

WORK IN TIMES OF THE CORONAVIRUS – ON THE WAY TO THE NEW NORMAL

A study by Fraunhofer IAO in cooperation with
German Association for Human Resource Management (DGFP e.V.)



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1. WORK IN A STATE OF ABNORMALITY

Once upon a time, Once upon a time, an exceptional situation arose and turned the life of many people upside down. Everyone thought this extraordinary departure from normality would be over by the end of the Easter holidays or, at the latest, after the German Pentecost break. Then things would surely return to the old normal. Even if many restrictions have been eased and a semblance of normality is returning with the sunnier weather, our lives have changed markedly in recent weeks.

Working at a distance – that is, remote work – has transformed the world of gainful employment in ways that would have hardly been conceivable before mid-March 2020. Job activities and the degree of digitization allowing people to work from home on a scale that scarcely seemed possible. For many of us, every workday has become a procession of meetings via Teams, Webex, Zoom or other platforms. It is now a fact of working life that business trips take place exclusively in the virtual realm. We have developed routines and rituals of our own to lend structure to the working days' crowded agenda. And the longer this goes on and the clearer it is that this distance will remain a core component of the way we work for quite a while, the more time we will have to look beyond short-term coping strategies to see if and how working life could change in a perhaps more permanent way. Granted, turbo-like acceleration, densely packed working days and exhaustion are all part of this new job experience, but we are free to be creative in how we organize day-to-day working life. There is also the shared realization that if we all pull together, we can surmount great obstacles even in a situation as extraordinary as this.

Expectations about the ramifications of all this are as diverse as the authors of publications and purveyors of opinions about the impact on people, communication, and the job market. Some statements are borderline euphoric, other views are more sober, but one thing seems certain: The coexistence of virtual and office work will figure a lot more prominently in this "new normal" or "new different."

We have to ask ourselves if this learning experience, in part involuntary but nonetheless influential, will prompt a real paradigm shift in work design and collaborative relationships. If this is taken to its logical conclusion, the cornerstones of work design, once thought immovable, will begin to shift. Apart from people who work in sales and a few pioneering enterprises that had already delved deeply into digital work, the normal case has been for employees to commute to work, mostly to their employers' offices or production facilities. Private life and the working world had been fundamentally separate, even if recent years have seen the arrival of far more flexible formats as to the time and place of work, giving rise to alternative office management concepts such as shared desks and co-working spaces. Definitions vary greatly, so estimates are hard to make. However, we do know that this flexibility is enjoyed but by a minority of the gainfully employed and accounts for the smaller share of the hours worked and people on the job.

All that changed with the lockdown.

2. CORONAVIRUS – A GAME CHANGER FOR THE WORKING WORLD AND HR?

Fraunhofer IAO and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Personalführung (DGFP, German Association for Human Resource Management) set out to ask the decision-makers at companies for their assessment. We wanted to know what changes the coronavirus crisis has brought. How is work being done and, above all, what effects is this having that you can see? Which lessons have you learned in the last few weeks? What does all this mean for future work arrangements? What kind of organizational concepts will this require? Which skills will we need? What infrastructural demands have yet to be met?

In addition to taking stock of what has transpired, we want to learn what is going to happen: How do we shape the future and what will have to be done to accomplish this? To this end, we polled decision-makers at nearly 500 companies throughout Germany. Directly responsible for human resources, organizational development and corporate strategies, these people have an ear to the ground near enough to the workforce and managers to hear what they are saying. They are also pathfinders pointing the way with this “new normal” in mind. And that is what makes their assessment of the situation so valuable.

Work in times of the coronavirus is work in a state of abnormality

The authors are well aware that in times of the coronavirus crisis, work is done under conditions that are hardly in line with standard practices and guidelines. Under ‘normal’ circumstances, much of it would not be done at all in this way. First among these unusual conditions is that home is now an office and a school. Then there is the practice that defies past corporate policies – people have been seen doing company work with their personal devices. Of course, these exceptional circumstances must be factored into the equation when interpreting data, drawing conclusions and making recommendations.

We believe that collecting and documenting the lessons learned in the great experimental lab that Germany has become is crucial and needs to be done expeditiously. For one, this experience will help you take the next steps. For the other, it will enable us, Fraunhofer IAO and DGFP, to define offers and research objectives that fit your needs.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 A most topical issue

Our call to action for this survey elicited an overwhelming response. During the three weeks we conducted this survey, from May 4, 2020 to May 24, 2020, nearly 500 companies of varying sizes and industries took part. Of these, 78 percent were in the private sector and 22 percent in the public sector. Close to 20 percent were exclusively manufacturing companies, 52 percent purely in the service sector and 28 percent were manufacturing companies that also provide associated services. Just shy of 30 percent of respondents represented companies with up to 250 employees; the rest were from enterprises with a higher head count. Companies with a workforce of more than 1,000 accounted for the largest share by far at just under 50 percent.

The unusually high response rate underscores our assumption: The changes in the working world and the question of what the “new normal” looks like are now a major concern for many people in positions of responsibility.

Fixed workspace assignments still dominate

The point of departure for most companies is the conventional work and office arrangement: More than 90 percent of those surveyed state that company employees have a fixed workspace assigned.

3.2 The speed at and extent to which enterprises adopted remote work practices: greater than expected

Nearly 70 percent of those surveyed indicated that their office personnel work almost entirely or largely from home during the coronavirus phase. Just over 21 percent split this down the middle with a 50:50 model. The vast majority coordinates office workspace in a decentral way – that is, decisions as to who works where at what time are made at the departmental level or in bilateral arrangements with supervisors.

The extent and speed of this virtualization is remarkable. The vast majority of employees have been working in this mode for several weeks. This heavy modification of the work situation has taken place at a blistering pace and under great pressure.

The figures are all the more impressive when we consider the extent to which the practice had been adopted before the crisis. Just short of 54 percent of those surveyed had no or few employees who were able to work from home before the coronavirus crisis. Most or all

employees could do this at only 15 and 17 percent of these companies. What is more, working from home was limited to one day a week or less at most companies. However, around 20 percent of the companies surveyed had established the practice of working more than ten days a month from home before the coronavirus crisis. There is clearly great divergence between companies that had adopted the practice or offered employees the opportunity to work from home in pre-coronavirus days and those that had not. Nonetheless, it is fair to conclude that the weeks of the coronavirus crisis brought changes that earlier would have appeared unworkable for many years to come. Germany during the coronavirus crisis has thus manifested itself as a vast experimental lab.

3.3 Potential for an agile response to the crisis squandered by reservations at the management level

Although social-distancing rules were in force, some impediments hampered remote work. The lack of a works agreement topped the list of main obstacles with 58 percent. Tasks critical to business operations to be done on-site were next with 51 percent. The lack of technical prerequisites for working from home was frequently mentioned, as were reservations on the part of management (28 percent) and executives (30 percent). There were objective reasons for these reservations, but also great resistance born of attitude and culture. This reluctance squanders potential that could be tapped to maintain an operating posture and prevent revenue leakage. We will examine this in greater detail in the section on key lessons learned. It appears that up-to-date and comprehensive provisions on working in a home office set out in works agreements provide a sound framework for action that directly impacts companies' ability to operate.

3.4 The basic set of IT equipment – designed for working on the go – falls short of the mark for a more permanent home office

If we want to engage in remote collaboration, we need mobile devices, voice or video connections, and the best support available for synchronous conferencing applications. The companies surveyed widely used all three components, which explains how they managed to enable so many to work remotely at such notice. These enterprises are very well equipped with software environments for communication: Nearly 90 percent had email, chats and remote access via VPN – that is, tunneled, secure access to the company’s local network – available even in pre-pandemic days. The same goes for self-service applications. Almost 90 percent had digitized processes, for example, for travel expense accounting, in place before the coronavirus hit.

However, consequences of this extreme coronavirus-induced situation are surfacing: An ergonomic home workspace with a height-adjustable chair, desk and a second, usually larger, screen had not been standard issue in the past. It was either provided on demand or has yet to be provided, but is still considered important by those polled. More than 35 percent of respondents believe the chair belongs in this “missing, but would be important” category, while 25 percent mentioned the table and 22 percent the second screen. On the other hand, many respondents do not deem furniture to be important, with nearly 58 percent feeling this way about the desk.

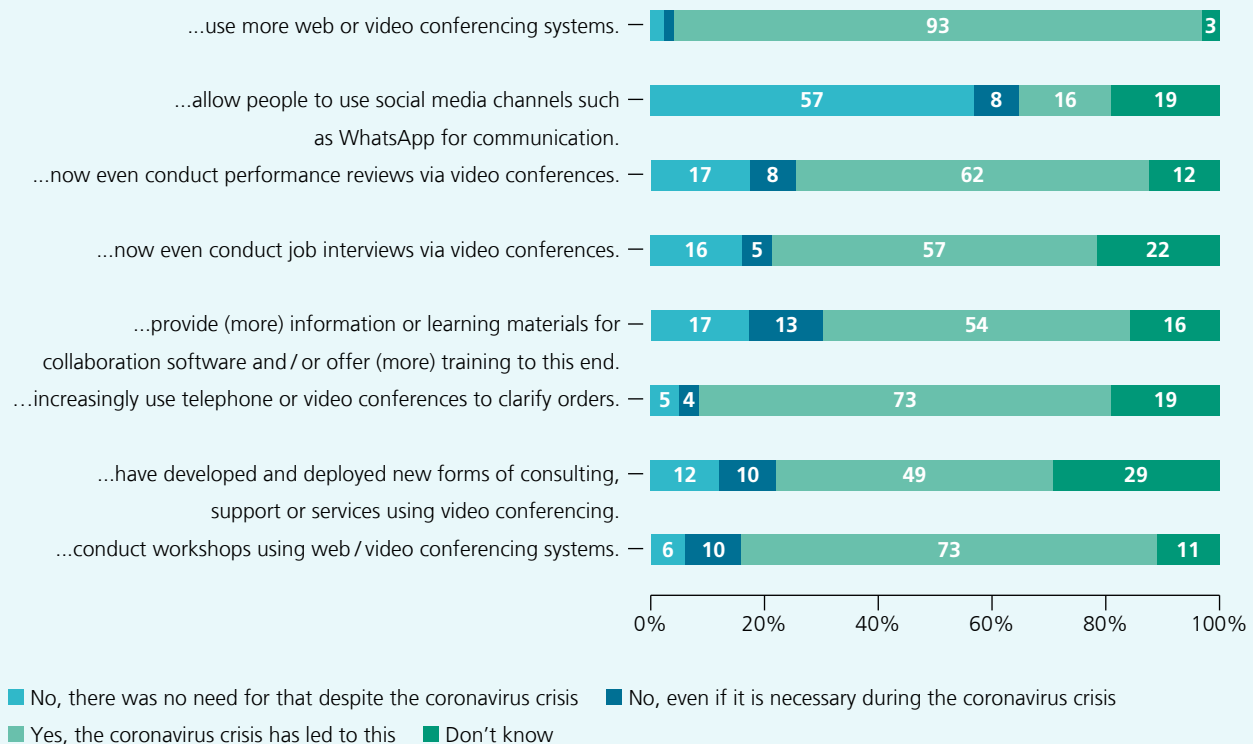
Our conclusion is that demand increases with the length and frequency of sessions spent working at home. This was to be expected, and it explains why this equipment carries such great weight these days. Depending on the shape of things to come in the “new normal,” this topic would certainly merit more discussion with both occupational health and costs in mind. If, as the findings of this survey would suggest, the “new normal” will have people working more from home, then companies will have to specify what furniture and equipment this home office needs and who is going to obtain and pay for it. The employer’s responsibility for equipment used for conventional teleworking and devices used for occasional work on the go is not the same. That old dividing line will also have to be reconsidered.

3.5 Coronavirus, a digitization booster and catalyst for agile digital business models and service creation

Companies are handling learning, HR processes and customer relationships with virtual tools to an extent scarcely seen before. That is nothing short of remarkable. The same holds true for the ways in which they are reaching out across the boundary between the corporate environment and the world outside: This includes applicant and recruitment interviews, which are being conducted virtually for the first time because of the coronavirus crisis (57 percent), employee performance reviews (62 percent), customer callbacks to clarify orders (73 percent), and virtual consulting and service concepts (49 percent). This is where we see the other half of the marked coronavirus-induced changes that are having a major impact on business models, sales and market strategies in the course of digital transformation.

1 Change in internal and external collaboration.

“Working from home during the coronavirus crisis has led to a situation in our company where, in terms of communication, we...”

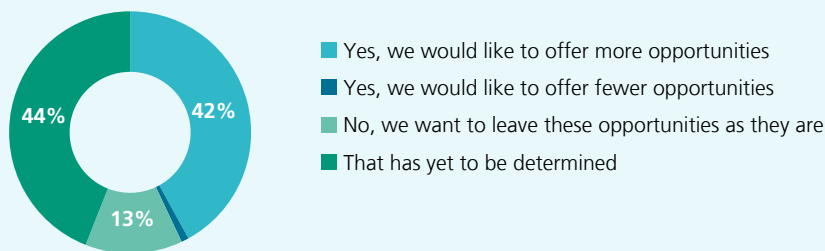


We believe that companies adopted several of these remote ways of working and collaborating for a lack of alternatives, some doing so at very short notice. Precisely this paucity of alternatives may have encouraged adoption and sparked a great deal of creativity paired with elevated tolerance for failure. This is a best-practice kind of agile approach and an experience in methodology on which the new normal should definitely be built.

3.6 The shape of things to come: from office-as-usual to a hybrid, flexible and sustainable working environment

The extensive experience gained in recent weeks has already prompted half of those polled to opt for expanding their work-from-home offers (42 percent). Roughly the same share of those surveyed are still weighing their options. Even by a conservative estimate, more than half of these companies are likely to branch out to more virtual ways of working. Less than one percent want to scale these options down.

“Given your experience during the coronavirus crisis, is the company’s policy on opportunities to work from home likely to change after the coronavirus crisis?”



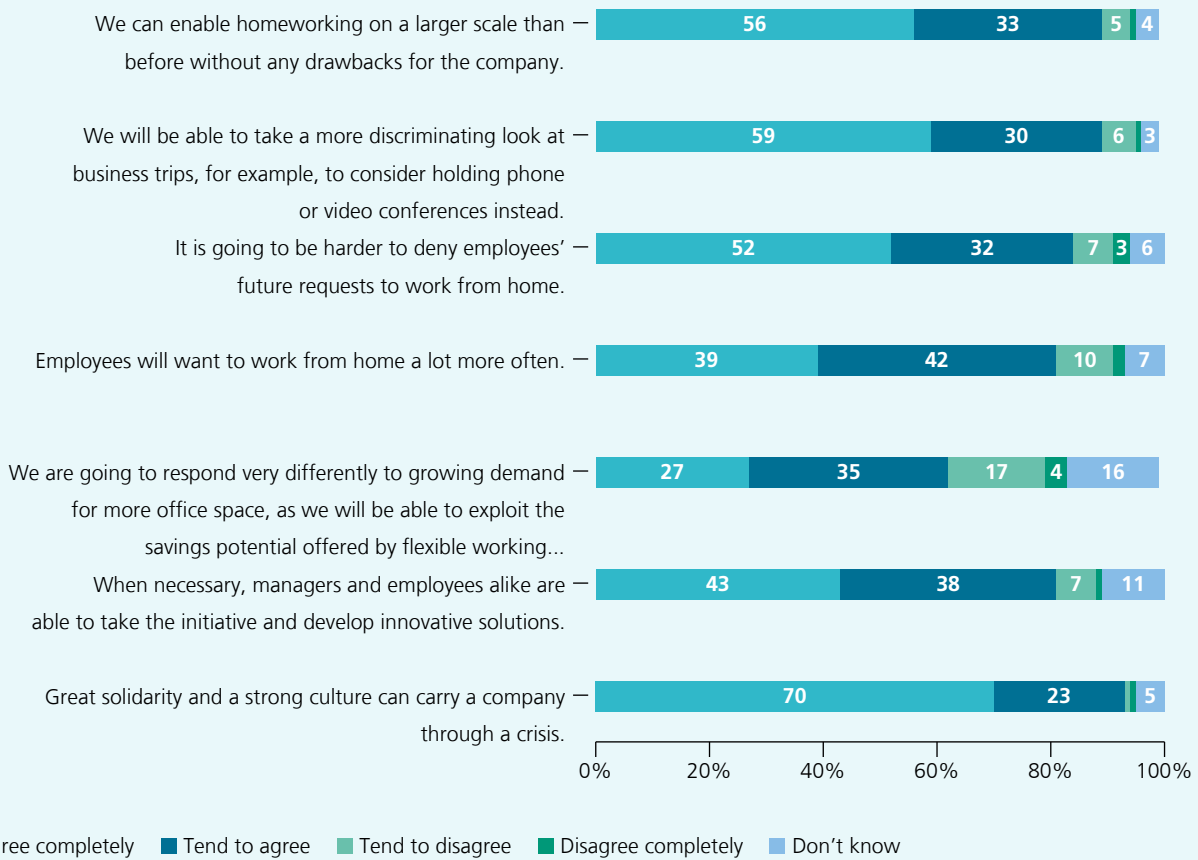
2 Expected change of the home office offer.

These are definite statements of intent underpinned by companies’ assessment of lessons learned during the coronavirus crisis: An overwhelming 56 percent (“strongly agree”) and 33 percent (“tend to agree”) have come to the conclusion that working from home can be adopted on a larger scale without any drawbacks. The question as to the extent to which business trips can instead be handled virtually, for example, in video conferences, elicited very similar percentages. The level of agreement was the same for the realistic assessment that the lessons learned here will make it impossible to deny such future requests from employees. The evidence of feasibility is too compelling. It is also expected that these requests will come.

The answers to the question about how skeptical the response to future demands for more office space will be is likely to interest architects, facility managers and project developers. Of those surveyed, 27 percent “strongly agree” and 35 percent “tend to agree.” Will this perhaps even impact the situation on the commercial property market? The many indications to be found in recently published dailies would seem to point in that direction (see e.g. Janovics, Inga 2020).

3 Learning experiences about Home office in the coronavirus crisis

“What do you think your company has learned from the coronavirus crisis?”



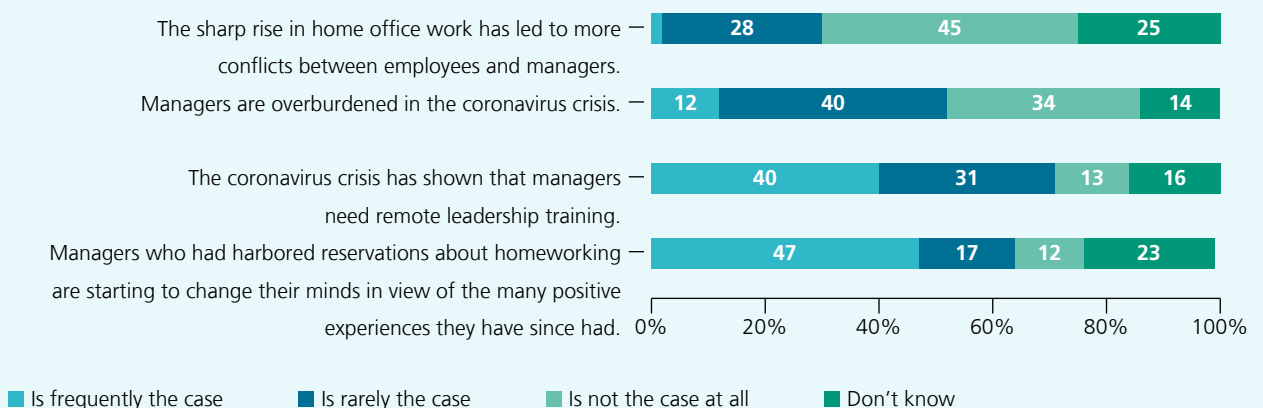
3.7 A management boot camp

Managers play a key role when it comes to adopting new ways of working. As a group, they are often thought to be skeptical of flexible work arrangements, particularly when that flexibility extends to the location because of the focus on attendance and the limited supervision. Our study shows respondents hold some very encouraging views that are sure to change this perception in the future: The high percentage of respondents who agree with the statement that managers have far fewer reservations about remote work as a result of recent weeks' experiences is noteworthy: 47 percent "strongly agree" and another 17 percent affirm it at least for some cases. It would appear that work in times of the coronavirus epidemic has been something of an on-the-job leadership boot camp for management. We believe this to be very beneficial because corporate cultures have to adapt and executives play a key role in change processes.

On another very positive note, few respondents – just 2.4 percent – concur with the statement that the sharp rise in home office work has led to more conflicts between employees and managers. And just 12 percent of those polled believe it to be "frequently the case" that the coronavirus crisis has overburdened managers. However, the many respondents confirming a definite training deficit with regard to remote management is striking, with 40 percent stating that this is "frequently the case" and 31 percent "rarely." The good news is that given the right mindset, it is entirely possible to design and deliver this type of training and development. And considerable progress has now been made to this end.

4 *Change in the management work in the coronavirus crisis.*

"We want ask you for your opinion from an HR perspective."

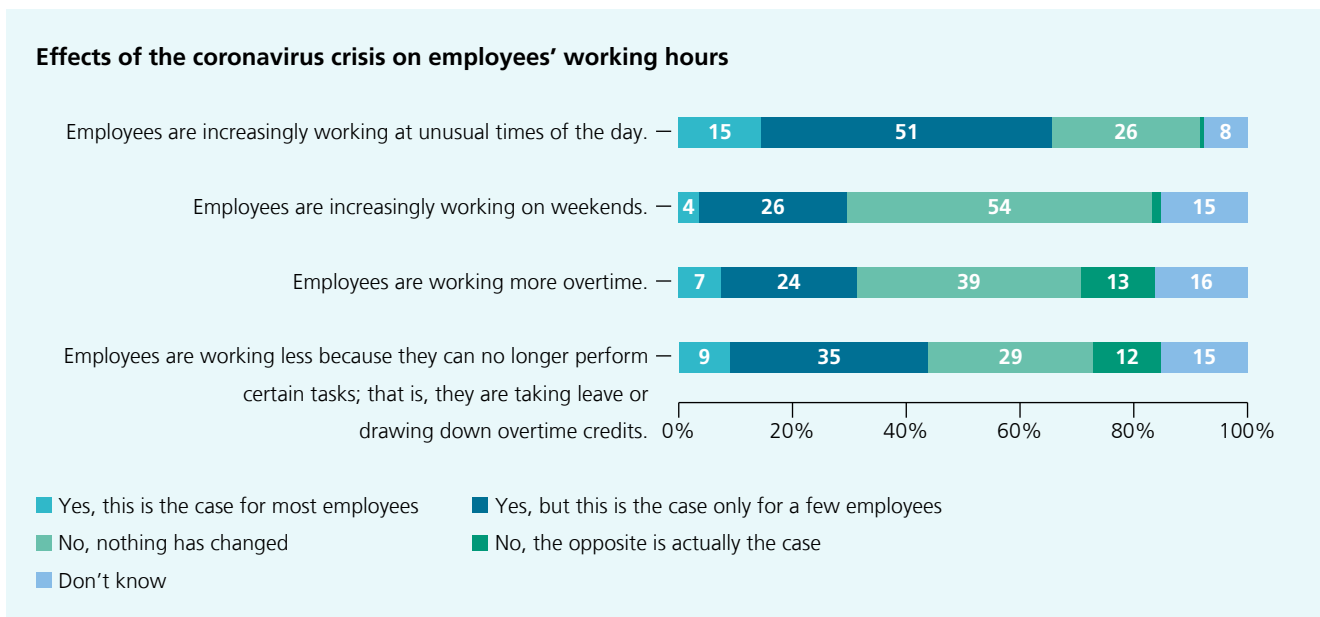


3.8 Greater locational flexibility, results in greater flexibility in terms of time

The insights gained need to be considered in the context of circumstances specific to the coronavirus phase, particularly that the home is often the venue for both office and school work. However, we had observed the underlying trends even before coronavirus hit: Greater flexibility as to the place of work practically always engenders greater working-hours flexibility and a tendency for boundaries between work and non-work to blur. The answers to our current survey’s question about working at unusual times of day bear this out: 15 percent confirm that this is the case for most employees and 51 percent for a few.

Work on weekends, a controversial issue for social partners, does take place, but on a relatively small scale: 4 percent affirm this for “most employees” and 26 percent for “few employees.” This begs for more detailed analysis. The spectrum of views on overtime is broad: 7.4 percent of those surveyed confirm it has increased for most employees and 24 percent state the same for a few employees, but 13 percent say that it is decreasing. The reasons for this are presumably that opportunities to accomplish much of the office work from home vary or may be inhibited by process-related constraints.

5 Effect of the coronavirus crisis on the working hours of employees.

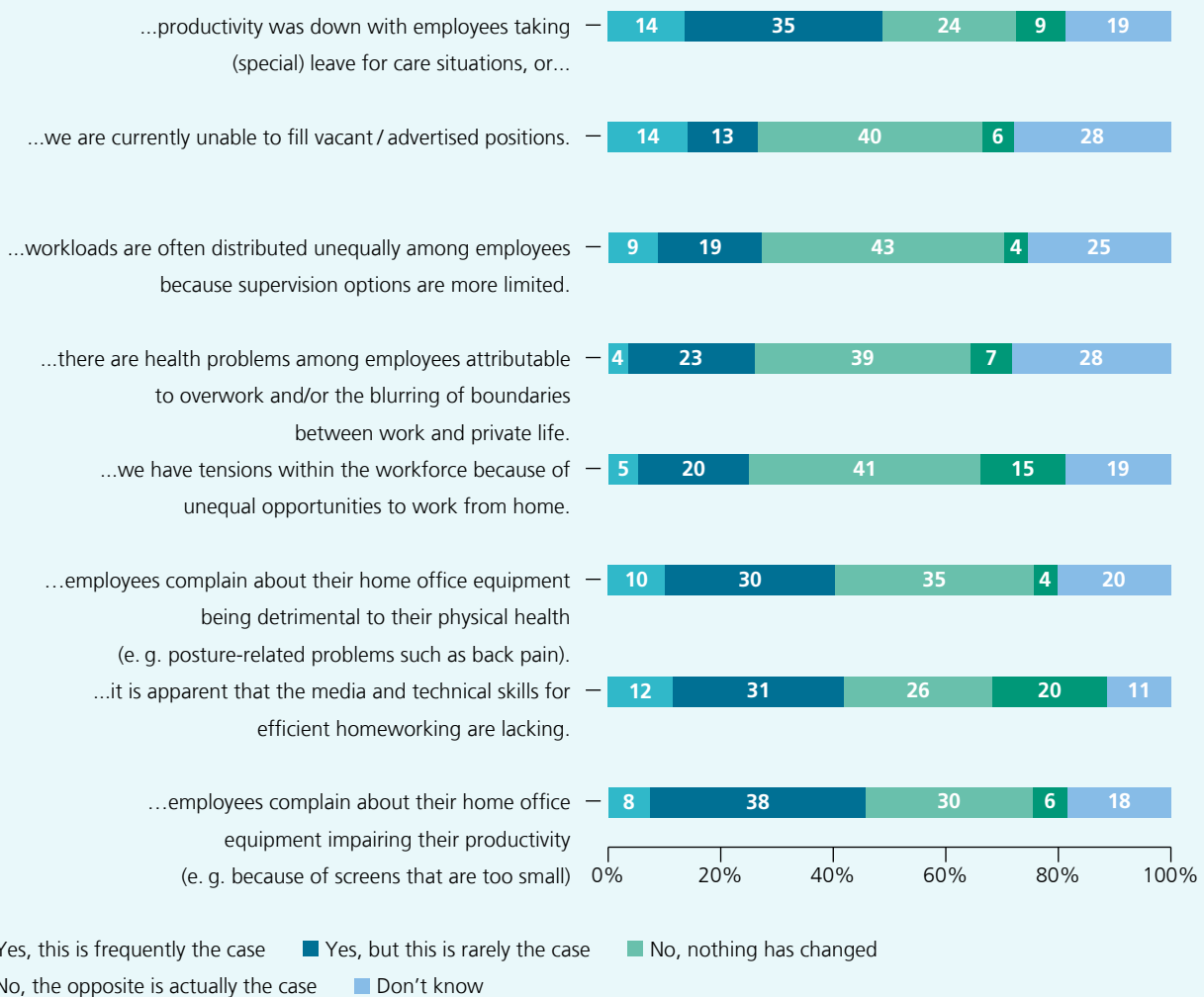


3.9 Impacts on productivity and health: a mixed verdict

This is another issue to be seen in light of working conditions specific to the coronavirus situation. Yes, there have been productivity impairments, but these are also attributable to employees taking compassionate leave or drawing down their working time accounts to handle the added burden of parallel care situations. Perhaps they are also a result of companies taking advantage of short-time work compensation schemes. This was frequently the case for 14 percent of those surveyed, and rarely for 35 percent. Nine percent say that workloads are often distributed unequally because supervision options are more limited.

A logical outcome of the office equipment situation discussed in the section above, respondents indicated that employees complain of back pain because their home workspaces are inadequately equipped. Ten percent say that this is “frequently the case” and 30 percent that it occurs rarely. It is interesting to note that 4 percent of those surveyed say that the opposite is the case. In addition, 8 percent of our survey partners confirm that employees themselves often complain about impaired productivity, for example, because of screens that are too small. We believe equipment may be needed here if this work situation persists as described in section 3.4.

"Because of the coronavirus crisis, ..."



6 Effect on productivity, workload and health in the company.

3.10 The key factor for robustness: a good, supportive corporate culture

Responses to the question about this specific learning experience confirm the views of every management and change consultant: Nearly 94 percent of those polled say that great solidarity and a strong culture can carry a company through a crisis (70 percent “strongly agree,” 23 percent “tend to agree”). Of all the lessons learned from the coronavirus crisis, this one achieved the most resounding endorsement.

Although the percentage was marginally lower, there was also much agreement that situations such as the coronavirus crisis are a powerful catalyst for the joint development of innovative solutions. Despite all the adverse effects of the coronavirus epidemic, this is an excellent indication of the creative forces that employees and managers can jointly muster in crisis situations.

3.11 Pre-coronavirus precautions – which helped most in surmounting the crisis?

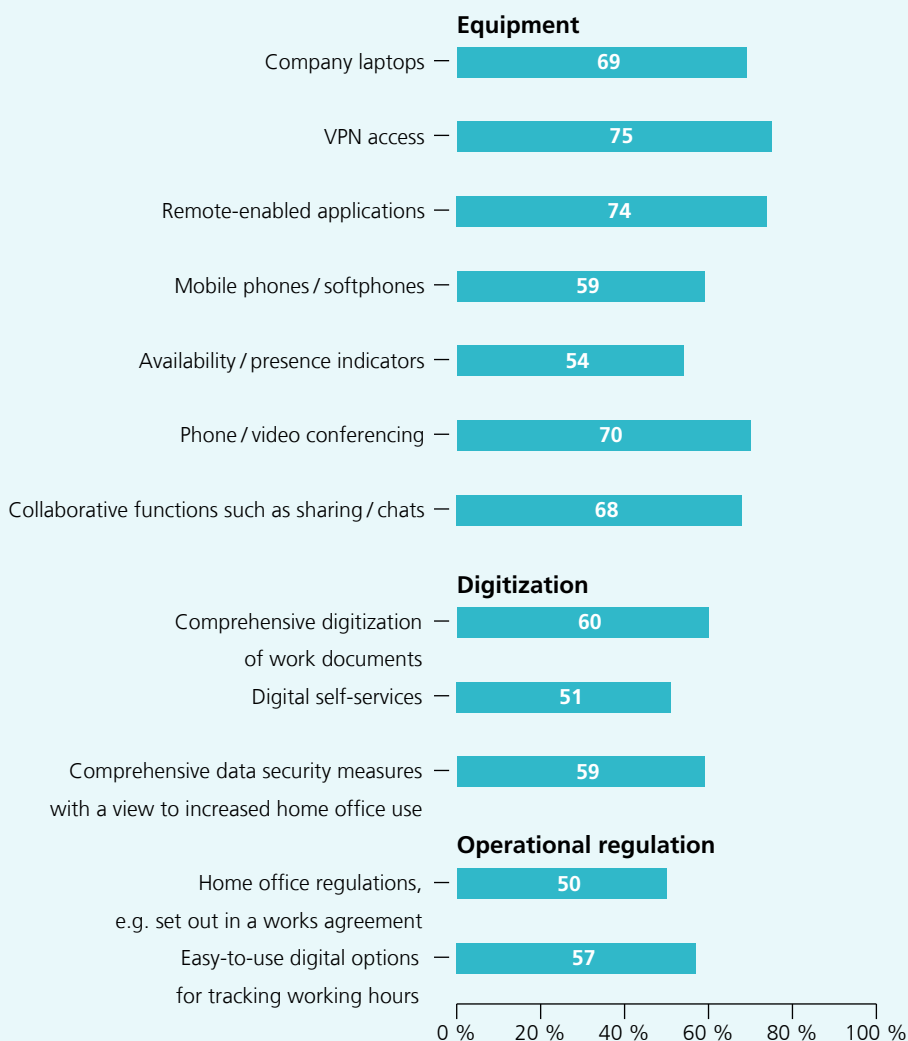
One of the most important questions we asked respondents addressed the key lessons learned about the rapid and extensive adoption of remote work arrangements. This is where we see specific actionable areas, which we want to share with you. Let us start with the things that were deemed “important and available.”

The insight that virtual work has some fundamental technological requirements for everything to function properly has been confirmed. These requirements have been met to a surprising degree. VPN access with 75 percent, remote-enabled applications with 74 percent and company laptops with 69 percent had the highest affirmative response rates in the category of technology that comes under the heading of “is important, we already had it before the coronavirus.” Other technological requirements with somewhat lower ratings followed, such as collaborative functions, phone and video communication, and, as expected, extensively digitized work documents. We put this less formally at events with customers: “Technology isn’t everything, but without technology, everything’s nothing.” This appears to have been confirmed. Of course, we are aware that technology is just one prerequisite. It takes more than that to enable healthy, productive remote work on a large scale.

Other points in this category mentioned by more than 50 percent of respondents include comprehensive data security precautions (59 percent), easy-to-use digital options for tracking working hours (57 percent) and corporate regulations for working from home (50 percent). Often set out in works agreements, these provisions also clarify insurance matters.

In summary, we can say that technical feasibility, a regulatory framework and data security are essential. And we can add that these requirements appear to have been met on a scale broad enough to enable extensive remote work.

“Is important in order to react more efficiently to a similar situation in the future; we already had it before the coronavirus”



7 *Learning experiences about home office in the coronavirus crisis: necessary precautions, processes and regulations.*

3.12 Biggest shortcomings not to be fixed simply by purchases

On to the points where there is still much catching up to do: Respondents' views of what they think is important, but has yet to be established to enable remote work on a large scale, are revealing:

They point to a number of key actionable areas centered very much on the larger, longer-term changes brought about by remote work. These include preventive measures to preclude adverse effects on health, particularly as a result of the blurring boundaries between professional and private life. They also encompass the broad topic of remote management, digital media skills, and ways of supporting informal structures and communication between people. In other words, this is a matter of skills, culture and health that requires a protracted development effort and, in some cases, dedicated structures.

These topics are important actionable areas for all companies looking to step up the amount of work done remotely. And there are quite a few of those, as we have seen above.

Specifics follow:

In the category under the heading of "is important, we still have to establish it as a precaution/process," the level of agreement was highest for questions about how to manage the blurring of boundaries. A "company-wide strategy to effectively counter symptoms of blurred boundaries," was designated by 74 percent as being important, but as yet nonexistent. Reworded to ask specifically about management skills in this regard, this statement elicited nearly the same level of agreement at 72 percent. However, it should also be noted that in times of the coronavirus crisis we are dealing with unusually heavy dual burdens of work paired with homeschooling and the like. On the other hand, these statements confirm scientific studies published before the crisis, for example, in the AOK's 2019 report on absenteeism (Badura et al. 2019). Examinations conducted by occupational physicians found that a working arrangement that is flexible in terms of time and place harbors the risk that employees are unable to get away from it all, which hampers their ability to recuperate. This underscores the importance of rigorously addressing and defining expectations about employee availability, the monitoring of working hours, self-management and leadership behavior.

The level of agreement with statements about the importance of having practiced remote leadership routines in place was slightly lower at 54 percent, followed by 46 percent for the correlate question about self-management skills in a remote working situation.

Put simply, a definite need for training and cultural development is seen in more than half of the companies surveyed. The experience of many of our accompanying projects and studies (cf. Bonnet, Hofmann et al. 2015) confirms this statement, as do the views on this situation expressed in literature published even before the coronavirus crisis. At 36 percent, the level of agreement with the statement that company management should lead the way, but has yet to do so by actively setting an example for virtual work also fits in with this conclusion.

This is about further developing established leadership models; about supporting managers who have been catapulted into a very different leadership situation and now have to get the mix of delegation, team organization, self-responsibility and duty of care right, while maintaining the same standards for quality and resource utilization. And that development effort will have to address the managers themselves as well as the leadership role model as practiced in their companies. Targeted support for managers of this nature was more exception than rule in many companies even before the coronavirus crisis (see Bonnet, Hofmann et al. 2015).

Responses indicate that companies have some catching up to do with their offers of comprehensive training to hone digital media and communication skills. This applies to both media-savvy interaction between employees, which garnered 42 percent of the mentions, and to training offers – for example, for interactive, remote workshops with customers, which received 39 percent of the mentions. This is about the ability to deal with the limitations of these altered states of work and collaboration; about properly presenting and using didactic learning methods to convey the new possibilities afforded by tech-assisted support; about creating effective work and collaborative situations that achieve results comparable to those in the face-to-face scenario. These skills extend far beyond merely knowing how to handle technologies. They also encompass effective moderation and properly adapted didactic skills (cf. also Hofmann 2020).

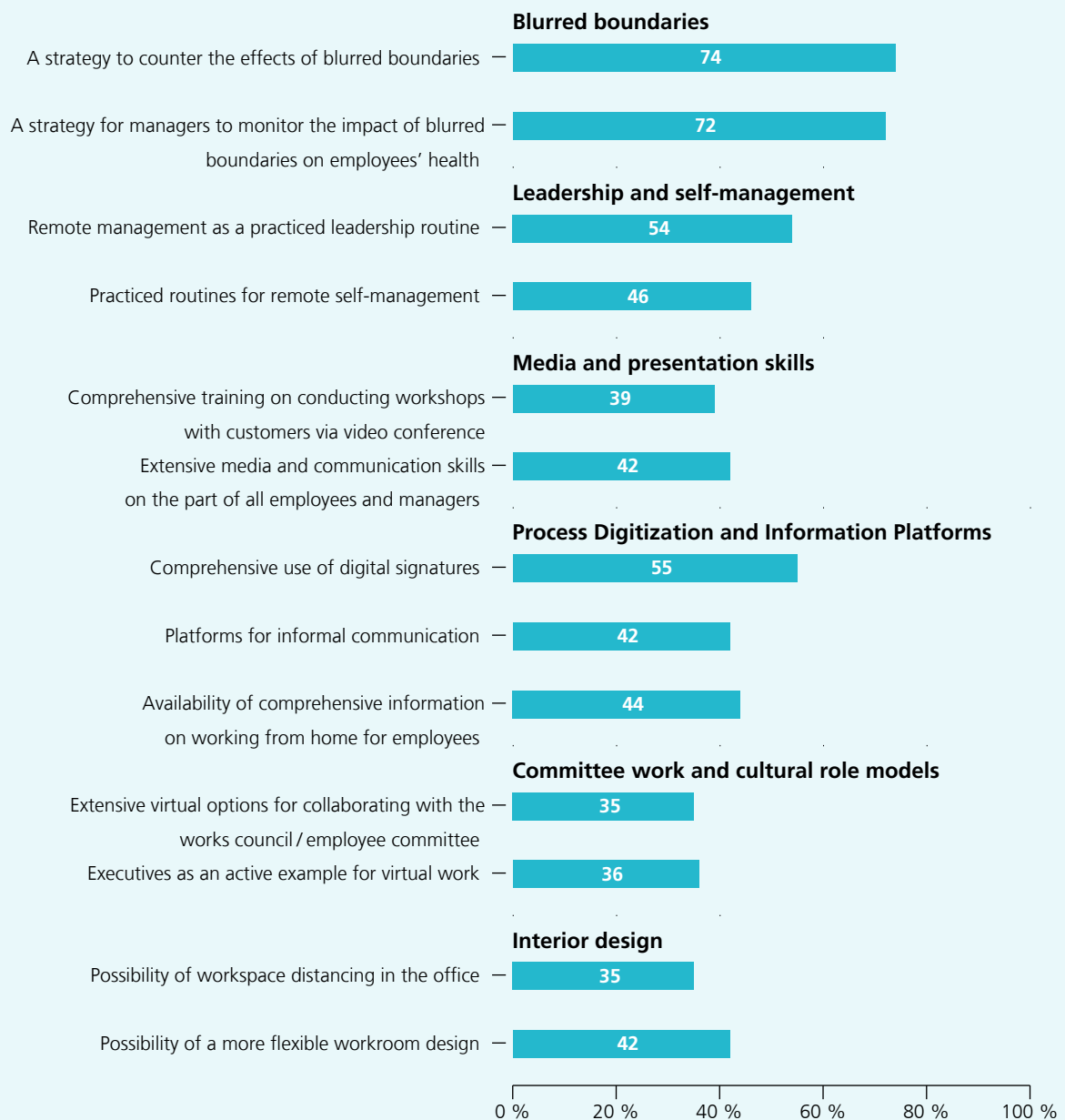
Respondents clearly expressed that there was also some catching up to do in terms of supporting informal communication. The level of agreement with the statement that companies need to provide employees in these virtual work situations with easy-to-use platforms for informal interaction came to 42 percent. This view is rooted in the realization that work is much more than just task-related collaboration with the associated sharing of facts and information. For workers to be perceived as reliable colleagues, they also have to be able to chat about non-work-related matters; to engage in small-talk, the social glue that connects people and contributes so much to robust teamwork. Respondents concurred at a slightly higher rate of 44 percent with the statement that all key information about working from home should be provided in a clear way that is easy to find. This includes questions about insurance regulations on work in a home office.

Many codetermination-related matters have to be coordinated quickly for work done in times of the coronavirus. It thus comes as no surprise that more than a third of those surveyed, 35 percent, deemed “extensive virtual options for collaborating with the works council/employee committee” to be important, but as yet unavailable. It is certainly worth considering if the conventional rhythms of meetings and prescribed decision-making processes need to be accelerated greatly, and if the formats in which social partners are permitted to meet and consult merit further development.

Finally, the precautionary measures that have yet to be taken include clear, predetermined processes and options for workspace distancing in the office, which 35 percent of participants rated as important, but still pending. Surely this is also attributable to the fact that the arrangement even of physical workspaces takes remote work into account while an epidemic is underway. However, nearly half of respondents, 42 percent, miss what they see as an important element of work design – the possibility of a more flexible workspace. This may include non-territorial office concepts, which are deemed harder to clean in times of the coronavirus, more flexible partitioning walls, and portable workspace equipment so rooms may be used more flexibly. If this growing flexibility in working place and time becomes permanent, the logical thing to do would be to reconsider the number and design of office workspaces. The office will play an increasingly important role as an environment for collaboration, meetings and representation. The catchphrase here is activity-based work environments.

8 *Learning experiences about home office in the coronavirus crisis: necessary precautions, processes and regulations.*

“is important, to react more efficiently to a comparable situation in the future , we still have to establish it”



4. WHAT WILL ENDURE?

We have learned a great deal in recent weeks. What will we be left with? The following bullet points provide an at-a-glance summary:

- The experience that remote work and collaboration can indeed function well and efficiently, even on a very large scale and despite more than 100 years of a different sort of socialization in a working world where people made their way “to work.” This is a lesson learned in a nationwide experimental lab that has mobilized unimagined forces
- The experience that in an extreme situation, it is possible to develop new service processes, virtual customer interfaces and business models based on these, and that this can be done in an agile, market-focused and participatory way without the perfectionism that is otherwise so typical for our country
- For many companies, a great shared experience of surmounting an existential threat, the story of which can become a common narrative that could serve these companies well in future crises
- The realization that the blurring of boundaries between work and life has to be handled with care
- A collectively experienced boot camp for managers and employees who were compelled to explore collaborative technologies and learn new work, collaboration and leadership techniques in a very short time
- A sharper eye for assessing the need to further develop skills, infrastructure and corporate culture with the “new normal” in mind
- Confirmation that highly digital, collaborative work environments and the employees who set up and maintain these ecosystems are very relevant indeed
- Great potential for designing more sustainable work arrangements and implementing more resource-friendly business communication and collaboration, as we expect virtual options to become a far more routine facet of future plans for commuting and business travel

5. WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

What do we believe are the key steps companies should take to give shape to the “new normal?”

Take stock

Get the most comprehensive picture possible of the experiences gained, the solutions put into practice, and the constraints in and effects on your organization. Ask your employees and managers, and then analyze your findings transparently. The lessons learned in recent weeks are too valuable to waste. They should be put to systematic use. This is also the best way to start shaping tomorrow’s working and organizational world – after all, your employees are the best experts in this field. Take advantage of what they know!

Physical distancing on the job

There will be a time spent in limbo – no one knows how long – waiting for a vaccine or drug to combat the virus. Take this as an opportunity to orchestrate remote work in the home office and business trips via conferencing. Make sure you are prepared for a potential second wave with predetermined courses of action and response schemes. Set up a crisis management team.

Envision the “new normal”

Picture how the work in your company will be done, preferably with your employees and managers joining in. Work from home, on the go and in the office – how much of each do you want in the mix over the long term? How many office-based workspaces do you see in your company’s future? How will they be furnished and occupied? Do you want to designate activity-based zones, for example, areas of the company devoted to communication and encounters? How will this impact commuting, parking space, public transport links or company incentives for alternative transportation options? Consider also your employees’ housing situation so that flexible ways of working do not open a back door to the selection of who has to go and who gets to stay based on social criteria. After all, the more the private abode becomes the normal place of work, the more specific the requirements for space and equipment will be.

Professionalize virtual customer interfaces

Take stock of the success you have had virtualizing the customer interface and see what you can do to improve and professionalize it. In particular, determine to what extent specific services are actually billable and how to market them effectively.

Compensatory perks for manufacturing personnel

Review what you want to address when communicating with this group of employees and perhaps offer to work remotely as compensation for fewer opportunities. Even with the digital transformation advancing rapidly, many jobs will have to remain at the company. Consider what you can offer these employees, for example, more flexible working hours, and encourage them to join together even in larger groups to discuss options and develop suggestions. There is quite a bit of information to be processed and conceptual activities to be pursued even on the shop floor. Perhaps circumstances allow some of this to be done remotely. Other organizational arrangements or pooled tasks could then at least enable alternating team members to do some of the work remotely, for example, based on a rotating roster.

Consolidate IT, especially collaborative technologies

Pinpoint which added assets were crucial to working efficiently with digital tools from one end of the process to the other, thereby enabling this locational flexibility. This includes effective collaborative technologies, headset/camera equipment, and digital signatures.

Workspace equipment

Examine your office furniture and equipment through the lens of your company's work objectives and pinpoint which components are necessary to ensure a healthy working environment. Determine if these are best provided by the company, subsidized or obtained via pooled orders.

Regulatory certainty

Not every company we surveyed has a robust policy on remote work. If yours does have a policy, review its provisions to see if they need to be amended or address this matter jointly with the social partners. Standardized individual contractual arrangements may also be useful.

Review your policy on working hours

Check your regulations on working hours for a proper fit regarding start and end times. Examine the possibility of using digital tools to track time. Find out how easy it is for workers to take longer breaks, and so on. To this end, review your options for logging mobile working hours in blocks, for example, per week. And determine when logged hours have to be approved and by whom, if at all. Attach value to the experiences of the recent few weeks by rewarding employees for their personal accountability. Managers have to be brought on board for this. The BMAS has yet to respond to the ECJ's 2019 ruling on trust-based working time, so the verdict on this working-hours regimen is still out.

Media and communication skills

Offer targeted training and education in the areas of collaboration, customer relations and communicating with management via telecommunications media. Encourage the workforce to share their experiences and continue professionalizing these areas. Logic would dictate that you should add these skills to the requirements listed in job descriptions, to management profiles and to the annual performance reviews to underscore their importance in a credible way.

Remote management

Offer remote management training and forums for leaders to address not only topics centered on handling media, but also to encourage managers to reflect on their leadership role. Set aside a space for your managers where they can share their thoughts in confidence. Also, motivate them to engage their teams so employees can have a formative hand in shaping relations with management.

Healthy leadership in the “new normal”

Offer employees and managers assistance in dealing with the topic of blurred boundaries in a sensible and (self-) responsible way. These patterns of behavior have to be embedded centrally to further develop the corporate culture and should serve to guide the conduct of people at all levels of the hierarchy.

Analyze sustainability aspects:

The new normal is giving rise to sustainability-related effects. Investigate and substantiate those that can make an important contribution to your corporate responsibility and public image. There is sound, quantifiable evidence to be found in these retooled commuter mobility and business travel modes. This proof can support further efforts toward sustainability.

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