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Freedom not at all. A new study proves it: Home office is more like a hamster wheel

The promise of freedom to shape the working day oneself and organise it on one's own responsibility shapes the idea of the home office - superficially at least. It makes many people ill, says Birgit Langebartels in the Stern interview of 30.11.2021.

Ms Langebartels, you say we have been taken in by a home office lie. What kind of lie is that?

We live in a culture that constantly promises us that anything is possible. Corona has shattered this image, but we still want to believe in it. We as authors of our own lives! This is also why we have experienced the home office as a promise, as a promise. We hoped for an unprecedented simultaneity: work and private life in parallel, a few meetings here, a quick look after the children there, a leisurely breakfast with our partner and jogging or yoga in between.

Which, if it were to succeed, would not be a bad thing.

But of course it can't work like that, and people noticed that at some point. Many of the people we spoke to in the course of our study had this feeling: That you no longer have to fight against your boss, but against yourself. Against inner, resisting tendencies. The soul is greedy. One wanted to shape the home office as hoped for through the promise, and is but get caught up in an excessive demand. Take the prototypical sweatpants, in which some people want to recognise neglect. I think sweatpants are a symbol for the fact that we first have to get up to operating temperature - and for how difficult that is in the home office, because theoretically you could just keep your sweatpants on.

External routines such as dressing appropriately, perhaps the morning shower, the way to work have suddenly fallen away. What does this do internally?

When I work in a company and have to go there, a lot happens automatically. I have the route, I come into the building, it smells like work and it looks like work. I meet colleagues and sit in meetings. I am part of a bigger whole.

But in the home office we are reduced to the net work, to what is done at the end of the day, but without anyone seeing how we did it. This leads to a loss of meaning. Many have the feeling: I am worth less, I am only

another little worm working away at the computer. All the distractions and creative opportunities that make up a company are gone. This is a radical change in the world of work.

But does that mean we have to speak of a lie when it comes to working from home? Home office is an epidemiological necessity to reduce the incidence.

I don't want to question that either. The home office has its justification, now more than ever. And it also has advantages that we should talk about: How easily we can confer now, how much time we can spend at home.

because there are no more roads. Many fathers have raved to us about the moments they can now spend with their children, about the fact that they get to see much more. Nevertheless, we have to bear in mind: Some have got caught in a domestic hamster wheel from which they can no longer find their way out. There are shadow sides. Private and work often diffuse to a point where they can hardly be separated.

What did your respondents tell you?

There was a man who had to lock his study at home and then give the key to his wife so that she would hide it. Otherwise he would have gone back to his PC again and again. He himself did not keep the separation between work and private life.

can manage. Another covers her desk in the flat with a cloth to block out the work. A third complained that his wife no longer appreciates him and what he does for a living since he sits in his home office.

He was constantly disturbed, was supposed to take out the rubbish and go shopping, all during working hours. Work was no longer perceived as work because it took place at home. How to deal with that? We have worked out four different types.

What are they?

First: the private individuals. Sounds good at first. But the privateers feel they have to do justice to everyone, especially at home. They get nowhere. On the other hand, there are the field workers who live permanently with the device in their hands, who have put their whole life at the service of the office and can't find an end to it even late at night. They still check their e-mails at three o'clock in the morning. In between, there are those who are more flexible. The casual ones, who creatively combine home and office, perhaps even share a study with their partner. In any case, the door is sometimes open, the children are allowed to run around, and the home office is perceived as an extension of one's own possibilities. And finally, the so-called home officers: they combine home and office by structuring and strictly separating them.

They go into the study at 7:30 in the morning, then don't go out again until they have lunch together, then go back to their desks in the afternoon and close the door. Even in the home office, they live by the motto: duty is duty and booze is booze.

Something that might bother many and is also an extreme in journalism: how often conferences are held since everyone is sitting in a home office. Are such video marathons the result of the compulsive

of desperate bosses who want to monitor whether their subordinates are really working?

There was a digital compression that was unbelievable. We were told that many times. The fantasy of omnipotence, that we are no longer bound to time and space in the home office, has taken on a life of its own. And because there is so much conferencing, conferences are sometimes scheduled in parallel, in the end you don't really get anything done. In the past, there were breaks in the process: changing rooms, going to the canteen, maybe a two-hour train ride to a client. Today, some people in the home office have forgotten how to eat lunch - because you can actually still work at the same time. could.

We have to learn to take a break again?

You need self-care. You need breaks, you need to get away from your desk sometimes. It has long been proven that walking through the garden or around the block is good for fresh thinking.

But when I do that, the guilty conscience comes immediately: Am I entitled to that? In the home office, I can no longer judge how much my colleagues work. Competition is triggered in this way.

It leads to you not stopping working at all because you think the others are doing even more than you. The fear of falling behind is immense. An inner suspicion has arisen that you first have to fight against.

But it sounds as if in the end it is merely a personal decision between two extremes: either self-realisation or self-exploitation, either happiness or unhappiness.

This is not a decision that one makes alone. I would like our study to be understood as an urgent appeal to company managers. You have to manage people differently when they are in the home office. You have a different duty of care. Employees must have the feeling that they are being seen - also so that they do not constantly put themselves under pressure with demonstrations of visibility. Going to the toilet must not become a race against time, the light in teams does not always have to be on online. Leaders should create a sense of community, now more than ever. Also so that people in the home office do not disconnect from the employer.

How do you create a sense of community when the hierarchies in an employer relationship are quite clearly defined?

By explaining again: what a company works for, what it stands for, what values it represents, what it offers - and what it demands. Define the guard rails! And respond to the respective employee, make yourself clear: Who do I have in front of me? What is easy for them, what is difficult? Does he or she need a lot of encouragement or does he or she prefer to work quietly and independently? Hybrid forms

can help additionally. Encourage them to come to the office one day a week, or arrange a meeting once a month to strengthen the team spirit. By the way, a lot is being taken away from managers at the moment. Many like to work together with their teams, and they are totally lacking that.

But the old office world with its group meetings at the coffee machine, the sticky Stromberg humour, the dusty yucca in the corner and traffic jams on the way to work, you don't wish it back either.

Nobody wants them back. At least that's what we claim. And yet, realistically, what you describe makes up a lot of our working world - and so is not only bad, but can also make for that operating temperature. Sometimes I need the colleague who is talking too loudly on the phone again, if only to get upset with him. In the home office, I'm thrown back on myself every day. I have no outlet at all for negative emotions.

At work, you get used to a lot of things over time, including the inconveniences, i.e. all the annoying things. Why is this not possible in the home office?

Many succeed in this. They've got their act together, they've put the doors back on to set themselves apart. They have also understood that a fixed time is needed to finish work. But there are also those who thought at first: The home office will work for a few weeks. And now they realise that it takes longer.

Some get into what we have called Long Homid: with dangers of burnout, unworldliness and neglect.

Tell me, Ms. Langebartels, this study in which you are tough on the home office - did it actually originate in the home office?

From my side, yes, at least most of the time. I was in the home office. So were the colleagues who conducted many of the depth psychology interviews. Only sometimes we had to sit down together properly for a meeting.

And you expect me to believe that you have never fallen into the traps of self-exploitation?

Let's put it this way: I can get a lot out of the home office and also work at home in a concentrated way. I just miss the rashes, I miss the cold air in the morning, I miss the unexpected. Everything is always at the same temperature. I need the office now and then. To balance things out, I've been going running a lot. At the end of a long day another walk, yes, it helps me. And last but not least, the hustle and bustle and the demands of my family also help me.