

A simple way to improve employee well-being without denting productivity

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During the coronavirus lockdowns, 50% of European workers were estimated to engage in some form of smart working—smart working at its worst, though, because it was unplanned and in many cases full-time, with a strong potential to create a sense of social isolation. The flip side of the coin is that this experience revealed that smart working is feasible

both for routine and for non-routine tasks, and agreements that allow employees to work from home one or more days per week are now common in the Western world. What is still lacking is a scientifically rigorous assessment of its effectiveness.

In a study published in *Management Science*, using a [randomized controlled trial](#) (the gold standard of scientific research), Paola Profeta and Marta Angelici (Bocconi Department of Social and Political Sciences) concluded that the flexibility of smart-working improves the well-being and [work-life balance](#) of workers, without reducing their productivity.

"An interesting side-effect is that men, when they can work from home, increase the time devoted to [household chores](#). The [gender balance](#) does not shift much, since women still work longer hours at those chores, but women report balancing their work and [personal lives](#) better," said Professor Profeta, a scholar specializing in gender economics and Director of the AXA Research Lab on Gender Equality at Bocconi University.

The study was conducted immediately before the COVID-19 lockdowns, i.e., in conditions reasonably comparable to the present day.

The authors divided 310 white-collar and blue-collar employees of an Italian multi-utility in two groups: 65% of them were granted smart-working one day a week (the standard use in pre-COVID times) for nine months, while 35% went on working as usual. Productivity, well-being and work-life balance of the two groups were monitored throughout the experiment using data provided by the company and questionnaires completed by the workers of both groups and their supervisors.

The productivity of smart-workers, measured by various indicators, slightly grew, but the difference became statistically significant only

from month 7 (out of 9) on.

- Smart-workers used one less day of leave per month compared to workers who had not been granted flexibility. It means that 1 of the 4 smart-working days per month likely would have otherwise been absence (e.g., because of a sick child, dentist appointment, or doctor's checkup).
- Compliance with deadlines was 40% higher for smart-workers.
- Smart-workers were 33% more satisfied with their life in general and 40% more satisfied with their free time.
- Smart-workers recorded better capacity to stay focused, less loss of sleep due to concerns, and less feelings of stress.
- Smart-workers reported that having some freedom to set their start and finish times and arrange breaks during the working day is associated with more time dedicated to household and care activities, both for men and women.

"Removing constraints on the place and time of work appears to be a promising and more efficient organization of working," the authors concluded, "without detectable negative effects on gender gaps. Smart-working also appears to be a promising way to promote work-life balance, which is becoming a significant issue in modern societies. This result was not obvious to foresee, since previous analyses have warned about the risk of overworking related to flexible work arrangements, with all the possible negative consequences involving stress, well-being, health, etc."

More information: Marta Angelici et al, Smart Working: Work Flexibility Without Constraints, *Management Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1287/mnsc.2023.4767](https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2023.4767)

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