

Lessons from the pandemic: The trouble with working from home

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Remember when COVID-19 hit, and suddenly everyone was working from home? Well, a team of researchers in Montreal and Paris decided to dig deeper into how this shift affected office workers during the

pandemic.

Led by Université de Montréal industrial-relations professor Marie-Colombe Afota, they followed 716 employees of a large global financial company in the U.S. and Europe over six months, from September 2020 to March 2021.

Published in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, the [study](#) surveyed people who worked at home at least three days a week and for whom such "high-intensity telecommuting" was something new.

Afota and her colleagues were particularly interested in examining the impact of intensive remote work on workers' sense of belonging over time, as well as how fluctuations in feelings of connectedness with colleagues influenced workers' psychological well-being and their perception of the meaningfulness of their work.

They found that, sure enough, as time went on, the [office workers](#) started feeling less connected to each other. The feeling of being part of a team and being able to shoot the breeze by the water cooler—all that started to fade as people spent more time away from their office.

"One important finding of the research is that while technologies and telecommuters' devices can facilitate seamless virtual interactions, physical encounters remain essential for cultivating a robust sense of belonging, a fundamental inner human need crucial for overall well-being," said Afota, describing what the participants reported.

"And we found that declines in belongingness over time correlate with diminishing perceptions of meaningfulness, highlighting the pivotal role of relationships in shaping people's perceptions of the worth and value of their job," said Afota, who did the study with colleagues in psychology

and management at Université du Québec à Montreal and the ESCP Business School, in France.

Burnout also an issue

All this disconnect and questioning led to another big issue for those in the study: [emotional exhaustion](#), a core component of burnout.

"Our findings suggest that as people felt more and more disconnected, they also started feeling more tired and worn out," said Afota. "The emotional toll of being away from the office and missing out on those personal connections increasingly weighed on them."

Perhaps not surprisingly, employees who especially enjoyed the company of their coworkers before the pandemic struggled more with working remotely.

"It's like they were trying so hard to keep those connections alive virtually, but it just wasn't the same," Afota said. "So they ended up feeling even more isolated and disconnected."

What can companies learn from all this? First they need to make sure their employees still feel like they're part of a team, even when they're working from their kitchen table, the researchers argue.

That might mean setting up virtual hangouts or finding ways for people to get together in person once in a while.

And companies also need to keep an eye on how their staff are doing emotionally. If people are feeling disconnected and worn out, it's going to impact their work in the long run, the researchers point out.

"Overall, our research suggests that workers don't acclimate to intensive

remote work," said Afota." Therefore, organizations should likely consider adopting hybrid remote work approaches and prioritize preserving workers' sense of belonging."

More information: Marie-Colombe Afota et al, Changes in belongingness, meaningful work, and emotional exhaustion among new high-intensity telecommuters: Insights from pandemic remote workers, *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/joop.12494](https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12494)

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