

How remote working can affect mental health: Work-life balance and meeting fatigue

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Abstract

When it comes to remote working, we often think about the many benefits this approach brings, such as being more flexible and productive, or improving our work-life balance. However, remote working without the right framework to profit from all these benefits can leave us feeling fatigued, isolated, or even depressed. I experienced the pros and cons of remote working both as an employee and a freelancer and searched for preventive strategies to improve wellbeing and preserve mental health.

The bright side of remote working

The global pandemic has made remote working more popular than we could have imagined, and it is also seen as the future of work for many people.

I worked at an international medical device company when the pandemic forced my colleagues and me to work from home. Before that, I spent more than two hours commuting each day on a crowded train that was always delayed. That is why I really enjoyed the first few months of working from home.

My apartment is located in a nice, peaceful area, with enough space to set up a workplace, and I never had to manage homeschooling or similar tasks besides my work. I was aware that remote working caused huge challenges for other people.

As an early bird, I now had the chance to focus on my work without any distractions before





my colleagues showed up online. As soon as my focus diminished, I could go out for a short walk to clear my mind.

In the middle of the pandemic, I quit my job and started freelancing. Working from home saved money for expensive office space and allowed me to collaborate with clients spread all over Europe.

Overall, the benefits of remote working seem pretty obvious. The magazine *The Economist* published an article in April 2021 saying that although most people work longer hours when working from home, they are happier and more productive.¹ For those who prefer to work remotely but not from their home, there are companies that provide coworking spaces and services. These companies claim that most people have a better work-life balance, and experience more freedom, which improves their wellbeing.² According to a 2021 survey,³ while remote working was associated with better mental and physical health status, among the characteristics analysed, higher productivity was associated with female workers, older workers, and high-wage (annual income between \$100,000 to 150,000 US\$) workers. As always, every coin has two sides.

The dark side of remote working

Besides all the benefits of remote working, I also experienced the downsides as an employee and freelancer, and I also noticed them with family and friends. One of these phenomena now has a name: meeting fatigue. We all know these situations: we join a virtual meeting where all but two or three participants turn their cameras off, mute their microphones, and there is almost no interaction. Microsoft studied the phenomenon of meeting fatigue using physiological signal monitoring (EEG).⁴

A study in the company's Human Factors Lab "found that brainwave markers associated with overwork and stress are significantly higher in video meetings than in non-meeting work like writing

emails. Further, due to high levels of sustained concentration, fatigue begins to set in 30-40 minutes into a meeting. Looking at days filled with video meetings, stress begins to set in at about two hours into the day. The research suggests several factors lead to this sense of meeting fatigue: having to focus continuously on the screen to extract relevant information and stay engaged; reduced non-verbal cues that help you read the room or know whose turn it is to talk; and screen sharing with very little view of the people you are interacting with."⁴

It is harder to feel like part of a team when working from home.

Besides meeting fatigue, research confirms that stress, emotional exhaustion or distress, and anxiety and depression are psychological symptoms that are associated with remote working.^{5,6}

Meanwhile, a significant number of my family and friends work (at least partially) from home. It's just a personal observation, but many people seem to struggle more with stress or frustration while working remotely than when they worked in the office. I sometimes miss the informal chats with my colleagues at the coffee maker. Especially as a freelancer, most of my meetings are dedicated to business questions with little time for personal interaction.

For people like me who have always worked in an office, it is also harder to feel like part of a team when working from home. But feeling part of a team and exchanging your thoughts, feelings, and struggles with your colleagues helps you cope with stress. To prevent isolation or meeting fatigue, we have to re-think team building strategies, project management, and virtual meetings. That is why companies, managers, employees, and freelancers should not underestimate the potential negative impact of remote working on mental health. Although the benefits of remote working still outweigh the drawbacks for me, I summarised my personal pros and cons (Table 1).

Table 1. Pros and cons of remote working

Pros of remote working	Cons of remote working
More flexibility and freedom	Isolation
Higher productivity	Meeting fatigue and longer hours at the workstation
Better work-life balance	Blurred lines between work and home life

Table 2. Online sources with tips for remote workers

National Health Service (NHS): 7 simple tips to tackle working from home ⁷	NHS provides nicely illustrated tips for remote workers. One of the recommendations highlights that staying connected can boost your wellbeing.
Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) England – My Whole Self: Supporting your mental health while working from home ⁸	This printer-friendly poster promotes a healthier workspace by getting into a morning routine, getting moving and connected, and getting support when you need it.
World Health Organization: Doing what matters in times of stress: An illustrated guide ⁹	This guide does not exclusively address how to deal with stress when working remotely. But it mentions five tools (grounding, unhooking, acting on your values, being kind, and making room) that are probably useful in every stressful situation.

Strategies for preserving mental health in a virtual workforce

After almost 3 years of working from home, I decided to work at a coworking space from time to time. Most coworking places offer flexible rates that allow you to book a seat when you need it without the financial burden of monthly rates. It’s a great way to meet new people who are happy to talk about things other than work. Coworking is my personal preventive strategy to preserve mental health as a freelancer. Besides that, I regularly meet with my freelance colleagues for virtual coffee breaks.

Of course, this is only a small step and doesn’t solve the problem of overworking or meeting fatigue.

Companies should implement clear guidance on working hours to prevent overworking. They should also consider interactive meetings or joint working sessions as potential ways to avoid meeting fatigue. Meetings should always have one focus and a clear goal. They should be thoroughly planned and have a moderator to take the lead.

Some companies recommend their teams meet for virtual “workathons”. During a “workathon”, a group of people meets virtually for a dedicated time. Everyone focuses on a specific task, either as a team or as individuals, that is supposed to be finished by the end of the session. Although I never tried it myself, this could be a good option when you find it difficult to concentrate at home.

During the research for this article, I was surprised by the number of online sources dealing with mental health for remote workers. I want to share the ones that seemed to be most

helpful to me (Table 2).

At the time of completing this article, I have upgraded my coworking membership to a fixed seat, meaning a desk and chair are mine, and no one else’s. For me it’s time to work among people again. How about you? I would love to hear about your stories and experiences. Please reach out to me at the email address at the beginning of this article.

Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own and not necessarily shared by EMWA.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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