



# Paper

## Out of sight, not out of mind

The importance of line management in the virtual world for employee wellbeing and performance

Dr Zofia Bajorek, Senior Research Fellow

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*'The Covid-19 crisis is the ultimate test of management and leadership – a sudden, dramatic, life-threatening upheaval, where the outcomes are uncertain. In this extraordinarily difficult time, the value of great management and leadership is being demonstrated every day...Poor decision making during this period will not be quickly forgotten.'* (Chartered Management Institute, 2020)

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a significant and rapid shift in how and where work is done. The mandated lockdown, and the government enforcing working from home where possible to reduce the virus transmission (Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés, 2020), had an impact on everyday organisational operations, but also changed relationships between line managers and their employees. This change has a number of implications for management skills and practices with potential knock-on effects for employee wellbeing and productivity. How managers adapt to these remote conditions is important for organisations to consider (Contreras et al, 2020).

Evidence suggests that even before the pandemic line managers were 'squeezed' as a result of the expansion of tasks they undertake beyond traditional supervisory roles (Bajorek, 2020). A line manager's role is pivotal for both employee wellbeing and organisational performance, but if 'squeezed' too much it can also be detrimental for their own wellbeing.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown for management practices, the employment relationship and wellbeing, and provide evidence-based recommendations for line managers and HR.

## Teleworking and Covid-19

Telework, the practice where employees can work at a site (or sites) remote from their office or workplace for at least part of the week (Lamond et al., 2003), is not new. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) estimated that in the UK before the lockdown, 12 per cent of working adults worked regularly or sometimes at home. However, a month after lockdown was introduced, the proportion of adults working from home in the UK had risen to 44 per cent, representing a major shift in working patterns. Teleworking for those not 'key workers' became the norm, but with a big difference to pre-pandemic times: there was a lack of volition. Employees did not have the choice to work from home and had to adjust to balancing working from home with caring responsibilities, negotiating technological difficulties remotely, using different or unfamiliar communication platforms, trying to remain productive with increasing concerns around the economy, job insecurity and the implications of what could happen if they caught the virus.

Factors for the promotion of telework include:

- helping organisations to attract and retain top talent,
- diversification of the workforce,
- allowing employee flexibility,
- less absenteeism,
- greater organisational commitment, and
- improved organisational performance (Greer and Payne, 2014).

Although advocates of teleworking focus on how flexible work practices can modernise and enhance the workplace, it may also present challenges to individual teleworkers, managers and organisations (Dahlstrom, 2013). An organisation's culture is important in determining whether teleworking would 'fit' as a common working practice, and having a culture of trust, openness and flexibility enables the transition to teleworking practices to take place more easily (Lamond et al., 2003).

Apparent risks to teleworking are:

- social isolation from work teams, which could result in employees becoming disconnected from the work environment, leading to reduced performance and demotivation (Wojcak et al, 2016);
- an increase in work-home conflicts, especially if work has an impact on private life demands;
- skill requirements – teleworking requires greater personal organisational skills and could be more suitable for those who can 'self-organise' and successfully allocate their time (Contreras et al, 2020).

Bentley (2014) noted the benefits of teleworking were realised when employees had managerial support to mitigate against any potential negative implications of social

isolation, stress and work-life conflicts. So how can line managers best manage in these virtual times?

## Line management in the virtual world

Research from the start of the pandemic found that the shift to teleworking could have implications for employee wellbeing (Bajorek, Bevan and Mason, 2020). Social contact was a factor that determined the experience of working from home (Bentley et al., 2016), and employees who had more contact with their line manager reported significantly higher levels of organisational commitment and job satisfaction. There was also evidence that this extra contact may have added extra pressure to the already squeezed line manager role, as survey respondents with managerial responsibilities reported lower levels of work-life balance and job satisfaction in comparison with those who did not manage anyone. This suggests that the range of responsibilities that line managers have, especially in ensuring a positive employee relationship, were amplified during this time.

Quisenberry (2018) argued that management of people and teams has never been easy, but further problems can arise when teams go virtual as managers must adopt new and more complex methods of communication. People do prefer to have face-to-face conversations (Hiemstra, 1982), which allows for subtle facial and body language cues, the use of the voice, pitching tone and intonation that may not transfer easily virtually. This does not mean that over time managers will not learn how to adjust to alternative cues and ways to effectively express themselves in a virtual environment, but this is an added layer to an already multi-faceted role. Line managers must still manage an individual's performance, implement solutions when necessary and have a vital role in establishing the organisation's shared vision, corporate values and organisational goals (Flood, 2019). This must be done in a way where trust is maintained, and where wellbeing is considered. So, it is not necessarily the technological skills that managers need to operate virtually (although this is useful), but the right people management skills which, it can be argued, is a harder challenge (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2007).

So, what skills do line managers need to have? Researchers have questioned whether 'emotional intelligence' can help a manager's performance, and consequently have a positive impact on the wellbeing and productive capacity of those they manage (Donaldson-Fielder et al., 2004; Kerr et al., 2005; Quisenberry, 2018).

Emotional intelligence has been defined as:

*'The ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought and understand and reason with emotion and regulate emotion in self and others' (Meyer et al., 2004, page 401).*

Having a high level of emotional intelligence is important, as it enables managers to identify the emotions of those around them, understand others and their social context, judge what an employee's emotional reactions can be in a given situation; and help managers interact with employees. Importantly it also means that managers can control their own emotions, support staff when needed and develop the employment relationship through which they are able to motivate staff. A manager's emotional intelligence plays an important role in the effectiveness and quality of social interactions; and in their ability to respond flexibly to changes in work and social environments, build supportive networks and take appropriate action (Kerr et al., (2005).

Having managers with emotional intelligence seems more important now than ever as employees adjust to the drastic changes in how and where they are working, as well as the continued uncertainty caused by the pandemic and government restrictions. Employees are experiencing these changes differently, which can result from how they have adjusted to their new 'person-environment fit' (Kristoff, 1996). Person-environment fit suggests individuals are attracted to and select to work at organisations where the culture matches their own beliefs and values. Where a person-environment fit is maximised, this will enhance job satisfaction, employee engagement and wellbeing (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020).

There are many ways through which this person-environment fit has been disrupted by the pandemic. The sudden shift and limitations to physical social interactions through not being physically present in the workplace could, for some, result in an incongruence to an employee's person-environment fit. It is therefore important for managers to recognise if this occurs and understand what could be implemented to help 're-balance' the fit, by introducing virtual social opportunities (both formal and informal) and maintaining frequent communication. Although these interventions could go some way to help reduce the misfit of social imbalance, for some it may only serve to further exacerbate the nature of the lockdown, and leave employees further pining for social interactions they previously experienced at work (Fetters, 2020). For managers with high levels of emotional intelligence, this recognition that employees may be having different experiences and stressors will be easier, and they will also have a greater willingness to address the situation.

Similarly, managers with high levels of emotional intelligence may be more attentive to employees who may be disproportionately affected by their new working environments (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). For many, working from home has led to work-home conflicts, whether that be through childcare and home-schooling, elderly care or both, creating inter-role conflicts and additional pressures. These added demands can have a negative impact on an employee's productive capacity and their wellbeing. Having a manager who not only recognises these added pressures, but is aware of organisational policies that can be implemented to support them, is essential. To help employees adjust to a better person-environment fit, line managers may recognise the importance of giving employees increased autonomy over when and how they work and manage their time, or ask whether more flexible working patterns may alleviate pressures. When line managers

initiate such conversations it highlights their recognition of work-family pressures caused by the pandemic, and their willingness to help when and where needed.

## What can line managers do to improve wellbeing virtually?

*‘At a time of crisis, leaders and their organisations will be judged on their ability to navigate challenging circumstances in a responsible way – that means, not just triaging their organisations but looking at how they do so; how they decide to ‘share the pain’ between staff, shareholders, suppliers and others, and how they make people feel as they do so.’ (Chartered Management Institute, 2020)*

Research has been undertaken to understand the strategies that line managers can undertake to help support those whom they manage, meet their expectations and enhance their wellbeing when teleworking (Poulsen and Ipsen, 2017).

- **Communication:** Employees often report that communication is key – taking into consideration when and how often contact is made. Employees thought it was important for managers to initiate communication, to highlight they were available and ready to help (be that related to project work or a wellbeing issue) when needed. Regular contact is important to show that employees have not been forgotten (out of sight does not mean out of mind), and a positive employment relationship can be maintained.
- **Listening:** Listening to what employees are saying is important and related to regular communication. In ‘normal’ face-to-face communication, the subtlety of spoken language and body language provide better clues about how employees are really feeling. When using more digital communication, it is more important to both listen to what is being said, and also to what employees are not saying. Everyone should feel they have been listened to, and for a good conversation to occur line managers may have to be exploratory to understand a source of anxiety, explore performance issues and gain full knowledge of what employees are currently experiencing (Hirsh, 2018). This can be more time-consuming, but it is time well spent.
- **Trust:** Trust was considered important by managers and employees as being key for honest and open communication. Developing trust also led to the development of work autonomy, meaning tasks could be done flexibly to fit around individual experiences. Trust had to work both ways for virtual management to be effective.
- **Understanding of current circumstances:** Employees have been differentially affected by the pandemic. Home-working circumstances vary dependent on living conditions, extra caring responsibilities, job role and previous experience of working from home. It is extremely helpful for managers to be aware of employee work

circumstances, as frustrations may arise if these are not adequately acknowledged. Establishing regular contact and trusting relationships will make this easier.

- *Establishing clear goals and objectives:* One outcome of teleworking is the potential reduction in the quality of information passed between managers and employees about organisational policies, changes in organisational structures, work roles and tasks. Establishing clear goals and objectives and the implementation of reporting systems to prevent any reduced clarity is important (Daniels, 2000). This may include creating communication channels with project teams and colleagues who may provide additional support. Helping employees to understand what is expected of them, allowing them input into any goal-setting or work priorities is an important dimension of effective performance and development conversations (Hirsh, 2018), but can also lead to a positive sense of autonomy and wellbeing.
- *Feedback:* Providing feedback helps employees to understand how they are doing and receive recognition for the work they have completed (which could provide further motivation to continue working to the same standards), and highlights areas for improvement (Hirsh, 2018). Managers can use various communication methods to give feedback to employees, but when teleworking it is important that feedback continues to avoid further uncertainty regarding performance outcomes (Poulsen and Ipsen, 2017).
- *Consider physical working conditions:* Poor physical working conditions or home-working set-ups can result in reduced physical wellbeing (which could lead to reduced emotional and mental health). Strategies to help reduce the implications of this include referrals to HR or Occupational Health (OH) to undertake workplace assessments to see what other equipment may be needed to help with working from home. Some organisations may also provide a budget allocation if employees have had to purchase additional equipment to work from home effectively.
- *Considerations of mental health:* Major changes in working patterns and routines, alongside other anxieties resulting from the pandemic can affect both employee and employer mental health. Line managers are in the best place to spot any changes in employee behaviour, and should be ready to provide support and signpost employees to relevant sources for further help (eg Employee Assistance Programmes, charities, OH). However, it is also important that managers are aware of the impact of these changes in circumstances on their own mental health, so they are in a suitable position to help employees when needed. Line managers at this time are also experiencing changes in their working patterns, and being the 'squeezed middle' they are also faced with many complex decisions and competing roles. The addition of virtual management may make some of these roles harder to complete (Zeike et al, 2019). Pressures of increased digitisation of work has been found to have an adverse impact on managerial wellbeing because of increased demands, indicating that line manager mental health should be considered important also.



Implications of poor line management have previously been discussed (Bajorek, 2020), but line management in the virtual world clearly brings additional challenges that some managers may not be adequately prepared for. If, as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, hybrid working patterns will become more common if employees have adjusted and are able to productively work from home, this leads to questions regarding what organisations should be doing to help line managers with any additional managerial challenges this will bring.

## What can HR do to support line managers?

*‘On a day to day basis, it’s typically line managers who are at the forefront of managing the complex range of organisational factors affecting people’s wellbeing at work...but this expectation is not always matched by adequate investment in their skills and capabilities. Too few employers provide an effective framework to ensure that managers can play the positive role that’s needed to support wellbeing.’ (CIPD, 2020)*

It is clear that line managers are important, but there are concerns they are not being provided with the resources that are necessary to be effective. So, what can HR do to support line managers?

**Training:** If teleworking is to become more popular and routine in everyday organisational life, then appropriate line management training would be required to help managers develop the skills needed to be effective (Lamond et al., 2003). Line management training suitable for managing teleworkers includes communication; self-management; time management; health, safety and wellbeing; and company policies regarding off-site working, just to name a few (Salmon et al., 2000). HR must prioritise the training of line managers (including how to manage digitally). A recent CIPD (2020) survey suggests that less than three-fifths (56 per cent) of organisations train their line managers in absence management, and only half (51 per cent) train their managers to support employees with mental ill health. The survey also found that 31 per cent of respondents agreed managers were confident to have discussions and signpost staff to expert services if help was needed, and only 25 per cent of managers were confident and competent to spot the early warning signs of mental ill health. Thus further line management training is key.

**Clarify line manager expectations:** It is not solely the lack of training that has implications for management effectiveness, and organisations must not fall into the ‘training trap’. Line managers often face unmanageable workloads and face increasing pressures to deliver to tight deadlines and targets. Line manager ‘bandwidth’ is constrained with ever increasing demands (potentially more stretched as a consequence of the pandemic), with reduced support from HR, often leaving managers feeling dumped upon (Harris et al., 2002). Managers have picked up roles that were HR’s remit (absence management, reward management, training) which could compromise their ability to perform to their full

potential. Now is the time to consider what the important aspects of line management *should* be and develop a more realistic understanding of line management roles.

*Wellbeing culture:* Line managers are important for employee wellbeing, so it is important that organisational policies and practices promote a culture of positive wellbeing. Results from the CIPD (2020) survey suggest more is to be done here. For example, only 44 per cent of surveyed organisations took a strategic approach to wellbeing by having a stand-alone wellbeing policy, and a majority of organisations are still taking a reactive rather than a proactive approach to wellbeing. Under half (45 per cent) of organisations reported using specialist knowledge provided by OH providers to help develop 'Good Work' principles or develop health and wellbeing programmes. More can be done to promote the wellbeing agenda within organisations to bolster the message that wellbeing is important, and to support line managers to manage this on a day-to-day basis.

*Manage workloads:* Employee workload needs to be monitored, especially during this time when teleworking is widespread. The 'always on' culture that can be triggered by teleworking can be detrimental for mental health. A third of employees in the CIPD (2020) survey reported their organisation was doing little to address stress at work and presenteeism and leavism (catching up on work during annual leave) have increased. Employees often report an inability to switch off during out of work hours, and being judged by hours worked and on being 'seen to be working', rather than on quality of outputs. It may be too early to understand how this has been affected by the pandemic, but it is sensible for organisations to develop teleworking or remote working policies that employees can discuss with their line managers that support wider organisational policies such as employee wellbeing and performance management.

## Conclusions

Organisations should reflect on the Covid-19 pandemic and the changes this may have for the workforce to reassess what organisations need and want from line managers, and develop strategic plans of action regarding how managers are selected and developed. To do this effectively key actions are required:

- Line managers should be selected on the basis of their emotional intelligence, their ability to understand and empathise with employee experience and their effective communication.
- Investment in line management training, including skills to undertake this remotely, is necessary if teleworking is to become a preferred working pattern in the future.
- Organisations need to make employee wellbeing a central priority to ensure that changes in work patterns do not have negative implications for health and wellbeing.
- Employees will have different experiences of teleworking, and line managers must be aware of employee needs.

- Communication channels between line managers and employees and employee teams need to be enabled to reduce the risk of social isolation and ensure employment relationships remain intact.

Out of sight should not mean out of mind, and these actions are key to ensuring this does not occur.

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## The author:

Zofia Bajorek is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Employment Studies (IES). Her main interests include the role of line managers and the development of the employment relationship, the management of the psychological contract, the temporary and flexible workforce, and the health and wellbeing of the workforce, including the promotion of good work practices.

Zofia can be reached on: [Zofia.Bajorek@employment-studies.co.uk](mailto:Zofia.Bajorek@employment-studies.co.uk)

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