERGING CHALLENGES

There are still numerous challenges that technology may be able to assist with as the profession evolves.

A recent webinar OHW+ held in association with Civica asked occupational health professionals about the biggest challenges they expected to face in 2022. In total, 32% identified staffing levels as a challenge. Recruitment activity has surged during spring and summer 2021, with job vacancies in August

What is the biggest challenge you expect to face as an occupational health department in 2022?



rising above one million for the first time since records began and the number of people on company payrolls increasing to 29.1 million.

If these vacancies are filled, occupational health professionals will see mounting demand for their services. Yet, the workforce appears to be shrinking, with a dramatic fall in the number of training places over the past two decades.

Of all poll respondents, 39% said increased service demand would be a challenge in 2022. Risks have increased during the pandemic, from the psychological impact of lockdowns and new ways of working through to skin concerns from hygiene protocols, while an ageing workforce – a third of all workers are now aged 50 or over – is likely to put further pressure on an already stretched service.

Other challenges include:

- Budget constraints
- Planning for future risks
- Retention of disabled people in work
- Shortage of qualified occupational health staff
- Increasing complexity of cases as physical, emotional and mental health concerns converge.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

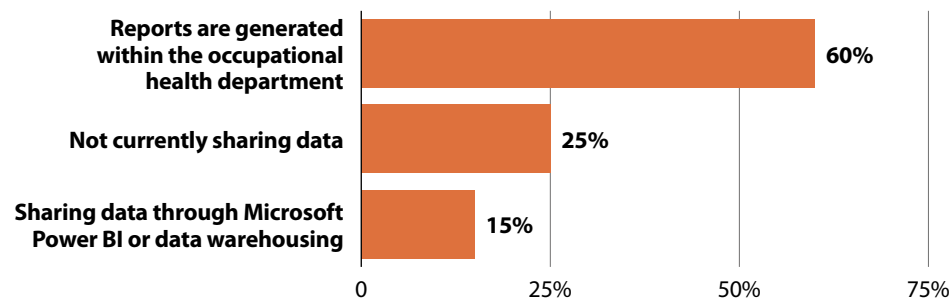
In order to meet demand and continue to innovate as a profession, streamlining processes will be essential, especially if resources are tight. Much of this will involve exploring how technology can be utilised further, particularly if occupational health is to support other departments such as HR with onboarding the expected influx of new staff.

During our webinar, we asked how they shared data with other departments. A quarter said they were not currently sharing any data.

In total, 60% generated reports within their own occupational health function to share with other departments, while only 15% utilised data warehousing or tools such as Microsoft BI to present and share data.

“The use of data to inform strategy could be improved,” says Pahl.

How are you currently sharing data with other departments?



“For example, they could provide anonymised data that would help analyse team performance. I think occupational health could contribute further in embracing tools that help do that.”

O’Neill identifies several areas that teams should focus on to help address these emerging challenges:

- Investing in multidisciplinary teams and education. “Growing our multidisciplinary teams with the relevant skills is going to be essential if we are to keep up with organisational growth and development,” she says.
- Collaborating with IT departments and procurement specialists. “Without this collaboration, we wouldn’t have been able to deliver our services during the pandemic. We can use technology to demonstrate quality and customer service, but we can also use it to drive data, which is going to be important in demonstrating our worth, but also in identifying trends – something that is going to be really important in understanding the health of the working population.”
- Keeping on top of emerging risks and priorities. This includes providing support for people with disabilities and long-term conditions, as well as managing developing health risks including long Covid, post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological safety.

“Delivering appropriate, slick and timely services relies on technology, and the challenge is keeping up with this to avoid losing out,” says O’Neill.

CASE STUDY UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM'S DIGITALISATION JOURNEY

The University of Birmingham has 8,500 staff spread across five colleges.

In 2010, its occupational health department decided to go "paper-light", with only consultation notes and consent forms retained as physical records. This meant that, when the first national lockdown hit, in March 2020, the university's occupational health function was able to pivot quickly to offer a fully digital service using Civica's occupational health software.

Philippa Hawkins, the university's head of wellbeing services, says that the urgent need to provide staff with information about pandemic procedures meant the information portal that came with its IT system became an invaluable tool.

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Philippa Hawkins,
head of wellbeing services



Practitioners were for the first time required to record their consultation notes electronically to avoid breaching security policies that prohibit paper notes being taken home. All appointment notifications were seamlessly switched to email delivery, rather than paper letters.

Sharing data with other departments and redacting information following subject access requests have also been much more efficient digitally.

The department's transition to digital service delivery has been so successful that employees are now requesting telephone or online appointments rather than face-to-face services. They are also exploring the development of a single digital portal for all health services, which will enable it to streamline services.

“We are identifying how we can continue to provide services using these additional platforms,” says Hawkins.

“We are not going to go back to face-to-face delivery on site, unless there is a clinical need.”

THE BENEFITS OF DIGITALISATION

With many organisations now exploring hybrid and remote working, digitalisation can ensure occupational health services and information are always accessible wherever an employee is based.

“Digitalisation means that you are no longer reliant on paper files. Service delivery can be agile and mobile, and people can use it from any device,” explains Howard Watson, workforce management sales director for occupational health software provider Civica.

“Processes need to be as efficient and effective as possible in a remote working environment and this is where technology and digitalisation can produce major benefits.”

The key benefits of digitising occupational health are:

- Collating data from other systems, such as HR, and making it available to occupational health practitioners in a single place.
- Working with and sharing information with HR, health and safety and occupational hygiene specialists for health surveillance purposes when someone starts a new role.
- Generating real-time dashboards and improved management reporting to give senior leaders an overview of the state of workforce health and wellbeing.
- Improving compliance with data protection and information security protocols.
- Enabling health and safety managers to check data at any point improves compliance with health and safety regulations.
- Accessing information 24/7 from any device, via cloud storage.
- Streamlining service delivery by freeing practitioners from inefficient procedures.

We asked occupational health professionals what benefits they expected technology to bring to their function. Process automation was the most obvious

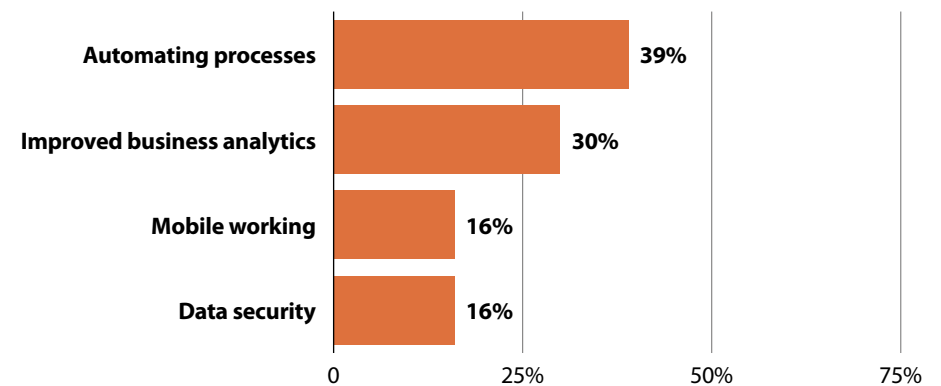
benefit that occupational health practitioners envisaged, while improved business analytics was also seen as significant.

Embracing digitalisation will also help the function demonstrate its value to business leaders, explains Pahl. “Occupational health as a profession is seen as slightly old-fashioned, but if we can be viewed as embracing analytics and AI [artificial intelligence] in terms of staff performance and wellbeing then we can show how forward-thinking we can be in supporting other functions,” he says.

With demand for occupational health services and the need for leadership around health challenges expected to grow in the years ahead, introducing tools and systems that reduce administrative burden and free up time will allow teams to focus on their roles as workplace health and wellbeing experts.

O’Neill says: “More organisations are understanding that healthy people mean healthy organisations, and we are ideally placed to support that. We have so much more potential to support organisations.”

What benefits do you see technology bringing to your occupational health department?



ABOUT CIVICA OPAS-G2 OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SOFTWARE

It has been an extremely challenging time for everyone as a result of work-related stress, sickness absence, and mental health issues increasing. Occupational health professionals are in high demand to advise on employees' health and wellbeing. Civica's OPAS-G2 occupational health software has helped occupational health adapt to increased face-to-face appointments and paper processes turning digital.

How can OPAS-G2 transform your services?

- Reduces administrative and clinical overheads
- Improves attendance by lowering did-not attend rates
- Faster triage supports earlier interventions and return to work
- Moving to the cloud drives savings.

Cancellations and do-not-attend rates can account for more than 20% of wasted resources, resulting in longer waiting times and increased admin. OPAS-G2 engages employees and drives business outcomes by improving the efficiency of:

- Management referrals
- Pre-placement
- Health surveillance
- Reports and communications
- Appointment booking.

It is clear the demand for occupational health services is set to grow rapidly in the years ahead. OPAS-G2 helps with this challenge by supporting services to be more accessible and responsive, also providing insights into how health affects work, so individuals return to work safely.

Improve the efficiency of your health clearance process by more than 25%! The integration module for OPAS-G2 occupational health and Trac recruitment management software significantly reduces time to hire across numerous KPIs.

HR governance and HR performance processes are streamlined. Health clearance e-form screening can take place within two days of offer letters being sent and the overall time to complete occupational health checks can also be reduced.

