CORONAVIRUS : OUR TOP TIPS FOR WORKING AT HOME

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MENTAL HEALTH

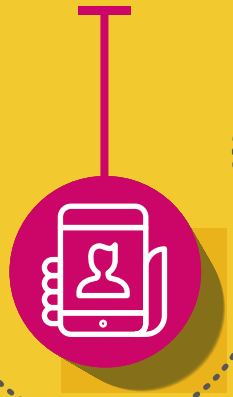
Many of us are experiencing difficult feelings and emotions about coronavirus, especially with the re-introduction of a national lockdown, the government's emphasis on working at home and the uncertainty of when the pandemic may end.

Here are our top tips for taking care of your mental wellbeing.

Maintain boundaries between your work and personal life. Where you can, start and stop work at fixed times, keep to a routine and separate where you work from where you have 'down time'.

Eat healthy, well-balanced meals and drink plenty of water.

Keep in contact with colleagues, family and friends using the telephone, instant messaging, video conferencing tools and social media channels.

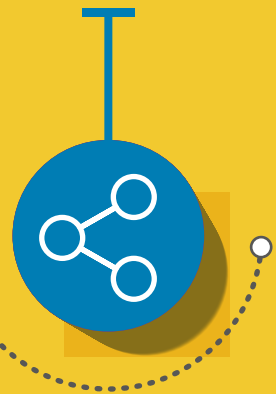


Use headspace or mindfulness apps, white noise machines, or audiobooks to help you sleep or take your mind off things.

Try to get outside in your lunch break or before or after work, while following social distancing guidance. Otherwise, make use of your balcony, garden or even just open your windows for some fresh air and a slight change of scenery.

Do some gentle exercise or stretches.

Stay connected with current events but be conscious of where you get news and health information from. Use trusted sources such as the NHS coronavirus webpage and the UK Government website.



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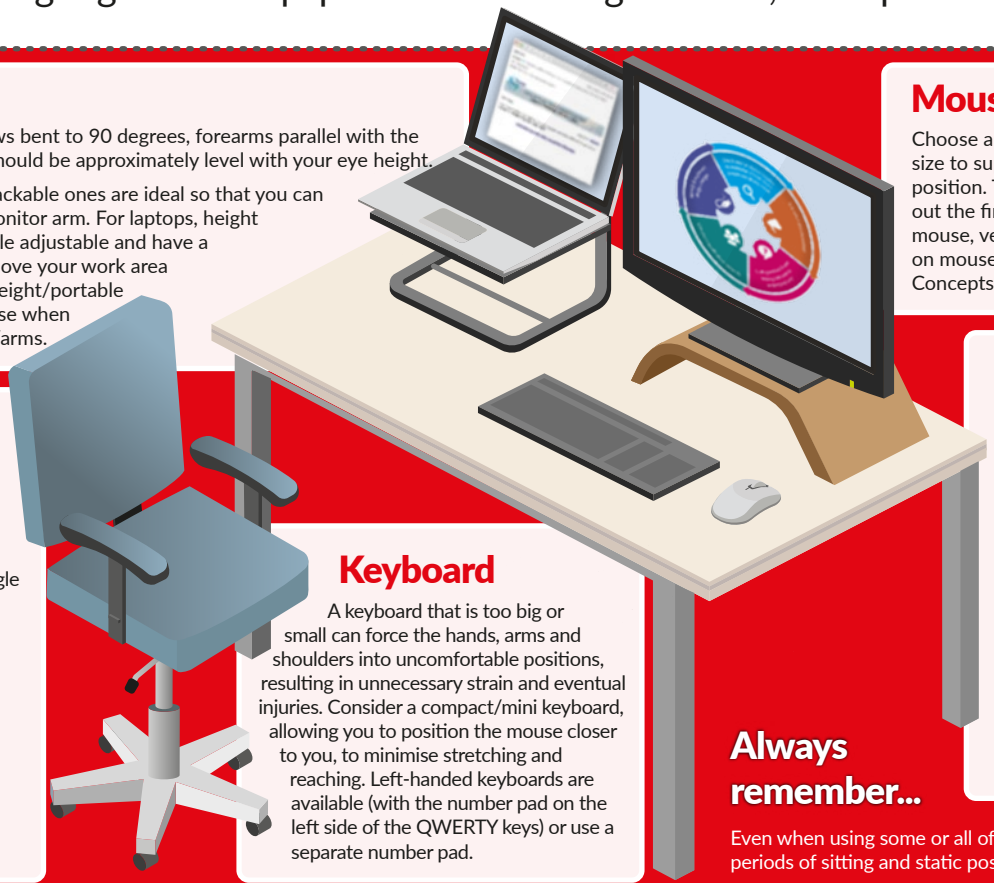
PURCHASING ERGONOMIC EQUIPMENT

Here are our top tips for purchasing ergonomic equipment for working at home, to help avoid any (potentially) costly mistakes!

Laptop / monitor riser

When sitting at the correct height (shoulders relaxed, elbows bent to 90 degrees, forearms parallel with the worksurface and wrists straight) the top of your screen(s) should be approximately level with your eye height.

If you use an external monitor, riser blocks are available; stackable ones are ideal so that you can achieve the desired height, or consider a fully adjustable monitor arm. For laptops, height adjustable stands are best; many laptop stands are also angle adjustable and have a rubber framework to protect your laptop. If you regularly move your work area (e.g. to alternate from sitting to standing), consider a lightweight/portable laptop stand. Always plug in an external keyboard and mouse when using a laptop stand; to avoid reaching up with your hands/arms.



Mouse

Choose a mouse that fits your hand; it should be the right shape and size to support the natural curve of your hand and allow a neutral wrist position. The mouse should have buttons that neither cramp nor spread out the fingers too much. Options include a standard mouse, trackball mouse, vertical mouse and roller bar/trackpad mouse. For further tips on mouse selection, see 'Computer mouse selection and use' - System Concepts (system-concepts.com).

Chair

No one type of office chair is necessarily the best, but there are some things that are important to look for in a good ergonomic office chair, including:

- an adjustable seat height
- a backrest that is adjustable in height and (preferably) in angle
- lower back (lumbar) support, ideally height and depth adjustable
- a depth-adjustable (sliding) seat pan, particularly if you are short or tall
- if the chair has armrests, height adjustable ones are better than fixed (and they should ideally be removable).
- a breathable fabric or mesh is better than leather/plastic
- ability to swivel and have a five-star base for stability
- castors that are suitable for the floor the chair is being used on, e.g. carpet or hard floor.

Keyboard

A keyboard that is too big or small can force the hands, arms and shoulders into uncomfortable positions, resulting in unnecessary strain and eventual injuries. Consider a compact/mini keyboard, allowing you to position the mouse closer to you, to minimise stretching and reaching. Left-handed keyboards are available (with the number pad on the left side of the QWERTY keys) or use a separate number pad.

Desk

A suitable desk is key. Consider the following.

- The desk height should be 72-74cm.
- The desk depth (front to back) should be a minimum of 60cm to accommodate your computer equipment and allow a comfortable screen viewing distance. Ideally 80cm depth if you are using external monitor(s).
- Desk length should ideally be at least 100cm to provide sufficient space for your computer equipment, but can be larger to suit your requirements.
- Make sure the worksurface of desk is not too thick (7cm maximum) so that you can sit at the recommended height with adequate legroom.
- If the desk has drawers/storage, make sure your chair fits under the desk and your legroom is not compromised.

Always remember...

Even when using some or all of the equipment mentioned above, taking regular breaks from long periods of sitting and static postures is key to maintaining comfort.

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ERGONOMICS FOR HOMESCHOOLING

Here are our top tips for creating a work area for your child that is comfortable and ergonomically sound.

Create a workstation so that your child can sit with their elbows bent at 90 degrees, at the same height as the table/desk.

If the chair is not height adjustable, and it is too low, sit them on a cushion to elevate their sitting height. If the chair is too high, place a wide board game box on top of the table/desk to elevate the working height.

Use a rolled-up towel for extra back support.

Make sure the seat is not digging into their legs; use a pillow or cushion to 'shrink' the seat.

Use a box or step-stool for foot support and to position their knees at 90 degrees.

Prop the laptop or tablet on a stand or some books so that the top of the screen is at eye height, directly in front of them, around arm's length away.

Use a separate keyboard and mouse, positioned close together and close to the table/desk edge. Consider using a mini keyboard (i.e. with no number pad to the right of the qwerty keys) so that the mouse can be positioned in front of the shoulder (and not out to the side). Little hands might also find a smaller mouse easier to use.

Place items that your child uses most nearby so they don't have to bend or twist their body or neck unnecessarily. Move the keyboard/mouse out of the way if they are writing or reading so that their school work/book(s) is directly in front of them, and vice versa.

Encourage your child to take regular movement breaks every 45 minutes or so throughout the school day. Children can be affected by eye strain too, so when virtual learning remind them to look away from the screen at something in the distance, every 20 minutes for 20 seconds.

Set-up your child's workstation near a window for natural light, perpendicular to the window to avoid glare on the screen.

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HOME OFFICE ERGONOMICS

Here are some simple steps you can take to help achieve the best set-up with the equipment you have.

Full workstation

If you have a desk, adjustable office chair, laptop riser/stand, separate keyboard and mouse:

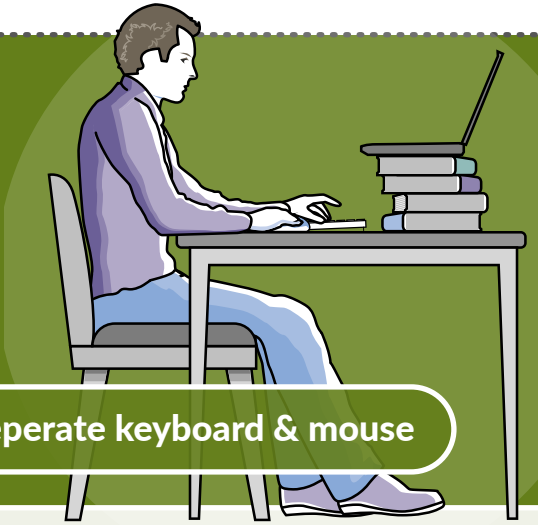
- Adjust your chair height so that you can use your keyboard and mouse with your wrists straight, forearms horizontal and shoulders relaxed. Your elbows should be bent at roughly 90 degrees.
- The top of the screen should be level with your seated eye height
- Position the keyboard and mouse directly in front of you within a comfortable reach
- Take a 2-3-minute posture break every 30-45 minutes to alleviate tension and stiffness
- Blink regularly and take a 20-second eye break from the screen every 20-minutes (by looking into the distance).

Some equipment

If you have a laptop riser/stand, separate keyboard and mouse, follow the previous advice and...

- If your chair is too low, sit on a cushion to raise your seat height
- Use cushions or a rolled-up towel for extra back support
- If your feet don't rest on the floor, use a shallow box, book or cushion.

Our qualified ergonomists can help you get your home workstation set-up comfortably. If you need help assessing your workstation, contact our Head of Ergonomics, Laura Milnes laura@system-concepts.com for more information.



Seperate keyboard & mouse

Follow the previous advice and...

- If you don't have a laptop riser, use a box or some books

No additional equipment

Follow the previous advice and...

- Can you borrow a keyboard or mouse?
- Try to move every 15 minutes or so if your posture is less than ideal
- Do some stretches, see https://www.system-concepts.com/downloads/SCL_ergo_stretches_2020.pdf
- Let your manager know if you are in pain or have any issues.

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STRETCHING EXERCISES

Try these stretches and gentle exercises at your desk to help you move more and ease the strain.

NECK ROTATIONS

Keep your head upright. Gently turn your head from side to side. As you turn your head, try to move it past your shoulder.

Hold for 5 seconds, then relax. Repeat 2-3 times on each side.

LOWER BACK ROTATIONS

While seated, cross your arms over your chest. Grab your shoulders. Rotate your upper body from the waist, turning gently from left to right as far as you can.

Hold for 5 seconds, then relax. Repeat 2-3 times.

ANKLE STRETCH

Lift your ankle clear of the floor. Alternately flex and extend your ankle in a pumping action.

Repeat 10 times with each ankle.

TORSO STRETCH

Lace your fingers together in front of you, with your palms out. Take a deep breath and stretch your arms up as high as you can. As you exhale, open your arms, sweeping them back down.

Repeat 2-3 times.

LOWER BACK STRETCH

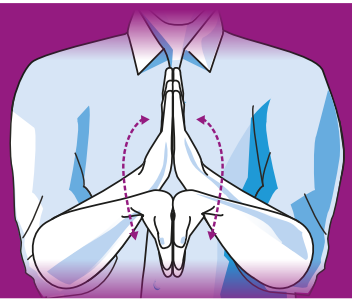
Sit straight with your feet together. Put the palms of your hands into the small of your back. Lean back over your hands, feeling your lower back stretch out.

Hold for 10 seconds. Repeat 2-3 times.

SHOULDER SHRUGS

Raise both shoulders up toward your ears, squeezing them as hard as you can.

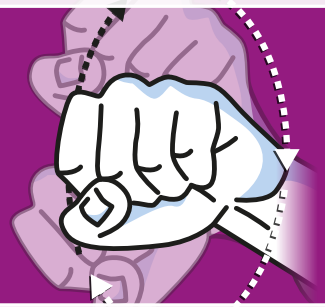
Hold for 5 seconds, then relax. Repeat 5 times.



FOREARM STRETCH

Sit with your elbows out and palms together. Slowly rotate your palms down until your feel the stretch.

Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 2-3 times.



WRIST CIRCLES

Make circles with your hands in a clockwise direction.

Repeat 10 times and then reverse the movement.

EYE BREAKS

Every **20** minutes look at something that is **20** feet away from you for **20** seconds.

If you have any musculoskeletal pain or injury, see your GP or physiotherapist for advice and support before doing these exercises/stretches.

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EYE HEALTH

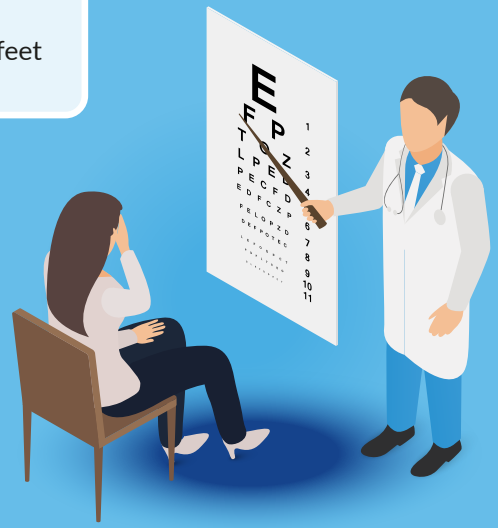
Here are our top 5 tips on how you can prevent 'digital eye'.

Adopt a good posture

Sit so your head and neck are upright and in-line with your torso, not bent down or tilted back. Face your screen directly and position the screen at around an arms-length away.

Take frequent breaks

Give your eyes a rest by following the 20-20-20 rule. Look away from your screen every 20 minutes, for 20 seconds and focus on objects 20 feet away.



Avoid glare and reflections

Use curtains or blinds to control light at windows. Position your screen so windows are to the side, instead of in front or behind it.

Adjust your device's display settings

Adjusting the display settings of your screen can help reduce eye strain and fatigue. Most screens can be adjusted in brightness, text size, contrast and colour temperature. If you are light-sensitive, coloured overlays on the screen may help.

Get an eye test

Regular eye examinations are important for eye health. Every two years is great, unless an optician or health professional suggests otherwise.

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PRODUCTIVITY

Here are our top tips for remaining focussed and productive.

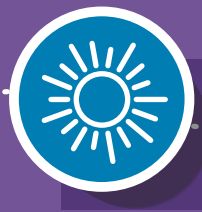
Get dressed each morning. You don't have to wear your normal work attire, but you do need to change your mindset from relaxed pyjamas to alert business time.

Ideally, you should have a dedicated office space with a door that can be closed to those you live with. If a designated office space is not possible, then try working in different parts of your home to break up the day and keep your mind focused.

Set yourself a 'to-do' list at the beginning of each day/week, to keep you motivated, with achievable deadlines to stop you procrastinating or getting side-tracked.

Just as you do when you leave the office (hopefully), switch off your work emails and calls at a set time so that your personal time remains as such.

Stick to your usual working hours, sleep times and break times to provide structure to your day. Maintain a structured meal plan; with a proper breakfast, lunch, and dinner away from where you've been working.



Use natural daylight, especially after lunch, to keep you alert and work-orientated when you're feeling tired.

Although it's important to stay connected, leave yourself time between calls and virtual meetings, and turn off instant messengers to focus on your to-do list..

Set boundaries with the people you live with (including your children) and put your phone on airplane mode to avoid getting distracted, particularly if you have a tight deadline or lots to do.

Use sound-blocking earplugs, headphones or earmuffs to distance yourself from the familiar world around you and aid concentration.

Working from home gives you flexibility and sometimes it might be worth using this to your advantage; by changing your hours to suit personal requirements or to dial into overseas meetings.

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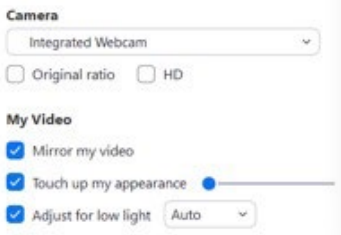
VIDEO CALLING ETIQUETTE

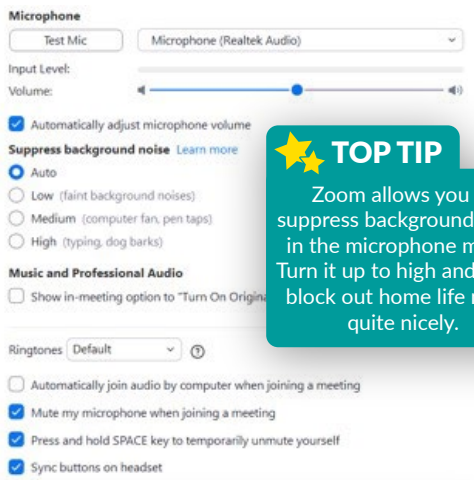
Here are our top tips for using video conferencing software options.

GENERAL TIPS

Zoom allows you to mirror the video so things are on the same side as you see them, and you can use the 'touch up my appearance' function to give a softer focus effect when using the camera:



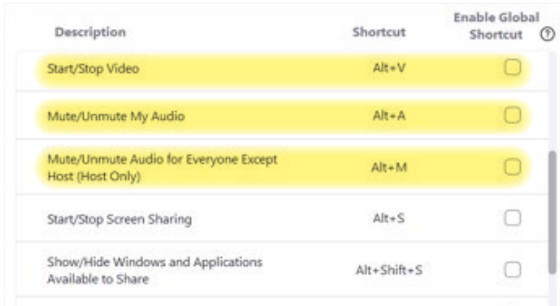
Check your microphone settings:



TOP TIP

Zoom allows you to suppress background noise in the microphone menu. Turn it up to high and you'll block out home life noise quite nicely.

Zoom offers a variety of short cuts *(the highlighted ones are probably most useful)*:



Description	Shortcut	Enable Global Shortcut
Start/Stop Video	Alt+V	
Mute/Unmute My Audio	Alt+A	
Mute/Unmute Audio for Everyone Except Host (Host Only)	Alt+M	
Start/Stop Screen Sharing	Alt+S	
Show/Hide Windows and Applications Available to Share	Alt+Shift+S	

1. Tips for meetings:

- If your video is buffering, close down browser tabs you don't need open. If you don't need your camera on, turning it off can help too.
- If you are in a large meeting, keep yourself on mute until you need to speak. Just don't forget to unmute when you do speak (Shortcut to unmute quickly - Alt+M).
- Unless you need to switch between multiple documents, remember to only share the relevant program window rather than your whole screen. This will prevent any unwelcome notifications from popping up and lets you easily refer to other documents while keeping the main screen up.
- Control large meetings by encouraging participants to use meeting conversation functions to ask questions, many online platforms have a 'raise your hand' function too.
- If you are hosting a meeting you can reduce disruption by muting participants until after you've presented, you can then open up the meeting for discussion. You can set the meeting up to mute participants on entry.
- You can swap hosts to give someone else control of the meeting.
- Long meetings can be recorded in many platforms. This can help if you need to produce meeting notes to circulate after. The app will inform everyone they are being recorded but it would be polite let them know too.

2. Tips for training:

- Leave plenty of time to set yourself up before you begin, check what you can see in the camera before you start. You can blur (Teams) or change (Zoom) your background if you want to keep your home private or disguise some messiness.
- Spend a little time before the session noting down the key points you need to deliver on post-it notes and stick these as close to eye level as possible (e.g. around the screen), this way you won't have to refer to hard copy notes and you'll maintain eye contact during delivery.
- Live captions functions translate what you are saying into text. If you speak clearly, captions mean people can read what you are saying.
- Think about ways to keep online training interesting, breakout rooms can be used to split participants into groups for different tasks or brainstorming sessions, and whiteboard sessions can be used by participants to draw answers on during a quiz.
- Make sure you include rest breaks as you would for face-to-face training to let participants stretch, refresh and maintain concentration.

3. From our research facilitators:

- If you're meeting someone for the first time, put your camera on at the start of the call to introduce yourself. You can always turn it off later.
- During research, make participants aware when there are observers on the call and try to make them feel at ease by explaining what they are observing and why.

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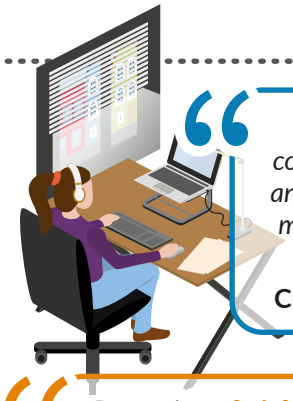
WHAT WORKS FOR US

Our team share all sorts of things that help them when they need to work from home.



*I set up my workstation in the corner of the room where I could **look out onto the street**. This has kept me very focused and ensures I look up from the screen frequently. I have found my eyes a lot less tired on the days where I have had back to back virtual meetings.*

Christine Critchley, Principal Health & Safety Consultant.

*I had severe back pain when I started working from home. I couldn't sit down for long, so I used some large delivery boxes with a sheet of thick cardboard (from another online delivery) to create myself a standing workstation. To help me manage my symptoms, I **alternated between sitting and standing to work**; walking during phone calls or lying down with my head, neck and back supported when reading documents. The flexibility of home working really benefited me; taking regular, short breaks throughout the day, rather than one lunch break.*

Helen Cheetham, Principal UX and Ergonomics Consultant.

*Borrowing **a height adjustable laptop desk, laptop stand and keyboard** from the office was the best decision ever! It means I have been able to set up a very small but comfortable office space in my room.*

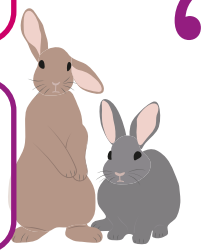
Amanda Owen, Operations Manager and Marketing Coordinator.

*I use a separate monitor with my laptop as I find it easier to work with a larger screen. I bought a webcam that I put on top of my monitor; it's a more cost effective option than buying a monitor with an in-built camera, it also means that **I can make eye contact during video calls without twisting** to use my laptop camera.*

Laura Milnes, Head of Ergonomics.

*I have bought **a fold down desk which turns my bedroom into an instant office!** The desk can fold away at the end of the day and I pack everything away for the night. This helps keep my work and home life separate; there's nothing worse in my opinion than lying in bed and looking at a desk!*

Matthew Henderson, Senior Health and Safety Consultant.



*I bought myself a new lamp for my dining table at home with a USB cable. It has a daylight bulb and is dimmable. I find that **being able to adjust the lighting keeps me focused**, particularly when it gets dark outside. Oh, and headphones! I don't even listen to music through them, they just seem to help block out London (and neighbour) noise and help me concentrate.*

Julie North, Principal Health and Safety Consultant.

*I regularly walk to check on my rabbits in the garden, which gives me **a couple of minutes away from my screen**, an opportunity to stretch and the reassurance that they are doing even less exercise than me!*

Frances Pike, UX Consultant.

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