

Measuring work environment and well-being among colleagues teleworking. Reporting from two surveys and workshops on the topic.

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Statistics Norway did two surveys on working from home, in April and June 2020. The surveys addressed questions on different sides of work environment, like cooperation with colleagues, efficiency, managerial support, physical challenges and experiences with the use of teleworking. More than 80% of staff thinks teleworking works well or very well after having been working from home for three months. This is a slight increase from two months earlier, when 75% reported the same. There has been a similar increase in the number of staff members that report to be more efficient at home than at the office, but still only 23% report to be more efficient at home. Even though most report sufficient managerial support, some staff members have little interaction with their immediate supervisor. But most of all, we would like to see more of our colleagues.

Measuring work environment and well-being among colleagues teleworking: Reporting from two surveys and workshops on the topic

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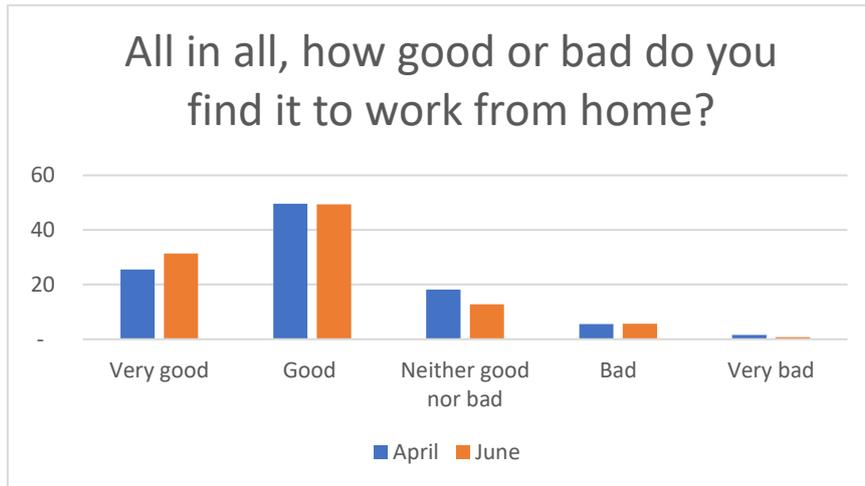
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The Challenge

As in many other countries, the Covid-19 pandemic forced staff in Statistics Norway to work from home. Even though working from home had been partially practised already, the extent to which it happened now, was unprecedented. Earlier, working from home was something a selected number of staff members did occasionally. The new normal being that almost everyone is working from home all the time. To monitor how staff are doing, Statistics Norway did two surveys on working from home, in April and June 2020. The surveys addressed questions on various aspects of work environment, like cooperation with colleagues, efficiency, managerial support, physical challenges and experiences with the use of teleworking. The first survey had a response rate at 81 per cent, counting only completed interviews. The second had a response rate at 83 per cent. The current paper will sum up some main results of the surveys, in addition to workshops held to discuss how we are working during the pandemic.

Home office works well for 80 per cent of staff

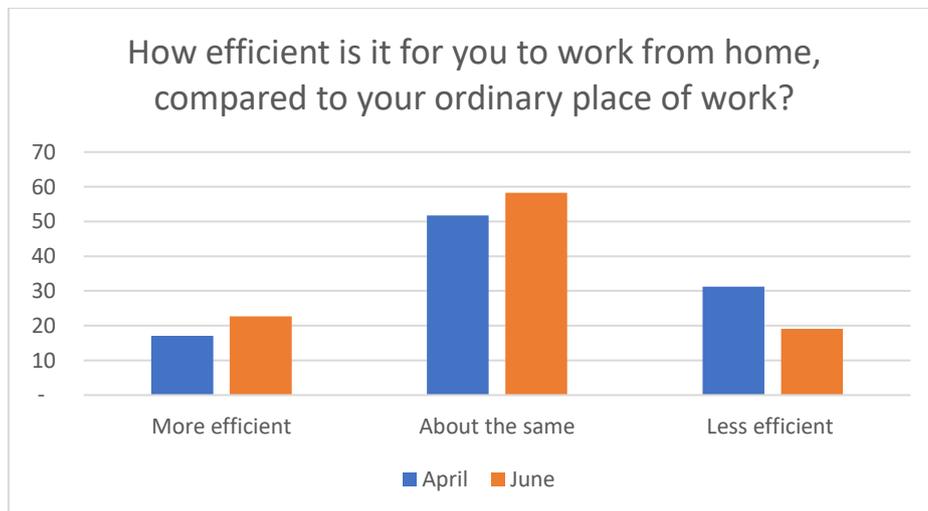
More than 80 per cent of staff thinks teleworking works well or very well after having been working from home for three months. This is a slight increase from two months earlier, when 75 per cent reported the same. What makes the figures change, is that the percentage of staff saying teleworking works *very well* has increased. In April 26 per cent reported that teleworking worked very well, while 31 per cent reported the same two months later. The question did not ask about challenges, tasks or efficiency, but was a general question on how it worked for the individual staff member. Managers report that some were struggling after some weeks teleworking, before finding new routines and establishing new ways to organize work.



Staff are generally doing good teleworking, and a bit better in June than in April.

Learning to be efficient working from home

Arguments against teleworking have traditionally been to foster communication and keep control over staff, aiming to maintain efficiency. Keeping up production was a major concern when shifting to telework. Hence, we asked staff how efficient it was for them to be working from home, compared to their normal place of work. In April 31 per cent of the respondents reported to be less efficient working from home, whereas only 17 per cent reported to be more efficient. Even though half of staff were equally as efficient as before, more reported to be less efficient than to be more. Two months later, the situation was turned around; now more people reported to be more efficient than the ones saying they were less. The main change is found in a reduction of the number of staff reporting to be less efficient. This can indicate that it takes some time to get into the new modality of working, to learn how to work from home.



Staff perceive themselves to be more efficient in June than in April.

In the end, we managed to produce the planned statistics during the pandemic, in addition to providing new information to guide policy response to the pandemic. Hence, the efficiency at statistics Norway was not compromised by introducing teleworking as a standard modality of working.

The pandemic has changed the attitude of the management towards working from home, both in Statistics Norway and many other organisations. A formal system trying to restrict the use of home offices, is replaced with a flexible approach based on trust and delivery of results. Trust is of course a core element in motivating staff to go an extra mile.

Most employees say they have sufficient support from their managers

Most staff reported to experience managerial support. 64 per cent of staff reported they got support from their immediate supervisor to a high or very high degree while teleworking. Facilitation of tasks, good dialogue and information, encouragement and motivation were mentioned as examples of support in the survey question. Even though support is generally perceived to be high, the results vary between divisions in Statistics Norway.

We learned that our managers were faced with new challenges. Their workload increased and having to do “remote management” was a new thing for them. The HR division invited all managers to two online sessions where the new challenges were discussed and experiences shared. We also made sure to make managers aware of any new employee policies related to Covid-19 before all staff members were informed on our intranet. Managers often found it difficult to know how staff are doing. It is challenging for them to ask about private circumstances if they do not know their staff members all that well, and it may feel intruding to ask repeatedly if they are lonely or are facing challenges.

Social interaction is limited

For some the work is the primary place of social interaction. Colleagues who live alone and do not have friends or family around them, may lose a substantial part of their social life when interaction with colleagues at work is limited. A bit more than half of staff in Statistics Norway would like to see their colleagues more often. Preliminary research has shown that there has been an increase in anxiety and depression during the Covid-19 pandemic¹, possibly caused by lack of social interaction. Making sure that everyone has someone to interact with may reduce this challenge. This may be particularly important regarding new staff and other staff less integrated in the organisation. Several attempts have been made to reduce the challenge of lack of social interaction. Having lunch together, coffee breaks before the weekend or celebrating birthdays on web meetings are some examples.

Social interaction and informal meetings are also important for discussions and exchange of work-related information. Meeting at the coffee machine may in addition to social interaction give room for exchanging information and ideas on how to move work forward.

Statistics Norway has two different locations, two office buildings situated 100 kilometres apart. When everyone started to work from home, the distance between the two locations was no longer a barrier. Even though we have gradually been turning to video meetings, the amount of traveling between the locations was still substantial before the pandemic. Since we during Covid-19 no longer could travel, all interaction with colleagues happened on-line, and there was no additional burden to reach out to colleagues on the other location. This made the cooperation between colleagues at the different locations become closer.

¹Early COVID-19 wave in Norway: Social inequality in morbidity, compliance to non-pharmaceutical interventions and labour marked consequences (CorRisk):
<https://www.oslomet.no/forskning/forskningsprosjekter/corrisk>

Challenging to maintain a work-life balance

Work has moved into our homes, and we need to make sure that it does not take over our private lives. The challenge of being aware of when to stop working, may increase when you are actually not leaving the office. Some may also feel they need to work more, not to be suspected of having lazy days at home. Managers do not only need to encourage people to work, but also to ask them to stop working, e.g. by logging off after normal working hours. Many managers have also experienced a high work-load during the teleworking period.

Some staff members prefer a clear divide between work and private life, while others favour integration of the two. Hence, asking staff to log off at a given time, is not necessarily an answer to the work-life balance challenge. Managers seek individually adapted solutions to help the individual employee to maintain a work-life balance.

Finding a suitable space to work at home

In the last survey 40 per cent of staff reported mild ergonomic challenges they relate to their home offices, and 3 per cent reported major challenges. Even though working in the normal office may also induce physical discomfort, the high number reporting challenges is a reason to put the physical work environment on the agenda. Statistics Norway has to some degree moved office equipment to people's homes, but the situation may have to be reviewed if the current situation continue to last for a long time.



Mr. Øyvind Bruer-Skarsbø, colleague at Statistics Norway having kindergarten at home while making e-learning in PowerBI.

Some have limited place suited to be used as an office at home. Bedrooms, kitchens and living rooms are used. The situation was particularly challenging for colleagues with children and spouses also working from home, all having to share the limited office-like space available.

Following up

The main results from the surveys were made available to all staff on Statistics Norway's intranet. All managers were invited to on-line meetings to learn about the results and have group discussions on how to follow them up. One meeting was held after each survey, the last one included an intervention from two researchers contextualizing our findings to help addressing the challenges we face. Results disaggregated by divisions has also been discussed in departmental management meetings. It has been up to each department to decide on how to address the results, and if staff should be involved in discussing challenges and finding solutions to them. The Division for Human Resources supported these processes through a HR-representative dedicated to each department, and facilitation of workshops on the topic.

Statistics Norway has a system of ombudsmen to help protect health, safety and environment for all staff. There are ombudsmen both at the central and departmental level. They all received detailed results for their parts of the organisation, to review if measures should be taken to improve staff's work environment.

Final remark

All in all, teleworking has kept the production going in Statistics Norway and staff generally works well. Never the less, most staff want to gradually return to the office, generally one or two days a week during the Covid-19 situation. Our next challenge will be to use the current experiences with telework to improve the way we work, both from our offices and our homes. We need to continue doing what has been positive inventions, and not just return to how things were done before the lockdown.