

# **The Effect of Working From Home on Loneliness**

Bachelor of Science

19.07.2022

Sara Stanjek

**Purpose/Motivation:** In early 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic broke out (Ekpanyaskul & Padungtod, 2021, p. 384). An important measure against the spread of the virus is social distancing. This, of course, applies not only to the people's private lives but also to their professional ones. Thus, the pandemic is seen not only as an international health crisis, but also as a global economic crisis (Kniffin et al., 2021, p. 65). Because the safety distance to be maintained is not feasible in most offices, many employees have been sent to working from home (WFH) arrangements. Since this way of working has several advantages, it can be expected to play a crucial role even after the pandemic (Bloom, 2020, p. 1). Thus, not only the positive but also the negative aspects should be highlighted, such as the perceived loneliness of workers in the home office. There are only a few studies that look at the impact of WFH on loneliness and therefore the aim of my thesis is to fill this research gap.

**Theories:** The social presence theory is one of the most popular theories to illustrate how well people can connect and communicate socially online through information communication technologies (ICT) (Lowenthal, 2010, p. 125). The theory states that different forms of communication have different levels of social presence. To determine the degree of social presence, it includes how well you can notice facial expressions and gestures of the person you are talking to (Gunawardena, 1995, p. 151). The highest degree of social presence is therefore of course face-to-face communication. As a result of the increase in WFH arrangements, the use of ICTs has also risen significantly. Thus, there is less face-to-face communication, which means that less social presence is perceived by the employees concerned. This prevents them from learning more about the lives and personalities of their colleagues. As a result, workplace relationships between coworkers are less likely to be built and strengthened. This lack of social presence makes some WFH employees feel lonelier than office-based employees.

**Approach/Methodology:** I conducted a literature review searching the major databases and journals for search terms like WFH, loneliness, social presence, effect of WFH, trigger of loneliness. The final review set comprised 38 sources.

**Findings:** That WFH contributes to the affected employees feeling more lonely sounds obvious at first. However, this relationship is influenced by some moderators. I have selected

several and analyzed their effects. First of all, it is important whether there is social support in the company. Then it also depends on how strong the work intensity is in the home office, i.e. how many days a week the employees work from home. And finally, the various personality traits and demographic characteristics play a decisive role.

**Research Limitations:** One limitation of my thesis is that in one study which I analyzed, the authors talk about remote working and not WFH specifically. Therefore, the question arises to what extent one can transfer the results of remote working to WFH. In addition, one should also look at whether the employees voluntarily enter into a WFH arrangement or whether they have to. This information can significantly change the results. Furthermore, there are also a few studies that, contrary to my findings, assume a positive effect of WFH on loneliness. For example, WFH is referred to a “community-friendly form [...] of work” (Kamerade & Burchell, 2004, p. 358).

**Research Implications:** Since WFH has only reached this extreme level of popularity since the COVID-19 pandemic, long-term studies of some effects of WFH are still missing. Thus, the findings should be adjusted as soon as long-term studies are available. Since there are only a few studies on the effect of WFH on loneliness, this relationship should be more investigated in the future. Furthermore, researchers should focus on the development of effective countermeasures against loneliness in the home office, since WFH will continue to accompany us in the future.

**Practical Implications:** There are three different points in time where companies can take appropriate action to prevent or reduce loneliness among their WFH employees. The first time is before the employee enters a WFH arrangement. Here, for example, it is enormously important that supervisors identify the right employees for such an arrangement. Different personalities and demographic characteristics are also differently suited to work from home. So to make sure that supervisors can correctly assess and then also assign their employees, they should first be trained in doing so. Next, there is the time when the employees are already in the WFH arrangement but do not yet feel lonely. Here it is extremely important that they have a contact person to whom they can turn at any time if they have a problem. Thus, feelings of loneliness do not arise in the first place. This is a question of the structural support of the company concerned (Bowling et al., 2004, p. 339). The last time is when the employee works from home and feels lonely. Here the company can offer a therapy, either with an external psychologist or, if available, with an in-house one. In addition, the supervisor and colleagues can offer support, for example with arranging more video meetings.

**Contribution:** My paper contributes to the WFH literature and identifies some countermeasures against the perceived loneliness by the employees that comes from the WFH arrangement.

**Paper type:** conceptual

**Further readings:**

Albertson, L. A. (1980). Review Essay: Trying To Eat an Elephant The Social Psychology of Telecommunications, by John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie. London: John Wiley, 1976. *Communication Research*, 14.

Bloom, N. (2020). How working from home works out. *Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR). Policy Brief June*, 1–8.

Bowling, N. A., Beehr, T. A., Johnson, A. L., Semmer, N. K., Hendricks, E. A., & Webster, H. A. (2004). Explaining Potential Antecedents of Workplace Social Support: Reciprocity or Attractiveness? *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 9(4), 339–350. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.9.4.339>

Cacioppo, J. T., Hawkley, L. C., Ernst, J. M., Burleson, M., Berntson, G. G., Nouriani, B., & Spiegel, D. (2006). Loneliness within a nomological net: An evolutionary perspective. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40(6), 1054–1085. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2005.11.007>

Hawkley, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2010). Loneliness Matters: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Consequences and Mechanisms. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 40(2), 218–227. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-010-9210-8>

Van Zoonen, W., & Sivunen, A. E. (2021). The impact of remote work and mediated communication frequency on isolation and psychological distress. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2021.2002299>

