

UK RESEARCH ZOOMS IN ON REMOTE WORKING FATIGUE

Working remotely during the UK's first Covid-19 lockdown led to an increase in employees suffering from 'zoom fatigue' while generating a need for longer recovery time, according to the findings of the first study of its kind by London South Bank University (LSBU).

The study entitled 'An Investigation of Self-Control and Self-Regulation as Mechanisms Linking Remote Communication to Employee Well-Being during the Covid-19 Pandemic' looked at the levels of energy depletion experienced by employees engaged in remote working.

It also investigated their increased need for daily recovery time, taking into account various digital media applications used to complete a range of work tasks.

The research, carried out by Karin Moser, Professor of Organisational Behaviour at LSBU's Business School, is the first study of its kind in the UK to show how remote communications can harm employee wellbeing at work, if left unregulated.

The researchers conducted a daily diary study surveying a cohort of 102 UK employees working remotely across a 10-day period during the UK's first full national lockdown. The survey results reported an 80 per cent (80 out of 102) employee response rate with a 67 per cent daily response rate.

Levels of exposure to remote communication were assessed by asking participants how many minutes they had spent each day using: text-based media (texting, emails), video conferences (Slack, Skype, Zoom, MSTeams), voice-based media (phone calls), social media (Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat), and collaborative platforms (Slack, Workzone, Blackboard, Glip).

The research highlighted the following:

- Remote working generally leads to increased tiredness or 'zoom fatigue' for employees and a greater need for longer recovery time compared to on-site office work;
- Communication via video calls is more tiring to deal with than other forms of digital communication, such as emails, texts, or chats, as video calls require higher levels of self-control and regulation of emotion;
- Daily fluctuations in different forms of remote communication

between employees is detrimental to the overall well-being of the workforce.

The study recommends that employers should:

- Be aware of employees' need for adequate time to recover from the demands of remote working;
- Give their staff additional breaks and stipulate no working beyond core hours;
- Encourage employees to shut down digital devices such as laptops and work phones, outside core working hours, in order to maintain a healthy work-life balance;
- Support and encourage healthy recovery time following remote working, for example, through extra-curricular activities such as sports, family time, off-screen activities and by creating workspaces at home, where possible;
- Provide support to employees who already have extra demands on their time and resources, due to caring and family responsibilities; such as pre-existing health issues.

According to Prof Moser, previous research which looked at remote working practices in the UK focused on employee productivity, whereas this study is the first of its kind to demonstrate that these practices pose a threat to employee well-being.

"The pandemic has thrown much of the workforce into one huge online experiment, forcing the majority of employees to work from home suddenly. This has left staff with no previous experience of remote working, with little time to prepare and adjust," she noted.

"The danger is that many work routines are now dictated by technology packages available, giving the user little time for reflection on whether what's been provided is adequate. Meanwhile employees are also lacking the necessary skills training to help them collaborate and lead virtually.

"This business practice is not sustainable, and in the long-term, will have detrimental impacts on employee health and productivity."