

Working from Home

Research results from a workplace innovation perspective

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The Corona crisis hit hard, both at home and at work. Suddenly, employees had to work from home as much as possible whilst their organisations did not have the time to properly prepare for this change. Individuals, teams and supervisors had to reinvent the way they organise their work.

There was no guidebook, we all had to learn along the way.

Workitects' Home Office Meter

As a centre of expertise in organisational design, [Workitects](#) wanted to measure the impact of working from home on the workability of jobs in Flanders. That's why we launched the *Home Office Meter*: a modified version of our employee survey [Work Meter](#). *Work Meter* helps organisations to optimise their task divisions and decision-making processes by uncovering the link between organisational structure and employee wellbeing. For our 'home office' [research](#), we added some questions to quantify the impact of working from home on those organisational and individual outcomes.

We started this research with a number of research questions in mind:

- How did tasks and job demands change: Is there a higher need for information, is it more difficult to manage the planning of the work?
- How did job resources change: Do respondents have more or less autonomy to meet these challenges?
- What does this mean for workers' stress and engagement levels?

More stress and less engagement

We received 402 completed questionnaires, mostly from well educated people over forty, both men and women, with varying degrees of seniority. Seventy per cent of respondents now work completely from home. Forty-nine per cent of them expressed an increased stress level whilst 39% felt less enthusiastic about their jobs. We set out to discover the reason for this decline in wellbeing at work.

European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN)

EUWIN was established by the European Commission in 2013 and is now entirely supported by contributions from an international network of partners co-ordinated by HIVA (University of Leuven). EUWIN also functions as a network partner for the H2020 *Beyond4.0* project.

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Three insights related to organisational design

First of all, we noticed that 73% of our respondents were assigned new tasks since the start of the crisis. Also, almost half of the respondents expressed a greater need for information necessary to complete their tasks. This increased information need was more common for those respondents whose tasks had changed compared to those whose tasks had remained the same. Furthermore, employees' stress or exhaustion levels increased systematically with the need for information. This relationship between stress and information need was a clear pattern among respondents regardless of whether their tasks had changed. Therefore, our first finding was the following:

New tasks go hand in hand with an increased need for information, and it is the latter that is particularly stressful.

Second, we discovered that working from home can have a very different impact on the extent to which employees are disturbed in their daily planning: 52% of respondents reported more disturbances during the working day, while 29% are actually less disturbed when working from home. However, one thing was very clear: employees who were disturbed more often feel more exhausted and stressed. Encouragingly, we found that autonomy in planning work can mitigate this increase in exhaustion. When planning is unpredictable, it helps to give people room to shift their tasks throughout the working day. However, planning autonomy is not a complete shield against work stress: we see that for people who are most disturbed in their planning, even with increased autonomy, there is still an increase in exhaustion. Nevertheless, our second finding is:

Planning disruptions are stressful, but planning autonomy can ease the pain.

Finally, we delved deeper into the effects of working from home on organisational culture. We noticed that relationships among colleagues seemed to improve: respondents reported more emotional support and appreciation from coworkers. At the same time, remote working made it more difficult to coordinate the work; feedback and goal clarity took a hit.

Looking at the variation among respondents, we discovered that employees who experienced an improved organisational culture (57% of respondents) also felt more engaged while working, whilst the opposite was true for respondents who stated that their organisational culture deteriorated. Although we saw this positive relationship between culture and engagement, we did not find a relationship to exhaustion. Therefore, our final conclusion was:

A supportive organisational culture helps with employee engagement, but doesn't take away their stress.

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