

State of the Art Review



Remote working and employee wellbeing

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This review considers empirical evidence on the connection between remote working and employee wellbeing. Remote working has increased substantially in recent years, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but evidence related to its effects and to the implications for managing these employees is patchy. The review identifies three main areas of focus for prior research: the wellbeing impacts of remote working, the antecedents of wellbeing impacts and the ways in which employers address wellbeing in remote workers.

Studies exploring the impacts of remote working have delivered inconsistent evidence, with some finding positive effects and others identifying negative outcomes. Research focused on the antecedents of wellbeing impacts have considered a number of individual and organisation-level factors that seem to be linked to wellbeing outcomes in those working remotely, and which may have implications for practice, highlighting several areas which merit further scholarly attention. An emergent strand of research has begun to contemplate the ways in which wellbeing in remote workers might be addressed, focusing mainly on working arrangements and culture, but evidence in this area is sparse. As remote and hybrid working practices become more embedded, understanding their wellbeing implications will be vital to enable positive individual and firm-level outcomes. With this in mind, several key priorities for future research are highlighted, including longitudinal studies to identify causal links between remote working and wellbeing, research focused on the long-term effects of remote working on wellbeing and studies addressing individual and firm-level initiatives for managing wellbeing when working remotely.

Background

The word 'telecommuting' was coined in the 1970s to denote the use of technology to remove the need for commuting, and later, 'telework' came to mean any working away from the office. 'Virtual work' and 'remote work' have subsequently replaced the previous terminology to refer to work away from the main place of employment, mainly at home, whereas 'hybrid working' refers to employees working partially at home and partially at their place of work (McPhail et al, 2024). In the UK, even pre-COVID 19, remote working was on the rise, with the UK Labour Force Survey finding that 17% of UK office workers

worked remotely for at least one day a week by 2017, up from just over 13% in 1997 (Charalampous et al, 2019). At the height of the pandemic, during 2020 and 2021, up to 39% of workers reported exclusive remote working with a further 10% hybrid working (Crafts et al, 2021). By late 2024, this had declined but still 28% of working adults in the UK were engaging in hybrid working of some kind (ONS, 2024).

While remote and hybrid working have implications for the ways in which employees experience work, the effects on individual wellbeing are under-explored (Dale et al, 2024; Giménez-Nadal et al, 2019) and evidence linked to wellbeing impacts is inconsistent. This may in part be because of the changes driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, when working from home was often mandated in lockdown conditions (Franken et al, 2021) which themselves may have provoked anxiety and affected wellbeing (Schmitt, 2024; Crawford, 2022). A distinction is therefore often drawn between remote working studies carried out pre-COVID-19, usually on jobs that were intended to be done remotely (George et al, 2022) and those which address remote working in the context of the pandemic.

This review assesses three strands of literature focused on wellbeing in the context of remote and hybrid working. The first considers the impacts that remote working may have on employees and offers evidence of both positive and negative effects. The second identifies a range of individual and firm-level antecedents to wellbeing impacts and suggests that a range of working practices and individual characteristics may shape the wellbeing experiences of remote workers. The third (emergent) body of work evaluates initiatives to support wellbeing in remote workers. The final section of the review identifies gaps in evidence and sets out an agenda for future research in this area.

Overview of evidence

Wellbeing impacts of remote working

Prior studies have been divided over the impacts of remote working (Schmitt, 2024), with some finding overwhelmingly positive wellbeing outcomes usually linked to a perceived better life-work balance, and others pointing to an inclination to over-working and a blurring of home and work boundaries making it difficult to 'switch off' from work (Charalampous et al, 2019). Starting with negative effects, social isolation has been found to be a risk in remote workers, with low social support linked to reduced job satisfaction and increased levels of stress (McPhail et al, 2024; Aleem et al, 2023) and increased sedentary behaviour (Dale et al, 2024). Lack of social support in remote workers has also been associated with fatigue and burnout (Ferrara et al, 2022). Studies also point to challenges with work-life balance in those working remotely. These include strain-based or work-life conflict, where work-related strain prevents full participation in family life (Lapierre et al, 2016), and life-to-work conflict, where home distractions impact on work (Nordenmark and Vinberg, 2024). These conflicts can drive fatigue and anxiety (Palumbo, 2020). Blurred boundaries in remote workers can mean that workers struggle to switch off from work when at home, leading to overworking (Kniffin et al, 2021) and increased presenteeism (Shimura et al, 2021). This can in turn provoke increased anxiety and depression (Olafsen et al, 2024). These impacts are often amplified in those with caring responsibilities (Schmitt, 2024).

Conversely, remote working can have positive emotional effects and has been associated with reduced emotional exhaustion and increased organisational commitment. For example, limited remote working is associated with increased job satisfaction, and there appears to be a connection to autonomy and perceived greater work-life balance (Kniffin et al, 2021) as well as positive short term psychological impacts derived from increased

flexibility and a better work-life balance (Crawford, 2022). Positive effects of remote working including lower stress, negative emotions, strain, depression and alcohol abuse and greater affective happiness and wellbeing, are potentially linked to remote workers' ability to manage the boundaries between work and home life (Ferrara et al, 2022). Emergent research contemplating the wellbeing impacts of remote working on those living with disabilities or chronic conditions suggests that outcomes are positive (Lake and Maidment, 2022) but more evidence is needed in this area. Key studies focusing on the wellbeing impacts of remote working are summarised in Table 1.

Antecedents of wellbeing impacts in remote workers

As noted in the introduction, the COVID-19 pandemic was a driver of mandatory remote working. Prior research suggests that while voluntary remote working is associated with reduced stress and higher job satisfaction, involuntary remote working, where employees have less control over their remote working arrangements, is associated with worse mental health outcomes including reported exhaustion, stress and emotional distress (Kaduk et al, 2019). There is no doubt that the pandemic-led acceleration in remote working was enabled by technological connectivity. However, alternative ways of achieving face to face communication such as video conferencing, while useful, can be a poor substitute for personal interaction and those working at home can find them intrusive (Kniffin et al, 2021). An increased requirement to employ remote working technologies has been linked to increased levels of stress (Schmitt, 2024; Molino et al, 2020; Singh et al, 2022) but having digital competencies appears to mitigate this (Fischer et al, 2023). Employees with previous experience of remote working are also more likely to be able to cope with negative effects such as isolation, perhaps because these individuals have already been able to set up social interaction opportunities (Donati et al, 2021). Several studies find reduced stress in those working remotely on a part time basis, suggesting that some time at the place of work is also important (Oakman et al, 2020).

Studies point to individual types that are associated with better experiences of remote working, including individuals who practise mindfulness, those with good social connections and those who are willing to ask for support if they need it (Aleem et al, 2023). Conscientious and introverted people are more suited to managing work and life domains to maintain a work life balance while working from home (Oseghale et al, 2024). Remote working does not suit all types of workers and can be difficult for those that appreciate close supervision (Kniffin et al, 2021). Gendered effects have also been observed, with women less likely to experience positive health benefits of remote working (Oakman et al, 2020; Bezak et al, 2022; Giménez-Nadal et al, 2020). Table 2 offers an overview of studies focusing on the antecedents of wellbeing impacts in remote workers.

Supporting wellbeing in remote workers

The emergent literature on supporting wellbeing in remote workers has tended to focus on two areas: working arrangements/practices and working environment/culture. Employees may find remote working arrangements unstructured and ambiguous which may lead to friction, and a feeling that they are not in control. Structured, consistent and clear arrangements are more likely to make employees feel that they are in control, reducing feelings of isolation and disconnection (Chafi et al, 2022). Where employers cede control of working practices to remote workers, giving them greater autonomy, wellbeing effects are evident, with lower reported stress and improved performance (George et al, 2022; Vander Elst et al, 2017). Information timeliness and accuracy also impacts positively on remote worker wellbeing. Information accuracy is a resource for alleviating work family conflict and information timeliness is a resource for addressing loneliness (Chuang et al, 2024). Organisations can support remote employee wellbeing by providing the right technological tools to allow remote workers to be effective (Franken et al, 2021; Aleem et al, 2023).

In terms of working environment/culture, adopting organisational HR practices to support psychological wellbeing such as encouraging mindfulness and facilitating networking activities (Aleem et al, 2023) is likely to ameliorate remote employee wellbeing. A number of studies also point to the importance of a supportive culture and in particular of the provision and encouragement of social support to help remote workers navigate potential issues related to isolation, loneliness and stress (Franken et al, 2021; Sok et al, 2014; Walz et al, 2024). Table 3 offers an overview of research in this area. Overall, organisational strategies may be decisive in employee level outcomes, but more research in this area is needed (Ferrara et al, 2022).

Evidence gaps and future research

Firstly, as evidenced by the tables summarising research, extant literature focused on the wellbeing implications of remote working relies strongly the use of cross sectional self-reported data. Future research could usefully generate and analyse longitudinal data, to allow for causal associations and trends over time to be identified. Finding ways to collect data through observation or other measurement would also mitigate the potential challenges of bias and inaccuracy inherent in self-reported data.

Secondly, the literature has highlighted early findings in several areas which merit further attention, and which could really help to bolster the evidence base, including:

- **Causal links between remote working and wellbeing:** given that research findings to date are inconclusive around whether remote working is positive or negative for wellbeing and mental health, longitudinal research could help to evaluate the connection. Is the extent of remote working important? What effect does ICT use have? Extant research suggests there may be complex relationships which are mediated by, for example, social interaction. This merits further investigation.
- **The long-term impacts of remote working:** this may include an exploration of the implications of social isolation in the long-term, and the effects of working at home on different demographic groups.
- **The implications for managers of remote working:** for example, research could explore the need to find different ways of communicating, carrying out tasks like performance appraisals, and fostering a team spirit. Also, the implications for managers' own wellbeing of working remotely and managing others remotely could be investigated.
- **The differences between mandatory and voluntary working from home:** studies indicate divergent wellbeing outcomes for those mandated to work from home compared to those doing it voluntarily, but more evidence is needed.
- **Strategies to avoid or manage the adverse wellbeing effects:** more research focus on organisational strategies linked to wellbeing in remote workers and on strategies that individuals themselves may be able to adopt could make a significant contribution to the sparse evidence in this area.
- **The implications of remote working for those with disabilities or chronic conditions:** further research in this under-explored area could inform policy and practice to improve workplace accommodations for, and wellbeing of, these employees.

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Tables

Table 1: Wellbeing impacts of remote work

IMPACT	AUTHORS	STUDY TYPE	KEY FINDINGS
Cognitive flexibility and autonomy	Barbieri et al (2024)	Quantitative analysis of cross-sectional online survey data from Italian Public Administration employees	Increased cognitive flexibility due to need to self-regulate is a job resource with positive wellbeing outcomes.
	Charalampous et al (2019)	Systematic review	Remote working is associated with reduced exhaustion. Autonomy linked to perceived better work life balance.
Isolation, stress and anxiety	Dale et al (2024)	Qualitative analysis of cross-sectional online survey of hybrid workers, mainly UK based	Remote working can be isolating and drive sedentary behaviour but can improve work life balance thus reducing stress and anxiety.
	Kossen et al (2022)	Quantitative analysis of cross-sectional online survey data of German employees	Increased remote working reduces organisational identification and increases social isolation.
	Aleem et al (2023)	Literature review	Remote working increases anxiety stress and emotional exhaustion
Work-life balance	Lapierre et al (2016)	Three wave survey in Dutch organisation	Positive relationship between remote working and strain-based conflict which prevents full participation in family role.
	Nordenmark & Vinberg (2024)	Three wave online survey in 27 EU countries	Remote working is associated with more life-to-work conflict i.e., non-work distractions to work but reduced exhaustion from work impacting on home activities.
	Palumbo (2020)	Quantitative analysis of cross-sectional European public sector worker survey data	Remote working negatively impacts on work-life and life-work conflict, increases fatigue and lowers perceived life-work balance.
Work life boundaries	Shimura et al (2021)	Quantitative analysis of two-wave panel data	Full time remote work increases presenteeism.
	Olafsen et al (2024)	Quantitative analysis of cross-sectional data from Norwegian employee panel study	Flexibility can help those with caring responsibilities but can be associated with lower levels of thriving and increased anxiety, depression due to blurred boundaries.

Table 2: Antecedents of wellbeing impacts

FACTOR	AUTHORS	STUDY TYPE	KEY FINDINGS
Involuntary vs voluntary remote working	Kaduk et al (2019)	Quantitative analysis of cross-sectional survey data from US firm	Voluntary remote working is associated with reduced stress and higher job satisfaction compared to involuntary remote working.
Prior experience of remote working	Donati et al (2021)	Quantitative analysis of cross-sectional survey data from Italian employees	Prior experience of remote working associated with more positive attitudes and ability to cope with isolation, maybe because social interaction opportunities already in place.
Digital competencies	Fischer et al (2023)	Quantitative analysis of cross-sectional survey data from German employees	Digital competencies are positively associated with increased employee resilience and wellbeing when working remotely.
Technology use	Molino et al (2020)	Quantitative analysis of two cross-sectional surveys of Italian employees	Technostress (linked to technology use) in remote workers contributes to perceived increase of overload and intrusion, with employees feeling permanently connected.
	Singh et al (2022)	Quantitative analysis of cross-sectional survey data from UK employees	Technostress in remote workers, both work-induced (WTPS) and personal/social platform related (PTPS) increases psychological strain and reduces wellbeing.
	Kniffin et al (2021)	Literature review	Alternative ways of achieving face to face communication such as video conferencing, while useful, are a poor substitute for personal interaction and those working at home can find them intrusive.
Gender	Bezak et al (2022)	Qualitative analysis of cross-sectional survey data	Women more affected by anxiety, depression, exhaustion and burnout due to isolation and reduced peer support.
	Giménez-Nadal et al (2020)	Quantitative analysis of survey data	Male remote workers report less stress tiredness and pain than male commuters whereas there is no difference for females.
	Oakman et al (2020)	Literature review	Women less likely to experience positive health benefits of WFH.
Individual level characteristics	Oseghale et al (2024)	Qualitative analysis of cross-sectional depth interview data	Conscientious and introverted individuals prefer integration as their boundary-management style, making them more able to manage their work life balance.
	Aleem et al (2023)	Systematic literature review	Employees who practise mindfulness, those with good social connections and those who are willing to ask for support if they need it cope better remotely.

Table 3: Supporting wellbeing in remote workers

APPROACH	AUTHOR	STUDY TYPE	KEY FINDING
Working arrangements & practices	Chafi et al (2022)	Qualitative analysis of cross-sectional data from two Swedish studies	Structured, consistent and clear arrangements make employees feel in control.
	George et al (2022)	Quantitative analysis of cross-sectional online survey data	Employers ceding control of working practices to remote workers lowers report stress.
	Vander Elst et al (2017)	Quantitative analysis of cross-sectional survey data from a multinational firm	Autonomy and social support from colleagues and are positively linked to wellbeing in remote workers.
	Chuang et al (2024)	Quantitative analysis of cross-sectional online survey data in Taiwan	Provision of timely and accurate information mitigates uncertainty loneliness and work-family conflicts.
Working environment and culture	Franken et al (2021)	Qualitative case study	Support, relationships and effective technology linked to better wellbeing outcomes in remote workers.
	Sok et al (2014)	Quantitative analysis of cross-sectional survey data	Supportive culture in the form of flexible working arrangements can lead to positive spillovers.
	Walz et al (2024)	Quantitative analysis of two-wave panel survey data	Job demands are associated with work-home interference, which is linked to loneliness, but work support moderates this.
	Yeo & Li (2022)	Qualitative case study	Job resources (e.g., support, empowerment) & personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, self-awareness) can impact positively on psychological wellbeing for remote workers.

About the author



Maria Wishart joined the Enterprise Research Centre in 2018 after completing her PhD in Ethics. She worked for seventeen years in SMEs before coming to academia. Since joining the ERC, she has contributed to a multi-country study into SME resilience and to a major longitudinal UK study into mental health in the workplace. Her work has addressed the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on small businesses, and she has led research projects focusing on rural enterprise and on workplace wellbeing. She is experienced at teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students and her research interests include SME resilience, workplace mental health and business ethics.

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