

Exclusive data from long-term study: 5 Truths about the Home Office

by Dominik Reintjes

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Employees felt particularly alone during lockdowns, when they spent a lot of time in the home office.

Picture: imago images

Hardly any scientist has researched the pandemic home office as closely as Hannes Zacher from the University of Leipzig. His data shows how employees' attitudes towards the home office have changed over the years and what role lockdowns and omicron play.

Hannes Zacher has been able to rely on luck several times now in his scientific work around the home office: Not only because he started his study at the end of 2019, before the outbreak of the pandemic, and even then asked a question about the home office. As if he and his team at the University of Leipzig had seen the mass forced transfer of employees to a writing or, optionally, kitchen table within their own four walls coming.

In addition, the study in which Zacher and his colleagues have been looking much more intensively at the home office since April 2020 should currently already be finished. Actually, Zacher only scheduled it until the end, 2021 and only applied for the Volkswagen Foundation funding until then. "After all, I was convinced at the time that we would find a way to

from the pandemic," says Zacher. When it became clear in the autumn that this would not work, Zacher hurriedly submitted a follow-up application, which the foundation approved again. "Fortunately", as the professor of industrial and organisational psychology says.

For as dramatic as the times are for the population and the health system, they are just as significant for the team's research. After all, the researchers' goal is to cover the entire period of the pandemic: Disregarding the new Omikron variant, the reintroduction of contact restrictions and home office duty would have taken a lot of meaning out of the figures.

However, the data that Zacher and his colleagues have collected over the past two years, and which are exclusively available to WirtschaftsWoche in this form, provide detailed insights into the significance of the home office in the pandemic, the risks and opportunities. Other studies mostly refer to shorter periods of time or their surveys only take place at intervals of a few months. The figures from Leipzig, on the other hand, allow conclusions to be drawn about the behaviour of employees when infection figures rise or fall, when lockdowns are unceremoniously imposed or lifted again, when new virus variants such as Omikron spread. The study shows that the use of the home office has levelled off at a high level in recent years (*see chart above*). And workers always switch more to home office when the Republic is in lockdown. During the first lockdown, in March, April and May 2020, this may seem unsurprising. [Many workers were put into the home office by necessity](#). But the spread of Omikron and the associated reintroduction of compulsory home office use also caused an increase in home office use, according to the data. Even without a de facto lockdown.



Hannes Zacher is Dean of Studies for Psychology and Professor of Industrial and Organisational Psychology at the Wilhelm Wundt Institute for Psychology, University of Leipzig.

Photo: Swen Reichhold/University of Leipzig

For example, in the January 2022 survey, employees who worked at least partly in a home office said on average that they had spent almost 58 per cent of their weekly working time at home in the last four weeks. Between the second lockdown and the Omikron outbreak, this share had still been falling sharply, but now it has been rising again since November.

For their study, in which the researchers also look beyond the home office, for example, at the perception of stress or job satisfaction, they surveyed around 1,000 employees from various sectors of the economy every month. The researchers then asked those who worked at least partly in a home office specific questions about working from home. In the study, a survey wave always refers to the experiences from the previous four weeks: So if the respondents said in April that they had worked at home almost 30 per cent of the working week, they did so according to their own assessment in the month of March. Each online survey lasted about 25 to 30 minutes; only in June was there a one-off survey.

It is true that many changes are only reflected in the range of decimal places of the mean values that Zacher and his colleagues work with in the study. However, these averages are reliable and reflect the trends over time very well, says Zacher. Even without the big outliers up or down.

Accordingly, the home office has established itself, Zacher comments on the results. "The respondents spend significantly more than half of their working week here and also have the opportunity to do so across the board," says the researcher. Over the period of the survey, the researchers registered only very slight fluctuations. This normality, to which the word "new" is so readily attributed, is now described by Zacher as "not so new" normality in view of the data. At the moment, we are still in a dicey situation, says Zacher. The infection figures are rising, Omikron is displacing the other virus variants and people have returned to the home office, says Zacher. "And they will stay there for now."

In addition to the use of the home office, the monthly surveys of the team also aim at psychological assessments, for example on the stresses and strains of the home office. Such a survey comes at the right time. The home office has been criticised for [promoting loneliness and stress](#). A study by the [Bertelsmann Foundation](#) in December, for example, showed that home office had a negative effect on motivation and relationships with colleagues, according to employees. [Researchers from the Institute for Employment Research \(IAB\) came to the conclusion that communication in particular suffers as a result of the home office](#). In the study by the Leipzig researchers around Hannes Zacher, the positive assessments of the respondents predominate, but the data also show that contact among colleagues and contact between employees and managers has suffered since the beginning of the pandemic. Especially in the first year of the survey, from April 2020 to April 2021, this value dropped significantly (*see chart above*).

Zacher and his colleagues also asked the participants whether they felt lonely in the home office and excluded from "work-related activities and meetings". According to Zacher, the survey showed that although the mean value for the feeling of isolation since the beginning of the pandemic was below the mean value of the scale (2.5), "for such an alarming consequence of the

home office remains at a very high level and the situation of many employees does not seem to be improving". The data showed that the feeling of loneliness among respondents was strongest at the end of the second lockdown and is now getting stronger again since the spread of Omikron (*see chart above*).

Other home office studies, such as the one conducted by the University of Konstanz, have already pointed out in the past [that employees feel more lonely when working at home than at work](#).

"Video conferences and mail contact are obviously not enough to create a collective sense of community," Zacher also says. He sees the superiors as having a duty: "Managers should definitely take the phenomenon of perceived isolation in the home office seriously; they must take countermeasures here." The bosses are "the key to successful and psychologically compatible home work".

However, the data also holds more optimistic observations. Satisfaction with the home office has increased since the beginning of the survey (*see chart above*). Although the movements here are also in the decimal range, the respondents on average show themselves to be "rather satisfied" with the home office. And especially in 2021, the second Corona year, satisfaction increased significantly. "The respondents associate the home office more with a place of creativity and relaxation - and less with a place of demands," says Zacher.

Even if other [empirical studies not based on surveys contradict this](#).

In a question asking employees to rate their performance in the home office over the past four weeks, the researchers arrive at similarly positive results (*see chart below*). For example, significantly more respondents than at the time of the first lockdown are convinced that they can successfully complete their tasks from home.

According to Zacher, the fact that the study ultimately shows both positive and negative assessments of the home office shows "once again that the home office is a double-edged sword, a rollercoaster of emotions". On the one hand, employees are in a familiar place where they feel comfortable. "On the other hand, however, they report being secluded. That makes home office a very ambiguous phenomenon - and gives me pause for thought." And so, even after two years of intensive research, home office remains too complex a topic to dismiss it sweepingly as a curse or a blessing, a place of alienation or a productivity miracle.

The study should now run until the middle of the year, according to Zacher's plan. Provided that new variants or lockdowns do not upset the plans again. Zacher himself has remained an office worker even during the pandemic, coming to Leipzig University "very gladly and very often". "In my individual office I can simply focus best on the work," he says. The psychologist already has enough of a home office in his daily research life. Even if it is not his own.

More on this topic: [The new contact restrictions make it clear: offices will not fill up that quickly in 2022. It's high time that companies develop a home office strategy now. This data shows the advantages and risks.](#)



[Dominik Reintjes](#)

[Editor](#)