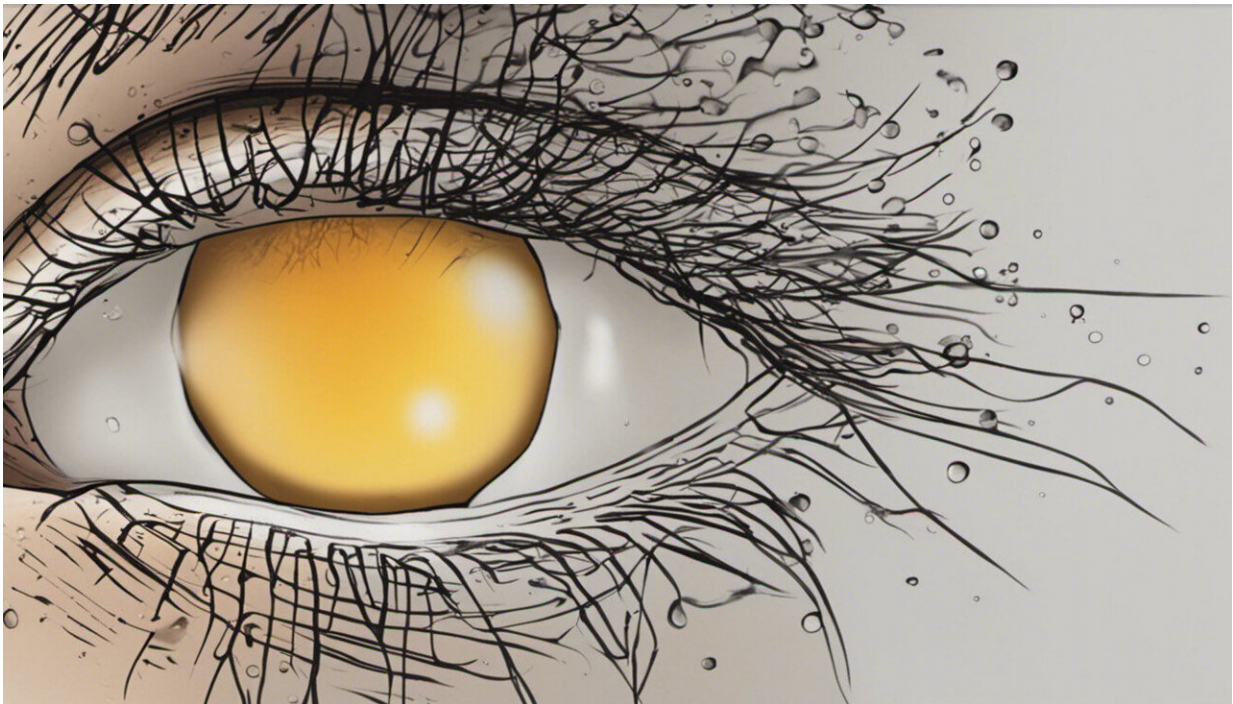


# Working from home does not make us less productive

March 25 2020, by Christina Benjaminsen

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Current research into teamwork is showing that we do not become less productive working from home, provided that we work intelligently and are equipped with tools that enable us to work together with our colleagues. In this article, researchers will be advising us not only on what works, but also on what isn't so smart.

For some time now, research scientist Nils Brede Moe at SINTEF, Norway, has been studying teams that work for companies such as Spotify, Ericsson and DNV GL, as well as several banks and consultancy companies.

He believes that it is more than possible to maintain productivity even if we now have to work from home—in so-called virtual teams.

"It's not the case that virtual teams mean lower productivity, although it can be a bit more challenging for such teams to work efficiently," says Moe. "Our research has revealed some [virtual teams](#) that are much more effective than co-localized teams," he says.

Many people experience that they get more done when they work at home, where there are fewer interruptions. This is something that the researchers have observed themselves.

"On average, a developer needs 20 minutes in order to return to a task following an interruption," says Moe.

## **Proper communication is key**

Working from home makes it easier to assess what tasks have to be prioritized because we avoid having to deal with a continuous stream of input and extraneous tasks. However, the benefits of working from home may be getting a shot across the bows. It is too easy to cut out meetings that in fact serve a useful purpose. Having so much communication carried on in writing makes it easy for people to misunderstand each other.

"We've found that it's incredibly important to use video conferencing and talk to each other, rather than simply sharing thoughts and needs in writing," says Moe. "Video meetings should be mandatory for teams that

don't work in the same location," he says.

He also points out the importance of having good equipment in place—quality headsets, computers and, not least, a reliable internet connection. Another bit of advice he offers is that we shouldn't work sitting on the sofa. Not surprisingly, research shows that this does our backs no favours, so the advice is to get up, stand and walk around.

"A good idea is to have a one-on-one conversation on the phone while taking a little walk," says Moe.

Here are the researchers' five tips for online video meetings:

- Do not use meetings simply for status updates. This information can be shared in other ways. It is managers that get the most out of status meetings, but they are of little value to ordinary [team members](#)
- Make sure that everyone gets an opportunity to speak (apply a check-in exercise during longer meetings)
- Make sure that the position of meeting chair is rotated so that more than one person gets to take responsibility
- Use [video conferencing](#) at all times
- Don't have too many meeting participants. Meeting of more than 11 or 12 participants have decreased value for the participants. If there are many people attending, a tip is to raise your hand if you have something to say.

## **A virtual boss has a demanding job**

Another research finding is that managers commonly feel the need to exercise greater levels of micromanagement when their team members are working remotely.

"This is not a good idea," says Moe, and goes on to explain. "Meetings that are held simply for reporting are often ineffective. If a manager trusts that his team members are working as normal, there is no reason to assume that there is a greater need for status reports when team members are working from home," he says.

However, it isn't so easy being the manager of a virtual team. For this reason, the researchers recommend that managers spend their time selecting high-quality and effective joint technology interfaces that ensure that everyone in the team is connected via the same systems. It is also important for managers to spend more time in a support and training role rather than demanding reports from their teams.

"A manager's main focus must be on removing obstructions and helping to identify effective solutions, both together with the team as a whole, and with individual team members," says Moe.

Take one for the team—but not in your pajamas!

At the venture builder and consultancy company Iterate, which is taking part in a research project with SINTEF, people are well aware of their new work situation. But the mood in the company is good.

"Now we're working from home because we have to, and we feel good about it because we're all in this together," says CEO Rune Larsen. "The challenge will be what happens when we've been working like this for six months. What will happen when our solidarity begins to fall apart? At the moment our continuous focus is on reflection and training so that we can adapt to the new situation," he says.

The HR Department at Iterate had a series of one-to-one meetings earlier today in order to find out how individual employees were feeling. Larsen doesn't believe in sending out a raft of e-mails. Instead, he

emphasises that he works in a sector that is skilled in working digitally.

"Companies that are not in the habit of working digitally in a distributed setting are facing bigger challenges than us," he says.

Larsen feels that many managers are exploring ways of working to achieve good productivity. There is no quick fix to managing the situation we find ourselves in today.

"In times like these it's good to have research-based advice to lean back on. It's also important to know that virtual work demands a high level of mutual trust, and this is what we have here," says Larsen.

Even though he has complete trust in his colleagues, Larsen also has some guidelines that are not IT-based. Working from home in your pajamas is not acceptable.

"Suddenly you're called in to a meeting and have forgotten that you're sitting in your underpants," he smiles. "That will undermine your integrity in no time, so we also have a dress code, even for working from home," he says.

## **Tell people when you log on and off**

"When a team is unable to work at the same location, there is a danger that mutual trust can be undermined," says Nils Brede Moe. "This in turn can lead to reduced information exchange and feedback, unbalanced workload, increased monitoring, and may create what we call a negative "spiral of mistrust," he says.

In particular, the researchers advise that team members must inform their colleagues when they log on and off.

"If you're sitting and waiting for someone to answer, but you don't know if they are logged on or not, it isn't difficult to start wondering what that person might be up to," says Moe. "If you give everyone an idea of how you are planning your day, such as "I'm just going out in the middle of the day to do some shopping for my parents," such things can easily help to allay mistrust," he says.

His findings indicate that it is also smart to reserve some time to reflect on how distributed working is functioning. And this also applies to the management team.

"The only thing that is certain when we suddenly have to change the way we work is that we have to keep improving in order to be efficient," says Moe. "Those who become the most skilled at this will end up being the most effective teams," he says.

## **Not everyone can be working at the same time**

According to Moe, social challenges can also creep in to undermine effective working from home. While some people may feel lonely and be looking to have a chat early in the morning, others may feel that this is stressful. Especially if we are sharing our workplace at home with another adult and have children in the house.

"One way of solving this is to come to an agreement that two team members should always be working at the same time," says Moe. In this way, those who have children can work after the children have gone to bed, without feeling that they are 'alone' at work," he says. This will be an important factor if the situation we are experiencing today continues for a prolonged period.

It is also important to reserve time to share with your colleagues what has happened to you during the day, what you are doing in addition to



your job, and what it feels like to sit at home alone all day.

Moe also encourages people to use communication tools such as Slack, Teams or Yammer that enable team members to ask questions and share information about what their colleagues are doing.

## **Don't forget new employees**

A challenge that researchers have been well aware of in recent weeks is the so-called "onboarding" of new employees. However, if a new colleague is joining the team it is important not to postpone this just because he or she is unable to meet their colleagues face to face.

"In fact we encourage welcoming new employees into well-functioning teams. Just make sure that they have a mentor who can supervise them," says Moe. "It is also a good idea to set up virtual get-togethers where new employees can get to know each other at an early stage and establish their own networks," he says.

## **A more effective working day**

Christine Wald-Jacobsen is Head of the User Experience Department at the bank Sbanken, and is responsible for two teams of developers and a so-called UX-team. (UX-teams work with user experience. Ed. note)

"Last Thursday everyone was issued with clear guidelines about how to work from home," says Wald-Jacobsen. "We intend to have a so-called "Slack-up" meeting at nine in the morning, and another at three in the afternoon to reflect on how we feel about the day," she says and goes on to explain. "Slack-up is brief morning meeting facilitated using the Slack remote communications tool, designed for written information," she says.

"At the morning meetings everyone reports on what we intend to do during the day and whether or not we need any assistance. We also notify of any obstructions in the way of getting our jobs done efficiently. For example there might be some aspect of technology or something else that I might have to sort out," says Wald-Jacobsen.

She says that they are modifying their work processes all the time. Some teams are now having daily video meetings in the morning, while the afternoon reflective meeting has now become a weekly event.

A typical challenge working this way is that communication is now mainly in writing," says Wald-Jacobsen.

"Discussions can get heated because we don't always fully understand each other. It can often be difficult to give constructive feedback, and sometimes people experience feedback as criticism. For example, I have had to ask team members to go over their discussion on video in order to clear up any misunderstandings and to exercise calm in the Slack exchanges," she says.

Nevertheless, the results from this way of working have been very satisfactory.

"Many teams feel that they experience a more effective working day. We deliver a lot more and a lot quicker," says Wald-Jacobsen.

**More information:** Nils Brede Moe et al. Understanding a lack of trust in Global Software Teams: a multiple-case study, *Software Process: Improvement and Practice* (2008). [DOI: 10.1002/spip.378](https://doi.org/10.1002/spip.378)

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