LSE Business Review: Remote working is good for mental health… but for whom and at what cost?

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Remote working is good for mental health… but for whom and at what cost?

The world of work as we know it is changing. We are seeing a dramatic rise in remote working, with more and more people working away from the physical office location — sometimes by choice, sometimes not. The Covid-19 pandemic has further accelerated these changes, indicating that remote working is here to stay for the foreseeable future.

From studying the effects of remote working on mental health, I found that some people may be inspired by it, and use it to perform their jobs well. For others, remote working can cause a lot of stress, loneliness, and reduced performance. But research has not told us why some people respond better to remote working than others. Experts say that personality traits are important — for example, agreeable people are generally more positive and optimistic about life, while neurotic people are easily frustrated, angry and sad. But the question is what traits are more beneficial (or more harmful) for people working remotely?

To understand this problem, I analysed data from 3200 workers across Britain. They were asked to rate themselves on different personality traits such as conscientiousness (being very organised and thoughtful), introversion (being quiet and reserved), neuroticism (being moody and easily frustrated), openness to experience (being curious and eager to try new things) and agreeableness (being friendly and kind to others). In terms of mental health, they described how often their jobs made them feel worried, depressed, miserable and gloomy in the past few weeks. Around thirty five percent of them said that they worked remotely from home, at their clients' premises, or "on the move", such as to deliver goods and services.

The results showed that remote working can be good *or* bad for people, depending on their personality traits. On one hand, those who scored high on openness to experience felt less worried, depressed or miserable when working remotely. Agreeable people and introverts (who tend to be quiet and reserved) also reported feeling less worried and depressed. On the other hand, I found that neurotic people were at a greater risk of reporting poor mental health. They tend to have bad moods and are easily frustrated, which can cause feelings of worry and depression when working remotely. But that's not all, those who scored low on conscientiousness, or found it hard to plan things carefully, reported feeling worried and gloomy. In short: the more messy and disorganised people are, the more likely they will report mental health problems when working remotely.

When I compared data from remote workers to those working from the office, I found some interesting differences. One was that being open to new experience made remote workers less worried, depressed and miserable than those who worked at the office. Being agreeable and introverted showed similar differences between remote and office workers, but for one mental health condition only — feeling gloomy. Another interesting story is that neuroticism caused mental health problems for everyone, both remote and office workers alike. The explanation is fairly simple: being moody and easily frustrated puts people at greater risk of feeling worried, depressed and miserable in every context, be it working from home, on the move, or at a physical office location away from home.

As the Covid-19 crisis continues, we will see remote working play an ever-expanding role in the economy and in our daily lives. In fact, it is likely to cause a permanent shift in the way we see the traditional office place. Managers need to proceed with caution. They must understand that remote working is not all rosy for everyone; some people's mental health and well-being could be badly affected. When delegating work, consider whether employees are properly equipped with the right resources and technologies, if not, make reasonable adjustments to support them. Some employees are very organised, open to trying new things, and therefore good at working on their own; but remember to keep an eye on those who are more stressed and need reassurance.

Employees have a role to play too. They should appreciate their own personality traits, whether admirable or not, and consider what works best when working remotely. Of course, some people are good at planning and completing the day's tasks, while others may struggle to take a break or get some sleep — so maintaining a good work routine is really vital. Be kind to yourself and to your colleagues, as some of them are at risk of poor mental health. If possible, find safe and responsible ways to check up on others, assist them where necessary, and let them feel a sense of belonging. At the end of the day, remote working can be a great opportunity for people to be inspired, productive and satisfied in their personal and professional lives.

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