Exposing the Downsides of Homeworking in Time to Design the New Normal

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Submission: January 19, 2022; **Published:** February 03, 2022

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Mini Review

Homeworking will be integral to the new normal once the pandemic subsides, so commentators are predicting. The use of mass homeworking to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 has accelerated a trend towards remote working. Evidence in support of this is that employees have found they like working at home and report their performance is unaffected or even better for it. The implication is that homeworking's contribution has gone beyond mitigating the spread of the virus and has helped to maintain the well-being of the working population. It has enabled a large group of workers to continue working and garner the benefits of working.

Social science has done a good job of demonstrating the value of work for well-being [1,2,3,4,5,6]. It emphasizes how the quality of people's jobs are crucial and suggests that if homeworkers can maintain high levels of discretion and support and avoid excessive demands then their well-being ought to be high. Homeworking during the pandemic was nonetheless distinctive. It was enforced and employees might not have been prepared for it. Employees might not have had adequate information and communication technology (ICT) equipment or have been readily able to accomplish their normal tasks. Moreover, it was in the context of a pandemic and subsequent recession. I and an inter-university team designed a study at the outset of the pandemic to assess the impact of these special factors on homeworking, relative to the standard job characteristics that dominated the study of job-related well-being.

Well-being when working at home

Our study of university staff, academics and non-academics, in England found that the downsides of homeworking, loneliness due to social isolation and an inability to detach from work, were by far the most important influences on well-being. The differences in the average levels of anxiety (or its converse contentment) and depression (or enthusiasm) between people over time were significantly related to these. Job security early in the pandemic also reduced well-being, while job autonomy, the extent to which

people had discretion in how they do their jobs, increased it. By September, these factors were insignificant, swamped by the deprivations of homeworking.

We assessed the constraints on homeworking arising from the enforced nature of the homeworking, such as the demands of caring responsibilities and home schooling, a lack of ICT equipment and support and an inability to get information. These did not have a consistent effect on well-being. Age and being male were associated with higher well-being in May, but this was not the case in September. There were no differences between academics and non-academics, the two universities in the study, parents and non-parents, and those with some or no history of working at home. We also assessed weekly fluctuations in well-being and again loneliness and the inability of detach from work were the dominant influences. In addition, the more work interfered with home life and vice versa, home life interfered with work, the more likely well-being reduced from one week to the next. The intensity of job demands, and total hours worked affected well-being through their effect on both forms of interference, rather than directly.

Covid-19 played a part too. We found an association between well-being and the change in the number of deaths in the UK from the previous day, but again only in May, but not in September. This implies that the fear in people about the spread of Covid increased anxiety and depression, but the effect was reduced when the first national lockdown restrictions were reduced. Finally, two factors conventionally associated with good quality working life, job autonomy and having supportive relationships with colleagues and line managers, had benevolent effects on weekly fluctuations in well-being.

Overall, the study, consistent with past homeworking research, highlights the downsides of homeworking or conversely that homeworkers are likely to be happy when they feel connected and can detach from work when away from it. The beneficial effects of work per se are of limited significance for well-being compared to

these homeworking factors. However, in the short term a wider range of factors associated with job quality and the work–home interface, were also significant. Factors associated with the unplanned and involuntary nature of the homeworking were not influential. Had these dominated we would have had to concede that the results are sui generis to the pandemic. As they did not, we need not be wary about drawing implications from our study for decisions about the future use of homeworking.

Designing the Future

The main implication for policy-making is that the focus in the design and management of homeworking should be on both the pros and cons of homeworking. Much public discussion of its inevitable increase has focused on its positive features for both employers and employees; its potential for win-win solutions. The focus has been on employees' satisfaction levels at the expense of their well-being; these need not coincide. In this study satisfaction with homeworking was far greater than well-being levels. For example, in September 75% reported being satisfied with working at home, but over 50% had high levels of anxiety in any one week.

The aim should be to minimize loneliness and maximize the ability of employees to detach from work. Ensuring people do not feel lonely or isolated demands measures to increase the integration of people into the organization and their sense of community and belonging. Recipes for addressing the problem of detaching from work typically include encouraging people to appreciate the importance for their health of recovery from work and the value of relaxation techniques. However, more significant is the management of workloads. This requires avoiding placing excessive demands on employees and giving them some control over them, regardless of the location of work. Designing homeworking can be used as an opportunity to take stock of people's tasks and flush out activities that contribute little to the organization's objectives or employees' job satisfaction.

The pandemic has provided us with an unplanned experiment in homeworking and research such as ours can be used in an evidence-based approach to remote working. It will have relevance to a range of organizations beyond the university sector, not least as the variety of jobs in universities is similar to equivalent professional jobs in the economy. It is because of such differences within organizations that the longstanding advocacy of high-involvement management by social scientists studying work seems so highly appropriate [7,8], since a one-size-fits-all approach to designing the future role of homeworking with no staff involvement is unlikely to produce optimal outcomes.

The research, based on a four-weekly diary study, was administered over two periods in May and September 2020. The research team led by Stephen Wood (University of Leicester) included Ilke Inceoglu (University of Exeter), Elizabeth Hurren (University of Leicester), Karen Niven (University of Manchester), George Michaelides and Kevin Daniels (both University of East Anglia).

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