

The hidden threat of the home office

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

It may seem a bit contradictory at first glance, but increased flexibility in our workday may have given us less flexibility in the work itself.

Benefits highlighted

The daily press and the nascent research literature on COVID-19 speculate on what more long-term consequences the corona situation

may bring. These could change the way we think about the methods we employ in our working life, especially with regard to [home](#) offices and digital collaboration.

Several large companies, both internationally and nationally, have announced that they plan to continue the option of working from home for anyone who wishes after the pandemic. The arguments for this include:

- Greater [flexibility](#) in work-at-home situations seems to significantly reduce stress for many people.
- Time that was previously used for commuting or traveling between meetings can now be used for other things, which in turn may lead to higher productivity.
- One argument we hear is that a home office situation provides fewer distractions and can make us more efficient.
- Employers, for their part, see an opportunity for reduced travel costs and less need for office space.

Working from home is also happening in academia, and several universities have said that the home office option will continue.

However, it has been pointed out that people cannot work exclusively in physically separate environments. We need opportunities to meet with colleagues and experience the social cohesion and replenishment this provides.

Practices are changing

The consequences of this kind of distributed work situation for workplace practices constitute an important aspect that has received less attention so far. How does working from home affect collaborative efforts and the quality of work, both in smaller teams and in larger work

communities?

In the article "Learning of academics in the time of corona" we describe how one academic's practices change, quite significantly, under the conditions we have worked under since March.

One of our conclusions is that we cannot expect work practices to remain the same when we move them. As conditions change around practices, so do the practices themselves.

Not everyone becomes more efficient

In two parallel projects, we collected data from students and staff. We focused on their work and study situations during the corona pandemic.

The data includes 1600 students and 16 lecturers in the Experts in Teamwork course. Students provided feedback through questionnaires, written exam reports and in-depth interviews. The lecturers represented different faculties and departments and were also interviewed in depth.

The preliminary findings show great variations in the consequences that the new work and study situations have had for individuals and for groups.

- Some groups became more effective, others less.
- Some people became more efficient in their new work setting, for example because they had fewer distractions and work became easier to prioritize. But others became less efficient, for example due to lower motivation and lack of daily structure.
- Some individuals thought it was beneficial to have more peace and flexibility in their daily life, while others felt lonelier and less motivated due to the lack of social and physical contact with fellow students and colleagues.

A number of employees also had a much busier schedule due to home schooling their children. This factor is less relevant in a situation without a pandemic.

In our study, we also found many of the positive elements of distributed teamwork and working digitally that are mentioned at the beginning of our article.

The paradox: less freedom at work

However, one finding stands out as a paradox.

While working from a home office, or as a distributed team, provides significantly increased flexibility for the work situation, it could provide less flexibility in carrying out the work, both in terms of meeting colleagues, collaborating and teaching.

"While working from a home office provides significantly increased flexibility for the work situation, it could provide less flexibility for carrying out the work."

This flexibility issue is largely related to a much greater need for structure, planning and clear communication in the digital modality. Meetings and teaching have to be planned in detail, and the digital form makes it difficult to deviate from the plan.

We lose the ability to pick up cues from being in a physical space together, and several aspects of digital working make it difficult to achieve good communication flow, as well as to make spontaneous and critical changes.

Higher threshold makes teamwork less flexible

We also find that the threshold is significantly higher in the digital realm for making small and necessary clarifications with collaborators. The flexibility to complete a task is reduced and can affect the quality of what we do.

For example, we risk continuing alone with a task for too long, assuming rather than clarifying along the way. We don't want to disturb other team members, and we don't know what they are doing right now. We found this to be the case both for students who tended to work synchronously, and for employees who mostly worked asynchronously.

Home offices may offer benefits for many, but it is hardly advantageous for everyone. More people will probably choose to work from home more, even when the pandemic has subsided. But having the opportunity to convene physically is still important, not only for each of us to meet our social needs, but also for the employer and for the quality of the work.

More information: Learning of academics in the time of the coronavirus pandemic: jphe.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Sj%C3%B8lie-Francisco-Mahon-Kaukko-Kemmis-.pdf

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