

Effects of Home Office on Employees' Working Conditions during Covid 19 Crisis in Switzerland

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Abstract. The current pandemic poses special challenges for employees. A survey was conducted in April and May 2020. The impact of the switch to home office on the living circumstances, quality of life and Well-Being was investigated. 333 respondents (female 62%, male 38%) participated in this survey. The results show there during these weeks a high level of Well-Being in the home office. More than 70% of respondents feel comfortable in home office and would like to maintain this type of work organization after the corona crisis. Leadership is a decisive factor. Working conditions at home (suitable working environment, undisturbed work) are less decisive for Well-Being than good leadership by the superior. Findings show the necessity of clear communication rules, so that employees are optimally integrated into the work processes and content. In addition, a high degree of personal autonomy in the home office and, at the same time, close integration into the team is important for the Well-Being of employees. Employees would like to keep the autonomy they gained even after the crisis. However, there are increasing demands due to digital leadership. Under these conditions, leadership means providing orientation and support from a physical distance, as well as promoting the autonomy of the employee. As a negative impact of home office, it can be stated that employees miss regular social exchange with colleagues. In consequence, the presence at the workplace should be used as quality time for building sustainable and resilient working relationships.

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1 Initial Situation

The world is for more than one and a half years now in the pandemic crisis. With the change from office work to home office, the working and living conditions changed fundamentally [18]. The authors conducted a survey in March and April 2020 in order to determine to what extent the change to a home office has influenced the living conditions, quality of life and Well-Being of employees [3, 5, 8].

The present study also aims to investigate whether leadership principles that have already proven effective in everyday business life are also effective in the home office

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and whether there is a connection (correlation) between digital leadership, Well-Being and resilience in the home office.

2 Home Office in Switzerland

Teleworking and home office is not a new phenomenon. According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, in 2018 about 138,000 people were working more than 50% of their working time in so-called teleworking from home. Another 445,000 were regularly in their home office, but with less than 50% of their workload. An additional 478,000 employees did this occasionally [1]. It can be assumed that of the 5.1 million jobs in Switzerland [2], the vast majority of employees have switched to home office work during the pandemic crisis. In 2016, 87% of employees wanted to have more of a home office, with the proportion of temporary home offices at that time standing at 28% [4]. By 2014, about half of the 4.9 million employees in Switzerland would already have been able to work from home or on the move, both in organisational and technological terms [11].

In principle, the home office offers many advantages, but also disadvantages. First of all, it saves time for users because commuting is no longer necessary. Working hours can also be made more flexible. The prerequisite is that the home office has the technical and Organisational-spatial prerequisites to carry out productive work. The disadvantages may be that the manager has to make additional efforts to accompany employees in their home office. In addition, personal social contacts are limited because the home office organisation means that colleagues are seen less often. Personal contacts cannot be fully compensated for by voice and video calls.

3 Digital Leadership

During the crisis, leadership made an important shift from leading employees in presence to do called digital leadership. There are various characteristics of digital leadership, it requires leadership at a distance without direct personal contact between leaders and guided persons, the use of suitable software tools and the application and implementation of basic leadership principles. Furthermore, good digital leadership is characterised by the fact that, despite "social distancing", an empathic relationship between the superior person and the employee is maintained even via virtual communication.

The basic principles of effective and efficient management include, above all

- clarifying the roles of team members in the delivery of services.
- clarification of tasks and duties of the home office staff.
- clarifying the integration into the operational processes.
- allowing freedom to bring in own ideas.
- the application and effectiveness of the principles of digital leadership
- establishing clear rules of communication in dealing with other group members.

4 COVID-19 - Challenges for Employees and Management

The pandemic poses special challenges for employees and their families. Home office under the conditions of the pandemic also means that freedom of movement is fundamentally restricted. Employees are faced with additional tasks, such as organizing their daily lives while at the same time reducing social contacts. Or looking after children and instructing them in distance learning. Many of the employees also worry about relatives and friends who are not well cared for, who need help or who may even be ill. Quite a few employees are worried about whether and how long they will keep their jobs, whether Short-time work will be introduced and whether they can stick to their career plans under the very uncertain conditions. For many employees, the pandemic poses many different challenges and burdens. But each of these burdens has its own quality. It is obvious to speak of the pandemic as an event that brings with it very different burdens and can certainly trigger a crisis. This crisis is a crisis for society and the economy, but it is also a crisis or critical life event for individual employees. What makes such an event a crisis? Fore sure there was hardly any preparation time, a pandemic is only foreseeable to a limited extent, we can only draw on a few experiences, the interrelationships are complex and difficult to manage, the negative effects are difficult to control, and living at loss has a lasting negative impact on Well-Being. Such emotional problems can put a strain on social relationships and also promote illness. The special thing about the pandemic is that it affects everyone. It is also special that we can understand the restrictions as a service to the community. This helps to deal with the negative consequences [6].

5 Resilience and Competence

In this context, we are working on the assumption that in the course of one's professional life, challenges will always arise that will have to be overcome. Under certain circumstances, this may lead to a reorientation, to a development of professional skills in everyday work as well as to an adjustment of one's own goals, wishes and interests. If coping with these challenges is successful, one speaks of "career adaptability" or "career resilience". Here, resilience is defined as successful professional action under difficult Job-related conditions. As with the general concept of resilience, personal and environmental risks and strengths are considered decisive for positive coping.

Work in the home office under conditions of the pandemic is now subject to a variety of stresses and strains that can, but need not, be associated with the pandemic. Other burdens can be added and all of them together can have a lasting negative impact on people's thinking, feeling and acting. People who are burdened but cope well with these burdens are considered resilient. Resilience is often understood as "the positive adaptation and sustainable development of a system to respond to Short- or Long-term everyday challenges or severe stress. Based on internal system processes and through dealing with the environment, the system defines new reference values and develops required competencies, and the ability to cope with future stresses improves" [13, p.557]. It is therefore not just a matter of overcoming a challenge or coping with pressures. It is also about the acquisition of skills and competencies, about changing attitudes so that future challenges can be better mastered. Whether or not such a

development takes place depends to a large extent on the strengths and support available within the person and in the environment. And it is certainly decisive whether and to what extent it is possible to positively influence the strengths within the person or the support in the environment. It is therefore a matter of direct control of what is happening as well as influencing all factors that can influence the perception and shaping of what is happening. An important contribution to Well-Being is that I can influence the essential factors of what is happening and thus have control over the current and future development. Resilience and Self-Efficacy (resilience and Self-Efficacy in Figure 1) are therefore closely related [14].

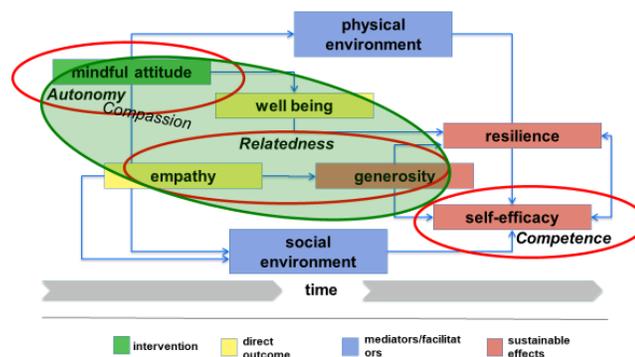


Figure 1: Factor model mindfulness, resilience, and social support over the life span [17].

Within the framework of our joint work in the research network "Mindfulness, resilience, and peer support across the life span" we have designed a model of conditions in which mindfulness and Well-Being, empathy and generosity are important factors on the individual side. With them Self-Efficacy and resilience can be promoted. This model is based on the basic assumption that people only consistently direct their actions towards Well-Being, health and their own positive development if the actions themselves serve their basic needs. The basic needs include autonomy, integration in social relationships and the experience of competence. Compassion and generosity, i.e. the willingness to stand up for others, to participate, are not only educational or socialisation goals but also important basic conditions of human life.

6 Research Questions and Design

Certain aspects of the COVID-19 crisis can now be understood as a particular constellation in the physical and social environment of the employees. It should be remembered that home office in general and home office under the conditions of the COVID-19 crisis are not the same. Under the influence of the COVID-19 crisis, personal freedoms are severely restricted. This also poses special challenges for management. Under

difficult conditions, it has a positive influence on motivation and performance and has to make its contribution to ensure productivity. The home office is no longer a right, but rather a civic duty, combined with the duty to perform the required work in the home office as well. In addition, large parts of the population not only have health concerns, but also considerable uncertainty about the safety of their own workplace. This outlines a field of hypotheses and variables that the questionnaire must take into account.

One of the basic conditions of human life is that environmental conditions influence individual behaviour and experience and individual development [15]. The social dimensions of employment, but also the social dimensions of family and friends, of the living environment and the community have an influence on the course of development. In addition, we assume that aspects of the physical environment are important protective factors or even pose risks. An attractive residential environment with plenty of space, green spaces and opportunities for leisure activities is generally regarded as a protection factor, while noise pollution and various disturbances are considered risk factors, e.g., also for work in the home office. It is therefore obvious that in this survey we have considered aspects of behaviour and experience, work organisation and management, as well as life design and the home environment. In detail, we asked for eight biographical data and data on professional biography. They were asked about the extent and duration of work in the home office, the occupational field and type of employment, as well as attitudes towards work in the home office.

Well-Being and resilience were surveyed using standardised questionnaires. Standardised questions on teamwork and team leadership complemented the various aspects of home office work. The physical environment became an issue by asking about living space, rooms and number of people, but also about the quality of the residential area and the wider living environment. The survey was completed on 21 May 2020. The survey involved 333 respondents* (female 62%, male 38%). Most of them have been working as employees in the service sector (economy, education, social affairs, administration) for more than 15 years. The respondents were invited by spreading requests through various distribution lists and target groups. This means that the link to the questionnaire was sent via the authors' networks and then forwarded to third parties by other helpers.

7 Objectives of the Survey

The survey served to assess the Well-Being and the experience of stress in the home office in times of the COVID-19 crisis. From the data obtained, recommendations can be deduced for work in the home office, for the design of interaction under the conditions of virtually mediated communication and leadership. These recommendations are helpful in the current situation as an impulse for consultation as well as for the design of management. They will also be helpful in the future, when more work is done from the home office and thus hybrid forms of work are to be promoted.

Key questions of the project therefore concerned:

- Individual Well-Being and individual resilience under home office conditions due to pandemic.
- The satisfaction with this special form of work.

- The satisfaction with the work in the team and with the leadership.
- The social and physical protection factors in the environment in their importance for the evaluation of work, and one's own Well-Being and resilience.
- The application and effectiveness of principles of digital leadership.

8 Structure of the Questionnaire

At the beginning, the respondents were informed about the purpose of the survey and about anonymity, confidentiality and the central concerns and structure of the survey: "With these questions we would like to know how working conditions and work experience under the influence of home office in quarantine are. We would like to assure you that all your information is confidential, and that the evaluation will be anonymous. With your information you will help us to better understand this new situation and to be able to give better advice. Thank you very much for your support! The questionnaire has two parts. The first part deals with everything that characterizes the current work situation. The second part focuses on your personal attitudes."

The questionnaires covered different aspects: Questions about age, gender, accommodation were followed by questions related to the type and duration of work, current employment and current occupational field. This was followed by the Well-Known WHO questionnaire on Well-Being [19]. Resilience was surveyed via a questionnaire developed by Schumacher and colleagues [9]. The questionnaire by Singh and Kolekar served to measure commitment [12]. Leadership style was measured by the scale developed by Janssen and van Yperen [7]. In addition, the employees were asked to evaluate their living environment using items from the former DFG Knowledge Transfer Project on Social Change and Neighbourhood by Claus-Christian Wiegandt, University of Bonn.

9 Results part I: Demographic Part. Questions about the Living, Professional and Working Situation

To describe the sample, it should be noted that the average age of the respondents is 42.17 years (N=317). The proportion of women in this sample is 59.2% (N=320). The average age of women and men is comparable. The vast majority of the respondents live in a household with two to four persons (N=238 of 320). Just over 25% live in a household with at least one child under the age of 17. Slightly more than 10% have a family member over 60 years old. 75% have an apartment with more than 80 square meters (239 of 318). About 10% report that they are living in quarantine. This means that they are infected themselves or have been in direct contact with an infected person (N= 33 of 310). Regarding the occupational situation, we have information on the employment relationship and the occupational field.

There are no significant differences in the duration of employment in the individual occupational areas. Most have been employed for 10 or 13 years.

We can also assume that the majority of respondents work with virtual tools, feel well oriented in the group and in their tasks, and can actively participate in the work. And that they tend not to feel lost or suffer from distractions from third parties.

With a similar scaling, the respondents seem to feel rather well. Their resilience is quite pronounced. Attitudes toward the team are also described as constructive. The employees pay attention to the contribution they themselves can make to good teamwork. Even if one's own contribution to the success of teamwork is seen, the influence and importance of leadership is definitely perceived more concisely. The respondents are thoroughly satisfied or relatively satisfied with their neighbourhood. Opportunities for active and "healthy" leisure activities are probably of particular importance.

10 Results Part II: Personal Attitudes toward Home Office, Well-Being, and Resilience

As the data show, Well-Being and resilience are closely related to satisfaction with the neighbourhood and the opportunities for active leisure activities. In the following, the two key variables Well-Being and resilience will serve as reference variables for aspects of leadership or "absolute" and relative time in the home office. There are strong links between resilience and Well-Being on the one hand and team leadership scores on the other. The actual time spent in the home office, on the other hand, has no influence on Well-Being and resilience. As the data show, however, there is a very close correlation between general satisfaction with the work situation ("I am satisfied with the new home office job") and the Well-Being or resilience of the employees. The autonomy of the work in the home office quite obviously also makes a decisive contribution to this ("I see opportunities to work autonomously").

11 Statements with great Significance for Well-Being and Resilience

In the following section, this gives us the opportunity, as an interim conclusion, to name those statements that are of great importance for successfully coping with work and life under the conditions of the pandemic.

In our findings, a large number of variables are moderately or strongly related to each other. How can these variables be meaningfully ordered? We elaborated a factor analysis. The majority of the items load quite high on one main factor. This main factor stands for "performance," for successful work in the home office and under the special conditions of the pandemic. Satisfaction with the work situation, general Well-Being and resilience go hand in hand with the perception of autonomy, role security, task clarity and good communication in the team [16, 17].

As a result of the factor analysis relating working conditions to resilience and Well-Being (three components were extracted via principal component analysis), one main factor emerges that lists conditions for a successful home office: (1) I am happy with the new home office work (.597). (2) I see opportunities for me to work autonomously (.537). (3) My role in my group (team) is clear to me (.509). (4) I know my

tasks and duties (.548). (5) I know how I am involved in the operational processes (.609). (6) I have the freedom to contribute and implement my ideas (.567). (7) There are clear communication rules when dealing with my group members (.592). (8) I would like to keep this form of work (home office) even after the COVID-19 crisis (.616). (9) I miss the interpersonal contacts I had in my old work environment (.462). (10) I wish to return to the previous organization of my work in my ancestral workplace (.463)

12 Evaluation and Interpretation

In this era of the COVID-19 pandemic, one's Well-Being in the home office is dependent on individual, social and other environmental factors.

High level of Well-Being in the home office: More than 70% of respondents feel comfortable or very comfortable in the home office and would like to maintain this type of work organization after the COVID-19 crisis.

Leadership as a decisive factor: The working conditions at home (suitable working environment, undisturbed work) are less decisive for Well-Being than good leadership by the superior. Clear communication rules: Rules for communication and processes must be defined so that employees are optimally involved in the work processes and content.

Desire for autonomy: Great personal autonomy in the home office and simultaneous close integration into the team are particularly important for Well-Being when working at home. The employees would like to retain the autonomy they have gained even after the crisis. If it becomes clear that productivity can also be ensured in the home office, then any restriction of this newly gained freedom could lead to a loss of motivation.

Increasing demands due to digital leadership: Under these conditions, leadership means providing orientation and support from a physical distance and promoting the autonomy of the employee. This sets new standards and demands on management. It is becoming more demanding because employees have become more independent [10].

Home office as a normal form of work: It can be assumed that pressure will increase to allow home office as an equal or even normal form of work even after the COVID-19 crisis.

Lack of social exchange: At the same time, respondents miss regular social exchange with colleagues.

Quality Time: Presence at the workplace should be used as quality time. On-Site work meetings will remain important in the future for building sustainable and resilient working relationships. Physical meetings will become quality time for creative meetings and innovation workshops.

13 Outlook

The present results are quite encouraging. They show that many feel up to the challenge of converting their work to home office and that personal attitudes, social

relationships and good guidance from management are important protective factors for remaining fit for work even under the more difficult conditions of the pandemic. Furthermore, they also show where consulting needs can arise, and which offers could promote positive coping with the upcoming challenges. Politicians should be encouraged to foster home office working conditions. Employers should acknowledge the fact that home office infrastructures would enhance employees to strengthen their motivation, productivity and well-being.

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