

Working from home in times of COVID-19: Challenges & recommendations

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Late October 2020, working from home became the norm again in Belgium to contain the spread of COVID-19. However, these measures require far-reaching efforts from both employees and employers and may have an impact on an individual, organizational and societal level. To sustain these measures, we need to look beyond the economic and health parameters. Work - and organizational psychological insights can help us to understand the challenges associated with working from home and inform evidence-based management practices.

Working from home or living at work?

Since measures were imposed to manage the COVID-19 crisis, the number of Belgian employees working remotely at least one day a week increased from 16.9% to 62%. This constitutes a dramatic and sudden shift, where employees and employers who had 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 can bestow several positive benefits to employees, such as a higher degree of autonomy, less work-family conflict, higher job satisfaction and performance, lower levels of stress, and a lower likelihood to quit their job.

However, these benefits were observed when employees combined working from home with working at the office. This is in stark contrast with the situation today, as many employees are now working fulltime from home and as this remote work is mandated rather than a voluntary choice. As a result, employees may not experience the positive benefits mentioned above. While some studies show that certain groups of employees still experienced benefits from working from home during a lockdown, there is also a body of literature that suggests that there are various negative consequences such as:

1. **An increase in work-family conflict because of work and family roles impeding each other**
2. Less opportunities to **detach and recover from work** because of blurring boundaries between work and other life domains.
3. Working longer hours, skipping breaks and an increase in virtual meetings resulting in an **intensification of work**, less time to recover and feelings of exhaustion.
4. Feelings of **isolation, loneliness** and **decreased sense of connection** due to the lack of social interaction.
5. A decrease in **intrinsic motivation** due to limited possibilities to fulfill the basic needs of employees (autonomy, connectedness and competence).

6. Difficulties with **performing tasks** due to the extra time to coordinate and reorganize work, manage uncertainties, gather information and lack of necessary work resources.
7. Lack of communication and thus **ambiguous expectations**.
8. Difficulties communicating with and managing **virtual teams** as they require a different approach: transparent and clear communication, trust, moving away from micro-management and excessive control.

The above challenges require quite a lot from employers and employees. However, various actions can be taken to meet these challenges.

Recommendations for employees:

1. If the epidemiological context allows it, it is recommended to find an optimal **balance between working from home and working from the office**. Two days of remote work per week are often recommended.
2. Try to **actively seek recovery from work**. Research suggests that it can be beneficial for recovery to actively invest time into finding an activity outside normal work (e.g., online workout classes, walking, social hours on video chat) that can help you to unwind from work.
3. **Structure your workday**. Set a clear place and time for working from home, and use rituals to signal the start and the end of the workday. Don't forget to include breaks in your work schedule.

Recommendations for organizations and managers:

4. **Managers need to use compassionate and family-supportive leadership**. This means that managers need to show empathy, attentive communication, a communal orientation, and vision-oriented leadership. Supervisors need to listen to employees' concerns and acknowledge that each employee may be facing a uniquely different and difficult situation right now.
5. **Organizations and managers need to clearly communicate what is expected from employees during this crisis**. Essentially, this means that organizations 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.
6. **Help employees in structuring their workday and creating a good office environment at home**. Avoid creating the impression that employees should always be available. Be aware that many employees do not have a dedicated, equipped workspace at home. When employees lack a good office environment at home, organizations should 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**. Stay connected to each other by using virtual tools for informal get-togethers (e.g., a digital coffee break). Start or end formal virtual meetings by checking in on how everyone is doing. However, be aware that 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.

8. **Show empathy and trust employees.** Constantly controlling and monitoring remote workers undermines their sense of autonomy and reduces their wellbeing. Offer structure and support, provide clear goals, and try to regularly check-in on employees to see how they are doing. Make sure to create a psychologically safe environment, where employees feel at ease to share problems and concerns with supervisors or other staff members.
9. **Allow for flexibility and offer support.** Be attentive to the unique needs of remote workers. Employees need to feel supported, meaning that the organization should demonstrate that they value their contributions and cares about their wellbeing.
10. **Offer training opportunities.** Employees need to master new virtual communication and collaboration tools, which can cause stress. 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.