

Employees with higher neuroticism struggled more transitioning to work from home

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Employees with higher levels of neuroticism experience lower empowerment and well-being in a sudden change from working in an organisational premises to working from home (WFH), finds new research by King's Business School and Norwich Business School.

Analysing surveys of WFH employees, the researchers found the move to WFH during the pandemic generally decreased perceptions of job satisfaction, overall well-being, and empowerment.

Empowerment, in this context, refers to employees' sense of control, competence, and autonomy in their work environment.

If an employee felt more empowered, they were more likely to be receiving better organisational support and to experience greater well-being.

The research was undertaken by Duncan Jackson, Reader of Organisational Psychology & Human Resource Management and Amanda Jones, Associate Professor in Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management at King's Business School, alongside George Michaelides, Associate Professor of Work Psychology at Norwich Business School, and Dr Chris Dewberry.

The sudden shift to WFH likely intensified feelings of anxiety and stress for workers with higher levels of neuroticism, with a potential lack of preparedness for the WFH environment exacerbating emotional instability.

Greater organisational support should not be mistaken with increasing oversight by managers. Managers who closely monitor employees will inevitably make those employees feel less empowered.

“If employees feel that their organisation supports and empowers them to get on with their job in the context of a sudden change, then those employees are more likely to experience increased well-being. Organisations need to show they support their employees and not just pay lip service to the idea of support,” says Jackson.

“Managers need to remove any hint of micromanagement, pressure, and surveillance over employees when they’re working remotely. By showing that employees are trusted to manage their work activities, organisations and managers can develop an empowering environment conducive to well-being.”

Moreover, employees who felt their homes were well-prepared for work reported higher levels of empowerment, which positively affected their well-being.

“Our findings clearly show that, in general, organisations should empower remote working employees if they want to protect their well-being and prevent them from seeking an alternative job,” says Jones.

“However, we can also see that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to managing remote workers may be a mistake. Some people will require much more structure and direction than others, especially where remote working is a requirement, rather than a choice.”

The research comes from an analysis of 337 employees surveyed during lockdown and highlights changing needs and attitudes to WFH, and how it impacts employee well-being. It was published in the June 2024 volume of the Journal of Vocational Behaviour.