

Professional isolation in the home workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 forced most office workers to work from home. Alongside known positive aspects of home-based telework, it is also associated with reduced organisational support and feelings of isolation. Isolation is often cited as the primary reason for not wanting to work from home (WFH) full-time, but there is limited knowledge on the relationships between personal- and environmental factors of WFH and feelings of isolation. It is therefore interesting to study isolation during obliged WFH and see how relationships with colleagues might have changed. Two surveys were distributed amongst office workers of 12 different (mostly public) Dutch office organisations in 3 cohorts across the Covid-pandemic in 2020 (April-December; n=25,058 and 18,859, response rates 33% and 23%). Bivariate analyses of survey 1 show significant relationships between personal and environmental characteristics and the professional isolation scale. Descriptive analyses of the survey 2 data are used to interpret how relationships have changed. Findings show that many respondents missed informal contact with their colleagues at the office, but on average professional isolation increased only slightly from 3.12 for cohort 1 to 3.16 (on a 5-point scale) for the later cohorts. Managers, females, and employees with similar workloads since working from home suffered less from isolation than non-management and/or male employees, and those with increased or decreased workloads. Also, respondents of higher age, those with a furnished and/or private home workspace, those living with others and those with higher perceived organisational support showed less feelings of isolation, while those with higher educational levels and/or children living at home perceived more professional isolation. Both the content (less personal) and the frequency of contact with

colleagues changed since working from home. Also, managers felt more involved with their colleagues, and found it more rewarding to see their colleagues during video meetings compared to regular employees.

Keywords

Home workplaces, Professional isolation, COVID-19 pandemic, Teleworking, Worker relationships.