

COBA

THE PEOPLE WHO STAND THE MOST

A Global Report on Standing Workers and Workplace Health
COBA International – Thought Leadership Report



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Executive Summary

Across Europe and industrial economies, millions of workers spend most of their working day on their feet. From manufacturing lines to airport security, retail counters to busy kitchens, prolonged standing remains one of the most common – yet least discussed – occupational risk factors.

While the modern workplace conversation often focuses on sedentary office environments, standing work presents its own set of health, safety and productivity challenges. Studies suggest that over **45% of European workers** report standing in tiring positions during their workday, with discomfort most commonly affecting the lower back, legs and feet.

At the same time, European labour data shows that the average working week remains around 36 hours, with many operational sectors such as manufacturing, construction and agriculture recording longer working weeks than the average.

For workers whose roles require constant standing, this means thousands of hours spent on hard flooring every year.

This report explores:

- Which industries rely most heavily on standing workers
- The health and productivity risks associated with prolonged standing
- The economic impact of fatigue in operational environments
- How workplace design interventions, including anti-fatigue matting, can reduce risk

As businesses increasingly focus on worker wellbeing, ergonomics and productivity, understanding the realities of standing work has never been more important.



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THE HIDDEN WORKFORCE: **WHO STANDS ALL DAY?**

While desk work dominates the narrative around workplace health, a significant portion of the workforce operates in roles where sitting is rarely an option.

Standing work is particularly prevalent in sectors such as:

Manufacturing and production

- Assembly line workers
- Machine operators
- Quality control staff



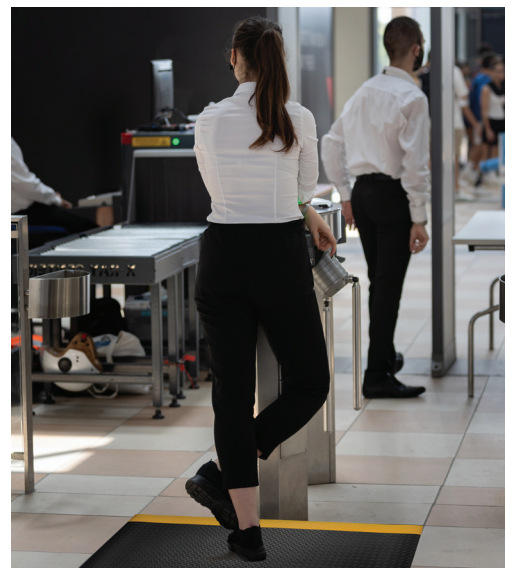
Retail and customer service

- Checkout operators
- Shop floor staff
- Pharmacy counters



Hospitality and food service

- Chefs and kitchen staff
- Bar staff
- Hotel reception teams



Transport and travel

- Airport security personnel
- Check-in agents
- Ground operations staff

Leisure and entertainment

- Stadium operations staff
- Theme parks
- Event venues

These sectors employ tens of millions of workers across Europe alone.

Recent European labour data shows:

More than
30 million
people work in
manufacturing
across the EU.

Wholesale
and retail
trade employ
approximately
**25.9
million**
workers.

Accommodation
and food services
employ around
9.9 million
people.

Combined, these industries represent over 65 million workers, many of whom spend the majority of their shift standing, walking or performing repetitive tasks.

Chris Stanley,
Commercial Director at COBA International, explains:

"When people think about workplace health risks, they often picture office workers sitting too much. But in many industries the opposite is true – millions of people spend their entire shift standing."

Those workers are the backbone of manufacturing, retail, logistics and hospitality, yet the physical demands of standing work are often underestimated."



THE SCALE OF STANDING WORK

Europe's labour force includes nearly 200 million employed people, with employment rates reaching historic highs in recent years.

Many of these jobs are located in operational environments where standing is part of the role.

Across the EU:



In many of these sectors, workers spend six to eight hours per shift standing on hard surfaces such as concrete, tile or metal flooring.

For operational workers, the numbers add up quickly.

Estimated Annual Standing Time



For roles such as manufacturing operators, airport staff or chefs, the figure may be even higher.

COUNTRIES WHERE STANDING WORK IS MOST COMMON

Standing work is particularly prevalent in economies with strong industrial, retail and hospitality sectors.

Across Europe, several countries have large workforces concentrated in industries where prolonged standing is common.



Germany

Germany remains Europe's largest industrial economy, with a significant proportion of workers employed in manufacturing and engineering.



France

France's service economy is particularly significant. In recent years, around 81% of the French workforce has been employed in the service sector, which includes retail, hospitality, transport, leisure and personal services.



Italy

Italy's economy combines manufacturing with a large hospitality sector driven by tourism.



Poland and Central Europe

Countries such as Poland, Czechia and Slovakia have developed strong manufacturing bases supporting automotive, electronics and export industries.



Spain and Southern Europe

Tourism and hospitality create millions of standing-intensive roles in restaurants, hotels and leisure venues.



United Kingdom

The UK has large standing-worker populations in:

- retail
- hospitality
- logistics
- airports and travel infrastructure

These industries rely heavily on workers who spend much of their shift on their feet.

Christian Elfroth,

Business Director Germany at COBA Europe, explains:

"Across Europe we see many industries where standing work is simply unavoidable. Manufacturing, logistics, retail and hospitality all rely on people being active throughout their shift.

The challenge for employers is ensuring that these environments support workers physically as well as operationally."



THE HEALTH IMPACT OF PROLONGED STANDING

Prolonged standing is associated with a range of musculoskeletal and circulatory issues.

Research across European workplaces shows that workers who stand for long periods commonly report:

- **Lower back pain**
- **Leg and foot fatigue**
- **Joint strain**
- **Varicose veins**
- **Reduced circulation**

These symptoms are part of a broader category known as work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs), which remain one of the most common occupational health issues across industrial workplaces.

The problem is not simply standing itself, but standing on hard, unforgiving surfaces for extended periods.

Concrete, tile and steel flooring provide no cushioning for the body's natural micro-movements. Over time, this places strain on joints, muscles and connective tissues.



James Alcock,

Operations Manager at COBA Europe, explains:

"Many workplaces focus on machinery safety, PPE and workflow optimisation, which are all critical. But something as simple as the flooring workers stand on every day can have a huge impact on fatigue levels."

"When people stand on hard floors for hours at a time, the body absorbs that strain."



EMPLOYER RESPONSIBILITY: MANAGING THE RISKS OF PROLONGED STANDING

Let's face it, standing work cannot be eliminated entirely. However, across Europe employers have a legal responsibility to assess and manage the risks associated with prolonged standing.

Workplace health and safety legislation requires employers to conduct risk assessments for tasks that may cause physical strain or musculoskeletal injury. This includes work that involves long periods of standing.

For example, the EU Framework Directive on Safety and Health at Work (89/391/EEC) requires employers to evaluate workplace risks and implement preventive measures to protect workers' health and safety.

Similarly, in the UK, the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and supporting regulations require employers to assess workplace hazards and take appropriate action to minimise risk.

When assessing roles that involve prolonged standing, employers should examine several factors within the working environment.

Risk Assessments Must Consider

Reducing static or awkward postures

- Standing in one fixed position places significant strain on muscles and joints. Workstations should be designed to allow natural movement and posture changes where possible.

Job rotation

- Where operationally possible, rotating employees between tasks that involve sitting, standing and movement can help reduce fatigue and repetitive strain.

Work surface height

- Poor workstation height can force workers into awkward positions that increase strain on the back, shoulders and legs. Adjustable or correctly designed work surfaces help support more natural posture.

James Alcock,

Operations Manager at COBA Europe, explains:

"Risk assessments are often associated with machinery or manual handling, but standing work must also be considered. When employees remain in one position for long periods, fatigue builds up.

Looking at workstation design and the surfaces people stand on is an important part of creating a safer environment."



PRACTICAL SUPPORT FOR STANDING WORKERS

Where prolonged standing is unavoidable, practical interventions can significantly improve worker comfort and reduce fatigue.

Employers have to consider a range of solutions to support workers throughout the working day.

Anti-fatigue matting

- Anti-fatigue mats are designed to provide a cushioned standing surface that encourages subtle muscle movement. These micro-movements stimulate blood circulation and help reduce pressure on joints and muscles, minimising fatigue over long periods.



Supportive footwear

- Appropriate footwear is another important factor in standing environments. Employers may consider implementing policies that encourage well-fitting, supportive footwear designed for occupational use.



Breaks and movement

- Encouraging workers to move, stretch or change posture during breaks can help reduce the cumulative effects of prolonged standing.



Christian Elfroth,
Business Director Germany at COBA Europe, comments:

"In many industries standing work is unavoidable, but fatigue doesn't have to be. Small improvements in workplace design can make a meaningful difference to employee comfort and wellbeing."

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ERGONOMIC INTERVENTIONS:

THE ROLE OF ANTI-FATIGUE MATTING

One of the most widely adopted ergonomic solutions for standing work is anti-fatigue matting.

Unlike standard flooring, anti-fatigue mats are designed to encourage subtle movements in the legs and feet known as micro-movements.

These movements help to:

- Stimulate blood circulation
- Reduce pressure on joints
- Minimise muscle fatigue
- Improve comfort over long periods

Studies show that cushioned surfaces can significantly reduce the physical strain associated with prolonged standing.

Christian Elfroth, Business Director Germany at COBA Europe, notes:

"In Germany and across Europe we are seeing more companies recognise that ergonomics is not a luxury – it is part of operational efficiency."

Something as simple as the right anti-fatigue mat can make a noticeable difference to worker comfort and productivity."



ERGONOMIC INTERVENTIONS:

THE BUSINESS CASE: ROI FROM THE GROUND UP

Investments in workplace ergonomics often deliver returns in several areas.

For organisations employing large numbers of standing workers, improvements may include:

Reduced absenteeism

- Musculoskeletal issues remain one of the leading causes of workplace sickness absence across Europe.
- Regained lost productivity
- Reducing fatigue allows workers to maintain performance across full shifts.
- Enhanced safety
- Lower fatigue levels contribute to fewer errors and workplace incidents.
- Higher worker satisfaction
- Comfortable working environments support retention and morale.

Using workplace ROI modelling, organisations can evaluate the potential financial impact of reducing fatigue across their workforce.

For distributors and facility managers, this creates an opportunity to position ergonomic matting as a strategic investment rather than a simple product purchase.



THE FUTURE OF WORKPLACE ERGONOMICS

Across Europe, workplace wellbeing is becoming a strategic priority.

Governments, regulators and businesses increasingly recognise that employee health is closely tied to productivity and long-term workforce sustainability.

This shift is especially relevant in sectors facing:

- **Labour shortages**
- **Skills gaps**
- **Increasing automation**
- **Rising expectations around workplace wellbeing**

Standing workers will remain essential to these industries.



As Chris Stanley concludes:

"The industries that keep our economies moving rely heavily on people who spend most of their working day on their feet.

Improving the environments those workers operate in isn't just good practice – it's good business."

Conclusion

Standing work remains one of the most common yet overlooked physical demands in modern workplaces.

Across manufacturing, retail, travel, hospitality and leisure, millions of workers spend their shifts standing on hard surfaces for long periods.

Addressing the risks associated with prolonged standing requires a combination of:

- **ergonomic workplace design**
- **better fatigue management**
- **practical interventions such as anti-fatigue matting**

For organisations seeking to improve worker wellbeing while maintaining operational efficiency, the solution may begin with something surprisingly simple: what people stand on.

Sources

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[Workplace fatigue and standing worker research](#)