

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

First findings from the UCD  
Working in Ireland Survey, 2021

John Geary and Maria Belizón



University College Dublin  
Ireland's Global University



# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic



**University College Dublin**  
Ireland's Global University

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

**First findings from the UCD  
Working in Ireland Survey, 2021**

John Geary and Maria Belizón

This is the second in a series of reports detailing preliminary findings from the UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021. This report looks specifically at the effects of homeworking on workers' health and well-being across Ireland, their preferences for future working arrangements, and the implications for employers.

The paper's findings are important because they derive from the only representative survey of workers' views of homeworking and well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic to date. Previous surveys have relied on convenience samples or were undertaken as pilot surveys.

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

## Our main findings include the following:

1. Between March 2020 and May 2021, 23.4% of the Irish workforce worked exclusively at home. A further 9.5% worked the majority of the period (9 – 13 months) at home, 11% worked 4 – 8 months, 6% worked a small period (1 – 3 months), and 4% worked for less than a month at home.
2. Working at home is associated with an increase in employees' productivity.
3. The increases in employees' productivity are due to their being able to concentrate better by working from home and having more time to work given that they did not need to commute to the workplace. It is also the case that these factors were fused with increased effort levels.
4. This intensification of employees' effort levels is associated with an increase in employees' stress levels, an inability to disconnect from work, and a diminishment in their health and well-being.
5. This intensification of effort levels was particularly pronounced among female employees.
6. The effects on women's health are particularly stark: 43% reported an impairment in their mental health and well-being, in comparison to almost a third of men, which is also not an inconsiderable proportion. Women were also more likely to report that their physical health had deteriorated as had their relationship with those whom they lived.
7. The effects of homeworking varied across parents with children of different ages. The mental health and well-being of parents of children attending late stage primary school were most impaired compared to parents of children in other age cohorts.
8. We found that the negative effects of homeworking were not moderated or lessened by particular attributes of people's work, such as, for example, whether they enjoyed considerable job autonomy, or whether there were opportunities for employee involvement and participation, and whether relations between management and employees were good. We found no such association in the data. It would appear then that job intensification was a general feature of working at home. There was one exception, however: where a trade union was recognised by management for the purpose of representing employees in the organisation, working at home was less likely to be associated with work intensification.

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

9. The majority of employees are in favour of a hybrid form of working where they work some days at home and other days in the workplace.
10. A little over a third (35%) expressed a preference for returning to work in the workplace all or most of the time.
11. People living in cities and commuting belts indicated a stronger preference for a hybrid approach to work than those living in rural areas.
12. The longer employees remained working at home during the pandemic, the more likely they are to prefer a hybrid approach to work in the future.
13. Those workers who indicated a clear and equivocal preference for returning to the workplace on a fulltime basis once all social restrictions were lifted included those who felt obliged to remain always connected to their work outside normal working hours, those who had experienced impaired mental health and wellbeing, and those whose relations with the people they lived with had deteriorated while they were engaged in homeworking.
14. The workers with the lowest self-reported levels of productivity reported the strongest desire to return to the office when restrictions are lifted, while those with the highest productivity levels were among the most eager to continue to work at home.
15. This sorting effect means that increased levels of homeworking in the future may enhance rather than reduce productivity levels. To garner this effect, however, will require a policy that allows employees to volunteer to work at home rather than everyone being compelled to do so.
16. Finally, we argue that 'remote working' represents one of the most significant – if not the most significant – challenge currently confronting employers and it is potentially momentous in its consequences for the organisation and management of work. A number of important practice and policy implications are drawn.

## Introduction

**A**t the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Irish employees whose work did not involve the provision of critical services were required to work at home. It was a dramatic response to the most serious health emergency encountered in the history of the state.

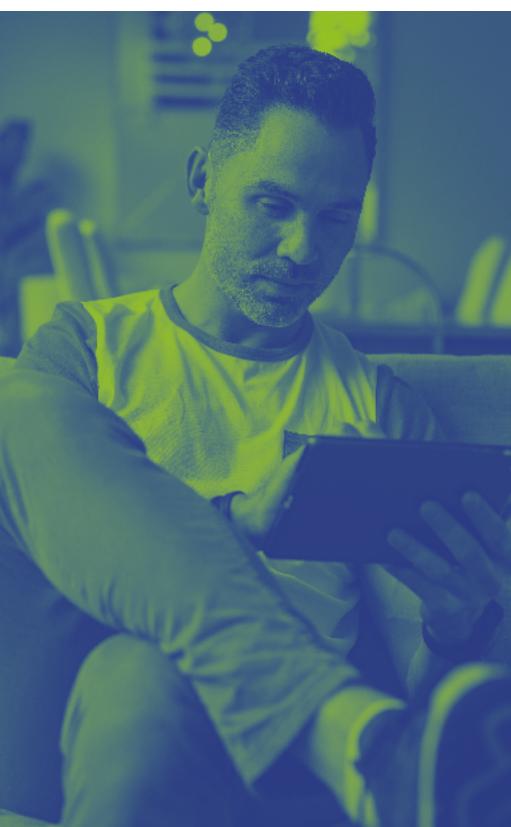
---

We conducted a major national representative survey on job quality and worker well-being during the pandemic

By and large, we know that working at home had its benefits and costs for both workers and employers. The distribution of those gains and losses, however, has largely been a matter of conjecture in the absence of reliable data. A great deal of public commentary has been based on specific sectors, individual companies' experiences, or on surveys of questionable provenance. We conducted a major national representative survey on job quality and worker well-being during the pandemic. In this paper, we provide comprehensive evidence on the consequences of working at home for workers. We examine a series of important questions that include:

- How extensive was working at home?
- Which workers worked predominantly at home?
- Did working at home affect the conduct of employees' work? If so, in what ways?
- Were staff more or less productive, and for what reasons?
- Did the changes they experienced improve or impair the quality of their jobs?
- What effect did working at home have on workers' physical health and mental well-being?
- What are workers' preferences for the future? Do they favour a hybrid model?

Before examining the detailed findings derived from our survey, we first consider the extent to which workers in Ireland worked at home by drawing on a number of sources and then consider the policy and regulatory context in respect of homeworking in Ireland.

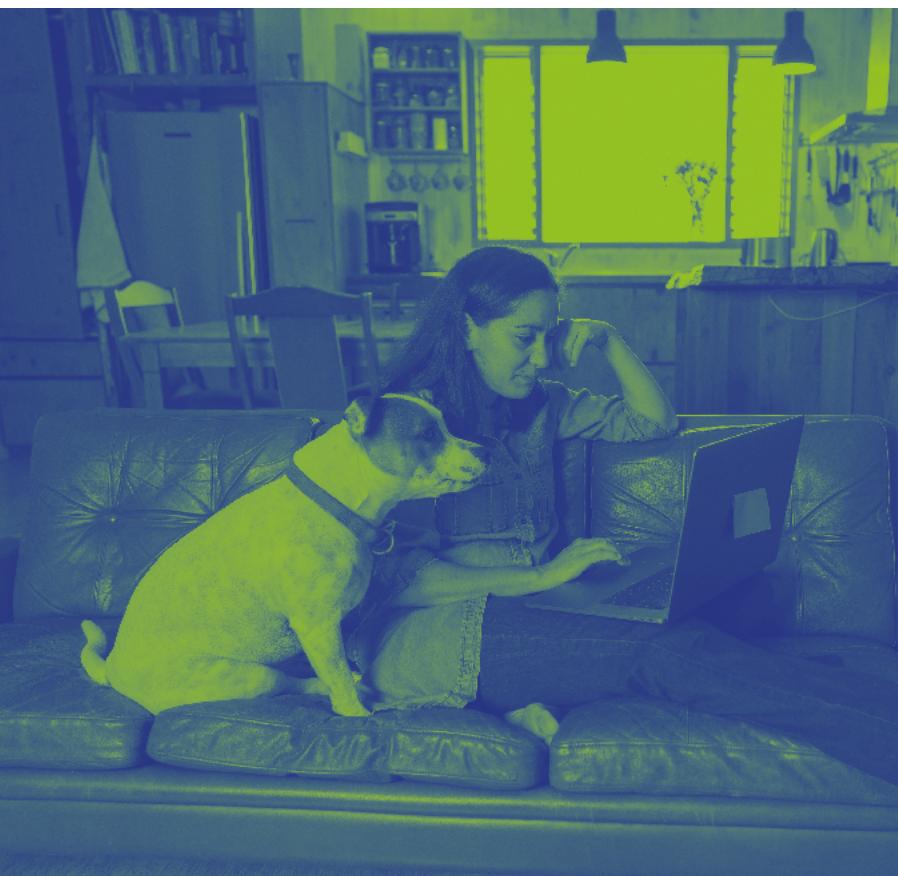


## **The extent of homeworking in Ireland**

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) asks two questions of respondents in respect of homeworking in each of its quarterly surveys. The first enquires whether they have "done any work at home for your job" in the four weeks prior to the survey. A follow-up question then enquires "how often did you work at home in those four weeks?" Two response categories are offered: "at least half of the days worked" (i.e., usually) and "less than half of the days worked but at least one hour" (sometimes). Using the LFS's data, we estimate that between Q4 of 2017 and Q4 2019 (i.e., for the period of the two years before the pandemic) the proportion of employees who worked at home usually or sometimes increased by a modest amount from 20 to 22 per cent. The incidence of homeworking was highest in the information, communication and technologies (ICT), finance and education sectors and lowest in accommodation and food, as well as being less evident among women, those engaged in providing essential services, non-Irish nationals and young workers, and far more likely in higher paid managerial and professional occupations compared to elementary occupations (Redmond and McGuinness, 2020). In our analysis of the LFS data for the period of the pandemic, we estimate that the period when the largest share of the workforce worked at home was in Q1 of 2021 when the proportion doubled from its pre-pandemic levels of 22 per cent to reach 44 per cent. During the period of our fieldwork – the second and third quarters in 2021- the proportion fell to 40 and 37 percent respectively.<sup>1</sup>

Similar findings were found by Eurofound (2020), which, at the height of the pandemic in 2020, estimated the proportion of people working exclusively at home in Ireland was over 40 per cent, second only to Belgium in the EU.

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic



There are two other significant studies of homeworking that have been conducted recently in Ireland. The first is a Central Statistics Office survey conducted in November 2021 and which achieved 10,797 responses (CSO, 2022). The second is a series of comprehensive surveys conducted by NUIG and the Western Development Commission (WDC), the first of which was administered in October 2020 (McCarthy et al., 2020a) and which was repeated on two further occasions (McCarthy et al., 2020b; McCarthy et al., 2021).

Both studies focus on what they refer to as "remote working". The CSO found that prior to the pandemic 23 per cent of respondents had worked remotely, 80 per cent had worked remotely at some point during the pandemic, and 65 per cent were working remotely at the time the survey (November 2021), almost all of whom (98 per cent) were working "from home". The results from the McCarthy et al. (2020a) study are very different. They report that just over half of its respondents (51 per cent) had never worked remotely prior to the pandemic. That the other half had is a significantly larger proportion of the workforce than that found by the other surveys (LFS and CSO). By October 2020, by which time it was six/seven months into the pandemic, McCarthy et al. (2020b) found that 68 per cent of the workforce were working remotely. By April 2021, this proportion had grown yet further to 75 per cent. A further 20 per cent were working in a hybrid manner attending the site of their workplace and working remotely. Again, these figures are considerably larger than that estimated by other studies.

The responses to both the CSO and NUIG/WDC surveys were obtained through respondents clicking on a survey weblink or a social media platform. As such, both are self-selected samples and, although the CSO study did use weightings to correct for some of its survey's sample selection biases, its findings cannot, as it openly acknowledges – and nor can the NUIG/WDCs' – be generalised to the entire population of workers in Ireland. As our survey draws on a nationally representative sample of workers in Ireland, its findings can speak with more confidence to the entire Irish workforce. And while we note some of the main findings from the CSO and NUIG studies here, we are mindful that it would be unwise and misleading to compare data collected by very different methods (see Felstead, 2021: 737-9).

---

We are mindful that it would be unwise and misleading to compare data collected by very different methods

## The Policy and Regulatory Context

In an effort to support and guide employers and employees in this extraordinary and unexpected move to remote working, the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (DETE) published a document entitled Guidance for Working Remotely during COVID-19. These guidelines were reviewed, adapted and continually updated following consultations with social partners and other interested parties during the course of the pandemic. In parallel, the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) published its Guidance on Working from Home which alerted employers and employees to their duties and responsibilities. It gave particular attention to the risks associated with working at home, including over-working, stress and isolation, and difficulties in retaining cooperation among work colleagues and maintaining productivity levels (HSA, 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, the Irish Government had already committed itself to promote remote working. At the end of 2019, for example, it published a report entitled *Remote Work in Ireland* that looked at the prevalence of different forms of remote working and appraised

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

---

The Strategy is mindful too of the risks, including turning homes into workplaces “where we are always on”, increased stress, loneliness and impairment of people’s mental health

employer and employee attitudes to working at home (DBEI, 2019). Later in January 2021, it published a strategy document, *Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy* (DETE, 2021) in an effort to further support the development of remote working. In the Strategy's foreword, the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise and Employment, Leo Varadkar, stated remote working (including hybrid working), would “On balance, ... be changes for the better”. He instanced less commuting, more time for family and leisure, new opportunities for the rejuvenation of rural towns and communities, as well as helping people with disabilities and caring responsibilities. But the Strategy is mindful too of the risks, including turning homes into workplaces “where we are always on”, increased stress, loneliness and impairment of people’s mental health. Referencing the concerns of employers the Strategy cites remote working as potentially hindering employee teamwork, creativity, resulting in declining productivity. The Strategy outlines a number of key actions that include: directing that remote working be the norm for 20 per cent of public sector employment, reviewing the treatment of remote working for the purposes of tax and expenditure in the next Budget, investing in a network of remote working hubs across the country and accelerating the provision of high-speed broadband to all parts of Ireland and legislating for the right of employees to request remote working and developing a code of practice for the right to disconnect.



A year later in January, 2022, the Government underpinned its commitment to promote remote working by publishing "The General Scheme" of the Right to Request Remote Working Bill 2022. The proposed legislation will provide, if enacted, a legal framework for the right of employees to request their employer to provide for their working remotely. All workplaces will be required to have a formal remote working policy and the employer will be required to bring it to the attention of their staff. To fail to do so, will be a legal offence and will carry a fine of up to €2,500. However, an employer may refuse an employee's request on a number of grounds, including that it is not feasible for their work to be carried out remotely, it is not possible to reorganise work among staff, or that to do so would impair the organisation's productivity. The Bill permits employees to make a complaint where they are unhappy with the response of their employer to the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). It is expected that the Bill will become law before the summer recess of 2022.

The government has also drafted new legislation under the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill. This will introduce changes to Ireland's parental leave laws. Specifically, for example, employees with children up to the age of 12 could request flexible working arrangements including reduced hours.

Both these aforementioned bills accord with and are designed to give effect to provisions contained within the EU Directive on Work Life Balance for Parents and Carers which is required to be implemented by August 2022. The Directive is intended to increase female participation in the labour market by promoting greater work life balance between men and women and by encouraging the adoption of flexible work arrangements. It includes the right of workers to request changes to their working schedules to meet their personal (parental and/or care) needs and preferences including, where possible, access to remote working arrangements, flexible working schedules, or a reduction in working hours.

---

All workplaces will be required to have a formal remote working policy and the employer will be required to bring it to the attention of their staff

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

Since the government published the draft of its proposed legislation on remote working, the coverage in the media has been very considerable with many commentators and representative organisations arguing that the proposed legislation, as currently drafted, is vague, represents a missed opportunity, favours the employer (Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)), may ultimately have little effect in promoting remote working and that it ought not to be a requirement for all employers irrespective of their size or sector (Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (IBEC)).

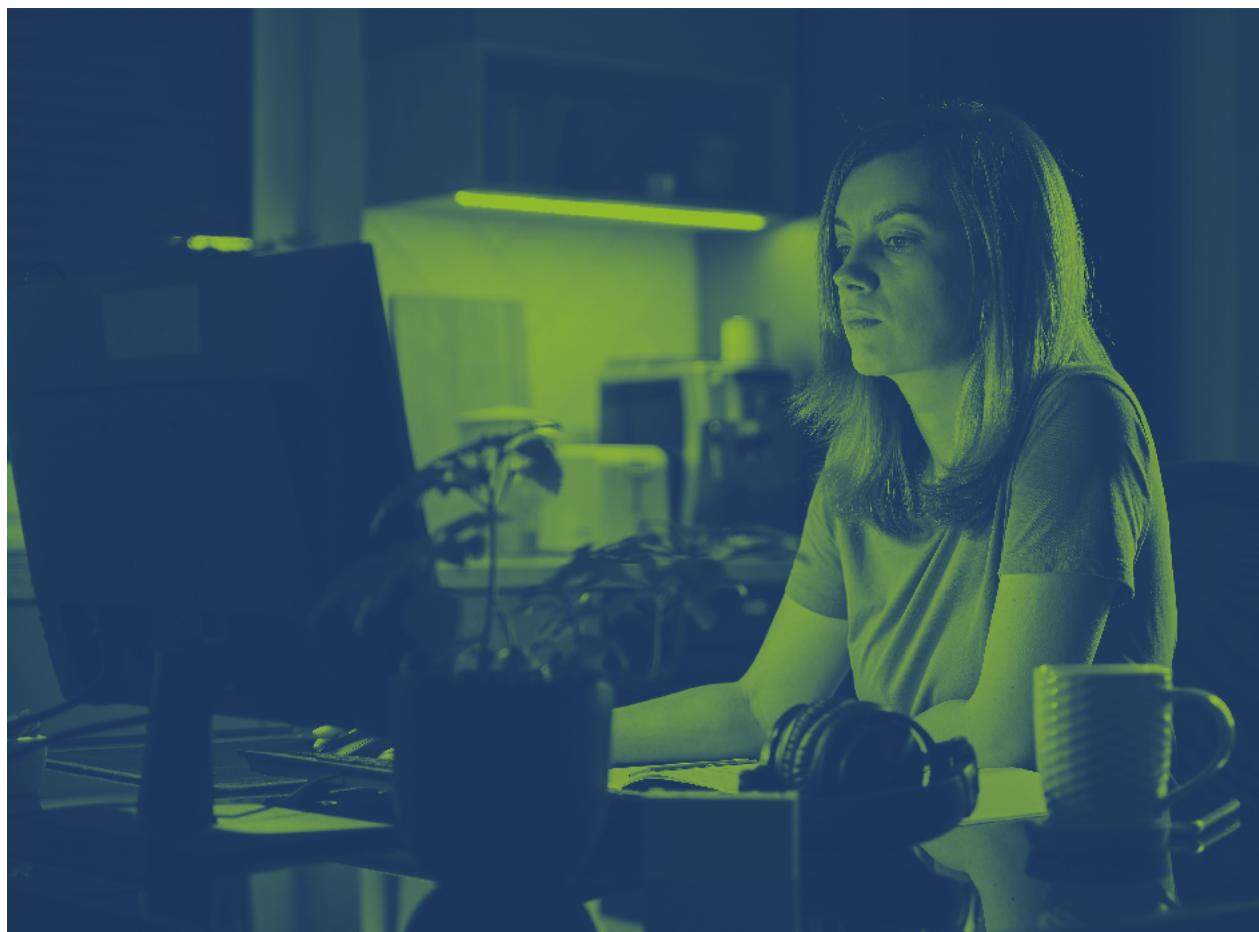
In parallel with these policy developments, the Government also introduced a new code of practice on the right to disconnect from work in April 2021. The Code developed by the WRC in consultation with the IBEC and the ICTU applies to all types of employees, whether they work remotely, in a fixed location, at home or are mobile. The Right to Disconnect has three main provisions: first, it ensures the right of an employee to not perform work routinely outside normal working hours; second, the right to not be penalised for refusing to attend to work matters outside of normal working hours; and third, the duty of staff to respect another person's right to disconnect (e.g., by not routinely emailing or calling outside normal working hours). While the Code expects that employers will "engage proactively" with employees and/or their representatives to develop the specific terms of the disconnect policy at an organisational level and in a manner that takes account of business requirements and workforce needs, the right to disconnect outside of agreed hours is deemed to be universal as is the right to be able to maintain clear boundaries between work and leisure time. An employer is also required to ensure that its disconnect policy is 'equality proofed' so that it does not discriminate against any employee who may, for example, have unique caring responsibilities or who has a disability arising from which they may need to avail of more flexibility.

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

While failure by an employer to follow the Code is not an offence in itself, the Code is admissible in evidence in proceedings a worker may pursue in regard to their working hours before a Court, the Labour Court or the WRC. This approach is distinct from that of other countries, such as France, Italy and Spain, where primary legislation has been introduced to protect workers' right to disconnect. However, the legislation in these countries was introduced prior to the pandemic and their authors would not have foreseen the explosion in remote working or the increased demand from employees for more autonomy in determining their own working arrangements and hours that has become evident since. The Irish code is also notable in not prescribing what constitutes "normal working hours". It also acknowledges the challenges of managing work across multiple time zones, and of the requirement to train and support managers so they can help an employee who appears unable to disconnect.

---

The Code is admissible in evidence in proceedings a worker may pursue in regard to their working hours before a Court, the Labour Court or the WRC



## **The UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021: A source of new evidence**

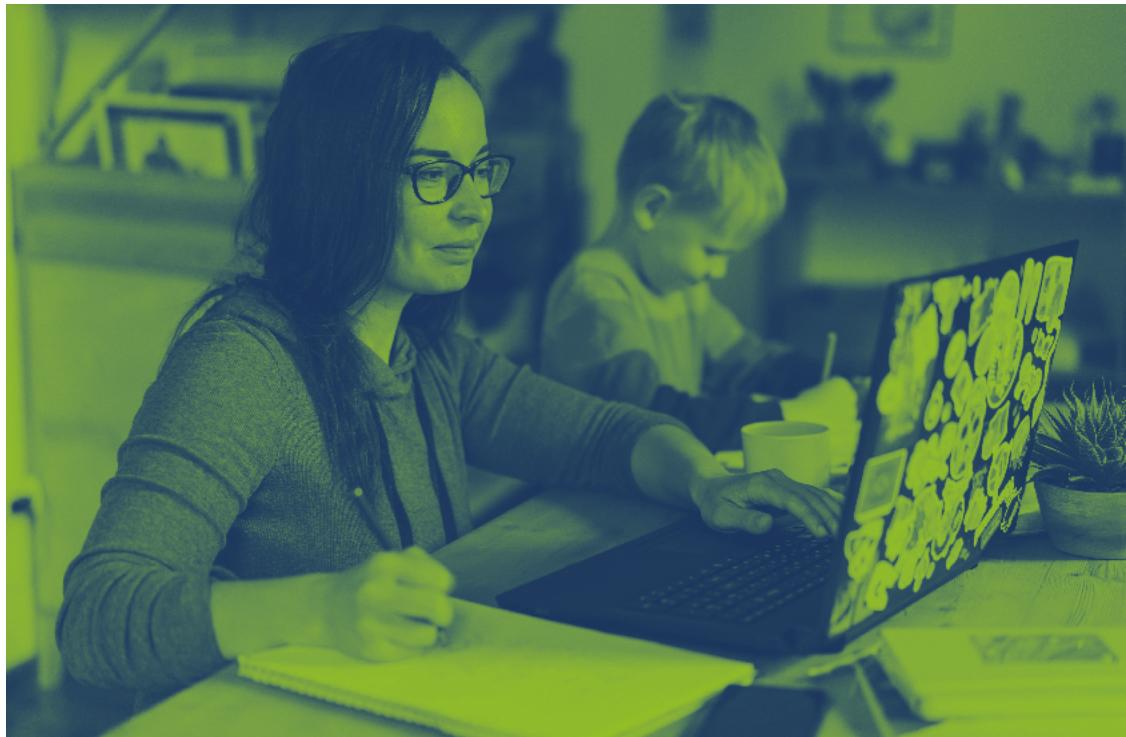
**T**he UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021 is the first major survey to examine people's work and employment in Ireland since O'Connell et al.'s (2010) study of The Changing Workplace. The UCD survey is also the only representative survey to comprehensively examine the quality of work during the Covid-19 Pandemic. It draws from a nationally representative sample of 2,076 people of working age in paid employment across the country. Both employees and self-employed workers were eligible for inclusion in the study. The survey was conducted between May and August 2021. The data were weighted for age, gender, region and economic sector to agree with the then most recent population estimates as derived from the Labour Force Survey (Q1 2021). Ipsos MRBI was commissioned by UCD to carry out the fieldwork for the survey. For the purpose of this report on working at home, we selected a subsample comprising those respondents who had worked in full-time positions as either employed or self-employed workers, and who had worked at home during the pandemic. In total, they numbered 889 respondents.

---

We specifically asked  
respondents of  
their experiences of  
*working at home*

In designing our survey instrument, we were aware of the conceptual confusion that pervades the discussion of homeworking. We specifically asked respondents of their experiences of *working at home*. A prior question, which examined where people had worked before the pandemic, made a clear distinction between *working at home*, *working in the same grounds/buildings as home* (including in an adjoining property or surrounding land) and *working on the move* (e.g., delivering products or services to different places). The latter two options were designed to identify – and then screen out – those who might, for example, have ran a pub or a B&B from their home, or who worked on an adjacent farm, or

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic



who might have operated a business *from their home* and used it as a base from which to conduct their work, such as self-employed professionals like management consultants and auctioneers, or tradespeople like electricians and plumbers. We desisted from using terms such as 'homeworking', 'mobile working', 'remote working', or 'hybrid/blended working' to minimise any confusion. Only those who indicated that they had *worked at home* (and not *from home*) during the pandemic were asked a series of questions upon which this paper is based. With this conceptual clarity, we were confident that only those respondents who were paid to undertake their work within the private sphere of their domestic dwelling alongside contending with other possible responsibilities that may have included minding children, elderly parents or sick relatives, and preparing meals and cleaning and tidying rooms would be included in our analysis. In such a work at home setting, workers experience what Felstead (2022; 17) has termed "the full force of the conflicting pressures of the world of work and home" where they and their fellow family members or residents are confronted with the challenge of managing, reconciling, and accommodating these pressures.

### Working at home during the pandemic

**D**rawing from our survey results, only 6 per cent of full-time workers worked mainly at or from home in Ireland prior to the onset of the pandemic. A further 8 per cent enjoyed the flexibility to work at home, a day or two a week.

Our estimates of the extent of homeworking during the pandemic are not too dissimilar to the LFS surveys' (various) and the Eurofound (2020) results referenced above, but they are more granulated. We first provide the results for all workers who worked at home during the pandemic. We then provide the results in respect of those workers who only worked full-time at home.

---

Between March 2020 and May 2021... 23.4 per cent of the Irish workforce worked exclusively at home

Between March 2020 and May 2021 (this was the timeframe we asked our respondents to consider when replying to the questionnaire), 23.4 per cent of the Irish workforce worked exclusively at home. A further 9.5 per cent worked the majority of the period (9 – 13 months) at home, 11 per cent worked 4 – 8 months, 6 per cent worked a small period (1 – 3 months), and 4 per cent worked for less than a month at home. The remaining 46 per cent of the workforce worked outside the home. To all intents and purposes, these respondents are those we came to term our "essential workers".

When we confine our analysis to full-time workers, we found that four in ten worked at home for the entire period and almost two in ten workers worked at home for the majority of the period (9 – 13 months), around 22 per cent worked at home for some of the period (4 – 8 months), while 12 per cent worked at home for one to three months. Only 7 per cent worked at home for one month or less. The remainder, circa 42 per cent of the full-time workforce, did not work at home at all. These we can assume are our "essential full-time workers". These – those full-time workers who worked outside the home for the entire period during the pandemic – were largely male (67 per cent) and were predominantly employed

by the wholesale and retail sector (21 per cent), health and social work services (19 per cent), the manufacturing sector (14 per cent), construction (8 per cent) and transportation and storage (6 per cent).

### The effect of homeworking on the conduct of work

We turn now to examine the effects of homeworking on employees' work. Table 1 below details the results. For the greater part, employees experienced some or considerable change across various aspects of their work, but not always in a single direction. The most striking finding is that a large balance of respondents experienced an intensification of their effort levels, an increase in their hours of work and achieved greater productivity. The finding in respect of employees' productivity<sup>2</sup> is particularly noteworthy: almost a half of respondents indicated that their output increased while working at home with only a quarter by comparison saying it had decreased. Smaller proportions (between 3 and 10 per cent) recorded a decrease in their effort levels and working hours, and 24 per cent indicated their productivity had declined. In between these two cohorts, only one in three to four employees saw no change in these three aspects of their work between working in the workplace and working at home. We return to the theme of how hard employees worked below.

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

**Table 1. Changes in the conduct of work while working at home during the pandemic**

	Increased greatly %	Increased slightly %	No change %	Decreased slightly %	Decreased greatly %	N
Effort put into your work	17	28	42	10	3	839
Working hours	15	31	39	10	5	837
Amount of work you got done per hour at home during the pandemic compared to when you were not working at home	19	29	29	16	8	829
Your loyalty to the organisation	7	16	69	6	2	839
Cooperation with work colleagues	8	17	43	25	8	837
Monitoring of your work by employer	4	13	66	14	4	837

69 per cent of employees reported that their loyalty to their organisation remained unchanged

In other areas of people's work, while there were evident changes, they were less stark or the consequences were more evenly distributed between gains and losses. For example, 69 per cent of employees reported that their loyalty to their organisation remained unchanged. One in five said it had improved and only 8 per cent said it had weakened. While cooperation with colleagues reported the largest decline, even here over two-thirds reported either no change or an improvement in levels of cooperation. The monitoring of people's work by their employer was rarely seen to have increased to a substantial degree.

When we put these two sets of findings alongside one another, they would seem to indicate that the increase in people's productivity is more likely to be due to their expending greater work effort than can be accounted for by increases in their loyalty to the organisation or greater collaboration with work colleagues. We return to further examine these possibilities below.

*Who's working harder?* We examined whether there were any differences in the responses between men and women in respect of those who indicated that their effort levels, working hours and productivity had 'increased greatly'. The results are reported in Table 2. They clearly indicate that female employees were more likely to have witnessed an increase in their work effort, hours of work and productivity levels than men.

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

**Table 2. Work intensification and productivity – differences between genders**

	% of Males	% of Females
Effort put into your work increased greatly	13	22
Working hours increased greatly	10	20
The amount of work you got done per hour at home increased greatly during the pandemic compared to when you were not working at home	16	21

Note: the results are only in respect of those respondents who indicated 'increased greatly'

## Accounting for the increase and decrease in employees' productivity

We turn now to examine the reasons put forward by workers themselves for the reported changes in their productivity levels while working at home. We begin with those who stated that their productivity increased. The predominant reason, by a considerable margin, is because employees reported they were able to concentrate better by working at home. For these employees, at least, this would suggest that the office may not always be the ideal environment for work that requires deep concentration and focus. The second factor was that people were not required to commute to work. Other less prominent reasons included that it was more convenient to work at home in terms of the ease with which one could take breaks, and also the perceived requirement to undertake more work. The latter was particularly true for female workers, who reported this reason twice as often as their male counterparts. We note again that employer surveillance of workers' performance is not an important factor in enforcing higher effort levels and ensuring that workers were more productive in working at home. See the results reported in Table 3 overleaf.

---

Employer surveillance of workers' performance is not an important factor in enforcing higher effort levels and ensuring that workers were more productive in working at home

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

**Table 3 The main reasons respondents indicated they got more work done at home**

	Male %	Female %
Able to concentrate better by working at home	56	54
Have not needed to commute/travel to work	21	17
More convenient working at home (ease of making coffee/lunch-going to toilet, etc.)	10	11
Have had more work to do	5	10
Have had to attend fewer meetings	1	3
Employer is monitoring work performance more closely	-	-
N	280	253

Note: Responses include those who indicated their output had increased greatly or slightly. Respondents were invited to indicate two main reasons.

We also found a positive correlation between workers' reporting an increase in their work effort and an increase in their working hours

In addition to asking workers directly why their productivity levels increased while working at home, we also examined whether there was any statistical association between respondents' estimates of whether their effort levels changed and their estimates of changes to their productivity levels. We found a positive and significant correlation.<sup>3</sup> While it might be objected that this correlation arises from respondents interpreting the two items in a similar manner; that is, inferring a productivity increase from a perceived increase in their work effort, this is unlikely given the way in which the two measures were specified in the questionnaire. We also found a positive correlation between workers' reporting an increase in their work effort and an increase in their working hours.<sup>4</sup> While there was a weaker correlation between longer working hours and productivity, the two were also correlated positively.<sup>5</sup> We also developed a summative measure of workers' effort intensity (see discussion below). We found that this measure of effort intensification to also be associated with increases in workers' productivity, although somewhat more modestly.<sup>6</sup> Thus, these positive correlation coefficients indicate that as workers' effort levels and working hours increased, so their productivity increased.<sup>7</sup>

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

In summary, then, we can state that the reported increases in employees' productivity are due to their being able to concentrate better by working from home and having more time to work given that they did not need to commute to the workplace. It is also the case that these factors were fused with increased effort levels and longer working hours.

Those who reported that they got less work done at home explained the decline in their productivity by a diverse range of factors. The results are presented in Table 4. The reasons related to lack of appropriate equipment, software or internet connection which placed limits on what people could achieve, particularly in the case of women; a lack of contact and interaction with work colleagues; and a lack of motivation and an inability to concentrate wholly on work. Two further reasons when combined - noise interruptions made by others/distractions at home and having to provide childcare/home schooling and/or care for others - were a major factor. The differences in responses between men and women were small suggesting perhaps that these domestic responsibilities were shared between the two genders. Finally, the nature of the work in some cases made it difficult for respondents to complete work tasks at home.

Those who reported that they got less work done at home explained the decline in their productivity by a diverse range of factors

**Table 4 The main reasons you got less work done at home**

	Male %	Female %
Equipment, software and/or internet connection limits what you can do	16	21
Lack of contact, interaction and exchange of information with work colleagues	18	13
Lack motivation, find it hard to focus or concentrate at home	17	14
Interrupted by noise made by others/distractions at home	17	14
Have had to provide childcare/home schooling and/or care for others	13	14
The nature of work made it difficult	10	16
Have had to share space and equipment	-	-
Have had less work to do	-	-
N	116	125

Note: Responses include those who indicated their output had decreased greatly or slightly. Respondents were invited to indicate two main reasons).

## **Homeworking and workers' work effort**

We now turn to examine the effort people expended at work while working at home and the consequences for their health and well-being. There is a vast literature on work effort, the great bulk of which has come to accept its multi-faceted nature and that its measurement requires the use of a variety of indicators that include both objective and perceptual data derived from employee responses. We use a range of such measures that have been proven in previous international research to be associated empirically with employee well-being.

Work effort has two dimensions: 'extensive effort' and 'intensive effort' (Green, 2001). The former dimension refers to the time people spend at work; that is, their working hours. We measured this by asking respondents how many hours did they normally work each week, including overtime and if their hours of work had increased when they worked at home. The latter dimension ('intensive effort') refers to the intensity with which people work while at work. It includes both the physical and cognitive inputs or demands of the job. We assessed the intensity of the work process by asking respondents how often they felt they had to work 'at very high speeds' and whether they had to work 'to tight deadlines'. With both of these measures if respondents indicated they did so 'all the time' or 'almost all of the time' we took that to mean they occupied 'high intensity' jobs. Together we combine these two measures – working hours and job intensity (extensive and intensive effort) - to constitute a summative measure of the work effort placed on workers in their jobs. This combined measure is calculated as a mean average that includes (i) working at very high speeds, (ii) working to tight deadlines and (iii) increases in working time during the pandemic.

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

The results indicate that over a third of respondents working at home worked in excess of what is typically considered to be a normal working week; that is 40 hours per week.<sup>8</sup> Of those who did, 21 per cent worked between 41 and 48 hours while a further 16 per cent worked in excess of 48 hours per week (see results presented in Table 5). Men were considerably more likely to report that they worked in excess of 48 hours per week than were women. Women however were more likely than men to report that their working hours increased while working at home. Women were also more likely to work at very high speeds and to tight deadlines and, overall, had higher levels of work intensification than men. There were also differences across sectors and occupational groups. Private sector employees and those occupying senior managerial positions were more likely to report higher effort levels – across the two dimensions and four separate measures – than those employed in the public sector and those in other occupational cohorts. Given the latter finding, it is perhaps no great surprise that effort levels also tended to move in tandem with increases in income levels. It is also the case that workers with caring responsibilities reported high level of work intensification while working at home. And while levels tended in the main to decline as children's ages increased, those with children in early primary school reported the highest work effort levels.

---

Women were more likely than men to report that their working hours increased while working at home

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

**Table 5: Work effort among those workers working at home: dimensions and cumulative scores**

	Extensive effort		Intensive effort		Cumulative work effort %
	Work 48 hrs+ %	Increase in working hours %	Work at very high speeds %	Work to tight deadlines %	
<i>Gender</i>					
Men	22	42	31	46	38
Women	10	50	40	47	46
<i>Sector</i>					
Private sector	18	44	40	50	45
Public sector	10	50	29	42	37
State-owned company	18	50	29	39	41
Not-for-profit	6	41	42	38	39
<i>Occupational groups<sup>1</sup></i>					
Mgr/director/snr official	29	54	43	54	54
Professional Occupations	14	53	36	48	43
Assoc Prof Occupations	16	39	30	45	38
<i>Caring Responsibilities</i>					
Financially dependent children	18	46	36	51	44
Infants (1-3 years)	20	30	39	50	38
Early stage primary (4-8 years)	14	46	34	56	45
Late stage primary (8-12 years)	19	46	36	51	47
Post primary (13-18 years)	26	58	40	48	47
<i>Salary Levels</i>					
Below €20,000	10	35	29	41	37
Between €20,000 and €39,999	25	41	34	42	37
Between €40,000 and €64,999	23	51	40	53	49
Over €65,000	47	61	45	58	49
All	16	46	35	46	42

Total N = 889

Notes

1. We only provide the results for those occupations whose work effort exceeded the average scores recorded for all those working at home.
2. The cumulative work effort (combined work intensification) has been calculated as an average that includes the following variables: (i) working at very high speeds, (ii) work to tight deadlines and (iii) an increase in working hours during the pandemic. This combined measured does not include the item of working long hours (48+) as this is a binary item and would not be methodologically equivalent to the other items, which follow a Likert scale.

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

In Table 6 we then take the data in respect of the cumulative work effort score (extensive + intensive work effort) from Table 5 and examine the proportion of jobs that reside along a continuum from being characterised by very high to very low work intensification. The overall picture provided by this data clearly indicates that a large proportion of the working at home workforce (42 per cent) found that the effort demanded of them by their work to be very high or high. A mere 11 per cent found it to be very low or low.

**Table 6. Levels of cumulative work effort (combined work intensification) during the Covid-19 pandemic for workers who worked at home**

	% of workers
Very High Work Intensification	7%
High Work Intensification	35%
Moderate Work Intensification	47%
Low Work Intensification	10%
Very Low Work Intensification	1%

N = 837

Note

1. The cumulative work effort or combined work intensification measure is the same as the one specified in Table 5 and was calculated by using an arithmetic mean that includes three variables, namely, (i) working at very high speeds, (ii) working to tight deadlines and (iii) increases in working time during the pandemic. Table 6 displays the different levels of cumulative work effort during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In sum, then, from the data presented in Tables 5 and 6, we can reasonably claim that a large number of workers experienced considerable effort intensification while working at home during the pandemic.

# Homeworking, effort levels and workers' health and well-being

Next we examine whether this evidence of high and increased levels of work intensification is aligned with an impairment in employees' health and well-being. From our reading of the international literature we expected that there could well be such a link (Green et al., 2022), but were mindful too that the effects of work intensification on people's health might be mitigated or moderated by organisational features of their work, including line management support, the provision of certain job resources such as training and job autonomy, and the quality of management-employee relations and whether workers were represented by a trade union.

---

a substantial balance of workers reported an impairment in their mental health and well-being

We addressed the issue of employees' health in a number of ways. First, we asked respondents whether homeworking had an effect on their mental health and well-being; second, on their physical health (i.e., whether they had developed any musculoskeletal problems - aches and pains in their back, shoulders, limbs, etc.); and third, on their relations with those whom they live. The responses, provided in Table 7 below, show a substantial balance of workers reported an impairment in their mental health and well-being, and in their physical health, although their relationship with others tended to remain unchanged or altered positively.

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

**Table 7. The effects of WAH on workers' well-being, health and relationships with others**

	Improved %	No change %	Impaired %
Mental health and well-being	25	39	36
Physical health	20	47	33
Relationship with those live with	31	52	17

N = 889

The results reported in Table 8 show that the effects on women's health are particularly stark: 43 per cent reported an impairment in their mental health and well-being, in comparison to almost a third of men, which is also not an inconsiderable proportion. Women were also more likely to report that their physical health had deteriorated as had their relationship with those whom they lived.

---

The effects on women's health are particularly stark



# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

**Table 8. Impaired Health, Well-being and Relationships while Working at Home**

	Mental Health %	Physical Health & Wellbeing %	Relationship with Others %
<i>Gender</i>			
Men	30	30	14
Women	43	36	20
<i>Sector</i>			
Private sector	34	34	15
Public sector	42	35	20
State-owned company	36	18	11
Not-for-profit	44	36	27
<i>Occupational groups<sup>1</sup></i>			
Mgr/director/snr official	31	31	15
Professional Occupations	40	33	17
Assoc Prof Occupations	32	38	18
<i>Caring Responsibilities</i>			
Financially dependent children	33	32	17
Infants (1-3 years)	29	31	16
Early stage primary (4-8 years)	33	34	16
Late stage primary (8-12 years)	42	36	22
Post primary (13-18 years)	31	32	16
<i>Salary Levels</i>			
Below €20,000	37	27	23
Between €20,000 and €39,999	40	33	19
Between €40,000 and €64,999	31	35	12
Over €65,000	35	32	22
All	36	33	17

Total N = 889

Note: In relation to the effects on health and wellbeing, we only indicate those cases where they reported to have been impaired greatly or slightly.

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

There were also differences across different sectors of the economy with those employed in the public sector and not-for-profit organisations being considerably more likely to experience an impairment in their mental health and well-being, physical health and relationship with others. In terms of occupational cohorts, those working in professional and associated professional occupations were more likely to report an impairment in their mental health and wellbeing. Income tended not to be as important in revealing diverging trends.

Finally, and interestingly, we identified different effects across parents with children of different ages. The mental health and well-being of parents of children attending late stage primary school were most impaired compared to parents of children in other age cohorts.

We also went further to assess the mental and emotional demands that working at home placed on people by looking at responses to four additional items. First, we asked respondents a direct question as to how often they found their "work stressful". While our measure is not a sophisticated one it does have the benefit of providing an additional measure to assess the negative effects of homeworking. Stress, too, can be seen as a proxy for or an outcome of work intensification (Green 2001). Second, we enquired whether employees continued to feel burdened by their work after they finished their work. We used three measures that included whether they kept worrying about job problems, whether they found it difficult to unwind and switch off, and whether they felt capable of detaching or disconnecting themselves from their work. With respect to the latter item, the interviewer provided the following explanation to respondents, "to disconnect is to turn off your electronic devices - phone, messaging apps, laptop, etc. - so that you do not have to respond to customer queries or matters raised by work colleagues, clients or by your employer outside normal working hours". Third, we enquired as to the degree to which employees' job demands interfered with their family life. Finally, we examined workers' sense of job security by asking how often they felt they were "easily replaceable".<sup>9</sup>

---

The mental health and well-being of parents of children attending late stage primary school were most impaired compared to parents of children in other age cohorts.

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

A total of 17 per cent of our sample reported finding their job stressful all of the time or almost all of the time (See Table 9). Fifteen per cent indicated that they keep worrying about work problems once they have finished work. Almost one in four workers feel they are easily replaceable and one in five workers find it challenging to unwind after a day's work. Additionally, nearly one in ten workers revealed that their job demands interfere with their family life. Finally, one in four employees feel that they have to stay always connected to their job outside normal working hours. And not surprisingly, we identified a strong significant correlation between those who feel they have to remain always connected to their work outside normal working hours and those who found it challenging to unwind after work.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 9 The extent to which workers' jobs are mentally and emotionally demanding on workers (%)**

	All the time	Almost all the time	Some of the time	Rarely	Never
Find your work stressful	4	13	59	19	7
Keep worrying about job problems	5	10	46	26	12
Feel easily replaceable	14	9	36	26	16
Difficult to unwind and switch off	7	12	39	26	18
Demands of job interferes with family life	3	6	39	30	22
	<i>I always...</i>	<i>I sometimes...</i>	<i>I rarely...</i>	<i>I never...</i>	
...feel I have to remain connected to my work outside normal working hours	24	43	17	16	

N = 889

In Table 10 below, we examine the varying consequences of homeworking on people's mental and emotional health across different worker cohorts. Overall, women are more likely to find their work to be more mentally and emotionally demanding. They also feel considerably more insecure in their employment in that they feel easily replaceable. The one exception is in respect of the ability disconnect from their work where men are twice as likely to be connected always to their work outside normal working hours. Workers in the not-for-profit

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

sector find their job much more demanding mentally and emotionally than their counterparts in other sectors of the economy. Others who find it difficult to disconnect include parents of children of post primary school age, senior managers and those earning over €65,000.

**Table 10. The extent to which employees' jobs are mentally and emotionally demanding on workers across different segments**

	Stressful Job* %	Worrying re work %	Easy replaceable %	Difficult Unwinding %	Interference with family %	Always Connect-ed† %
<i>Gender</i>						
Men	13	13	19	18	8	27
Women	19	18	27	21	9	19
<i>Sector</i>						
Private sector	18	16	19	22	8	22
Public sector	13	13	29	16	8	24
State-owned company	21	18	32	14	7	14
Not-for-profit	24	24	15	24	1	27
<i>Occupational groups<sup>1</sup></i>						
Mgr/director/snr official	20	19	17	22	10	36
Professional Occupations	18	16	23	20	10	23
Assoc Prof Occupations	13	12	18	17	8	22
<i>Caring Responsibilities</i>						
Financially dependent children	15	16	21	19	11	26
Infants (1-3 years)	16	19	25	20	10	29
Early stage primary (4-8 years)	13	17	21	15	11	22
Late stage primary (8-12 years)	18	17	18	27	13	25
Post primary (13-18 years)	17	18	18	19	13	34
<i>Salary Levels</i>						
Below €20,000	1	18	35	13	6	24
Between €20,000 and €39,999	16	12	28	18	6	18
Between €40,000 and €64,999	20	16	13	20	10	30
Over €65,000	20	22	16	31	10	47
All	17	15	23	19	9	24

Total N = 889

\* In relation to the first five items, respondents could have replied 'all the time', 'almost all of the time', 'some of the time', 'rarely', or 'never'. The results reported here only include those who replied 'all the time' or 'almost all of the time'.

† Respondents could have replied 'always', 'sometimes', 'rarely' or 'never'. The results reported here only include those who always feel they have to remain connected.

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

---

The higher work intensification levels in a job, the greater likelihood that the job holder finds their work stressful

We noted above that respondents recorded a balance of increasing work effort (extensive and intensive), an impairment in their physical and mental health and well-being, and, here in this discussion, an inability to disconnect from their work, as well as a balance of increasing stress. The question now is whether these various responses are correlated. The results point, in the main, towards a significant relationship. Thus, for example, the higher work intensification levels in a job, the greater likelihood that the job holder finds their work stressful,<sup>11</sup> that they would continue to worry about job problems after they finished their work;<sup>12</sup> that they would feel unable to unwind and switch off from their work,<sup>13</sup> and that their work interfered with their family life.<sup>14</sup> As such, the higher the effort level demanded of a job, both in hours worked and the effort expended, the greater the likelihood the person found their work to be stressful as well as mentally and emotionally demanding. Similarly, there is a significant relationship between an increase in working hours and an impairment to workers' mental health<sup>15</sup> as there was too between an increase in workers' stress levels and impairment to their mental health.<sup>16</sup> Further analysis, revealed that it is when these demands come together – as measured by our cumulative score in respect of effort intensification – that the effects are strongest. (The full list of the value of the correlation coefficients are reported in Appendix A).

With such a set of consistent results, it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between an increase in workers' effort levels (extensive and intensive) and the emotional and mental demands placed on workers when they work at home.

## **Are the adverse consequences of working at home moderated by the presence of particular job resources?**

Our findings to date indicate that, in the main, working at home is associated with job intensification, both in terms of the long and lengthening hours of work, and increased effort (physical and cognitive) expended by workers. Many workers too find these increased demands are associated with impaired health (physical and mental well-being), increased stress, an inability to switch off from work as well as increased emotional demands. While these are the study's dominant findings, in some cases, the relationship between working at home and whether workers encounter effort intensification and an impairment in their health and well-being is weaker than in others, or these effects are not encountered across the entire workforce. This raises an important possibility: that is, that effort intensity and stress may not always have negative consequences for workers, that some workers at least who work at home are energised by undertaking work that is demanding and stressful. We know from our reading of the literature, for example, that this may be the case where particular job resources are in place such as work is organised in a manner that permits workers high levels of job autonomy, where there are opportunities for employee involvement and participation, and where line management support staff and provide them with extensive training. By contrast, however, where excessive workloads are combined with low job autonomy, little or no employee participation and poor training, greater "work strain" is likely to emerge (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Green and Whitfield, 2009; Karasek, 1979). In other words, the effects of effort intensification are more pernicious where workers are ill-equipped in their training or in not possessing sufficient voice or job resources to mitigate its potentially negative effects.

---

where excessive workloads are combined with low job autonomy, little or no employee participation and poor training, greater "work strain" is likely to emerge

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

---

Where a union was recognised by management for the purpose of representing employees in the organisation, working at home was less likely to be associated with work intensification

To examine these various possibilities we explored whether the demanding and damaging effects of the increased work intensity required of working at home were moderated by other attributes of people's work. Here we included measures of line management support, training and job autonomy,<sup>17</sup> the quality of management-employee relations and whether workers were represented by a trade union. We anticipated in advance that, if these various elements were in place, the stress and strain on people would be lessened.

We were wrong. Our results point to an almost uniform picture. There was no correlation in the main between the provision of these identified job resources and the effects working at home had on workers' health and well-being. For example, there was no relationship whatsoever between workers' mental and physical health and trust in management, or in the quality of the management-employee relationship. Neither was there an association between workers' mental health and whether they received job training and also their level of job autonomy.<sup>18</sup> Neither was there any correlation between workers' experiencing work intensification and their trust in management, their levels of job autonomy, training provision, or the broader quality of the management-employee relationship towards employees.

What then is the import of these findings? They suggest that, irrespective of the presences of the identified job resources and supports, job intensification was a general feature of working at home. There was one exception, however and that related to union representation. The findings suggest – and the relationship here is a modest one – that where a union was recognised by management for the purpose of representing employees in the organisation, working at home was less likely to be associated with work intensification.<sup>19</sup>

In summary, we conclude that for many employees homeworking is associated with an increase in their work effort, long working hours, stress and an inability to disconnect from their work – all of which results in jobs which are emotionally and mentally demanding. These draining and damaging effects were found to

be more apparent among women than men and were found not to be moderated by the provision of a series of identified job resources and training, save for the presence of trade union representation.

## **Future work location preferences: in the workplace, at home or a blending of the two**

We turn now to examine workers' preferences as to where they would like to undertake their work in the future. Specifically we asked, 'When the COVID-19 pandemic ends and all restrictions are lifted, where would you like to work, assuming you had the choice?' We restrict our analysis here to those workers who had experience of working at home during the pandemic. The results are reported in Table 11. The results are complex. First, the balance of opinion (74 per cent) is decidedly towards a preference for a hybrid approach to work; that is, option B+C+D combined, alternating between working at home at least some days and other days in the workplace. Second, over a third of respondents (35 per cent) favour a return to the workplace, either for most of the working week (17 per cent) or on a full-time basis (18 per cent) (option E+D). Third, only eight per cent report a preference to work at home full-time (option A). The proportion increases to 30 per cent when options A+B are combined; that is, working at home on a full-time basis or at least 3 days a week.

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

**Table 11. Future work location preferences when the COVID-19 pandemic ends and all restrictions are lifted**

	A Full-time at home %	B Mostly at home (3+days/ week) %	C Equal Mix %	D Mostly in the work- place (3+ days/week) %	E Full-time in the work- place %
All	8	22	35	17	18
<i>Gender</i>					
Men	9	21	36	19	16
Women	7	23	34	16	20
<i>Sector</i>					
Private sector	10	23	37	17	12
Public sector	4	19	29	18	29
State-owned company	7	25	50	7	11
Not-for-profit	12	18	36	27	6
<i>Occupational groups<sup>1</sup></i>					
Mgr/director/snr official	9	18	44	19	11
Professional Occupations	7	20	30	19	24
Assoc Prof Occupations	8	27	37	19	8
<i>Caring Responsibilities</i>					
Financially dependent children	10	24	33	15	18
Infants (1-3 years)	10	25	37	11	15
Early stage primary (4-8 years)	9	21	35	20	15
Late stage primary (8-12 years)	10	25	29	21	19
Post primary (13-18 years)	5	25	31	17	22
<i>Salary Levels</i>					
Below €20,000	12	19	21	21	26
Between €20,000 and €39,999	7	21	32	18	23
Between €40,000 and €64,999	10	24	38	16	12
Over €65,000	2	24	53	13	7
<i>Age Cohorts</i>					
16-24	3	10	35	26	26
25-34	7	24	34	20	15
35-44	8	22	36	16	17
45-54	7	24	37	16	15
55-64	8	18	20	16	28
65+	-	-	-	-	100

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

	A Full-time at home %	B Mostly at home (3+days/ week) %	C Equal Mix %	D Mostly in the work- place (3+ days/week) %	E Full-time in the work- place %
<i>Geographical Location</i>					
Dublin City & Co	9	23	35	18	14
Other Leinster	7	22	34	14	23
Munster	7	19	35	24	16
Ulster & Connaught	4	21	39	16	21
Urban	8	22	37	19	14
Commuter Belt	8	23	35	17	17
Rural	7	20	34	16	24
<i>Length of homeworking during pandemic</i>					
The entire period	13	36	39	8	4
The majority of the period	7	19	38	23	14
Some of the period	2	9	32	22	35
A small period	3	8	23	31	35
A very small period	-	7	33	29	31

Total N = 889

Notes: Urban includes: Dublin City, South County Dublin, DLR, Cork City, Limerick City and Galway City. Commuter belt includes: Kildare, Fingal County, Wicklow, Meath, Cork County, Limerick County, Galway County and Clare. Rural includes: Carlow, Cavan, Donegal, Kerry, Kilkenny, Laois, Leitrim, Longford, Louth, Mayo, Monaghan, Offaly, Roscommon, Sligo, Tipperary, Waterford, Westmeath and Wexford.

We look next at the differences in people's preferences depending on their gender, their sector of employment, occupation and income levels, age cohorts, location of residence, whether respondents had caring responsibilities for young children, and length of time they had worked at home during the pandemic. Overall, women have a slightly higher preference to work full-time in the workplace. This is also the case for those employed in the public sector and parents of teenage children. Respondents living in rural areas also show a higher preference for working full-time in the workplace. A slightly higher proportion of workers working in state-owned companies (82 per cent) and not-for-profit organisations (81 per cent) indicated a preference for a hybrid or blended approach to work (B+C+D combined). Managers and associate professionals also tend to prefer some form of hybrid working. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, a preference for a blended

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

---

Respondents living in cities and commuting belts indicated a stronger preference for a hybrid approach to work than those living in rural areas

approach to work increases in step with higher salary levels. So, for example, while 60 per cent of those earning below €20,000 have a preference for hybrid working, the figure rises to over 90 per cent for those reporting salary levels in excess of €65,000. In terms of age, seven in ten young people (16 to 24 years of age) have a preference either for a hybrid approach or for working mostly or full-time in the workplace (C+D+E). A preference for either a hybrid approach or working at home full-time or mostly increases with people's age.

We also found that the differences in preferences between the location of people's residence were small. That said, respondents living in cities and commuting belts indicated a stronger preference for a hybrid approach to work than those living in rural areas. We observe, too, that the longer the length of time people spent working at home during the pandemic, the higher their preference for hybrid working. For instance, over 80 per cent of those who had worked at home during the entire period of the pandemic expressed a preference for a blended approach to work, compared to some 60 per cent of those who worked at home for shorter periods of time.

Finally, we were able to identify those workers who indicated a clear and equivocal preference for returning to the workplace on fulltime basis. They included those who felt obliged to remain always connected to their work outside normal working hours (see Table A8 in Appendix 1), those who had experienced impaired mental health and wellbeing<sup>20</sup>, and those whose relations with the people they lived with had deteriorated while they were engaged in homeworking.<sup>21</sup>

We explored too as to the reasons that lay behind workers' preferences for wanting to return to the workplace to work all or most of their working week. The results are reported in Table 12.

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

**Table 12. Reasons for preferring to return to work full-time or mostly (3-4 days) in the workplace for those who worked at home during the pandemic**

	%
More productive when working in workplace with colleagues	37
Miss the contact with my work colleagues	35
Prefer to keep my working life separate from my domestic life	26
Domestic circumstances not conducive to WAH	9
Nature of the job	9
Prospects for career advancement better if working in workplace	4
Lack necessary broadband/internet capacity to WAH	3

N = 889

Note: The combined percentage scores may exceed 100% as respondents were permitted to mention more than one reason.

We also enquired of respondents how much of their work did they believe could be carried out at home. We believed this to be important so as to discern whether the preference of the balance of employees to return to the workplace on a full-time basis or through some form of hybrid working arrangement is informed by the perceived impracticalities of performing their work at home. The results are reported in Table 13.

**Table 13. Future possibilities to carry out work at home**

	All %	Most %	About half %	Just a little %	None %	N
Looking to the future, how much of your work do you think you could carry out at home?	27	26	20	19	8	889

Over half of respondents (53 per cent) believed they could carry out all or most of their work at home. When these results in Table 12 are then put alongside those reported in Table 11, it is clear that the preference to return to the workplace is not informed solely by the reason that they need to go to the workplace to get their work done. While it is the case that employees' preference is at least partially related to their productivity with a little over one-third (37 per cent) believing they are more productive in the workplace when working with their work colleagues, two other reasons were cited as or nearly as frequently: they miss the social contact with their work colleagues (35 per cent) together with a preference to keep their domestic and work lives separate (26 per cent).

## Conclusions: some implications for practice and policy

In conclusion, we provide some lessons from our research for policy makers and employers. We stress that our research is the only study to date to fully assess the consequences of working at home for employees that is derived from a sample of respondents that is representative of the population of workers in Ireland. We have documented our findings carefully and in detail so that lessons can be learnt particularly in respect of the risks that employees may bear by working remotely and what policy responses might mitigate such dangers. We turn first to consider the advantages of homeworking.

The advantages of homeworking for our society and communities are considerable: less commuting, less pollution, more time spent with our families and in our communities, and greater flexibility to organise our work around our domestic duties and caring responsibilities. The advantages for employers are also evident: less need for office buildings and car parking spaces, higher productivity, being seen positively by their workforces in their provision of flexible working arrangements, but also – and less commented upon – cheaper labour. It warrants emphasis, remote workers may be hired from anywhere and not necessarily as a direct employee on a permanent contract.

---

These advantages notwithstanding, many employers will want their employees back in the office

These advantages notwithstanding, many employers will want their employees back in the office, in some cases on a full-time basis just as they were before the pandemic. The reasons may vary but they are likely to include the requirements to induct and socialise new staff, to inculcate staff identity with and commitment to the organisation, to cast oversight over staff performance, and to capture the insights and performance improvements that emerge from

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

spontaneous informal interactions between staff when they are present physically in the one place. Some employees will be happy to comply and will return to the office on a full-time basis, but they are likely to be a minority. While the evidence clearly points to most workers wanting to come into work at least for some days of the week, they also want to continue with an arrangement that permits them to remain at home for other days, if only one or two days a week. The reasons employees may have for wanting to come into work are likely to complement those of employers: a desire to profit from the collegiality that springs from interacting in-person with colleagues, to raise their profile and to enhance their promotion opportunities as well as contributing to the future survival of the enterprise. But where such an arrangement is combined with working at home, at least for some days each week, workers will also be able to maintain the flexibility they have grown accustomed to and value. As a consequence, blended or hybrid working is likely to become the preferred option for large numbers of employees and employers. However, hybrid working is not a single or uniform phenomenon; it can take many forms and the managerial consequences and challenges are huge. To illustrate this, consider the following questions that are very likely to confront employers:

- Who will work remotely and on what basis? Will it be that a defined cohort will work remotely permanently and the remaining staff will be required to come into the office?
- On what basis might employees be selected to join either cohort? Will it be based on the nature of the work performed, or will it be based on employees' preferences?
- If employees are to come into the office on some days each week, will those days be the same day for all employees or will it vary depending on the workers concerned or on the projects they might be working on?

---

blended or hybrid working is likely to become the preferred option for large numbers of employees and employers

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

---

Employers must now act to define the parameters of hybrid working. To not do so, will be to ignore employees' recalibrated expectations in respect of work-life balance as well as to risk increased labour turnover

- How will remote workers' performance be managed? Are there prior measures of performance already in existence against which homeworkers' productivity might be benchmarked and assessed? Will performance standards inform who is to be afforded the opportunity to work at home? In such circumstances, what of the possibilities that line management bias might intrude on who is favoured?
- How will any new arrangements be arrived at? Will management consult with staff and their representatives, will management decide unilaterally, or will groups of workers be afforded the autonomy to organise working arrangements among themselves?

Together with this mix of possible arrangements, motives and preferences, employers must now act to define the parameters of hybrid working. To not do so, will be to ignore employees' recalibrated expectations in respect of work-life balance as well as to risk increased labour turnover. To adopt an approach of, 'let's wait and see how it works out' will not suffice. At best, it will be ham-fisted and, at worst, it will establish precedent and embed expectations which will then have to be unwound in a manner that does not infringe employees' legal rights. To alter existing remote working arrangements or to deny an employee's request to work remotely will require employers to tread very carefully indeed. To put it plainly: employers do not hold all the cards here.

Matters are complicated further by the potential for homeworking to impair people's health. Our evidence is clear: homeworking is associated with an increase in workers' working hours, an inability to disconnect from work and more demanding effort levels. In turn this is linked with a general intensification of people's work, increased stress and impaired physical and mental well-being. The HSA's Guidance on Working from Home for Employers and Employees (2021) recognises these risks in a context where the boundaries between work and home are no longer fixed. Our findings

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

demonstrate that these detrimental outcomes are particularly associated with female workers and for parents of children aged 8 to 18, for whom work intensification has been the most severe.

Employers, then, would be well-advised to stay in frequent contact with and review the well-being of their staff to ensure that the negative consequences found in this study are not produced. When people come to the office regularly it is easier for line managers to spot that a colleague is unwell. However, recognising impaired mental well-being is considerably more difficult. Remote working confounds this difficulty even more. As a consequence, remote workers will need to be empowered by their employers to feel secure in saying, "I need to take some time off to take care of my mental well-being." Employers, too, will need to give explicit recognition in their policies that being sick takes a variety of forms and that their workplace culture take account of this. The government, for its part, needs to give more thought to widening access with a right to request flexible working arrangement to working parents of children older than 12 years of age, as is currently the proposed Work-Life Balance Bill (2022). Our evidence shows that the stresses and strains that parents encounter continue right up to the late teenage years.

We return to the benefits of working at home for employers, particularly those relating to productivity and how workers' performance might be best managed. The evidence from this study is clear: employees' productivity was not impaired while they worked at home. Indeed the balance of views is that workers' productivity increased. That this occurred without employers using surveillance technologies to monitor employees' work performance – many would not have had the time nor the resources to deploy them in any case as the pandemic swept rapidly through the country – or with little or no decline in workers' loyalty to their organisation, points to other factors being important in accounting for the increased performance levels of staff. The evidence identifies two:

---

recognising impaired mental well-being is considerably more difficult. Remote working confounds this difficulty even more.

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

---

A policy that allows employees to volunteer to work at home rather than everyone being compelled to do so is likely to improve productivity

first, there was the convenience of working at home (no commuting, ease of making lunch, etc.) and workers being able to concentrate better; and second, staff expended greater work effort and worked longer work hours. Both these factors mattered a great deal, but underlying them was little or no diminishment in employees' loyalty to their work or organisation. This links with people's future preferences and their likely effects on their productivity levels. We would anticipate that particular selection effects are likely to come into play; that is, a policy that allows employees to volunteer to work at home rather than everyone being compelled to do so is likely to improve productivity. We found that those workers with the lowest self-reported levels of productivity were the most eager to return to the office, while those with the highest productivity levels were among the most keen to continue to work at home when social restrictions are fully lifted.<sup>22</sup> This mirrors recent evidence from the UK (Felstead and Reuschke, 2021) and similar policy implications are drawn: this sorting effect (i.e., based by people's preferences) indicates that increased levels of homeworking in the future may raise rather than reduce productivity levels. The implications for management, then, are evident. First, they will have to become comfortable with the long-term challenge of managing a workforce that wishes to remain dispersed and out-of-sight for at least some of the working week. Second, this will require the maintenance or the adoption of a 'trusting approach' in place of a close control model of work relations that deploys surveillance technologies.

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

In summary, we make the case that homeworking represents a most significant – if not the most significant – challenge currently confronting employers and it is potentially momentous in its consequences for the organisation and management of work. It is also a huge challenge for the state as the raft of pending legislative measures and code of practice reflect, and it is well advised to remain vigilant in its oversight of the parameters of the proposed new regulatory arrangements. For employees there are huge benefits in the adoption of hybrid forms of work and particularly where they are introduced on a voluntary basis and with their participation. Unions, too, can play an important role in moderating the more harmful effects of homeworking as evidenced in this study but the challenges of doing so with a dispersed workforce are significant.

To continue to fully and properly assess the effects of remote working in Ireland will require further research. This paper is derived from a study of people's views where they were compelled to work at home arising from the Covid-19 restrictions. While important lessons can be learnt, it will also be important to repeat this research in circumstances where workers return to work under more 'normal' circumstances. The coming years are likely to be periods of significant experimentation with remote working. There will be successes and there will be failures. Some will benefit, others will lose out. The bases for these variable outcomes will need to be identified. There can be no doubt however: the changing location and organisation of work will have profound implications for workers, businesses and the state. This is – in a very real sense – the "future of work", but the challenges and choices confront us now and we will have to learn fast how best to manage them.

---

To continue to fully and properly assess the effects of remote working in Ireland will require further research

## References

- Bakker, A. and Demerouti, E. (2007), "The Job Demands -Resources model: state of the art", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22: 3: 309-328.
- CIPD (2021) *Flexible Working: Lessons from the Pandemic*. April. London: Chartered Institute for Professional Development.
- CSO (2022) *Pulse Survey Our Lives Online: Remote Work November 2021*. <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/fp/fp-psolo/pulsesurvey-our-livesonline-remoteworknovember2021/background-notes/> (Accessed online 7/03/2022).
- DBEI (2019) *Remote Work in Ireland Future Jobs 2019*, Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Government of Ireland.
- Eurofound (2020), *Living, Working and COVID-19*, COVID-19 series, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Felstead, A. (2021). Are online job quality quizzes of any value? Selecting questions, maximising quiz completions and estimating biases. *Employee Relations* 43(3): 724-741.
- Felstead, A. (2022) *Remote Working: A Research Overview*. London: Routledge.
- Felstead, A. and Reuschke, D. (2021) A flash in the pan or a permanent change? The growth of homeworking during the pandemic and its effect on employee productivity in the UK. *Information Technology & People*. ([doi:10.1108/ITP-11-2020-0758](https://doi.org/10.1108/ITP-11-2020-0758)).
- Green, F. (2001). It's been a hard day's night: The concentration and intensification of work in late twentieth-century Britain. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 39(1): 53-80.

## Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

Green, F and Whitfield, K (2009) 'Employees' experience of work', in Brown, W, Bryson, A, Forth, J and Whitfield, K (eds) *The Evolution of the Modern Workplace*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Green, F., Felstead, A., Gallie, D., & Henseke, G. (2021). [Working Still Harder](#). *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 75(2), March 2022, pp. 458-487

Karasek, R A (1979) 'Job demands, job decision latitude, and mental strain: implications for job redesign', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24: 285-308.

McCarthy, A., Ahearne, A., Bohle Carbonell, K., Ó Síocháin, T. and Frost, D. (2020a). *Remote Working During COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey Initial Report*. Galway, Ireland: NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission.

McCarthy, A., Bohle Carbonell, K., Ó Síocháin, T. and Frost, D. (2020b). *Remote Working during COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey - Phase II Report*. Galway, Ireland: NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission.

McCarthy, A., O'Connor, N., Ó Síocháin, T. and Frost, D. (2021). *Remote Working: Ireland's National Survey - Phase III Report*. Galway, Ireland: NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission.

Mehdi, T and Morisette, R (2021) *Working from Home: Productivity and Preferences*, Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

## **Appendix 1: Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficients**

**Table A1: Increased effort put into your work**

Items	Correlation Coefficient
Increased effort put into your work and increased productivity	0.450** (<0.001)
Increased effort put into your work and increased working hours	0.426** (<0.001)
Increased effort put into your work and cooperation with colleagues	0.245** (<0.001)
Increased effort put into your work and loyalty to the organisation	0.125** (<0.001)
Increased effort put into your work and employer's monitoring	0.118** (<0.001)
Increased effort put into your work and union representation	-0.104** (<0.002)
Increased effort put into your work and mental health	-0.012 (0.715)
Increased effort put into your work and physical health	-0.093**(<0.005)
Increased effort put into your work and relationship with others	0.062 (0.062)

**Table A2: Increased working hours**

Items	Correlation Coefficient
Increased working hours and increased productivity	0.329** (<0.001)
Increased in working hours and not need to commute	0.007 (0.789)
Increased in working hours and being more able to concentrate	0.151* (<0.002)
Increased working hours and union representation	0.036 (0.284)
Increased in working hours and mental health	-0.116** (<0.001)
Increased in working hours and physical health	-0.140** (<0.001)
Increased in working hours and relationship with others	-0.016 (0.629)

**Table A3: Working at high speeds and toward tight deadlines**

Items	Correlation Coefficient
Working at high speeds and mental health	-0.043 (0.181)
Working at high speeds and physical health	-0.036 (0.272)
Working at high speeds and relationship with others	0.011 (0.735)
Working at high speeds and union representation	-0.115** (<0.001)
Working towards tight deadlines and mental health	0.035 (0.277)
Working towards tight deadlines and physical health	0.032 (0.330)
Working towards tight deadlines and relationship with others	0.045 (0.167)
Working towards tight deadlines and union representation	-0.100** (<0.003)

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

**Table A4: Work Intensification**

Items	Correlation Coefficient
Work intensification and increased productivity	0.271** (<0.001)
Work intensification and effort put into your work	0.277** (<0.001)
Work intensification and mental health	-0.049 (0.146)
Work intensification and physical health	-0.085* (0.010)
Work intensification and relationship with others	0.024 (0.469)
Work intensification and union representation	-0.092** (<0.005)
Work intensification and stressful job	0.370** (<0.001)
Work intensification and worrying about work	0.311** (<0.001)
Work intensification and feeling easily replaceable	0.007 (0.827)
Work intensification and being unable to unwind/switch off	0.316** (<0.001)
Work intensification and interference with family life	0.320** (<0.001)

**Table A5: Feeling always connected**

Items	Correlation Coefficient
Feeling always connected and being unable to unwind/switch off	0.401** (<0.001)
Feeling always connected and mental health	-0.093** (0.004)
Feeling always connected and physical health	-0.082** (0.012)
Feeling always connected and relationship with others	-0.091** (0.005)
Feeling always connected and union representation	0.032 (0.332)

**Table A6: Stressful job / Worrying about work**

Items	Correlation Coefficient
Stressful job and mental health	-0.117** (<0.001)
Stressful job and physical health	-0.064* (0.047)
Stressful job and relationship with others	-0.039 (0.226)
Worrying about work and mental health	-0.143** (<0.001)
Worrying about work and physical health	-0.091** (<0.005)
Worrying about work and relationship with others	-0.085 (0.086)

**Table A7: Difficulty to unwind / Job interfering with family life**

Items	Correlation Coefficient
Difficulty to unwind and mental health	-0.196** (<0.001)
Difficulty to unwind and physical health	-0.107** (<0.001)
Difficulty to unwind and relationship with others	-0.098* (<0.003)
Job interfering with family life and mental health	-0.074* (<0.023)
Job interfering with family life and physical health	-0.105** (<0.001)
Job interfering with family life and relationship with others	-0.056 (0.083)

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

**Table A8: Preference for going back to the workplace fulltime or most of the time**

Items	Correlation Coefficient
Preference for going back to the workplace fulltime or most of the time and feeling always connected	-0.163** (<0.001)
Preference for going back to the workplace fulltime or most of the time and work intensification	0.095** (<0.004)
Preference for going back to the workplace fulltime or most of the time and impaired mental health	0.253** (<0.001)
Preference for going back to the workplace fulltime or most of the time and Impaired physical health	0.067* (<0.043)
Preference for going back to the workplace fulltime or most of the time and impaired relationship with others	0.220** (<0.001)
Preference for going back to the workplace fulltime or most of the time and decreased levels of productivity	0.434** (<0.001)

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

## Endnotes

1 In our calculations, we subtract the 'not stated' responses from the total N before deriving our estimates. We are grateful to Sheila Bulman of the CSO for guiding us through the LFS data.

2 Here we use a widely accepted measure of productivity – that is output per hour. Specifically we asked respondents what effect, if any, had working at home on the amount of work they got done per hour compared to how much they got done when they were not working at home. Five possible responses were provided: increased greatly, increased slightly, little or no change, decreased slightly or decreased greatly. A conceivable shortcoming of this form of questioning, as others too have emphasised (Felstead 2022), is that it relies on respondents reporting on their own productivity levels and making comparisons with the past. This may result in exaggerated estimates where respondents overstate their productivity levels in an attempt to demonstrate – to themselves and others – that they are well able to work at home and/or to enhance their chances of being permitted to continue working at home in the future. Of course, the corollary may be also be true: those who do not wish to continue working at home may underestimate their productivity levels in an effort to be able to get back to the office. While we do not dismiss these possible biases out of hand, we are inclined to accept employees' responses for what they are. Certainly the evidence of our study accords well with the positive reviews of homeworking and productivity levels derived from recent surveys of employers (CIPD, 2021). That said, other research points to additional complexities in the links between homeworking and productivity arising from employees' different skill levels and domestic caring responsibilities (Mehdi and Morisette, 2021). Further analysis involving multivariate modelling will help to reveal whether such complexities exist in our data.

We enter, however, one other important caveat. Despite asking our respondents to focus on the amount of work they got done per hour – and emphasising this – there remains the possibility that some at least may have reported on their total output levels over the period of their working day (which may have lengthened), and not strictly or solely on their output per hour. If they did so, their outputs may have increased but their productivity, *stricto sensu*, would have actually declined.

3 The Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.450\*\* (p = .001) (N= 892).

4 The Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.426\*\* (p = .001) (N= 889).

5 The Spearman rank correlation is 0.329\*\* (p = .001).

6 The Spearman correlation coefficient is 0.271\*\* (p-value <0.001).

7 The relationship between workers' effort levels and loyalty to the organisation and between effort levels and employee monitoring was also positive and significant but weaker. All results are reported in Appendix 1.

8 Under Irish legislation, an employer cannot permit an employee to work, in each 7 day period, more than an average of 48 hours. The reference period by which such a calculation is derived may be 4 or 6 months depending on the industry. This may be extended to 12 months where an agreement between the employer and employee is certified by the Labour Court. The law does not apply to all occupations; there are some specified exceptions.

9 To make clear again, we avoid the possible influence of formally constituted insecure forms of employment such as temporary or contract employment as we focus solely on full-time permanent workers.

10 The Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.401\*\* (p = 0.001).

11 The Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.370\*\* ; p-value <0.001.

12 The Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.311\*\* , p = <0.001.

13 The Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.316\*\* , <0.001.

14 The Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.320\*\*, <0.001).

# Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

- 15 The Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.116\*\* (<0.001).
- 16 The Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.117\*\* (<0.001).
- 17 The scale used asked respondents 'how much influence or say do you personally have over these various aspects of your job? Arranging to take an hour or two off during working hours to take care of personal or family matters, deciding the pace at which you work, deciding how to do your work (scheduling, organising tasks), deciding the times you start and finish work, and deciding the performance standards by which your work is judged or rated. Respondents could answer, none at all, just a little, a great deal, or complete say.
- 18 Albeit there was a very low positive correlation (0.108\*\*) in one of the five measures of job autonomy we used – that is, the autonomy to decide one's job performance standards and workers' physical health.
- 19 The Spearman rank correlation is -0.092\*\* (<0.005).
- 20 The Spearman rank correlation is 0.253\*\*, p = 0.001, N=889.
- 21 The Spearman rank correlation is 0.220\*\*, p = 0.001, N=889).
- 22 The Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.434\*\* (<0.001).

This report may be cited as: Geary, J. and Belizon, M. (2022) *Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 Pandemic, First findings from the UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021*, College of Business, University College Dublin.

Professor John Geary and Dr Maria Belizon are at the College of Business, University College Dublin.

## **Working at home and employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic**



**University College Dublin**  
Ireland's Global University

[www.ucd.ie](http://www.ucd.ie)