

Homeworking during the Pandemic

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Loneliness and an inability to detach from work emerge as the primary determinants of well-being of homeworkers during the pandemic in our study of University staff

Mass homeworking has been a central element of many governments' responses to Covid-19. At the outset of the pandemic, the Office for National Statistics (2020) reported that in April 2020 47% of employed people did some work at home, 86% of which were doing so because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Such a development provided a natural experiment in what has been treated previously as a core flexible working practice. Homeworking during the pandemic is however distinctive. First, it was enforced and people may not have been prepared for it, have had adequate information technology (IT) equipment, or be readily able to accomplish their normal tasks. Second, it was in the context of the virus so employees were afraid that they or their relatives might contract it. Third, the United Kingdom's government policies to mitigate it induced a recession which increased feelings of job insecurity.

The study

We designed a study at the outset of the pandemic focused on well-being to answer the question: would Covid-19 factors have an overpowering effect on employee wellbeing or would the standard work-related influences, or even those associated with homeworking in normal times dominate?

The research included a four-weekly diary study administered over two periods, in May and September 2020 in which the same questions were asked each week, which were based on a mixture of established scales and developed measures to assess Covid-19 specific issues. The study was conducted in two universities in England with all academics and non-academics invited to participate; a sample of 835 employees was achieved in phase one and 492 in phase two, reflecting the problem of retaining participants in longitudinal studies, which we attempted to mitigate by giving feedback on initial frequencies of responses. . Participation in the study was voluntary with the respondents assured of anonymity and the secure storage of the data.

Well-being when working from home

Research on the effects of work on well-being has consistently shown that key characteristics of jobs, i.e., the level of autonomy and support from peers and managers, and being able to disengage and recover from work after hours, have benevolent effects on wellbeing; whilst high levels of demand and work-nonwork conflict have malevolent effects. Past research specifically on homeworking has shown that it can increase individuals' job autonomy, and particularly their ability to decide priorities and how to approach them (Wood, et al, 2020); a downside may be a blurring of the work-home boundary and feelings of loneliness and isolation from colleagues (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007; Charalampous, et al, 2010; Kniffen, et al, 2020).

Our study shows that the factors that most affect the average levels of well-being or mental health (measured by anxiety, depression and the meaningfulness of life) in both periods are loneliness and inability to detach oneself from work, both of which are factors that are exacerbated when working from home. Well-being declined between May and September and increases in these two factors that largely accounted for the reduction. Consistent with past research they reflect the downside of homeworking. Job autonomy was an additional contributor to well-being in May, but by September it was not, being swamped by the homeworking effect; the extent of job autonomy remained stable between the two periods.

The factors associated with the weekly fluctuations in wellbeing went beyond these predictors of average wellbeing as ascertained within the two data collection points. In this case, the pandemic is important, as the daily change in the Covid-19 death count had a significant effect on the weekly fluctuations in well-being throughout May; the effect being greater for older workers. However, in the September study the change in Covid-19 deaths did not have an effect on fluctuations. Two conventional job-related factors, job autonomy and support from colleagues, had positive effects on weekly fluctuations in both phases, while work-nonwork conflict, as expected, had negative effects.

We asked questions specific to the enforced nature of the pandemic. For example, the degree to which work could be done normally, the lack of preparation for the new regime, and the extent to which IT support or caring responsibilities affected the ability to work at home. But these were insignificant for both wellbeing averages and fluctuations in it.

The average well-being or weekly fluctuations did not significantly differ between the two universities. Nor were there differences between those who had worked at home before the pandemic, and those who had not. This should not be interpreted to mean that homeworking had no effect, but simply that having a history of homeworking made no difference to employees' wellbeing.

Significantly factors affecting the level of satisfaction with homeworking are not the same as those which affect well-being. We found, for example, that not having to commute (measured by commute time) initially had an impact on satisfaction with homeworking but not on employees' well-being, as commute time was positively related to well-being in May, though this relationship was insignificant in September. Crucially, in our survey over 75% of respondents in both periods reported being satisfied with homeworking, while those who reported being anxious were also in the majority (just above 50%) in both times. In contrast to well-being levels decreased between May and September but satisfaction with homeworking increased.

Our finding that those factors which affected the averages and fluctuations differ has a general significance for well-being research: we must not assume that explanations of variations in well-being between people will be the same ones as those for changes in the well-being of individuals over time. The core finding that loneliness and the inability to detach from work are the key determinants of the well-being levels and fluctuations shows that homeworking is a crucial factor. That factors associated with the enforced nature of the pandemic are less significant, suggest that we need not be too wary of using the experience of the pandemic for making decisions about the future of homeworking, as we move out of the pandemic. However, our study shows that we should be particularly wary of using satisfaction metrics in decision-making.

Planning the future

The pandemic has provided us with an unplanned experiment in homeworking and research such as ours can be used in an evidence-based approach about the future of remote working. Within organizations, any such discussions should involve employees. Employers and employees need to jointly evaluate the available evidence and their experience during the pandemic. Developing a homeworking policy must be part of a vision of a healthy workplace, and a realisation that, while a healthy workplace depends on a healthy workforce, it is itself defined by its provision of means by which this can be achieved. Employee well-being initiatives, at least in the two universities studied, consistent with the advice on web sites such as the CIPD, are targeted at stress not stressors, and hence at coping and not eliminating the causes of stress. Any evaluation of these initiatives typically relies on surveys about the satisfaction with the service provision. Such surveys, akin to market research, are in danger of becoming the main means of employee involvement in organizational design.

The homeworking issue highlights that the challenges professional organizations like universities face coming out of the pandemic are crying out for intensive employee

involvement. Allied to this, the increased digitalisation of work processes provides the opportunity to correct the longstanding lack of user involvement in IT design. For example, the instruments of involvement, working parties constituted on a cross-level and inclusive basis, survey feedback methods capturing the experience of homeworking, and other forms of idea-capturing can all play a role. The focus should be on identifying new ideas, using facilitators, assessing constraints and stressors, and less on training for imposed changes or programmes for coping with stress, without regard for its underlying causes.

Wellbeing was measured by three discrete indicators: Warr's continuum from anxiety to contentment and one from depression to enthusiasm, and Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS).

30 per cent were lonely some, often or all the time in phase 1, whereas the figure for phase 2 was 36%.

40% in phase 1 and 48% in phase 2 reported that they were never or rarely able to not think about work at all i.e., detach from work?

41% in phase 1 and 37% in phase 2 experienced job insecurity some, often or all the time in phase 1, phase 2 respectively.

51% reported feeling anxious some, often or all the time in phase 1, whereas the figure for phase 2 was 60%

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