



Swedish Agency for Work
Environment Expertise

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on work environments in Sweden

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Report 2023:1

Report presenting the results of the mapping and analysis of the short and long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on work environments in Sweden.

A2021/02355, A2021/02331 (partial)

ISBN 978-91-89747-22-7

Published in 2023

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Preface

The 2022 appropriation directions (A2021/02355; A2021/02331 (partial)) presented to the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise tasked the agency will analysing the short and long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the work environments in Sweden. In order to complete this major government assignment, the agency conducted five projects, each focusing on a professional group or groups particularly affected by the pandemic. These projects were also used to highlight general changes to the work environment, such as remote working and working in hybrid organisations. The results of these studies provide insight into how society can address similar crises and social disruptions in the future. This report summarises the results from the five projects:

- The work environment for teachers in compulsory schools during the Covid-19 pandemic
- The work environment for managers during the Covid-19 pandemic
- The work environment for healthcare workers during the Covid-19 pandemic
- The organisational and psychosocial work environments in the Swedish labour market during the Covid-19 pandemic
- The work environment for workers who remained in their regular workplaces during the Covid-19 pandemic – retail, transport, health and social care

The Covid-19 pandemic generated many changes in the approach towards how the workplace is shaped and how duties are organised. Regardless of whether organisations continued to work on site, or transitioned to remote working – either entirely or in part –, the pandemic forced organisations to adapt to new circumstances.

The use of digital equipment increased; new communication channels emerged and working methods were transformed. Overall, the reports demonstrate how Swedish working life showed a strong resilience against the effects of the pandemic – even though certain professions faced particular risks. There is a preparedness that needs to be maintained and reinforced so we are able to meet sudden, comprehensive social disturbances in the future.

The Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise commissioned scientific journalist Krister Zeidler to write this report. Docent Robert Ljung was the process leader at the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise. Communications officers Camilla Wengelin and Sverre Lundqvist oversaw the communication efforts of the project.

I would like to extend my thanks to all of those who contributed to the creation of this report.

Gävle, March 2023



Nader Ahmadi,
Director General

Summary

About the Government Assignment

In the letter of instruction for 2022 the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise was awarded extra financial resources to describe and analyse the consequences of the corona pandemic on the work environment in Sweden.

The aim of the project has been to describe both the short-term and longterm consequences that the corona pandemic has had on the work environment in Sweden and which groups have been especially affected during the pandemic. The results of the studies also includes factors and measures that have improved the work environment which may improve the ability of work-places to manage sudden and turbulent disruptions to society.

Method

In order to carry out the government assignment, the work has been organised into five different sub-projects with different orientations and with parallel studies where several researchers have worked to answer different questions.

Three of the studies have reviewed and analysed the consequences of the pandemic for particularly vulnerable professions: "The work environment for elementary school teachers during the corona pandemic", "The work environment for health care workers during the corona pandemic" and "The work environment for personnel working at their regular workplaces during the corona pandemic - retail, logistics, health and social care".

A fourth study, "The work environment for managers during the corona pandemic", has described roles and conditions for managers during the pandemic and how leadership and activities connected to the work environment have been affected for managers whose co-workers are either working remotely or at their regular workplace.

The fifth study, "The organisational and psychosocial work environment in the Swedish labour market during the corona pandemic", has analysed statistics about work conditions and work environment factors based on the Swedish Longitudinal Occupational Survey of Health (SLOSH) and two additional surveys undertaken during the pandemic.

In addition to the other reports, there is also an international comparison of the pandemic's consequences for employees, based on reports from the

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, EU-Osha, and the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Eurofound.

Results

When the rate of infection for the corona virus accelerated in Sweden during the spring of 2020, employers were forced to rapidly change and adapt their organisations in order to protect their employees and to follow the restrictions and recommendations issued. Infection prevention measures were introduced, work was reorganised and new duties and routines were introduced in workplaces at the same time as working from home became commonplace. This resulted in comprehensive changes in employee's work conditions which primarily affected the organisational work environment and the social work environment.

The largest organisational change was the large-scale transition to remote or hybrid working. A long-term consequence of the pandemic is that it has become more common to work remotely, often in combination with working at the regular workplace.

However, the employees that were most vulnerable during the pandemic were those who did not have the same possibilities of working from home and were instead required to be at their regular workplace. This particularly applied to employees within female-dominated professions such as health care, social care and education. A significant proportion of these employees experienced an increase in workload and stress when new routines and duties were introduced. This led to a high level of psychological workload that was exacerbated by the emotional demands of the work duties, the high levels of sick leave in the workplace and a worry over being infected, or infecting others, with covid-19.

The studies show that there are organisational and individual measures that can be put in place to reduce the psychological workload. These can consist of support and allocation of resources, adapting staffing and worktimes or individual measures that increase the possibility for recuperation.

Working systematically with work environment issues was proved to be effective in reducing the negative effects of the pandemic. The studies show that workplaces that already prior to the pandemic worked actively with work environment issues, were better prepared to cope with the effects of changed work conditions and were able to more quickly identify and manage risks in the work environment. These results are confirmed in the EU-studies that are reviewed in this report and that show that employees at companies and organisations that work preemptively with their work environment were affected to a lesser degree with stress related health issues.

A further protective factor during the pandemic was the comprehensive and rapid transition to remote and hybrid working. Those working remotely were less exposed to the risk of infection or accidents and had a more flexible worklife with a better balance between work and private life. Those working remotely also had a larger influence over their work, less time pressure and a lower psychological workload than those who worked at their regular workplace.

Sweden was one of the countries in Europe where remote working was most widespread during the pandemic and the conditions were especially favourable in the form of digital infrastructure, technical competency and a certain degree of familiarity with working independently. In contrast to many other countries, remote working in Sweden was facilitated by the fact that childcare and schools remained open during the pandemic.

Together, the five completed studies show that workplaces had both a large capacity to adapt and a flexibility, which enabled management of the negative consequences of the pandemic. This is a preparedness that needs to be maintained, but also strengthened, to be able to cope with sudden and turbulent disruptions to society in the future.

At the same time, it is important to learn from how the consequences of the pandemic continue to leave their mark on peoples' work environment and health. An example of this is that the psychosocial work environment, that to a large degree was paused during the pandemic, now needs to be recouped. This also applies to the workload that continues to be high in several professions even after the pandemic, which risks leading to an exacerbation of the already wide-spread stress related health issues in society.

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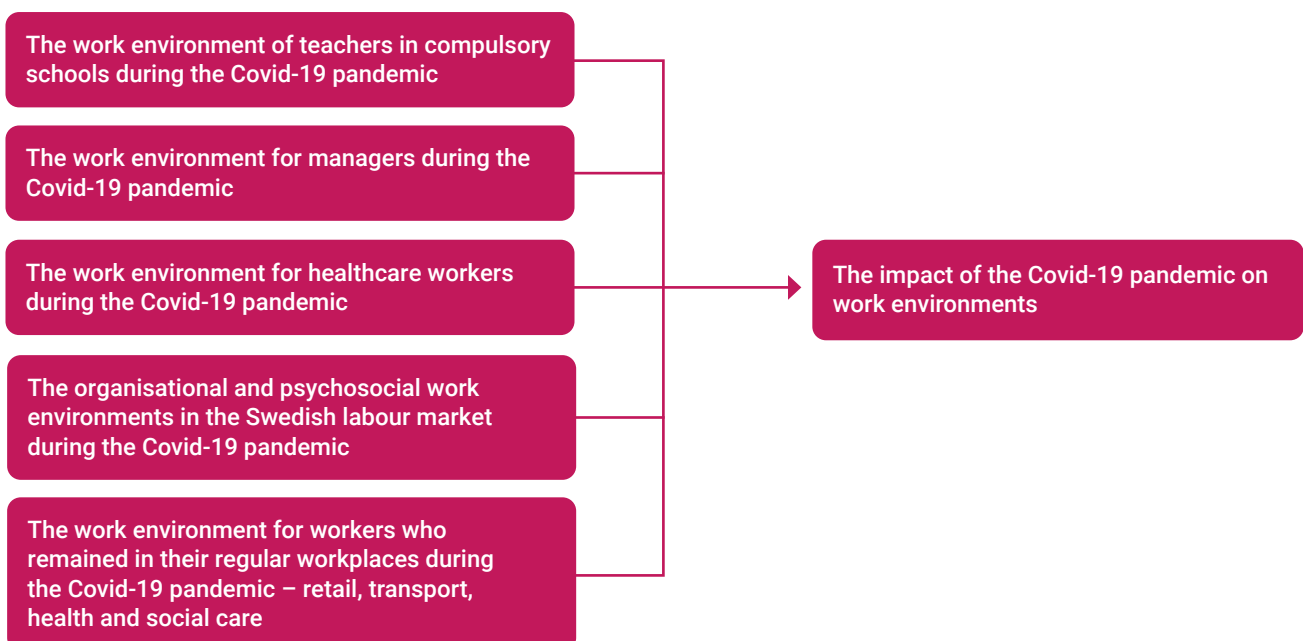
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1. Background

When the World Health Organization, WHO, classed the spread of Covid-19 as a global pandemic, Sweden enforced a number of restrictions and recommendations to limit the spread of the virus.

Workplaces were one of the worst infection sites, which led employers to rapidly reorganise work activities to protect both employees and the organisation. Radical and comprehensive changes to employees' working conditions ensued, affecting their work environment and risk of illness. At the same time, there has been a great ability to adapt, and the flexibility following the transition has increased the focus on the psychosocial work environment as well as created working methods that have streamlined tasks and improved work environments.

The Swedish Government tasked the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise to map and analyse the effects and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the work environment in Sweden. This work has resulted in five studies that highlight how the pandemic affected working life. The aim has been to highlight both the short and long-term impact of the pandemic on employee groups who were particularly affected, such as teachers, health and social care workers and other professions who generally stayed in their regular workplaces. The studies also look at how the pandemic affected managers and remote workers. The objective has been to establish the risks of increased illness that arose during the pandemic. However, the study also highlights the positive factors and measures that improved work environments, and that can strengthen preparedness ahead of similar social crises in the future.



Working conditions changed drastically

During the pandemic, there were major changes to how work was organised and how work conditions were adapted to reduce the risk of spreading Covid-19. These changes subsequently affected the physical, organisational and social work environments. This is demonstrated in the study, 'The organisational and psychosocial work environments in the Swedish labour market during the Covid-19 pandemic' that builds upon the Swedish Longitudinal Occupational Survey of Health (SLOSH) and two supplementary surveys conducted during the pandemic.

The increased possibility of working from home was the biggest change to the organisational work environment. Approximately 40 per cent of the survey participants stated that they had been able to work remotely to some extent before the pandemic. This figure grew to 77 per cent during the pandemic's first and second waves, i.e. spring and autumn 2020.

As regards the psychosocial work environment, approximately one-third of employees stated that the increase in mental workload was the most significant. A similar proportion stated that their workload had increased, whereas one in five employees reported a lighter workload.

Collaboration and support from managers and colleagues were also affected. One in five employees felt they received increased support during the pandemic, with somewhat fewer believing support had decreased. A relatively large proportion – approximately one-third – felt that solidarity and the work atmosphere deteriorated compared to before the pandemic.

However, 'high-strain' work – i.e. high standards, low control – decreased during the pandemic. This links with employees receiving greater decision-making capacity and increased influence over their work.

Furthermore, the results of the SLOSH study demonstrate that many employees felt they were at a higher risk of infection, particularly those who attended their regular workplace.

Certain groups were more vulnerable

Women were more affected by poorer working environments during the pandemic than men. This applied most of all to the mental workload, as well as increased time pressure and work volumes, a decrease in cooperation and unity, and more conflicts at work. However, compared to men, more women felt that they received increased support from managers and colleagues during the pandemic.

Work environments also differed between those who worked from home and those who remained in their regular workplace. Those who continued working in their regular workplace stated greater time pressures, work volumes and physical and mental strain throughout the pandemic.

On the other hand, those who worked remotely during the pandemic felt less solidarity and collaboration compared to those who continued to work on site. At the same time, they stated that they had greater influence over their work compared to those who did not work remotely.

The 36–55 age group experienced increased time pressures, work volumes and mental workloads at the start of the pandemic, although these differences evened out during the pandemic's latter stages.

Poorer work environments could be seen in professions where women workers dominate, such as health and social care, compulsory schools and childcare professions. Those who work in these fields experienced significantly greater time pressures, work volumes and mental workload than others.

However, people who work within health and social care, compulsory schools and childcare experienced greater support than those in other professions.

2. Major impact on teachers working conditions

A study by the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise has mapped the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the work environments of teachers in the compulsory school. The study aims to address the risks of ill health that arose, as well as learn how society can be better equipped ahead of future crises that may affect both work and the work environment in compulsory schools.

Unlike many other countries, Sweden chose to allow most schools to remain open during the pandemic. The decision to continue teaching while limiting the spread of infection resulted in a drastic change of circumstances for teachers in the compulsory school.

Infection control measures in schools were one major change to be introduced. Teachers were given new tasks and worked with airing rooms, disinfecting desks and teaching materials, and ensuring that pupils socially distanced, washed their hands and used hand sanitiser.

The transition to hybrid teaching was another major change. Working both remotely and in schools placed requirements on technical prerequisites and knowledge, and involved more planning work for teachers. Teaching materials also required adapting for pupils who were at home, and the digital teaching format required more documentation and follow ups alongside more frequent contact with the children's guardians.

Poor work environment and increased risk of ill health

The study builds on survey responses and interviews, and shows that teachers in the compulsory school were already experiencing shortcomings in their work environment before the pandemic. The changes to working conditions during the pandemic had further negative implications.

Above all, teachers saw an increase in their workloads during the pandemic, primarily due to the transition to the combination of distance and classroom-based teaching. Before the pandemic, 57 per cent of all teachers felt they had enough time to complete their tasks, compared to 41 per cent during the pandemic.

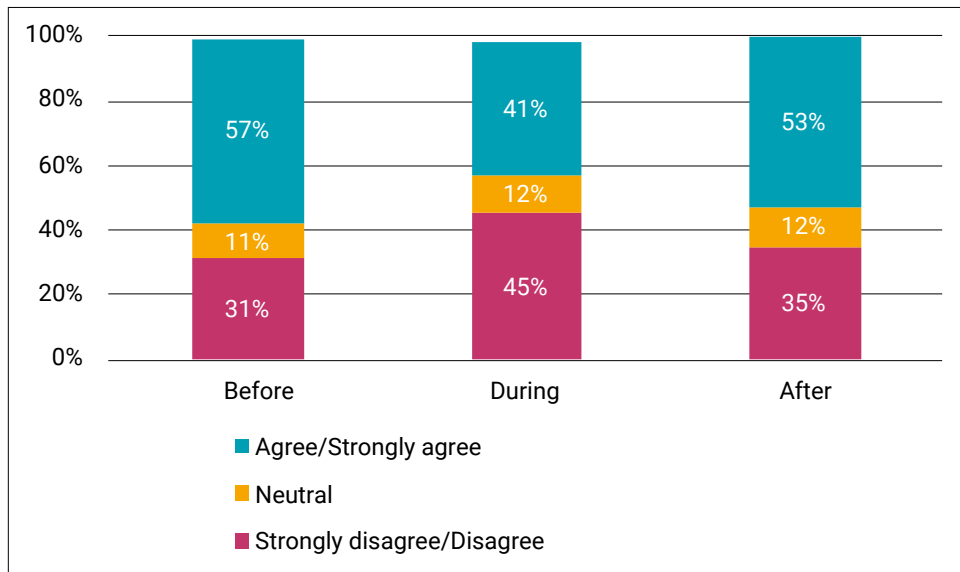


Diagram presenting the degree to which respondents agreed with the statement: 'I had/have enough time to complete my tasks.'

The workload was further increased as a result of sick leave in schools, meaning teachers who were on site had to substitute for their absent colleagues. One teacher described a working day as follows:

'You have to work with three classes, but they can't all be in one classroom, as the children still need to be socially distanced. So you have to go between three classrooms and teach in roughly the same way for all three classes.'

Even though compulsory schools introduced a number of infection control measures, many teachers constantly feared catching Covid-19, especially at the start of the pandemic, when we did not know how dangerous the virus was and when no vaccine was available. Teachers who were older and those with underlying health problems were more concerned. Some were also worried about taking the virus home from school and infecting those close to them. One teacher explained:

'You were living with the expectation of becoming ill; resigned to the fact that during the pandemic you'd get sick and die but nobody would care anyway...' There was a strong sense of resignation among teachers.

The heavy workload together with the concern of becoming infected led to an increased risk of stress and exhaustion. Some teachers reported headaches, stomach pain and sleeping difficulties due to the deteriorating work environment. Even though compulsory schools remained open, many teachers experienced an increase in social isolation, which in turn led to a risk of decreased motivation and low moods.

The study's results also showed how in many cases, compulsory schools became characterised by uncertain situations, rapid changes, a lack of information

and unclear governance. Whereas 60 per cent of the teachers believed that recommendations issued by public authorities provided clarity before the pandemic, only 40 per cent felt this was the case while it was ongoing. The proportion who believed they received sufficient information from school management was also lower during the pandemic than before. Regarding the information provided, one teacher felt that:

‘Certain things were tougher, especially at the start when there was a lot of contradictory information. New rules were introduced regularly, and it was difficult to know how to act in relation to everything. There was a constant fear of needing to close down schools.’

Adaptations were made to working methods in schools in order to reduce the risk of spreading infection. This resulted in fewer physical meetings in schools. This, together with the periodically high rates of sick leave and the lack of social gatherings, led to a decrease in support and collaboration among colleagues during the pandemic. The survey results show that 93 per cent of the teachers felt they had a successful collaboration with their colleagues before the pandemic. This figure dropped to 75 per cent during the pandemic.

In addition, teachers felt that school management was less involved in their work during the pandemic, and they felt less included in the decisions taken in their schools. The interviews held with school management found that managers were under a great deal of pressure and were occupied with tasks such as managing high levels of employee sick leave, introducing infection control measures, continually reprioritising and informing staff, pupils and guardians about the pandemic. This resulted in a decrease in teachers’ access to support from school management.

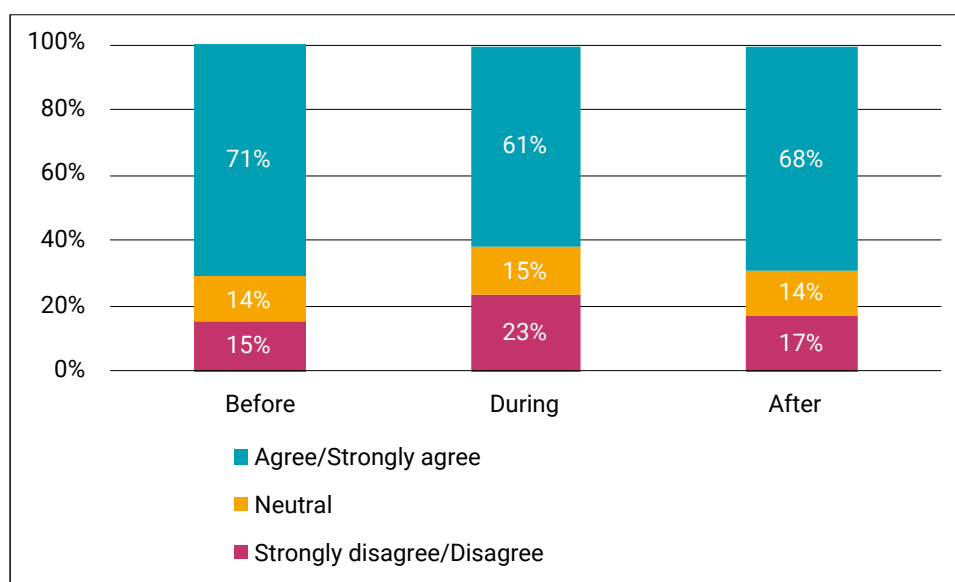


Diagram presenting the degree to which respondents agreed with the statement: 'I received/receive sufficient support from school management when I needed/need it, e.g. meetings with the principal.'

There was also a decrease in cooperation with pupils during the pandemic, as they were not in classrooms to the same extent as before. In their interviews, teachers described a decrease in the 'we feeling' with their classes during the pandemic.

Many pupils were at home, very few were in the classroom, so people worked from home. And it isn't quite the same. Establishing the connection between pupil and teacher is more difficult when people do not see each other in person.

The study shows that the physical work environment in schools deteriorated during the pandemic, especially at the start. Teachers needed to work with infection control measures in premises that were not always designed to enable social distancing. Additionally, there was often a lack of hygiene products and personal protective equipment.

Online teaching was also seen as a challenge, with teachers indicating they sometimes lacked the equipment and support for using the right technology. Not all teachers and pupils had the right skills for using the digital tools.

Women's work environments further deteriorated

Prior to the pandemic, women teachers already experienced poorer working environments than their men colleagues. During the pandemic, their work environment deteriorated even further, and they felt there was a poorer balance between work and leisure time, compared to men teachers. The proportion of women teachers who were satisfied with their work decreased to a greater extent than compared to their colleagues who were men. Furthermore, organisational and physical work environments deteriorated more for women teachers than men during the pandemic.

In addition, the study showed that younger teachers felt there was a greater deterioration in their work environment during the pandemic compared to those who were older. For example, teachers aged 50 or younger experienced greater deterioration in the organisational work environment and the balance between work and leisure, compared to teachers aged 51–59 or 60 and above.

Generally, teachers at municipal schools found their work environments had already deteriorated prior to the pandemic, in comparison to those at independent schools. The pandemic appears to have led to greater deterioration in work environments for teachers at municipal schools compared to those employed by private education providers.

Systematic work environment management a protection factor

The study also showed how schools who had systematic work environment management procedures in place prior to the pandemic were better equipped for addressing the changes to working conditions that arose during the pandemic. These were a protection factor, meaning that teachers in the compulsory school did not face the same extent of negative changes to the physical, social and organisational work environments, when compared to those who worked in schools without systematic work environment management procedures.

Principals of schools with active work environment management procedures identified several success factors. This applied to both the possibility of rapidly capturing and addressing risks in the work environment by systematically identifying and assessing risks, taking action and conducting follow ups. This work included regular health and safety inspections with checklists adapted to different parts of the school, such as playgrounds and sports halls.

School management also conducted regular staff surveys and remained in contact with staff, health and safety representatives and trade union representatives. This increased the wherewithal for identifying and addressing risks in the school environment. In addition, trusting relationships and constructive discussions between teachers and school management further contributed to more successful work environment management.

Close collaboration with the municipality or other organisers on shared procedures and monitoring new infection control regulations, guidelines and recommendations were also included.

New working methods led to certain improvements

Despite the work environment generally deteriorating for teachers in the compulsory school during the pandemic, the changes to working methods led to some improvements. In order to limit the risk of spreading infection, teachers were given certain freedoms such as working from home when planning lessons and following up on teaching. More meetings were conducted online, including team or local workplace meetings and pupil-conferencing. When combined, this increased efficiency and teachers' flexibility and freedoms, which one teacher described as follows,

‘Things improved as we didn't need to be at the school. During our planning periods or when we were not with the children, we didn't need to be on site. In that respect, things were positive – we had more freedom to manage our own planning.

At the same time, the fact that many pupils were ill or attended classes online reduced disruptions and noise at school.’ The study shows that 51 per cent of teachers felt that noise levels in school were acceptable during the pandemic, compared to 45 per cent prior to the pandemic.

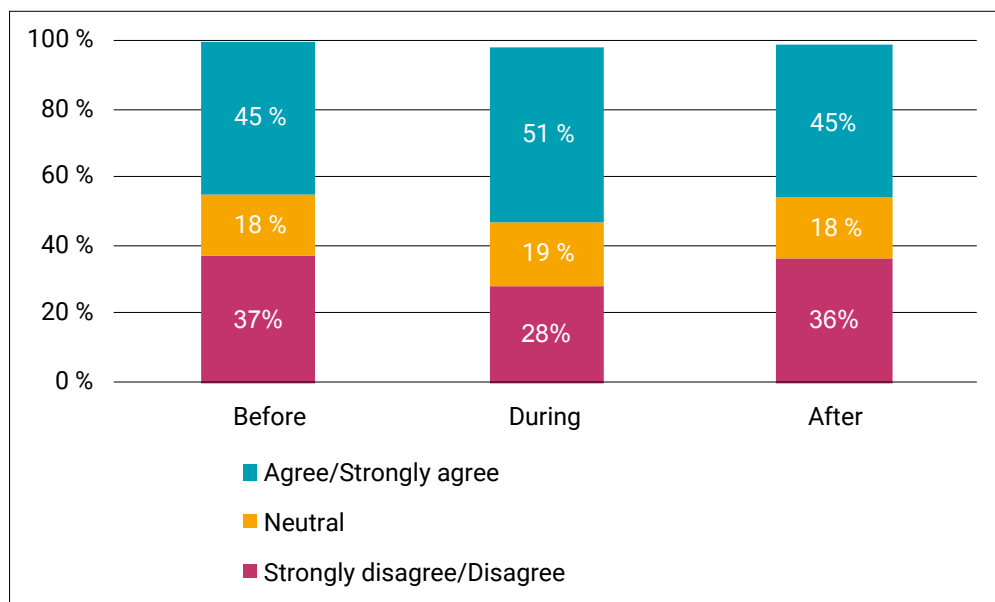


Diagram presenting the degree to which respondents agreed with the statement: 'Noise levels at the school were/are acceptable.'

The interviews also report improved noise levels in schools during the pandemic. Many teachers described how it was clear that the regular number of pupils in schools is too large in relation to the size of the premises. When interviewed, one teacher said the following about the improved working conditions,

‘There were fewer pupils, and we noticed it was much calmer and noise levels were better. So we realised just how crowded it is when many pupils are in a small space. This was great when we didn't have all the pupils on site.’

Several teachers and principals also highlight increased solidarity among staff during the pandemic. The challenges that arose in keeping schools open during the pandemic also appear to have strengthened the sense of community among staff groups at certain schools.

Challenges and lessons going forward

The study demonstrates that changes in working methods in schools during the pandemic generated several positive factors. Stress levels reduced for many teachers thanks to increased flexibility and autonomy over where and when they could work. This resulted in a better balance between work and leisure

time. Online teaching and the possibility of conducting remote meetings from home also reduced stress.

The infection control procedures that were introduced following the pandemic were also a positive factor. Staff and teachers were better at staying home when they felt ill, regularly washing their hands and social distancing. Many teachers have seen evidence of how improved infection control measures have resulted in fewer colds and stomach bugs among both pupils and teachers, compared to before the pandemic.

Nevertheless, the study shows that on the whole, the pandemic has generated a major strain on the work environments of teachers in the compulsory school. It led to problems such as increased workloads, continual fear of being infected with Covid-19 and a work situation that was unclear, with rapid changes, poor support and ambiguous governance.

As the pandemic began to abate and restrictions were lifted, the compulsory school has returned to full-time classroom teaching. This has resulted in the teachers who participated in the study generally experiencing a better work environment following the pandemic. At the same time, in many cases this means that teachers in the compulsory school have returned to the sub-par work environment that also existed prior to the pandemic. This environment includes time pressure, requirements from parents, insufficient support from school management, poor premises, comprehensive administration and lack of calm study environments when teaching.

The work environment in schools needs to be improved and developed in order to reduce the risk of ill health and secure the number of teachers in the profession in the future. The study shows that successful systematic work environment management slowed down the negative effects of the pandemic, and can be used to strengthen a school's resilience against sudden and radical social disruptions.

The online methods used during the pandemic that streamlined a teacher's work and gave them more professional freedom could also be used to enhance contingency plans, improve work environments in schools, facilitate recruitment and encourage more teachers to stay in the profession.

3. Increased workload for healthcare workers

The Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise has mapped how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted work environments within healthcare, studied the measures taken and looked at how they improved workers' work environments and health. The results, that include both national and international studies, are presented in the knowledge compilation 'The work environment for healthcare workers during the Covid-19 pandemic.'

When the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in Sweden, the healthcare sector successfully transformed its organisation and resources in order to meet the increased need for its services. However, at the start, there was a lack of medicines and the medical and personal protective equipment, and capacity needed to effectively combat the spread of infection. Healthcare workers, especially those working in intensive care units, were forced to work under strenuous conditions and faced high workloads. At the same time, the restructuring in healthcare resulted in surgery and other procedures being down-prioritised, causing a 'healthcare debt' which still needs to be 'repaid'.

Many of the studies included in the compilation demonstrate how workloads in the healthcare sector increased during the pandemic. One survey conducted at the Sahlgrenska University Hospital in Gothenburg found that workers in emergency medicine were more likely to state having a heavy workload, struggling to take breaks and to stop thinking about their work during their free time and lacked energy after work. In general, women reported higher workloads than men.

A different study conducted at an anaesthesia unit in Rome, Italy, found that 52 per cent of staff felt their workloads increased during the first wave of the pandemic in April 2020, with this proportion increasing to 86 per cent during the second wave in December 2020.

Workers mental health suffered

Several studies linked the high workloads within healthcare to developing symptoms of mental health problems over time. This also applied to the work with treating and caring for patients with Covid-19, and witnessing deaths caused by the virus. Mental health problems manifested in the form of symptoms of exhaustion, depression, post-traumatic stress and anxiety.

Many studies in the compilation also investigated the link between mental health problems and moral stress, i.e. stress caused by external factors preventing staff from doing what they believe is right. Here, we also see that those exposed to moral stress during the pandemic had a higher risk of developing mental health problems over time.

The risk of staff becoming infected with Covid-19 was an issue raised, particularly at the start of the pandemic. Nevertheless, based on the scientific data in the knowledge compilation, it is difficult to see clear connections between working in healthcare and an increased risk of becoming infected. This may be the result of established procedures and habits of using protective equipment. The healthcare system builds upon preventing and treating illness, maintaining good hygiene standards and ensuring patient safety. Furthermore, community transmission of Covid-19 is thought to have contributed to healthcare staff contracting the virus.

However, two of the studies included in the compilation show that a lack of protective equipment and a fear of contracting Covid-19 or infecting others were linked to mental health problems.

Efforts to improve the work environment and health

The knowledge compilation includes three studies that assessed efforts made during the pandemic to improve organisational and social work environments. One of these studies evaluated how staffing, workload, skills and physical work environments for nurses were adapted at a hospital in Italy. The results show that adaptations reduced perceived stress and improved quality of life.

A number of studies assessed stress management methods targeted towards healthcare workers. Efforts for individuals included meditation, breathing and relaxation techniques to improve staff recuperation. The results showed that these efforts appeared to have a direct positive effect on mental health, however no long-term follow ups are available to guarantee the results.

A number of studies also show how supportive and inclusive leadership and organisational support in the workplace were generally linked to a decreased risk of developing mental health problems. In one study, managers at an emergency hospital in Taiwan conducted systematic improvement work among nurses. Action taken included infection control measures as well as support efforts involving practical training for new nurses, adaptations to work schedules and group meetings to improve communication. The results demonstrate that work-related stress decreased somewhat over time.

Lessons and challenges for the healthcare sector

Healthcare services differ considerably around the world in terms of organisation, resources and strategies to limit the spread of Covid-19. Nevertheless, a number of similarities exist. For example, many countries were unprepared for a pandemic, experienced high levels of community transmission in a short period and the best strategies to meet the challenges were unclear. Just as in the rest of the world, this led to healthcare services in Sweden coming under great pressure over a long period, with severely ill patients and insufficient knowledge about infection routes, treatment, and perspective on how the pandemic would develop over time.

The results of the knowledge compilation show how the health and wellbeing of a broad group within the healthcare sector can be affected by heavy workloads, moral stress and infection risk in combination with a lack of protective equipment and work environment factors.

However, the studies included in the compilation also demonstrate that the risk of mental health problems can be reduced through efforts such as organisational action to change work procedures, adapted staffing and supervision of staff. Recuperation efforts targeted towards individuals were thought to have had an immediate positive impact on their mental health.

More knowledge about organisational measures is necessary in order to increase resilience within the healthcare sector and ensure it is better equipped for similar crises in the future. This could include knowledge on support and resource allocation, staffing and working hours in order to rapidly restructure duties and prevent ill health among staff. Collecting new knowledge about the individual steps staff can take to reduce stress poses a further challenge.

4. Changed working conditions in the regular workplace

Many workers had limited or no possibility of working remotely during the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, 59 per cent of workers said they had no way of working remotely. The SLOSH study based on two surveys conducted during the pandemic found that this figure dropped to 23 per cent during the pandemic.

However, a majority of workers, 55 per cent, stated that they needed to attend their workplace, and could only work remotely on occasion or not at all during the pandemic.

The work environments of those who continued to work in their regular workplace during the pandemic deteriorated to a greater extent than for those who were able to work from home. The people who remained in their workplace had less influence over their tasks, faced more time pressures and heavier physical and mental workloads than those who worked remotely. The risk of having an accident or being infected with Covid-19 was also felt to be significantly higher.

However, a number of workers who remained in their workplace did not feel that their working conditions or work environment deteriorated during the pandemic. They found that their workloads and time pressures went unchanged, or even became lighter than before the pandemic. This could be due to unevenly distributed workloads during the pandemic, for example parts of the healthcare sector and service industry, when patients and customers were avoiding contact with other people.

Difficult working conditions within social care

A study by the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise has mapped how workers in social care, retail and transport felt about their working conditions during the pandemic. The aim was to study how the work environment changed for these workers, how they felt about the changes and the long and short-term consequences of the pandemic.

Care workers, such as those working in homecare and in care homes for elderly people were highlighted as being one of the professional groups with the most strained working conditions during the pandemic. Approximately 80 per cent of survey respondents also stated that their workload increased during the pandemic. Furthermore, eight out of ten workers reported that their jobs had become more stressful and the majority worked overtime.

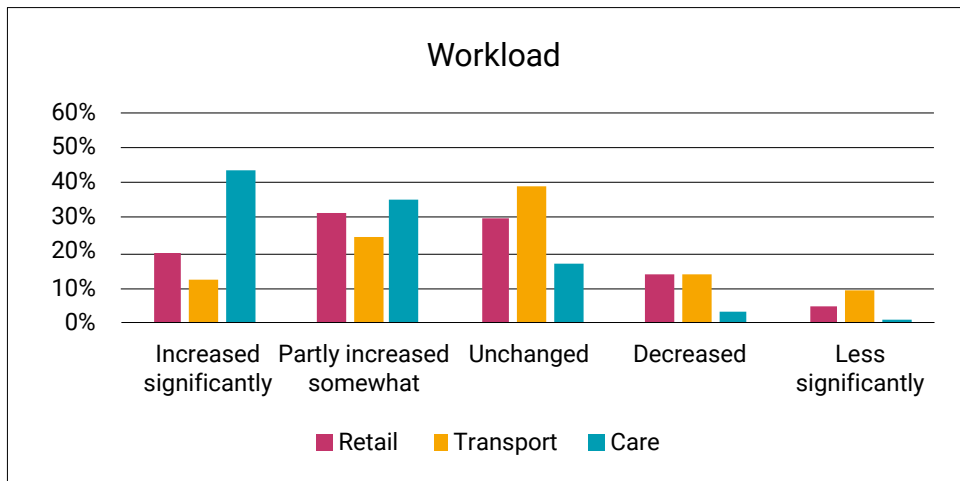


Diagram showing how survey respondents felt the pandemic affected their workload.

Four out of five respondents stated how working conditions also made it more difficult to complete care tasks. A majority also believed that new situations arose that they did not know how to address. Changes to work procedures were reported by 80 per cent of respondents. This affected the quality of the work, with around 60 per cent stating they were afraid of making mistakes at work.

At the start of the pandemic, the spread of infection and number of deaths caused by Covid-19 were high among patients and clients receiving care services. There was an increase in concern among care workers, with a clear majority stating they were afraid of being infected, taking the virus home or infecting colleagues or clients.

During the initial stages of the pandemic, care services for elderly people faced a major shortage of personal protective equipment such as face masks and face shields. The situation improved as equipment was purchased, with only a small proportion of care workers stating they did not receive any new protective equipment in the workplace. Most also stated that social distancing was introduced between staff and their clients, and the physical work environment changed in ways such as increased distances between tables, seating areas and similar. A clear majority of care workers felt that social distancing and using protective equipment made their tasks more difficult.

The study also showed that the social workplace climate deteriorated during the pandemic, something reported by 59 per cent of care workers. In addition, over 40 per cent stated that tension and conflicts at work increased. Although this does not appear to have impacted the support from work groups, with almost half feeling that there were no changes and 33 per cent stating it had increased.

Approximately 70 per cent of survey respondents believed that the support they received from their line manager was either quite good or very good. A large majority also felt they received regular updates about the pandemic's status, with 40 per cent being satisfied with how their workplace managed Covid-19.

Retail and transport were less affected

When compared to care workers, those working in retail and transport did not experience such significant changes to their working conditions. Around 70 per cent also stated that, on the whole, they were able to continue working as per usual. However, for a majority of workers, daily routines changed and performing daily tasks became harder. Many also received an increased workload – especially those in retail – and the majority experienced increased levels of stress.

As was the case with care workers, those in retail and transport were also concerned about the spread of infection. A majority of workers were afraid of contracting the virus, taking it home or infecting colleagues and customers.

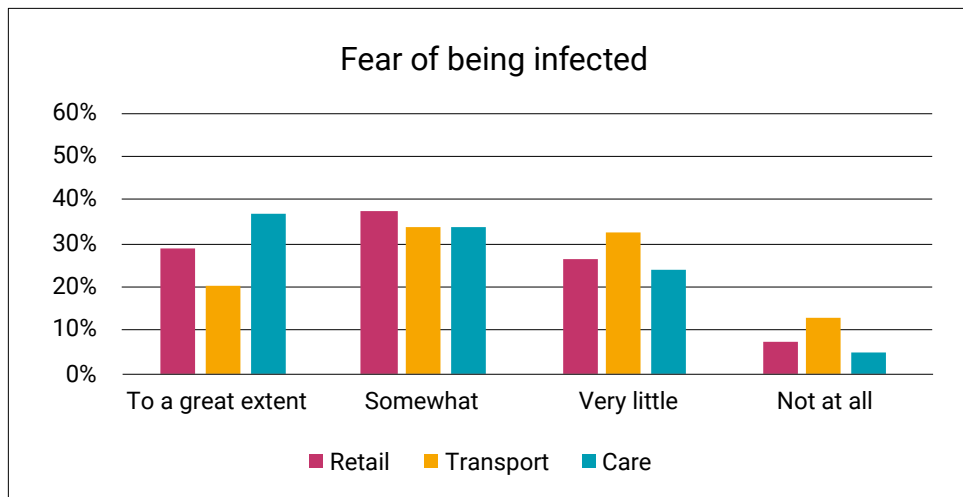


Diagram presenting the extent to which survey participants were afraid of being infected in the workplace during the pandemic.

Measures were taken within retail to reduce the risk of infection. For example, plexiglass was installed at checkouts, social distancing markings were placed on floors and social distancing information was provided to both customers and staff. The majority of retail workers said that some form of social distancing was introduced in the workplace. However, one in four retail and transport workers reported that no protective equipment was introduced to the workplace during the pandemic.

Almost half of the retail and transport workers stated that the social climate deteriorated during the pandemic. An equal number felt it did not change. Almost 30 per cent of retail workers and 23 per cent of transport workers stated that the risk of conflict in the workplace also increased. Nevertheless, the majority of workers found the support from their work group was unchanged.

Approximately 70 per cent of survey respondents within retail and transport believed that the support they received from their line manager was either quite good or very good. Additionally, a large majority felt they received regular updates about how the pandemic was progressing, and 50 and 40 per cent of retail and transport workers respectively were happy with the way management handled the Covid-19 pandemic.

Return to life as it was before the pandemic

The study shows that approximately four out of five retail and transport workers believe that the conditions in their workplaces have returned to how they were pre-pandemic. In contrast, around 30 per cent of care workers state that things have not returned to the way they were before the pandemic.

The pandemic also resulted in a greater focus on infection control measures, such as hygiene procedures and staying home when ill. Approximately 60 per cent of care workers state an increased focus on this area following the pandemic. Transport and retail workers also believe that there is a continued emphasis on infection control measures.

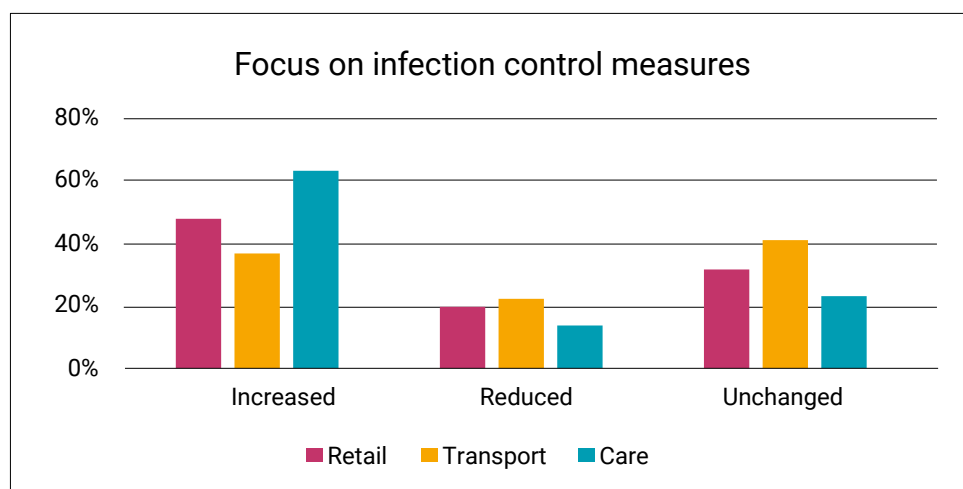


Diagram presenting how survey participants believe the pandemic has affected the focus on infection control measures.

The study also shows how the pandemic has resulted in a heavier workload. Around 40 per cent of care workers believe their workload has increased. This figure is 30 per cent for retail and transport workers.

A number of workers believe there have been improvements with collaborations between colleagues. This is especially the case within retail and care services. However, throughout the sectors, the majority of workers believe that communication with their line managers did not change either during or after the pandemic.

The study shows that compared to men, women in all sectors were more afraid of catching Covid-19, taking the infection home or infecting others in their workplace during the pandemic. More women than men were concerned that they would become overworked or make mistakes at work. Women also reported greater increases in workloads and stress during the pandemic, which was particularly evident in the care professions.

5. On-site managers prioritised running their organisation

In its study, ‘The work environment for managers during the Covid-19 pandemic’, the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise has mapped the role of managers and the conditions they faced during the pandemic, and looked at how leadership and work environment management was affected.

The results show that managers who stayed in their regular workplace during the pandemic prioritised keeping their organisation running over everything else. Many organisations continued as normal and the only additional task managers received was to ‘Covid-proof’ the workplace. This applied to areas such as industry and manufacturing, where managers who were interviewed explained how they worked to ensure that their premises were adapted and protective equipment was available. In order to avoid spreading infection, timetabled breaks were introduced and the number of people allowed in buildings and spaces was limited. One manager was of the opinion that this damaged the feeling of solidarity.

Previously, everyone ate lunch together and that created a sense of belonging. But now we need a timetable to enable social distancing.’

Nor did managerial tasks change significantly within the retail sector, beyond the responsibility of ensuring that both staff and customers followed restrictions and regulations. Otherwise, a manager’s task was to make sure that staff and goods were on site and sales were maintained.

In property management, the main changes were made to procedures and how the work itself was planned. Even if a building needed repairs or service, many organisations did not allow visitors, meaning that only one person could be present at a time. One manager explained,

‘Care homes for elderly people have been on total lockdown. They still need servicing, but we’re not allowed to go in together, only one at a time. So I need to arrange Skype meetings for their managers and they have been completely overburdened.’

Managers in other organisations described how work became more complicated and took longer during the pandemic. It may have been a case of getting hold of materials, equipment, goods or certain people they previously had close contact with.

The work of managers in health and social care had already changed drastically during the early stages of the pandemic. They also prioritised keeping their

organisations running. However, the rapid rise in infections created challenges such as high rates of sick leave and heavy workloads for the staff still on site.

They faced the additional challenge of explaining to a person with dementia or intellectual disability why staff were wearing face masks, relatives did not come to visit, activities were cancelled and why they were not allowed to spend time with other people in the home.

Managers and principals of preschools and schools were affected in similar ways to care staff. Not only did they need to keep teaching going, but they also spent a lot of their working hours being available, managing concerned calls and situations with infection, conducting risk assessments and remaining updated on the restrictions and regulations.

Their duties may also have needed to be reprioritised. Some principals stated they had been forced to place strategic work to one side to be able to work more operatively. This was also the case for managers in the emergency services, where the operative activities – emergency call outs – were prioritised at the expense of others, such as training, community information and regulatory work.

The fact that operative work was prioritised during the pandemic at the expense of the manager's work to develop their organisation is in line with the survey findings in the study. Managers who remained in the regular workplace had to take rapid decisions more often and impose isolated measures during the pandemic, compared to those working remotely.

Overall, there were few differences between managers in various sectors. Managers within the hotel industry, education, health and social care stood out as they estimated the conditions, they faced were worse than those of managers in different industries. They also felt that more requirements were placed on leadership and less focus on development issues in their work.

Major differences in work environment management

During the pandemic, there was variation in the way managers addressed work environment management in their regular workplaces depending on the sector and organisation. Some managers stated that the pandemic did not cause any major changes to existing work environment management and, prior to the pandemic, they had already been working carefully with safety and hygiene – which continued to work well during the pandemic. One manager reported:

‘... We haven't need to change a thing. And that's nice, because we reviewed all of our hygiene procedures before, but we realised that actually, we already worked to such high hygiene standards we didn't need to change anything, despite the pandemic.’

Other managers described having needed to make major changes and introduce more safety measures into their existing work environment management. These could include introducing requirements to wear face masks in care professions, urging social distancing between staff, reducing the size of work groups and introducing online workplace meetings. The initial lack of protective equipment was one problem that arose. Another was the fact that trying the equipment on was not always possible, and working in it was uncomfortable. One manager described the lack of protective equipment as follows:

‘From a work environment perspective, the lack of protective equipment at the start was a disaster. So, just like other places, we now have a stockpile so we will be able to manage for a while should it happen again – which we hope it doesn’t.’

Managers in retail made changes to their stores to protect both customers and their staff from infection. These included social distancing markings, screens and plexiglass barriers at checkouts. Managers and school principals described various forms of reorganisation and changes in work teams to reduce the stress teachers may experience when they were forced to work alone with their pupils.

Furthermore, a reliable system for sharing clear information about the restrictions and measures being taken was stated as being an important component of work environment management, especially as the recommendations could change rapidly.

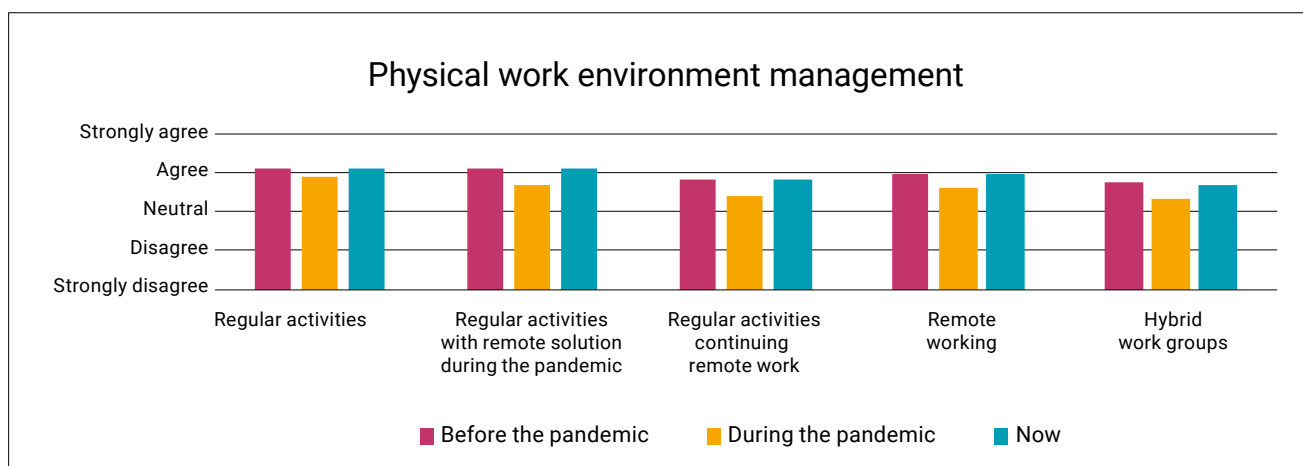


Diagram presenting the degree to which respondents agreed with the statement: 'We regularly worked/work with the physical work environment' divided over work formats.

The survey responses show that managers who remained in their workplace had more work environment management procedures and worked more with the physical work environment. Compared to managers who worked remotely, they also had better access to information, more insight into their employees' duties and worked less with keeping teams and work groups together.

Significant increase in remote and hybrid working

Mere days after the World Health Organization, WHO, declared Covid-19 to be a global pandemic in March 2020, Sweden's former state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell declared, 'Now is the time to consider working from home if you can.' This was the start of a major increase in remote and hybrid working, which can still be seen today.

A knowledge compilation from the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise demonstrated how Sweden had particularly positive conditions for the transition to remote working. See: 'Remote work – review of international research on work environment and health, work–life balance and productivity before and during the COVID-19 pandemic with particular consideration for conditions for women and men.'

One explanation was that, compared to many other countries, Sweden kept childcare services and schools open. Well-functioning digital infrastructure and familiarity with independent working also contributed to Sweden successfully managing the digital transition compared to other countries.

According to the SLOSH study that analysed the results of two surveys conducted during the pandemic, 41 per cent of participants stated they were able to work from home to some extent prior to the pandemic. The majority of respondents worked up to one-quarter of their working hours remotely.

This figure increased dramatically during the first and second waves of the pandemic, i.e. spring and autumn 2020. 77 per cent of the workers included in the study stated that they worked from home during this period, with the majority working remotely for more than three quarters of their working hours. Only 23 per cent said they did not work from home at all during the pandemic.

Office workers were those who had the best prerequisites for working remotely during the pandemic, with four out of five white-collar workers stating they did. To a great extent, this was due to public authorities, county councils, municipalities, businesses and organisations moving large parts of office work to the employees' homes.

Other professions had fewer opportunities to work from home during the pandemic. This mainly applied to those who worked in professions tied to a workplace, such as manufacturing, health and social care, schools, childcare and service trades.

There was no major difference between women and men, even though slightly more women than men worked from home. However, people with higher levels of education were more likely to work from home compared to those with lower levels.

Managerial roles and conditions changed alongside the transition

In its study, ‘The work environment for managers during the Covid-19 pandemic’, the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise has mapped the role of managers and the conditions they faced during the pandemic, and looked at how leadership and work environment management was affected.

There was a major transition for managers whose staff began working remotely during the pandemic. Both in terms of their ability to perform their leadership role, and the changes to their duties and how they organised work.

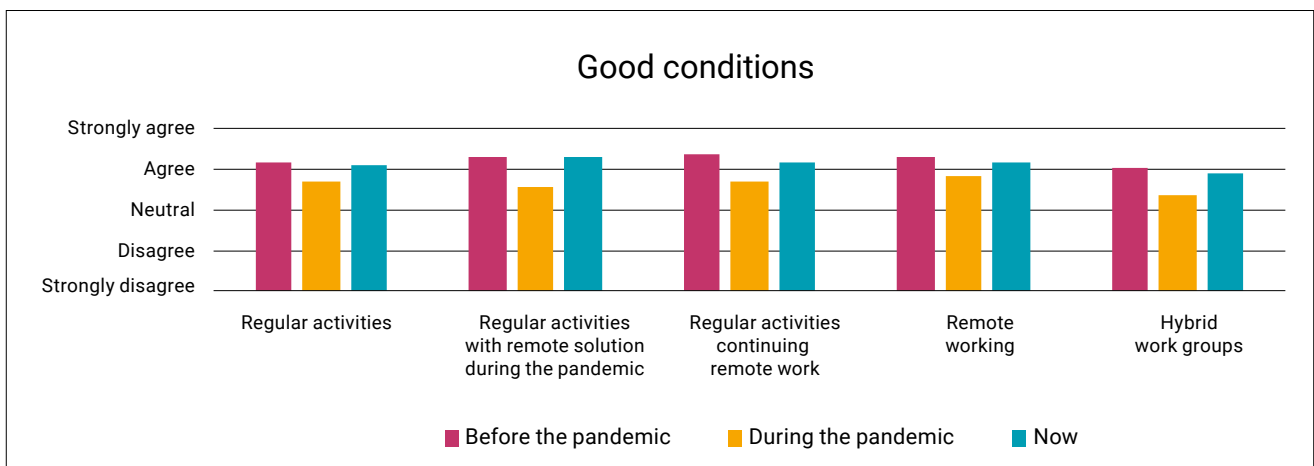


Diagram presenting the degree to which respondents agreed with the statement: ‘Conditions for performing my duties were/are good’ divided into work categories.

Managers’ experiences of remote working differ. Some of the managers interviewed believed they had become more efficient and flexible, and found it easier to concentrate. Others were unhappy with remote working, finding it lonely and easy to lose focus and motivation. They also believed they got more work done in the office.

Positive experiences included organisations reviewing their decision-making structures, giving managers more authority on certain issues. Similarly, support from higher management was also mentioned. Many managers felt they had close contact and good support from their superiors, meaning they believed they had the authority to re-prioritise. One manager described this as follows:

‘...My manager has also been really clear that your main task is to support your staff. If faced with say, performing in a certain way, then supporting staff comes first in this situation. So I would say I have what I need to be able to do what’s necessary, for as long as I can, at least.’

Natural interaction and collaborations in the workplace disappeared, creating a challenge. Managers felt that this compromised the 'we' feeling and solidarity. One way to counteract this was the introduction of new procedures for regular online meetings. The advantages of online meetings facilitated a quick transition between meetings, more were able to participate and meetings tended to stick to schedule. However, the majority of the managers in the study had little or no experience of remote working; there were problems with technology and equipment, particularly at the start of the pandemic.

A number of managers had a hybrid approach, where some of their staff worked remotely and others remained in the regular workplace. One way of implementing this method was to allow staff in risk groups to work from home.

Other organisations had rotating schedules, where staff took turns to work in the office, or they divided tasks so those whose duties could not be performed from home were able to work on site. Sometimes this was viewed as unfair. The majority of managers with hybrid organisations chose to divide their time between the office and their home.

The managers who worked remotely lifted the need for increased trust that their staff were actually completing their work tasks. The survey results also showed that managers estimated they had less insight into the duties of their staff during the pandemic. Some managers explained how they learnt to let go of their control and dare to trust that their staff were doing what they were supposed to. One manager described themselves as a 'control freak' but had learnt to let go of the need to see that work was progressing when being performed remotely.

'I can't function as a manager by being some form of communist espionage unit and placing a CCTV camera in the office to see if they're sitting at their desks at home or doing something else, I mean, that's just not possible. So I had to battle with myself to be able to deal with this lack of immediate needs-based satisfaction from seeing progress.'

Furthermore, the study shows that managers tended to work more hours than their contracts stated – before, during and after the pandemic. Many managers who worked remotely stated that their working hours often increased as it was easier to work overtime or skip breaks. However, they felt that there was more freedom and flexibility with their work and they worked less in the evening and on weekends compared to before the pandemic. Nevertheless, the results of the survey show that the balance between work and leisure deteriorated during the pandemic.

The survey results show that there was a reduction in conflict management work during the pandemic for the managers who worked remotely. Administrative and development work also declined, and fewer strategic decisions were taken.

The difference between women and men in managerial positions was negligible. However, women estimated that their duties included more administration, communication and work adaptations compared to the men, whereas men worked more with organisational development compared to women. Women also estimated having less time for completing their work, a poorer balance between work and leisure time and higher demands on leadership compared to men.

Work environment management and leadership were affected

The work environment differed depending on whether staff remained in their regular workplaces or worked from home during the pandemic. During the initial stages of the pandemic, managers whose staff worked remotely spent a lot of time ensuring that the physical work environment in the home was satisfactory, by ensuring that there was enough equipment and the right conditions for healthy ergonomics.

As for the organisational and social work environments, managers described how remote working placed great requirements on motivation and discipline, which was not suitable for all staff. Therefore, they tried to emulate regular work routines using digital aids. The increased isolation generated by remote working meant that managers had more follow-up meetings with their staff, introduced online social activities and tried to support and maintain social relationships in work groups.

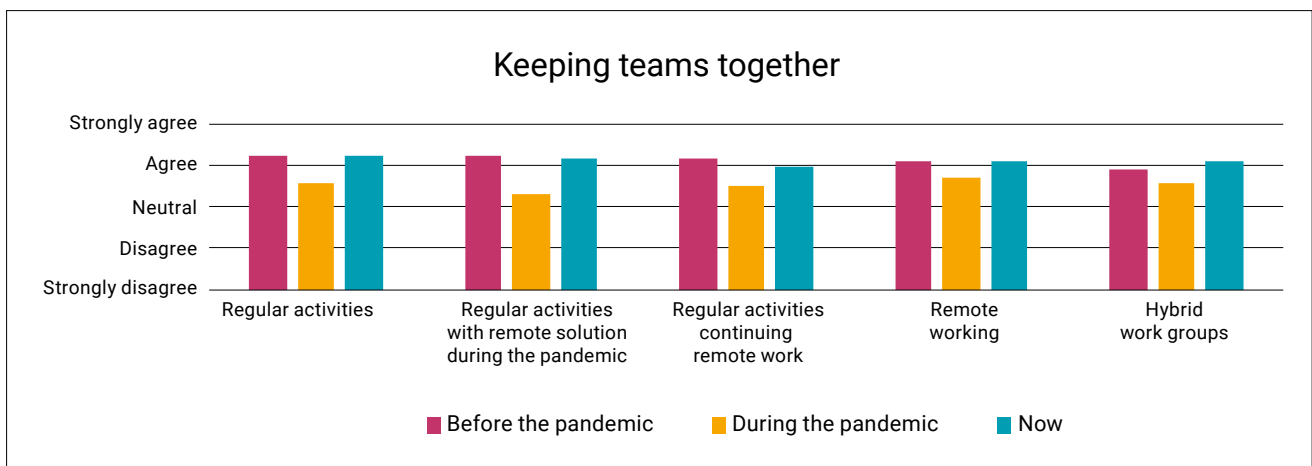


Diagram presenting the degree to which participants agreed with the statement: 'A large portion of my work is/was spent keeping teams and work groups together (maintaining a group feeling, being present at social and work meetings)' divided over work forms.

The majority of managers working remotely believed that the pandemic changed their leadership. Most described the concern and fear among their staff, and they needed to manage staff who were struggling for various reasons. Other managers reported having become more relationship-oriented in their approach, they showed more compassion towards their staff and developed closer relationships with their colleagues.

‘I think this might sound a bit strange, but it may have made me and my staff a bit tighter (...) It’s in the discussions with my colleagues, I think that’s where I see the biggest difference. Previously I tended to ask, “how’s your work going?” but now I start by asking “how are you doing?”’

The survey results also showed how leadership requirements increased during the pandemic, regardless of whether activities were conducted remotely or on site. These increased requirements remained high after the pandemic.

Managers placed high value on task-related leadership, with its focus on creating structure and organisation during the pandemic. This was the same for the relationship-oriented leadership where managers focused on their colleagues and work groups. Women placed greater value on both task and relationship-oriented leadership than men.

In contrast, change-oriented leadership – with its focus on change, innovation and new ways of thinking – decreased during the pandemic. This has now returned to the same level as before the pandemic.

Management tasks such as insight into staff’s work and duties as well as following up on their performance were given lesser importance during the pandemic than previously. This particularly applied to managers whose staff worked remotely or followed a hybrid system. However, insight and follow-up work has now returned to the same level as before the pandemic.

Managerial work with keeping work groups together decreased during the pandemic. However, this has now returned to the same level as before the pandemic, except in organisations that have continued with remote working following its introduction during the pandemic.

6. International comparisons

The Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise has reviewed three EU reports and compared the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on work environments in Sweden with other countries: the 'OSH Pulse Occupational safety and health in post-pandemic workplaces' by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, EU-OSHA, 'Working conditions in the time of Covid-19: Implications for the future' by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), and 'Telework and health risks in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic' by EU-OSHA.

Heavy workload a common problem

The OSH Pulse – Occupational safety and health in post-pandemic workplaces report by the EU-OSHA draws upon approximately 27 000 interviews conducted during April and May 2022 in the EU member countries, Iceland and Norway.

The results showed that, just as in Sweden, workers in other European countries felt that they were under more pressure at work during the pandemic. An average of 46 per cent of the participants felt they experienced great time pressures or heavy workloads. Sweden's results – 48 per cent – were close to the EU average, while over half of workers in Finland, France and The Netherlands experienced heavy workloads.

In general, women experienced greater workloads than men. This experience was greatest in professions where women dominate, such as health and social care.

In contrast, those who worked at companies and organisations with strong safety cultures and that worked with preventive health and work environment measures stated that they were not exposed to stress-related ill health to the same extent.

Heavy workloads over a long period of time risk leading to exhaustion disorder, depression or other mental health problems. The survey also found that extreme tiredness or exhaustion were the most common occupational health problems in the EU during the pandemic. This was reported in 17 of the EU's 27 member countries.

On average, more than one in three survey participants stated they had experienced extreme tiredness or exhaustion in the past 12 months.

The corresponding figure for Sweden was 40 per cent, whereas almost half of the respondents from Finland stated they felt exhausted.

Physical symptoms such as headaches and eye strain were also common. One in three workers in the EU reported such health problems. Here, Sweden was again close to the EU average, with 32 per cent.

The results of the survey demonstrate that despite the majority of infection control measures against Covid-19 having been lifted, the pandemic continues to have repercussions on the work environment. Approximately 44 per cent of workers in the EU believed that work-related stress increased as a result of the pandemic. Workers in Lithuania, Hungary and Greece reported the greatest increase in stress following the pandemic, whereas Sweden is significantly below the EU average, with 34 per cent. Here, it was primarily health and social care workers who thought their stress had increased. However, an almost equal proportion, 58 per cent of those working in education shared this view.

Major focus on the work environment

Participants in the EU-OSHA survey were also asked to respond to questions on how the work environment was addressed in their workplace. Eight out of ten workers stated that safety problems in their workplace were rectified immediately. A similar number believed that measures were implemented to improve the work environment. Sweden was just below the EU average. Whereas 85 per cent of workers in Sweden stated that they were encouraged to report shortcomings in their work environment – somewhat higher than the EU average.

Participants from Sweden were also those who most agreed with the statement that it is easier for organisations with strong safety cultures and health focus to attract workers.

When asked, almost 40 per cent of workers stated that their workplace raised matters relating to stress and mental health problems. A similar number reported being able to access information, advice and support on stress management. Sweden's results are around the EU average, whereas in Finland measures to prevent stress and mental health problems in the workplace are more common.

As regards attitudes towards mental illness, over half of workers in the EU stated that the Covid-19 pandemic has made it easier to talk about stress and mental health at work. Generally, understanding of mental health and stress matters are more common in larger companies and organisations with strong safety cultures and that address the work environment proactively.

The way workers were affected differed significantly

The working lives of people around Europe during the pandemic are summarised in the report: ‘Working conditions in the time of Covid-19: Implications for the future.’ This report was created by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) and is based on 72 000 interviews conducted between March and November 2021 as part of the European working conditions survey (EWCS).

The result of the survey shows that the pandemic affected people’s working conditions and work environment in an incredibly unequal way. Those most at risk were the people who worked in environments where the spread of infection was the highest, for example health and social care and schools. Not only did these workers face a higher risk of catching Covid-19, but their workload was also heavier and they faced greater requirements than other professions.

The people who remained in their regular workplace in manufacturing, retail and service professions also encountered tougher working conditions, involving one-sided and heavy work, low levels of influence and risk of infection and accidents.

In contrast, people who worked remotely or in hybrid workplaces appear to have best survived the repercussions of the pandemic. They were less exposed to the risk of infection and accidents, had a more flexible and independent working life with a better balance between work and private life.

The report highlights how if we are to overcome major social crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic in the future, it is important that those who remain in their regular workplace have greater influence over the decisions that affect their work and their workplace. This applies most of all to people who work in key social functions such as health and social care and schools. However, for people who work remotely or in hybrid workplaces, it is important that their work is organised in a way that protects the workers’ health and safety.

The results of the survey show that there is a link between the psychosocial risks at work and the changed working conditions during the pandemic. In 2021, almost half of workers in EU worked at a high pace and with tight time margins. Sweden was somewhat higher than the EU average as regards work intensity, although it was lower when it came to tight time margins.

Furthermore, approximately 30 per cent of workers in EU countries and slightly fewer in Sweden stated that their work was tense, i.e. high demands and low levels of control at work.

One conclusion presented in the report is that the quality of work needs reinforcing in order to further workers' wellbeing and create a better balance between work and private lives. The quality of work is also decisive to creating a sustainable work life that makes the workforce more resilient to major social disruptions. This particularly applies to women in professions such as health and social care. They were especially exposed to the spread of infection and psychosocial risks during the pandemic.

Remote working was on display

The EU-OSHA report, 'Telework and health risks in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic' explored how the transition to remote working in EU countries during the pandemic affected work conditions and work environments.

Remote working was fairly uncommon in EU member countries prior to the pandemic. However, by July 2020 – right in the midst of the first wave of infection – almost half of workers in the EU partly worked from home. Statistics from Eurostat show how Sweden, Finland, Ireland and the Benelux countries were those with the highest proportion of remote workers during the pandemic.

However, at the start of the pandemic, many companies and workers were poorly prepared for the transition to remote working. This led to increased work strain and stress. This transition was particularly difficult for workers in professions with close contact with others, whose duties involved emotional challenges such as teachers and social workers.

Remote working is often tied to increased independence that contributes to greater work satisfaction and balance between work and private life. However, the extent of autonomy remote workers actually receive depends on their duties and how their work is organised.

The report suggests that people in professions with high levels of autonomy at work did not feel that their work conditions changed with remote working. However, employees with lower levels of influence on their work experienced greater opportunities to choose how and when their work would take place. Remote working made little difference for employees who work with standardised work processes and limited influence over their working hours and pace.

Musculoskeletal disorders and other physical problems caused by poor ergonomics and sitting for too long were some of the risks associated with working from home. Nevertheless, the most common health risks were psychosocial, particularly the risk of feeling isolated. The report concludes that limiting the scope of remote working is the best way to counteract isolation. Research tends to suggest that hybrid working provides the best balance between remote working and personal exchanges with managers and colleagues.

In addition, the flexibility of remote work and its unclear boundaries between work and leisure time lead to workers feeling obligated to be continually available. Hence, one of the conclusions in the report is that companies and organisations need guidelines on availability and connectivity outside of regular working hours.

The report further raises the line manager's central role in creating positive work conditions for remote workers. They may consequently need training in order to adapt the organisation of the work and develop a greater understanding of the psychosocial risks and negative health effects. Corporate and organisational management also need to work for more trusting relationships between line managers and remote workers.

In order to more efficiently identify and prevent physical and psychosocial risks associated with remote working, workers also need to be involved, and risk assessments of the home working space should always take place together with the employee.

Legislation in EU countries has a decisive role in regulating remote working. The EU's 2002 framework agreement on teleworking has formed the basis of national legislation on remote working and collective agreement negotiations in EU countries. However, experiences of remote working during the pandemic have brought forth changes to the law in a large number of EU countries, although this is not the case in the Nordics. This primarily addresses the legal definition of remote working, the right to be disconnected, the right to remote working and work environment provisions. Nevertheless, there are major differences between EU countries' legislation and there is no Union-wide strategy for safe and healthy remote working. A review of the 2002 framework agreement by labour market actors would be an important step forward, as the report states.

7. Moving forward after the pandemic

The spread of Covid-19 and the accompanying pandemic have had a significant impact on society – especially working life. Employers were forced to rapidly adapt their activities to protect their employees, and follow restrictions and recommendations that were issued. Some workplaces shut down completely, whereas others were able to continue to varying extents without any major changes. Others were forced to reorganise their activities, which affected working conditions and their employees' work environment.

On 1 April 2022, the Covid-19 pandemic was no longer classed as being dangerous to public health and society, and working life has largely returned to how it was before its outbreak. However, over the course of two years, working conditions changed drastically and the repercussions can still be seen in people's work environments and health.

If we are to be better equipped for a similar crisis in the future, it is important that we learn from the experiences we gained during this pandemic. We also need to draw on the success factors to have arisen from the transition of working life. Employers, managers and employees all demonstrated enormous flexibility and the ability to rapidly adapt to the conditions that prevailed during the pandemic. This demonstrates the significant resilience that working life has against social disturbances such as pandemics, natural disasters and other crises.

Remote and hybrid working – for better or worse

The pandemic has led to an increase in working from home, often in combination with days in the regular workplace. There are a number of positive factors with remote working that benefit workers' health and wellbeing. Many appreciate not having to commute to the office and the increased flexibility that makes it possible to determine their own working hours and reach a better balance between work and leisure time.

Those who worked from home during the pandemic also felt they had higher levels of influence over their work, faced fewer time pressures and had a lighter mental workload than those who remained in their regular workplace. This was evident in the SLOSH study that builds on two surveys conducted during the pandemic. The risk of being involved in an accident or being infected by Covid-19 was seen as being significantly lower than for those who had to travel to work.

In particular, white-collar workers who worked from home during the pandemic and other workers felt that this contributed to a better balance between work and private life. Remote working was also appreciated by teachers in the compulsory school.

In one study, they describe how the possibility of deciding where and when their lesson planning and review could take place contributed to reduced stress and a better work-life balance. Holding lessons and meetings online from home also reduced stress, according to some teachers.

However, there were also risk factors associated with remote working, something which the compulsory schools saw first-hand. There was a decrease in daily exchanges and contacts with colleagues and pupils, which left many teachers feeling more isolated. This in turn could affect motivation, cause feelings of resignation and low moods. One teacher expressed the consequences of isolation as follows:

‘I have the advantage of having excellent colleagues at the school where I work. There’s a positive atmosphere between us, which is really important. When we didn’t have this exchange with our colleagues, we noticed we felt more isolated and even a bit depressed.’

The study on the consequences of the pandemic on managers showed that managers whose activities and staff transitioned to remote working during the pandemic were more ambivalent towards the working conditions. Some felt that they became more efficient, whereas others felt that distance work was solitary and boring, and it was easy to lose focus and motivation. At the same time, working hours became more flexible which made it easier to continue working even though the working day had ended.

Managers also had varying experiences with leading their staff from a distance. One consequence was that natural interactions in the workplace disappeared, which affected feelings of solidarity. Creative professions often struggled with remote working, as managers believed that ideas were frequently generated spontaneously in the workplace.

Time saved and more efficient, results-oriented work from staff were two positive experiences linked to remote working. Many managers also felt that their staff appreciated being able to work more independently and flexibly, and struggled to motivate them to return to the workplace following the pandemic.

Challenges with continuing remote working

One problem raised in the study ‘Managers’ work environments during the Covid-19 pandemic’ was the difficulty of being responsible for the work environment without having control over their staff’s work environments. The Work Environment Act is primarily formulated around an employer’s premises, where it is easier to oversee and assess the work environment.

Despite this, experience during the pandemic has shown that if remote and hybrid working are used correctly, there is the potential to create a more balanced work life that is more sustainable in the long term, with increased wellbeing for both managers and their staff. Simultaneously, remote working can lead to increased social isolation, which can in turn negatively affect mental health. This places great demands on not just the way work is organised, but also leadership. Hence one challenge is to establish guidelines and procedures for remote working in collaboration with employees, and to facilitate remote working for both managers and their staff.

One risk of remote-and-hybrid work is that staff are treated differently thus creating A and B teams. It is a case of creating a divide between those on site and those working remotely, but it is also a case of the conditions for a satisfactory working environment at home, for example as regards the size of a person’s home or family constellation. An additional aspect is that those working from home can be held at a career disadvantage, as they miss out on the informal relationship between managers and staff in the workplace. As a result, one challenge is to allow for variation in the work groups and take the conditions of each worker into consideration.

In a previous study mapping remote working during the pandemic, the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise presented proposals for short and long-term measures that can be taken to reduce the risks of remote working.¹ This includes strengthening workers’ skills and ability to operate systematic work environment management for remote working. However, it also involves strengthening workers’ skills and ability to discover risks in their own work environment and adapt it to ensure it is satisfactory.

In the long term, it becomes a case of strengthening an employer’s skills for addressing work environment management regardless of where the work takes place. Hybrid working has increased after the pandemic, and systematic work environment management needs to address both those who are in the regular workplace and those who work from home. In addition, the young adults who are making their way into an increasingly individualised workforce need to be prepared for their individual responsibility to adapt their work environment and working conditions.

¹ The Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise: ‘Mapping and Analysis of Conditions for Working from Home during the Covid-19 Pandemic.’

Post-pandemic lessons going forward

The results of the study looking at how the pandemic affected managers show how their work situation has by far and large returned to how it was before the pandemic. However, during the pandemic, the operative work environment prevailed and managers spent a great deal of their time keeping their organisation running. This has resulted in a down-prioritisation of the strategic work with areas such as organisational and skills development. One future challenge will therefore be catching up with strategic development work, as well as being prepared for development work ahead of similar crises in the future.

The Covid-19 pandemic further showed shortcomings with slimmed-down organisations that are dependent on a continuous flow of goods, products and services. Some managers in the study raised the importance of companies and organisations establishing a buffer for the future. This buffer could include a budget and extra materials for maintaining the organisation following major events and challenges.

Another lesson the pandemic has taught us is the need for regular reviews and updates to crisis plans. It is a case of going through the functions, roles, procedures, areas of responsibility and so on necessary to be better equipped if a new serious crisis should appear.

The study shows that relationship-oriented leadership increased during the pandemic. Many managers saw the importance of showing compassion and having a close relationship with their staff so they could perform well and protect their wellbeing. After the pandemic, it will become difficult to maintain this relationship-oriented leadership that was established, and not just continue to work with task-oriented leadership.

Managers who worked remotely also mentioned the need to trust that their staff were actually doing their jobs. This requires managers to let go of their need for control, work with trust-building leadership and be clear with what they expect from their staff. At the same time, trust and increased autonomy can increase staff motivation and make them feel happier and perform better.

The pandemic affected managers' working conditions, especially those who had to transition to remote working. This increased demands on leadership – something which remains after the pandemic. Simultaneously, managers were given more authority on certain matters and felt that their superiors provided them with great support. One future challenge may be creating flexible organisations that enable managers to adapt their role based on the conditions around them.

The rapid transformation of working life during the pandemic demonstrates how society is highly resilient against major, radical social disruptions. From an international perspective, Sweden has excellent conditions for remote and hybrid working thanks to its extensive fibre-optic communication network,

high levels of technological literacy, familiarity with working independently and well-developed childcare system. One future challenge for companies and organisations therefore, is to maintain and build upon these conditions.

Work environment management plays a key role

Studies on the way the Covid-19 pandemic affected the work environment show that working conditions changed drastically throughout this period. This, in turn, led to consequences on the physical, organisational and social work environments. Infection control measures were taken, work was re-organised and new procedures were introduced for remote working and in regular workplaces.

One positive work environment effect was the decrease in ‘tense work’ – i.e. high demands and low levels of control. This links with employees receiving greater decision-making opportunities and increased influence over their work. This in turn could be the result of managers not having the same insight into their employees’ work, thus letting them govern more of their work themselves.

The increase in mental workload was one of the more negative consequences of the pandemic, with around one-third of people stating this was a problem. Several factors were in play here, such as job insecurity, unclear role at work, lack of resources, working hours and emotional demands².

The fear of being infected with Covid-19, or infecting colleagues or loved ones added to the mental workload. This applied to teachers in particular, as the majority of schools remained open, despite the spread of infection. Furthermore, teacher’s work was characterised by an uncertainty with rapid changes, insufficient information and unclear governance, all increasing the mental workload.

Health and social care workers also faced pressurised work situations, with heavy workloads, new and difficult to manage work situations and fear of the virus. The emotional demands, i.e. the need to adapt and manage feelings, were especially high in these professions.

Systematic work environment management is essential in order to prevent heavy mental workloads. It involves investigating, analysing and rectifying work factors that could lead to mental health problems among staff. It may include taking action at organisational level, such as making roles and duties clear, reducing workloads, introducing more efficient working methods and creating time for recuperation and reflection. In certain instances, it may be a case of individual measures, although this is generally an organisational matter.³

² Centre for Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Region Stockholm – Mental workload

³ Swedish Work Environment Authority, ADI 688 Eng

Psychological support may also be necessary for staff during a crisis. This could involve defusing interventions in groups, or individual meetings. Employers must be prepared for crises and have crisis support procedures in place. This includes measures such as appointing a crisis support group, creating a crisis plan and conducting risk and vulnerability analyses⁴.

The pandemic resulted in a down-prioritisation of the psychosocial work environment. Managers focused on the physical work environment, by ‘Covid-proofing’ the workplace or ensuring that those working from home had suitable equipment and good ergonomics. The reduced levels of social contact between colleagues, and the fact that conferences, training and other shared activities were cancelled have likely contributed to this down-prioritisation. Hence, there may be a built-up need to work with psychosocial issues after the pandemic. This applies especially to the mental workload that increased during the pandemic.

The pandemic has had positive effects on the work environment. For example, infection control measures in the workplace have received greater focus by way of hygiene procedures and staying home when ill. This applies in workplaces such as compulsory schools, retail, the transport sector and social care. Teachers in compulsory schools stated that this has led to a decrease in sick leave among both teachers and pupils.

However, workloads remain high after the pandemic in industries such as retail, transport and social care. During the pandemic, one in three workers experienced increased work volumes and greater time pressure, factors that can lead to mental health problems. This applied to women in particular. Mental health problems have increased again following the pandemic, and attention needs to be paid to the fact that women make up 75 per cent of all new sick leave cases⁵.

The studies show that to a great extent, working conditions have returned to how they were before the pandemic. There is a risk that the pandemic will become a historic ‘aside’ in working life, and both the positive and negative experiences will be forgotten. In order to remain better equipped ahead of major social disruptions in the future, it is important that we draw on and learn from the experiences of how the pandemic affected working life.

Studies have also shown how workplaces that operated systematic work environment management before the pandemic were better equipped for managing the changed working conditions and negative work environment consequences caused by the pandemic. Active work environment management can quickly pick up on and address risks in the work environment, thus acting as a protection factor against major and sudden changes in working life

4 Prevent – Crisis management at work

5 The Swedish Social Insurance Agency – Stress-related sick leave is increasing following the pandemic.



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ISBN 978-91-89747-22-7