

Working from home in times of COVID-19: Recommendations based on scientific literature

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In March 2020, the Belgian government took measures to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus. These measures have had a substantial impact on the working conditions of Belgian employees. Likewise, they present a number of challenges for employers. While some of these measures have since then changed (e.g., schools have reopened), others are still in place (e.g., social distancing) or have been reinstated (e.g., those who can are asked to work from home). At the time of writing, a second wave appears to be underway and measures to stop the spread of the virus are being reinstated. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to play a big role in the next months, it is crucial that employees, employers, the government, and other stakeholders consider evidence-based recommendations for optimizing the functioning and wellbeing of employees and organizations. In this report, we offer recommendations based on the work and organizational psychology literature.

Different contexts, different challenges

It is important to acknowledge that the COVID-19 crisis and the measures taken by the government create complex, multifaceted problems for both employees and employers.

First of all, we need to acknowledge that employees are impacted in various ways (Kniffin et al., 2020). Broadly speaking, we can distinguish (a) employees who were forced to work from home and transition to a digital way of working and collaborating, (b) employees who are considered essential workers and who continued working at their organization (e.g., nurses, department store personnel, couriers), (c) employees who lost their job, were placed in temporary unemployment status, and (d) employees who face considerable changes in their work content or conditions or worry about future job loss. Each group of employees faces rather distinct challenges and there is likely ample variation within each group with regard to the challenges faced.

Second, employers and managers also face several challenges, as they figure out how to, for example, transition to a virtual way of collaborating, how to manage remote workers, keep their business viable despite employee absenteeism and/or reinvent their core business. At the societal level, several experts have warned that the COVID-19 crisis and the measures taken by the government may reduce the psychological wellbeing of employees and increase the incidence of burnout (Kniffin et al., 2020; Sibley et al., 2020).

The challenge of working from home

Given the complexity and multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by employees and employers, we will zoom in on one specific set of challenges pertaining to employees who transitioned **to working from home**. Other challenges could be addressed in future reports. In the following sections, we describe some specific challenges to working from home and factors that may increase the risks faced by certain groups of employees. Finally, we offer some recommendations based on the scientific literature to improve the functioning of employees who are currently working from home due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Working from home or living at work? Working from home in times of COVID-19

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, 16.9% of Belgian employees worked remotely at least one day per week (FOD Mobiliteit & Vervoer: <https://www.telewerken.be/in-cijfers>). Due to the COVID-19 crisis and the lockdown measures that were imposed, this number increased to 62% of Belgian employees working from home (SDWorx: <https://www.sdworx.be/nl-be/pers/2020/2020-05-22-corona-doet-vier-op-tien-belgische-bedienden-voor-het-eerst-telewerken>). This constitutes a dramatic and sudden shift, where employees and employers who had little to no prior experience with remote working were suddenly forced to transition to virtual means of collaborating.

The scientific literature shows that occasionally working from home offers several positive benefits to employees (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). For example, meta-analytical findings suggest that employees who worked from home prior to the COVID-19 crisis reported less work-family conflict, higher job satisfaction

and job performance, lower levels of stress, and were less likely to quit their job. These positive effects can be explained by employees who work from home experiencing higher levels of autonomy. However, remote workers may not experience an optimal level of autonomy while working from home during the covid19 pandemic. On the one hand, the sense of autonomy may be undermined when working from home is mandated (Delanoëije & Verbruggen, 2019). Rather than being voluntary, remote work is now the norm and company policies or family obligations may have decreased the freedom previously enjoyed during working from home. On the other hand, some employees may actually experience too much autonomy, which could lead to work intensification. Moreover, the abovementioned positive benefits were observed for employees who combined working from home with working from an office, and may therefore not apply to people who continuously work from home during the COVID19 pandemic (Eddleston & Mulki, 2015).

That being said, there is some evidence suggesting that remote work during the pandemic may also have positive effects for certain employees. For example, a yet unpublished study that followed Dutch secondary school teachers for 35 weeks prior to and during the first wave lockdown showed that teachers actually felt more energized in the first five weeks of the lockdown (Vullingsh, Meijer, Vantilborgh, & Driver, 2020). This could be due to, for example, an ending of long/stressful commutes, a slowing down of the pace of life, and a temporary decrease in workload (Vaziri, Casper, Wayne, & Matthews, 2020). Likewise, a large survey study with Flemish teleworkers during the first wave of the covid19 pandemic showed that a substantial proportion of employees attributed positive characteristics to

working from home, such as increased efficiency, reduced stress, and reduced work-family conflict (Baert, Lippens, Moens, Sterkens, & Weytjens, 2020).

However, these positive benefits may not outweigh the negative consequences for certain groups of employees. Indeed, studies show that remote work is a challenge stressor, meaning that it can be stimulating but it can also deplete energy and be exhausting, depending on the situation (Perry et al., 2018; van den Broeck et al., 2010). We summarize eight potential negative consequences in the following section:

1. Increase in work-family conflict:

Research shows remote workers experience more conflict between their work and family roles during the COVID19 pandemic (Vaziri et al., 2020). This conflict goes in both directions, as remote workers feel that work hinders their family activities but also that their family activities impede work (Eddleston & Mulki, 2015). Vullingsh and colleagues (2020) showed that there was a considerable increase in work-family conflict as the lockdown was imposed during the first wave in the Netherlands, and that the level of conflict experienced grew progressively worse. Remote workers who engage in emotion-focused coping, experienced high levels of stress due to working with novel technological tools and software (i.e., techno-stress), and had less compassionate supervisors, were more likely to experience work-family conflict (Vaziri et al., 2020). Likewise, recent survey results suggest that work-family conflict may be especially problematic for remote workers with childcare (Baert et al., 2020). It should be noted that work-family conflict likely fluctuated over time and peaked when a lockdown was imposed.

2. Less opportunities to detach from work and recover:

Research suggests that the dissipating boundaries between work and family domains may also mean that remote workers have less opportunities to detach from work and recover (Eddleston & Mulki, 2015; Sonnentag, 2018). Remote workers reported feeling unable to detach from work in the evening and felt as if they were “always on” (Eddleston & Mulki, 2015). Hence, they may feel compelled to continue working during evenings or weekends, as the home environment is associated with work and/or workdays lengthen to take care of children in between working (Delanoëije, Verbruggen, & Germeys, 2019; Singer-Velush, Sherman, & Anderson, 2020). Nevertheless, detaching from work is crucial to facilitate recovery and alleviate stress (Chawla, MacGowan, Gabriel, & Podsakoff, 2020).

3. Intensification of work:

Related to the previous issues, research suggests that remote workers actually work more hours (e.g. in the evenings or weekends), due to the weakened boundaries between work and family domains (Perry et al., 2018). Remote workers may skip breaks or use time that was previously spent commuting to work. Working longer hours may reduce time to recover, and thwart recovery from stress. In addition, the increase of virtual meetings may lead to remote workers feeling exhausted (i.e., zoom fatigue) (Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai, & Bendz, 2020).

4. Feelings of isolation and loneliness:

A key issue to working remotely is the lack of social interactions with coworkers, supervisors, and customers

(Charalampous, Grant, Tramontano, & Michailidis, 2019). While some interactions may take place virtually, these interactions tend to lack the richness of face-to-face communication (Kniffin et al., 2020). Research by Vullingsh and colleagues (2020) indeed shows that Dutch teachers experienced higher levels of detachment and cynicism during the lockdown, which indicated that they felt less connected to coworkers and to the organization as a whole. This is worrisome as detachment/cynicism is a key component of burnout. Moreover, a yet unpublished study in a Belgian company from October 2020 showed that employees felt lonelier and less supported by their colleagues when working from home, compared to when working in the office (Van den Broeck & Vanderstukken, 2020).

5. Decrease in intrinsic motivation:

Maintaining high levels of intrinsic motivations during the COVID19 pandemic may be difficult, as remote work offers limited opportunities to fulfil remote workers' basic needs (need for autonomy, need for competence, need for relatedness) (Perry, Rubino, & Hunter, 2018). When these three basic needs are not fulfilled, motivation may shift from more intrinsic to extrinsic forms of motivation.

6. Difficulties with performing tasks:

Working remotely may help to increase productivity, particularly because it helps avoiding interruptions and allows to better concentrate on the task at hand (Van den Broeck & Vanderstukken, 2020). However, it also poses challenges as it can require more time to coordinate efforts, manage ambiguities, gather information, and perform tasks without the equipment or support that would have been available at

the office (Chong, Huang, & Chang, 2020; Perry et al., 2018; Van den Broeck & Vanderstukken, 2020). This may lead to feeling time pressure, as certain tasks suddenly require more time when being performed from home. Employees also may need to restructure and reorganize their work tasks and find new ways to perform them which creates additional workload and pressure to adapt (Niessen & Lang, 2020). Employees typically tailor their work in a way that it allows them to live out their personality and motivational dispositions. The rapid changes may have led to a situation in which this is no longer possible or they may need to find new ways to do so.

Moreover, many remote workers lack a suitable place to work from home. When remote workers have no dedicated room for work at home and lack a quiet environment for focused work, they may experience difficulties performing tasks. For example, sharing a wifi-network with partner and children can lead to technical difficulties, as some networks may not be able to handle large amounts of data traffic.

7. Ambiguous expectations:

A lack of communication between team members or with supervisors may lead to unclear expectations. For example, remote workers may feel unsure about what their employer expects from them in terms of work hours, deadlines, communication, etcetera. Ambiguous expectations increase the risk of psychological contract breach perceptions, as employee/employer may believe that the other party is not fulfilling its obligations (Rousseau, Hansen, & Tomprou, 2018). This may lead to conflict and a loss of mutual trust (Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007).

8. Difficulties communicating with and managing virtual teams:

Supervisors may struggle with shifting to managing remote workers virtually. Virtual teams require a different approach to communication and project management (Mesmer-Magnus, DeChurch, Jimenez-Rodriguez, Wildman, & Shuffler, 2011; Ortiz de Guinea, Webster, & Staples, 2012). Moreover, supervisors who are not accustomed to remote working may not trust this new way of working and may worry that remote workers are not working as hard as in the office (Perry et al., 2018). This may lead to supervisors trying to use virtual means to control remote workers (e.g., demanding that remote workers check in using online tools) (Kniffin et al., 2020). Job control and autonomy are key job characteristics, and employees who lack control and autonomy tend to report lower levels of wellbeing.

While the abovementioned issue may arise for all remote workers, some groups of employees are at a higher risk:

- The risk of loneliness and social isolation is greater for singles. Singles reported feeling lonelier on days working from home than employees having a relationship (Van den Broeck & Vanderstucken, 2020): 22% of singles indicated feeling lonely on days working from home compared to 10% of those in a relation. Moreover, only 50% of the singles agree with the statement that telework has more advantages than disadvantages while 68% of the employees in a relationship agree with this statement. The Coronabarometer study (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020) arrives at similar conclusions: singles feel lonelier and less satisfied in their need for relatedness compared to employees in a relationship. Notably, also employees who are in a relation

may feel lonely when working from home.

- The risk of work-family conflict is greater for remote workers with young children, couples who are experiencing relational problems, remote workers with a low socio-economic status, for female remote workers, and for remote workers with a preference for work segmentation or with a personality characterized by low emotional stability (Perry et al., 2018). Employees who experience techno-stress or who have a supervisor who is not supportive or compassionate are also at a higher risk to experience problems (Vaziri et al., 2020).

Recommendations for employees

How can employees and employers deal with the challenges that accompany remote work? Based on the scientific literature, we list a number of recommendations:

1. Balance between remote work and working in the office

We would like to emphasize that the balance between remote work and working in the office depends on the epidemiological context. Working from home may be an effective tool to reduce the infection rate, as it reduces social interactions between coworkers. However, if the epidemiological context allows for it, we believe that finding an optimal balance between remote work and working in the office can bestow several benefits to employees. A common suggestion is to have 2 days of remote work, while the rest of the work week employees return to the office. Ideally, these days working at the office allow employees to connect with coworkers, strengthening team cohesion and

identification. However, this also implies that team members come to the office on similar days.

While previously it has been suggested that negative consequences prevail when working from home more than 2 days a week (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), other research suggest that not the amount of telework but the way the work is organized has the biggest impact (Vander Elst et al., 2017). Similarly, not the amount of days, but one's motivation for working in the office or at home was found to relate to employee well-being: employees felt more burned-out and less engaged when they were pushed either to work at home or to work from the office, while working voluntarily from home or from the office was associated with increased well-being (unpublished data collected in a Belgian organization in Oct 2020; Van den Broeck & Vanderstukken, 2020). This suggests that employers should engage in a discussion with individual employees to determine the optimal balance between remote work and working in the office.

2. Actively seek recovery from work

Research suggests that the most effective way to recover from work is to unwind and focus on activities that are completely unrelated to work. The literature suggests that especially physical and social activities are most effective in helping people to unwind and are typically more effective than just lying on the couch and watching TV (Sonnentag, 2018). However, a major problem during a pandemic is that many social and physical activities that employees normally engage in and that typically help them to unwind like meeting family and friends or playing sports are not possible (in the normal way). Given this situation, it seems important that employees search for new ways to unwind and recover from work. Online workout

classes, social hours on video chat, hiking, walking, running or bicycling outside are some example of activities that are still possible during even extreme forms of lockdown. Overall, research suggests that it can be beneficial for recovery to actively invest time into finding an activity outside normal work that can help you to unwind from work.

3. Structure your workday

Some employees require a clear segmentation between the work and family domain and may struggle when working from home. To resolve this, they can create boundaries between work and other areas in life (Verelst, De Cooman, & Verbruggen, 2020). For example, a physical boundary can be created by having a designated work area (e.g., a home office). A temporal boundary can be created by setting specific work hours for remote work. To further strengthen this segmentation, remote workers can use rituals to signal the start and the end of work (e.g., going for a walk before starting work, cleaning up the desk area when ending work) (Eddleston & Mulki, 2015). Moreover, it can be helpful to start working as you normally would (e.g., don't start working in your pajamas, but get dressed). Try to have a clear structure for the workday, outlining the tasks that you want to get done and when you will do them (e.g., time blocking). Planning ahead can help reduce stress and anxiety. Unpublished data from a Belgian governmental organization (collected Sept 2020, $N = 200$) indicates that employees who get dressed for work each morning and set a clear working schedule for themselves suffer less in terms of mental well-being than those who don't use such strategies (Van den Broeck & Vanderstukken, 2020). Don't forget to include breaks in the schedule, allowing

you to go outside and get some fresh air, and make sure that you allow time for focused work without Zoom, Teams, or Skype meetings (Newport, 2016).

Recommendations for organizations and managers

4. Use the right management style

Studies show that compassionate and family-supportive leadership can help reduce the risk of work-family conflict while working from home (Vaziri et al., 2020). It is important that supervisors are aware of the leadership style that they employ. In times of crisis, it is common for supervisors to adopt a more task-oriented, transactional leadership style (Dóci, Hofmans, Nijs, & Judge, 2020). However, empathy, attentive communication, a communal orientation, and vision-oriented leadership are required right now (Kniffin et al., 2020). Supervisors need to listen to employees' concerns and acknowledge that each employee may be facing a uniquely different and difficult situation right now. Research shows that successful managers pay more attention to 1:1 meetings with their employees and have more, but shorter meetings (e.g., 30 min; Singer-Velush et al., 2020) At the same time, try to develop a clear vision with your organization on how you can handle the crisis and move through it. Employees need to believe in the "tomorrow" of the organization and that it is worthwhile to navigate through potential difficulties. Even if supervisors and employers are unable to address problems faced by employees, the mere acknowledgement of the employee's concerns can be helpful and motivating. Supervisors should also emphasize positive aspects to keep up spirits, as focusing too much on negative emotions may lead the emergence of a

negative affective climate (Lang, Bliese, & de Voogt, 2018; Sy & Choi, 2013).

5. Clearly communicate mutual obligations

Organisations need to fulfil the requirement listed in CAO85 to develop a formal telework policy, including a clear description about what to expect from teleworkers, e.g. in terms of accessibility and availability and means of communication (Perry et al., 2018) and should aim to balance the diversity in employees' right for disconnection (mentioned in the law of March 26th 2018) and need for flexibility in organizing work and private life. For example, when should employees be reachable by coworkers and supervisors; what tools do you use to communicate; can you deviate from this when there are urgent issues? Unpublished data in a Belgian governmental organization ($N = 200$) indicates that employees feel better when they have clearly communicated to their team members when they are available and when not (Van den Broeck & Vanderstukken, 2020). By making these expectations explicit, the risk of inadvertently violating mutual obligations is lowered (Morrison & Robinson, 1997).

6. Help employees in structuring their workday and creating a good office environment at home

Organizations and managers can facilitate a structured workday by establishing clear communication rules, especially around email. For instance, it may be a good idea to delay email delivery for emails that are sent after the end of the workday until the next morning. Most office software and online email tools have a function allowing users to set times for email delivery. Especially avoid creating the impression

that employees should always be available or that they can expect this from others.

Having a good space to work is indispensable when working from home (Charalampous et al., 2019), yet – even before the pandemic when telework was voluntary, about 1 in 3 employees did not have an adequate working space. Current unpublished data indicate that between 40% (Belgian organization, $N = 350$; Van den Broeck & Vanderstukken, 2020; representative sample with $N = 5000$, ordered Tempo Team) and 50% of the employees (Belgian governmental organization, $N = 200$) works from a private room or dedicated office space when working from home. A complementary 40% to 60% works in the living room or at the kitchen table. About 10% has no space and needs to work from the bedroom or sofa. Organizations need to stress the importance of having a good office space at home and can facilitate setting up such a space by providing (the means to buy) office equipment such as an ergonomic chair, keyboard, stable internet connection, etcetera (e.g., by allowing employees to use these materials from the office).

7. Use virtual communication tools to keep in touch with coworkers

To address social isolation, it is important to stay connected to each other. Virtual communication tools can be used for informal get-togethers with coworkers, such as a regular digital coffee break over a videocall, or a Whatsapp group for spontaneous conversations on non-work topics (Verelst et al., 2020). More formal meetings could start or end with an informal chat to check in on everyone. Regardless of whether the meeting is formal or informal, it is encouraged to use your camera. This improves the quality of the interaction, as non-verbal cues allow

for richer conversations (Burgoon et al., 2002; Talley & Temple, 2015).

However, it is also important to not create additional obligations when employees are already strained (e.g., when they have kids at home). It is thus important to carefully balance the need for social interaction with overall workload. Consider tailoring this to the needs of different employees by, for instance, organizing social get-togethers where attendance is not an obligation.

8. Show empathy and trust

As managers, right now is the time to trust employees. Constantly controlling and monitoring remote workers may undermine their sense of autonomy and reduce their wellbeing (Kniffin et al., 2020). Offer structure and support, provide clear goals, and try to regularly check-in on employees to see how they are doing. These check-ins should focus on listening to employee concerns and require an empathic attitude. If you need to check-in on large groups of employees, a quick regular survey with a few short questions can also be used to assess psychosocial risks, stress and burnout. Make sure to personally follow up on employees who seem to struggle based on these survey results. Overall, make sure to create a psychologically safe environment, where employees feel at ease to share problems and concerns with supervisors or other staff members (e.g., psychosocial risk advisor) in the organization (Bradley, Postlethwaite, Klotz, Hamdani, & Brown, 2012).

9. Allow for flexibility and offer support

Be attentive to the unique needs of remote workers. For example, remote workers with childcare responsibilities or caring for a family member who was diagnosed with

covid19 may not be able to work regular office hours. Flexibility may therefore be needed, where employees are allowed to craft their own optimal conditions for remote work. Overall, employees need to feel supported, meaning that the organization should demonstrate that they value their contributions and cares about their wellbeing. Managers play a crucial role in this, as research shows that perceived organizational support trickles down (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006): when managers feel supported by the organization, they offer more support to their subordinates as well.

10. Offer training

Switching to remote work and virtual collaboration can be difficult. Employees need to master new virtual communication and collaboration tools. This can be a daunting task, especially for those who experience technostress (Vaziri et al., 2020). Organizations can reduce this stress by offering courses or workshops on how to use these new tools. Likewise, managing virtual teams can be a daunting task for supervisors. Training courses can help them to adjust their communication strategy and management style. This training should pay attention to age-related learning strategies and skills for improving success and reducing stress (Kanfer, Lyndgaard, & Tatel, 2020).

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