

Major political transformations can have an influence on employee wellbeing

March 3 2022



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Significant societal and political transitions, such as Brexit, can impact employee wellbeing—although not necessarily in the ways that might be expected. Researchers based at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz

(JGU), the Leibniz Institute for Resilience Research (LIR), Loughborough University, and Medical School Hamburg asked academics who worked at a British research institution how they felt about the UK's exit from the EU. The results showed that those surveyed experienced Brexit as threatening rather than as positively challenging.

"This, in its turn, impacted on how they perceived their job security and the quality of social relationships with colleagues," said Miriam Schilbach, lead author of the corresponding article recently published in the *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*. Schilbach is a doctoral candidate in the Work, Organizational, and Business Psychology department, headed by Professor Thomas Rigotti, at the JGU Institute of Psychology and a research associate at LIR.

Job security and quality of co-worker relationships are prominent determinants of employee wellbeing

There has been very little investigation of relationships between the fallout of important political events and personal wellbeing in the workplace context to date. The research team thus saw in Brexit an opportunity to examine a stressful situation that is having an influence, in one way or another, on everyone living in the UK. The team decided to look at the group of academics at British universities and asked them to complete questionnaires at three separate points in time—in September and December 2019 and in February 2020, in each case more than three years after the Brexit referendum but still prior to the final exit from the EU. A total of 115 respondents completed all three questionnaires. Their average age was about 44 years, some 37 percent of the respondents were women. They were required to respond to statements such as "I felt burned out from my job" and "Throughout the past three months, even at home I often thought of my problems at work."

"Our hypothesis when we started our survey was that a feeling of [job security](#) and also a sense of belonging, in other words, the quality of relationships with work colleagues, are fundamental human needs and are thus closely associated with the level of personal wellbeing," stated Miriam Schilbach, describing the starting point of the study. In view of a generally growing sense of insecurity due to factors such as economic instability and increasing globalization, it has become vital to better understand the mechanisms behind the effects that far-reaching events can have on individuals' wellbeing. It is to be expected that employees will in future be increasingly subject to these influences.

The group of authors was also interested in the aspect of whether the individual assessment of such an event corresponds to the social norm or rather deviates from it, i.e., whether an individual is in line with his or her peers' experiences of the event as a threat or as a challenge. "Asking this question, we questioned a prevalent and widely accepted assumption, namely that if a situation is regarded as a challenge, it generally results in [positive outcomes](#)—while if it is seen as a threat, the results are generally negative," Schilbach added. This consideration is not only relevant in the context of Brexit. Although the survey and analysis were based on Brexit, the researchers assume that other controversial events, such as questionable mergers of companies, have similar effects.

Collective experience of stress situations can help forge bonds

The study indicates that the participating group of academics predominantly appraised Brexit as threatening, less as challenging in a positive sense. "The perception in terms of a threat unsurprisingly goes hand in hand with a sense of greater job insecurity but is also accompanied by a better relationship with work colleagues," Schilbach

pointed out. She postulates that a group of colleagues exposed to the same stress situation which they conjointly appraise as threatening forges bonds over the shared problem bringing them closer together. For the smaller group of those who see potential in Brexit, i.e., appraise it as challenging, effects were reversed: their relationship with colleagues deteriorates, with adverse consequences for their wellbeing.

There have been very few prior investigations attempting to determine how political events shape employee [wellbeing](#). "What we have been able to demonstrate here is that, with regard to psychological health, it is important whether an individual shares the same view or not of a communal event as their peers," concluded Schilbach.

More information: Miriam Schilbach et al, Work in times of Brexit: explanatory mechanisms linking macropolitical events with employee well-being, *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/1359432X.2021.2019709](https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2021.2019709)

Provided by Universitaet Mainz

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