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The Psychology of Working from Home and Returning to the Workplace: Reflection of Interview

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic saw a large-scale change in how work was performed with a rapid move to working from home where possible to support public health restrictions. This short article is based on the first author's TV interview in 'The Agenda' on the CGTN Europe (2021), discussing the psychological impacts of this transition, with suggestions on how to mitigate the negative aspects of working from home, and considerations on supporting workers on returning to the workplace. Notable psychological impacts of working from home during COVID-19 pandemic included reduced feelings of connection with increased sense of isolation, raised levels of stress, and the phenomenon of 'Zoom fatigue'. Building trust between organisations and employees has become even more crucial during COVID-19. As reported in some sectors, innovative practices need to be implemented to build trust, reframing this crisis into an opportunity.

Keywords: Work from home; TV interview; Work mental health; Isolation; Stress; Connection; Zoom fatigue; Trust

Introduction

Working from home during COVID-19 brought health challenges among employees (Royal Society for Public Health [RSPH], 2021). These problems included reduced physical activity and exercise levels (46%), musculoskeletal issues (39%), disturbed sleep patterns (37%) and an inability to switch off from work (56%). The largest impacts were around feelings of connection, with a sense of reduced connection from colleagues (67%) and being isolated to the workplace community (59%), with isolation effecting women more than men (RSPH, 2021). Increases to stress levels, and reduced happiness and quality of life levels as a result of extended working from home were reported (Oakman et al., 2021). These were negatively correlated with the levels of a) support from the employer and from colleagues, b) the employee's social connections, and c) work-life balance (Oakman et al., 2021). Despite the salient mental health difficulties, only around a third of employees reported being offered any organisational support for their mental wellbeing (RSPH, 2021). These findings indicate that there were certainly negative impacts of COVID-19 on work mental health, yet organisations in general struggled to offer appropriate support to their employees.

Though organisational support was not offered sufficiently in many cases, each employee can support themselves at home. To assist with working from home, the employee can be supported to implement changes where possible in their physical space, establish a routine, which includes time for breaks, setting boundaries around work and family life, and using technology to foster connection (National Health Service [NHS], 2021). Employers should also encourage leaders and managers to lead by example with healthy work-life balances, supporting their staff with regular contact and encouraging the use of tools such as action plans to formalise how employees can maintain good mental wellbeing (Mind, 2021). As boundaries in location and time have become looser, mental boundaries need to be strongly established with support and understanding of managers.

Consideration for Zoom Fatigue

A specific aspect of working from home during the pandemic has been the increased use of and reliance upon technology to support employees, notably the increased use of video conferencing platforms. The term 'Zoom fatigue' has been used to describe the physical and mental tiredness that often occurs following long periods on video calls (Sklar, 2020). There are aspects of video calls that impact individual's attention, such as background noises, differences in sound quality and poor articulation, which coupled with a reduced ability to interpret body language and gestures alongside what is said, introduces barriers to natural interaction and communication. Videocall meetings should be concise, and if a long meeting is required, short breaks should be embedded to prevent staff suffering from Zoom fatigue, allowing their concentration to last, which can lead to better meeting outcomes.

The Importance of the Unimportant

The pandemic also made us aware of the importance of workplace behaviours that were considered rather unimportant. One good example is informal chit-chat, which may be missing in working from home. Office chit-chat, which makes up around a third of office discourse (Methot et al., 2020), can foster positive employee working relationships (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2020): employees in general create better work relationships through chit-chat. While having a positive impact to wellbeing and organisational behaviours, however we need to be aware that chit-chat was also found to be distracting to cognitively demanding tasks (Methot et al., 2020). How to harvest the benefits of chit-chat such as better relationships, while minimising the damage on concentration may be an important area of research and practice for many organisations.

New Practices to Be Maintained Post-COVID

Despite the negative aspects of working from home, a large majority of workers would like it to continue to varying levels and not return full-time to their workplace as COVID-19 restrictions are reduced (RSPH, 2021). To support this there are steps an employee can take, such as creating a dedicated work-space area to help with defining a psychological boundary between work and home (Mind, 2021) and communicating with their employer around wellbeing needs while ensuring time for self-care activities are included in their working day (Jefferson Center, 2021). Especially self-care has been drawing attention during the pandemic, enabling workforce to retain high productivity for a long time (Kotera, 2021). Likewise, wellbeing meetings, where staff exclusively discuss their wellbeing, were reported effective to cope with mental health challenges during COVID-19 pandemic (Kotera et al., 2020). These new workplace practices developed during the pandemic can be still utilised in the post-COVID era.

Suggestions for Employers

Employers can support the use of different times of the day for video calls, as certain times of the day have been found to be less tiring and foster higher levels of employee connectedness to support reducing the 'Zoom fatigue' phenomena (Bennett et al., 2021). To support connectedness, employers can provide regular opportunities for staff check-ins (Kotera et al., 2020), model healthy working behaviours, and offer flexibility around work (Greenwood & Krol, 2020). Bringing a focus on fostering trust, social relationships and instilling purpose within their employees, to provide feelings of inclusion and a sense of psychological safety, can provide real benefits to workers (Kotera et al., 2020). Employees who feel that their employer has been supportive and successful in responding to working changes are six times more likely to report healthy levels of wellbeing (Emmett et al., 2020). To support employees working from home may require different approaches than

more traditional office-based initiatives to support employee wellbeing, such as virtual coffee breaks, gratitude challenges and virtual workouts (Kohhl, 2020).

Careful considerations are also required to support employees as they return to the workplace. Fears around increased exposure and risk of COVID-19 have been reported by half of employees (Price Waterhouse Cooper [PWC], 2021) while a return to a familiar work environment which may have some differences due to COVID-19 guidelines, can lead to a sense of discomfort (Hogg & Vaughan, 2018). Such different familiarity may be confusing psychologically, in a similar way that driving on the opposite of the road in a different country to the usual side is, requiring more attention and concentration. Employers should be aware of the anxiety and changing needs of their employees, some of whom will wish to continue with levels of remote working, while others will be keener to be back in the workplace, with differences noted across age groups (PWC, 2021).

Taken together, connection and trust are deemed to be essential to successfully support employees both working from home and in the return to the workplace. Employers need to consider and support their employees with the key negative aspects of increased fatigue, detrimental impacts to mental wellbeing, and the reduced delineation of work and home commitments (Kotera & Vione, 2020) to help with both enforced and optional working from home practices. Organisations can take this crisis as an opportunity to build trust from employees and vice versa (Kotera, 2021). Innovative practices need to be developed and implemented in order to reframe this crisis into opportunity.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Availability of data and materials

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Authors' contributions

All authors significantly contributed to the preparation of this manuscript.

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