

Working from home during Covid increased productivity, but also stress – survey

ANDY PRENDERGAST

Job intensification was a clear feature of working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, a new UCD survey demonstrates, with the influence of trade unions at organisations appearing to be the only mitigation against demanding and damaging effects.

Nearly one-quarter of the workforce in Ireland worked from home exclusively, between March 2020 and May 2021, with another 20% working from home for most of that period, the results of a new UCD survey, *Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic*, reveal.

Employee productivity increased for those working from home, predominantly due to being able to concentrate better (saving time on the commute was reported as less important).

Women were more likely to report decline in mental and physical health

However, working from home also increased stress levels, with a reported inability to disconnect from work and “a diminishment in health and well-being”, the survey shows.

The negative effects were more pronounced for women: 43% of women reported an impairment in their mental health and well-being (33% of men reported this impairment). Women “were also more likely to report that their physical health had deteriorated as had their relationship with those whom they lived.”

Furthermore, the negative effects reported do not appear to be lessened by positive job attributes such as job autonomy, employee involvement and participation and good management-employee relations. The only factor that appears to have mitigated these effects was where management recognised trade unions.

The report’s authors, John Geary and Maria Belizon, argue that remote working is “one of the most significant – if not the most significant – challenge currently confronting employers and it is potentially momentous in its consequences for the organisation and management of work.”

TRADE UNION IMPACT

The theory on job intensification, the authors record, is that negative effects “are more pernicious where workers are ill-equipped in their training or in not possessing sufficient voice or job resources to mitigate its potentially negative effects.”

However, what the researchers found was “an almost uniform picture. There was no correlation in the main between the provision of these identified job resources and the effects working at home had on workers’ health and well-being.”

“For example, there was no relationship whatsoever between workers’ mental and physical health and trust in management, or in the quality of the management-employee relationship. Neither was there an association between workers’ mental health and whether they received job training and their level of job autonomy.

“Neither was there any correlation between workers’ experiencing work intensification and their trust in management, their levels of job autonomy, training provision, or the broader quality of the management-employee relationship towards employees”, the authors found.

However, there was one exception: union representation. The findings suggest a (modest) relationship that where a union “was recognised by management for the purpose of representing employees in the organisation, working at home was less likely to be associated with work intensification.”

BREAKDOWN OF PRODUCTIVITY

The following table shows the changes in work patterns for people working from home during the March 2020 to May 2021 period, as reported by the UCD survey (involving 889 respondents).

	Extensive effort (%)		Intensive effort (%)	
	Work more than 48 hours	Increase in working hours	Work at very high speeds	Work to tight deadlines
<i>Gender</i>				
Men	22	42	31	46
Women	10	50	40	47
<i>Sector</i>				
Private sector	18	44	40	50
Public sector	10	50	29	42
State-owned	18	50	29	39
Not for profit	6	41	42	38
<i>Occupational group</i>				
Manager/director	29	54	43	54
Professional occupations	14	53	36	48
Associate professional	16	39	30	45
<i>Caring responsibilities</i>				
Infants (1-3 yrs)	20	30	39	50
Early-stage primary (4-8 yrs)	14	46	34	56
Late-stage primary (8-12 yrs)	19	46	36	51
Post primary (13-18 yrs)	26	58	40	48
<i>Salary levels</i>				
Below €20,000	10	35	29	41
€20,000-39,999	25	41	34	42
€40,000-64,999	23	51	40	53
€65,000+	47	61	45	58
All	16	46	35	46

MIXED PREFERENCES

In somewhat of a contrast to the findings of another recent major survey on remote working, the third annual NUIG WDC remote working survey (see *REMOTE WORKING in IRN 22/2022*), the UCD survey shows slightly more mixed results when it comes to preferences towards remote/hybrid working, post-Covid (note: the UCD survey asks about home working, while the NUIG/WDC survey asks about remote/hybrid working, which is not necessarily working at home).

More respondents to the UCD survey would prefer to work mostly in the office (17%), or fully in the office (18%) after Covid, compared to those who prefer to work mostly at home (22%) or fully at home (8%). Around 35% opted for 'an equal mix' of home and office work.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, younger workers showed a greater desire for office work: over half of workers aged under 24 want mostly office or fulltime office work, compared to just 10% who want mostly to work from home and 3% who want full home working.

About 30% of both men and women indicated preference for mostly or fully working from home, post-Covid. On fulltime office working, women were slightly more in favour (20%) compared to men (16%). There is a slightly greater appetite for hybrid working in the private sector than in the public sector.

One clear aspect, however, is that full working from home is the least favoured option for all demographics (age, occupational groups, caring responsibilities, salary levels and sector – except for workers at non-profits, who showed more enthusiasm for home working than office working).

REASONS FOR PRODUCTIVITY CHANGES

About 40% of workers said their output increased whilst working from home; 24% indicated a decrease in output (29% said there was no change).

Women were more likely to report higher levels of increased output, working hours and effort. The primary reason for increased output was being 'able to concentrate better by working at home', with 56% of men and 54% of women listing this answer as the reason for their increased productivity – a reason much more influential than saving time not having to commute to work (21% of men; 17% of women).

For those who reported a decline in output whilst working from home, there was a spread of reasons. For women, the leading issue was 'equipment, software and/or internet' (21%), with 'the nature of work made it difficult' the next most significant issue (16%). For men, the main problem was 'lack of contact, interaction and exchange of information with work colleagues' (18%).

Caring and other domestic duties or distractions appear to be reported by men and women in similar numbers, which, as noted in the report, suggests that domestic responsibilities “were shared between the two genders.”

Two-thirds of surveyed workers said the level of monitoring by their employer did not change while they were working from home. A similar percentage of workers reported a slight increase (13%) and a slight decrease (14%) in employer monitoring, while 4% of workers reported great increases and great decreases in employer monitoring.

NEED TO TREAD CAREFULLY

The authors comment that hybrid working “is not a single or uniform phenomenon; it can take many forms and the managerial consequences and challenges are huge.”

They advise that employers “must now act to define the parameters of hybrid working.” If employers do not act, they will “ignore employees’ recalibrated expectations in respect of work-life balance as well as to risk increased labour turnover.”

“To adopt an approach of, ‘let’s wait and see how it works out’ will not suffice. At best, it will be ham-fisted, and, at worst, it will establish precedent and embed expectations which will then have to be unwound in a manner that does not infringe employees’ legal rights”, they caution.

The authors state that employers will have to tread carefully if they are to alter existing remote working arrangements or to deny an employee’s request to work remotely. “To put it plainly: employers do not hold all the cards here.”

Considering the negative effects working from home can have, particularly on women and those with children aged 8-19, the researchers recommend for employers “to stay in frequent contact with and review the well-being of their staff to ensure that the negative consequences found in this study are not produced.”

On the proposed Work-Life Balance Bill (see [IRN 16/2022](#)), they recommend the Government to “give more thought to widening access with a right to request flexible working arrangement to working parents of children older than 12 years of age, as is currently the proposed [...] Our evidence shows that the stresses and strains that parents encounter continue right up to the late teenage years.”