

Stressed by Boredom in Your Home Office? On „Boreout“ as a Side-effect of Involuntary Distant Digital Working Situations on Young People at the Beginning of Their Career

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Abstract: The main focus of this paper is on boredom and boreout perceived by working novices driven into home office due to the covid-19-pandemic. Because this situation is exceptional, the impacts on a crisis of meaning, job boredom and a crisis of growth manifest themselves more clearly. Young people are the unit of interest within this paper, as a boreout could be devastating for their professional career. Leaning on recent literature, a qualitative analysis was conducted, followed by an anonymous online survey to test the viability of the approach. Only sparse indicators for a crisis of meaning were identified, clear signals pointing towards boredom and strong indicators for a crisis of growth as well as evidence for coping strategies relying on various communication tools to compensate the lack of personal contact. This paper contributes to the body of knowledge by expanding research on boreout and by underlining the importance of its dimensions crisis of meaning, job boredom and crisis of growth. A moderating effect of IT-equipment and IT-support on establishing and maintaining connectivity in distant digital working situations became evident. This paper reports on work in progress, further research would be necessary to confirm the results.

1 INTRODUCTION


Spurk and Straub (2020) point out, that the pandemic and its consequences can affect working conditions, work motivations and behavior, job and career attitudes, career development, and personal health and well-being. Due to the recency of the pandemic, its impact on employees is yet underexplored, results of actual studies contradictory. Dubey and Tripathi (2020) e.g. report on a sentiment analysis conducted on 100000 tweets worldwide, identifying a positive attitude towards working from home, while a lack of work motivation became evident within a study among Indonesian teachers (Purwanto et al. 2020). Within this paper, we elaborate on possible negative effects of digital distant working situations. We aim to contribute to the body of knowledge by focussing on boredom as a side-effect of home-offices due to the covid-19-pandemic.

The pandemic drove employees into home offices and changed their working situations decisively. Access to job resources is suddenly blocked,

technological equipment is poorer than at work, interaction with co-workers limited. In digital distant working situations, feedback from superiors and co-workers is reduced, acknowledgement of achievements is less noticeable. And even though neither the amount of work nor the complexity of the tasks necessarily changes with a shift towards home offices, a lack of excitement, of challenge, of competition and of team spirit could lead to job boredom.

Boredom can be understood as a negative psychological state of unwell-being (Reijseger et al. 2013), that can even turn into an phenomenon called “boreout” (Stock 2015). In contrast to “burnout”, its counterpart “boreout” is still underexplored. Triggered by a crisis of meaning, job boredom and a crisis of growth, boreout goes along with demotivation, a lack of coherence and a loss of purpose (Stock 2015).

Even though these stressors affect employees in any stadium of their working life, young people at the beginning of their careers are the focus of our interest.

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In this stage of working life, boreout could have a serious impact on these young people's careers and it is in their interests as well as in those of their employers, to deal with the working situation accordingly. Exploring the impact of involuntary distant working situations on "boreout" as a negative psychological state of young people at the beginning of their career, is therefore the focus of this study.

2 RELATED LITERATURE

Boredom at work can be understood as a negative psychological state of low internal arousal and dissatisfaction (Reijseger et al. 2013). In its extreme, "Boreout" manifests itself in a crisis of meaning at work, job boredom, and content plateauing, also referred to as a crisis of growth (Stock 2013, 2015). In contrast to "burnout", its counterpart "boreout" is still underexplored.

A *sense of coherence* in working environments is built on a perception of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness (Antonovsky 1988). Comprehensibility points towards the working situation being structured, clear and consistent. Manageability addresses the availability of job resources to cope with job demands and meaningfulness indicates the perceived value and sense of the assigned tasks (Jenny et al. 2017).

According to Kompanje (2018), boreout as well as burnout are rooted in a crisis of meaning. He posits a basic need of a person to believe, that what this person does is important, makes sense and is significant (Kompanje 2018). If people lose this belief, their capability to cope with difficult working situations is restricted, they might even crash (Kompanje 2018). A recent study confirmed a positive association of boreout with depression, anxiety and stress (Özsungur 2020a).

As loss of meaning, lack of excitement and of personal development correspond with loss of valued resources, the main effects of boreout can be explained by the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Stock 2016). The COR theory was introduced by Hobfoll (Hobfoll 2001; Hobfoll et al. 2018). According to this theory, the loss or anticipated loss of valued resources causes mental strain (Stock 2016). Compared to job demands, job resources are more stable (Brauchli et al. 2013), or rather: they *were*, until the covid-19-pandemic turned this upside down.

The *salutogenic model*, or the *model of salutogenesis* defined by Antonovsky, underlines the importance of coherent experiences (Antonovsky

1991, 1979). A sense of coherence influences how an employee makes use of the available job resources and can cope with stressors in working-life (Jenny et al. 2017). A good sense of coherence can protect employees from negative aspects of working conditions (Feldt 1997). Jenny et al. (2017) point out, that this mechanism is reciprocal: building and maintaining job resources enables employees to develop coping strategies and to put them into action. Losing this sense of coherence can lead to a „crisis of meaning“ and can even affect the health of an employee. Kempster et al. (2011) put the task of building meaningful working situations into the responsibility of management.

Boredom as a lack of internal arousal due to understimulating working environments leads to dissatisfying working experiences (Reijseger et al. 2013). According to Stock (2015) a lack of excitement and on-the-job challenges can have a demotivating effect. Habituation increases and creativity impedes (Stock 2013). Evidence for boredom are daydreaming, task-unrelated thoughts, or work-unrelated tasks, inattention or a distorted perception of time dragging along (Reijseger et al. 2013).

Jessurun et al. (2020) introduced the concept of relative underperformance and chronic relative underperformance and aligned both to a person-environment-misfit. Relative underperformance addresses a state of being, in which the performance stays underneath a person's level of abilities. In relation to what they could do, they fall behind. This state is acquired, develops over time and can turn chronic, if permanent (Jessurun et al. 2020).

But as an unpleasant state, boredom can also have a positive effect: it promotes movement, urges the need to take action, to escape this uncomfortable situation (Jessurun et al. 2020). If this urge to actively move away from a dissatisfying working situation is inhibited, this person is stuck within this state and might even switch into a paradox behaviour by actively maintaining the situation (Rothlin und Werder 2007). This would indicate a boreout, so job boredom is a precursor of boreout (Jessurun et al. 2020).

Another dimension of boreout is a crisis of growth (Stock 2015). If the perspective of gaining knowledge, learning and personal development is restricted, motivation decreases (Özsungur 2020b). A lack of challenge can initiate a crisis of growth, which can lead to a crisis of meaning. A crisis of meaning can be related to boredom. The three dimensions are thus not independent, but related to each other.

Within this pandemic, access to job resources is blocked, technological equipment in home office is poorer than at work, interaction with co-workers limited. On the same hand, the limited control offers more autonomy. We focus on working novices, as a boreout at this very early stage could have a negative impact on their professional career.

3 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Informed by literature, we conducted a qualitative analysis as a preliminary step to building our hypotheses. Due to the situation, the interviews had to be conducted by telephone or video conference. The distance subdued the interviewees being influenced, therefore we drew up a guideline for the semi-structured interviews.

As ambitious young people at the beginning of their careers are the units of our interest, interviewees were selected among the target group of trainees, interns and student workers (age 20-24 years, mixed sex), that were sent into home office. They were selected from different lines of work: Mechanical engineering, automotive, advertising, financial services and service providers, but all engaged in IT-supported tasks.

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted lasting 25-45 minutes. Linking the responses to the dimensions of boreout and grouping them into themes, led to six categories:

- Crisis of meaning,
- Job boredom,
- Crisis of growth,
- Connectivity,
- IT equipment and IT support and
- Benefits.

Table 1: Sample statements on a crisis of meaning.

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| I4 | “This is not what I wanted, what I imagined. There is a lot missing, that made this profession special and I know that many colleagues and friends feel the same way.” |
| I5 | “I get along very well with my team. I get along very well with my direct supervisor. And the fact that some of that has disappeared means that, the only thing that remains is work. Only what you actually are paid for [...] I think that makes the work less rewarding.” |

Even though the discontent is palpable, the interviews gave only sparse indication of a crisis of meaning. The tasks were comparable to the tasks assigned before. Neither quantity nor quality changed

significantly. Initial problems in task assignment were solved after a short period of time: *“In the beginning, I didn't have many tasks. It was just: I was sitting at the PC, I was online when something was going on, but I didn't really work on anything and there I would say that I was underchallenged during that time.”* (I2) While indicators for a crisis of meaning were sparse, signals for boredom became more evident.

Table 2: Sample statements on job boredom.

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| I1 | “You spend more time on everyday chores, less on the bigger and more challenging tasks. [...] You feel a bit, I wouldn't say underchallenged, but the tasks are a bit monotonous.” |
| I2 | “However, because I don't have to take the subway or train in the morning, I am in front of my laptop earlier and start earlier, but it takes me longer until I actually really do something.” |
| I3 | “You have a bit of a feeling that time has stopped.” |
| I3 | “When you work at home, it happens quite quickly that you are distracted” |
| I4 | “Procrastination is definitely a thing and also the lack of contacts.” |
| I4 | “Yes, you spend more time on fewer tasks. So I often needed more attempts for one thing.” |
| I5 | “Due to the fact that the work is currently more monotonous, if you do the same thing over and over again, then you get bored or I get more bored.” |

Commenting on a feeling, that time had stopped (I3) addresses a distorted perception of passing time, indicating boredom (Reijseger et al. 2013). Distraction, procrastination, work unrelated tasks, monotony and boredom were mentioned by all five interviewees. As the pandemic caused massive restrictions in the working situation plus the private situation, the combination adds up to the discontent: *“It somehow doesn't feel as satisfying anymore when you finish the eight hour day because you can't do anything after that anyway.”* (I4)

Our special interest was on a crisis of growth, as this would be devastating for young ambitious people in the early stages of their working life. The interviewees experienced this very differently. I5 postponed his intention to pick-up studies at a university. He commented on a decreased mood: *“Yes, but this is not directly due to the job. I think it's more due to the duration. It's been going on for months now. [...] This, of course, makes for a diminished quality of life.”* (I5)

Table 3: Sample statements on a crisis of growth.

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| 13 | "In general, I still learn a lot on the work I do. Especially as a student it is extremely valuable to have such experiences and I am therefore very grateful anyway and very satisfied." |
| 14 | "The contact is not so direct, and I find that if you don't know the people well, it's [...] more distant. You might be more inhibited to ask something, especially if you're new to the department or the office." |
| 14 | "I had the feeling I dared much less. So my feedback has actually gotten worse because of that." |
| 14 | "We have an "academy of knowledge" almost every week where someone from the industry is invited or marketers are invited, to present themselves and give their presentations for training or for marketing purposes." |
| 15 | "For me specifically in marketing, of course, it's the case: this is a profession that is extremely communicative. That is now completely gone. There's no exchange at all anymore, and that naturally has an impact. Both personally and professionally. That means that you could even call it professionally limiting." |

Table 4: Sample statements on connectivity.

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| I2 | "We often take a coffee break together or something like that. And we chat a lot, yes. So I still feel like part of the team." |
| I3 | "I think building social contacts is relatively hard online. You can maintain them, if you have already met people, but online people simply don't walk by and pop in and say "hello"." |
| I3 | "It's always easier to go straight over and talk in person than to write an email or arrange a call for the next day. It always seems to take a little time right now." |
| I4 | "I have the feeling that, through videoconferences or other media, there are often misunderstandings and then I ask things and then I do things the way I think they were told to me and afterwards they say, "Well, that's completely wrong. I told you that, didn't I? What's going on?" And I think that a lot of it is also due to this lack of interpersonal contact." |
| I4 | "We have a rotation principle. That means we're in new departments every four months, and I have to say, in all my last departments, all during the Corona crisis, I felt my connectivity was very low." |
| I4 | "So yes, I can say that you can feel left alone as a trainee." |

"I had the feeling I dared much less." (I4) points towards a relative underperformance (Jessurun et al. 2020), that I4 is well aware of and discontent with. Interviewee 2 mentioned a lack of acknowledgement:

"Maybe it is less, because the co-workers just acknowledge it less or generally see less. In the end, they only see the result, and even that is not necessarily the case. Yes, the others just don't see it anymore." The perception of results remaining unseen and achievements going unnoticed could indicate a crisis of growth, but the interviewee denied: "Personally, that's not so important to me. First and foremost I do it for myself." (I2).

But the degree to which a person perceives to be valued by their supervisors, takes influence on their innovative work behaviour (Stock 2015). Jessurun et al. (2020) describe "not been seen" as a major stressor, capable to undermine the attachment system and to sow doubts into an otherwise self-confident person.

The aforementioned statements referred to connectivity as a major issue. The statements underlined the importance of social interaction for these young people and the difficulties they face in building up new working contacts, to help them cope with on-the-job challenges. Interviewee 2 pointed in a similar direction: "And the distant working often gives you the feeling that the supervisors don't have much time or are annoyed when one of us wants something." (I2) Following up on this, the interviewee was asked if "annoyance" was more frequent, he commented: "Because of the home office, yes, because you can't assess the mood as well as you can face-to-face. You can more easily tell whether there is time for you at the moment or not." In Reijseger et al. (2013) evidence was found, that unsupportive and uncooperative co-workers are positively related to job boredom, declaring the social context as a risk factor for boredom.

As the company of interviewee 2 found ways to compensate the lack of personal interaction, the feeling of isolation was prevented: "I wouldn't say that, because we often take a coffee break together or something like that. And we chat a lot, yes. So I still feel like part of the team." (I2). This statement gives evidence for the necessity to offer a digital surrogate to compensate the lack of personal communication.

IT-equipment & support are basic resources to fulfill the assigned tasks. As the interviews gave evidence for coping strategies relying on digital surrogates to compensate the lack of personal contact, the importance goes beyond the basic necessity. Even though mandatory, an adequate IT infrastructure in a home office can't always be taken for granted. Purwanto et al. (2020) dedicated the main part of their discussion of negative impacts of "work from home" within the covid-19-pandemic to technical equipment, advocating an additional budget to cover the increased costs for electricity and internet.

Table 5: Sample statements on IT equipment and IT support.

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| I2 | “The company was well prepared. Just about every employee got two notebooks to take home and also the opportunity to still work at the company if they really wanted to.” |
| I2 | “However, because I work at home, there is less space, and also no extra monitor anymore. This makes working a bit more difficult sometimes.” |
| I3 | “I have always had a work laptop and VPN access. Accordingly, the infrastructure for home office has always been there. At the same time, we had [...] as a communication and a video conferencing tool” |
| I5 | “We are all equipped with mobile devices and have a VPN network.” |
| I3 | “[...] especially during the first lockdown the VPNs were simply overloaded and then a new node was set up relatively quickly [...] so that all people could continue to work again.” |
| I2 | “We have our internal tool. I can write a lot with colleagues there, or some employees meet with their boss for coffee breaks and the like. We students also have a monthly lunch together every Tuesday. So I certainly don't feel so isolated” |

Within their study of 100000 tweets on “work at Home” conducted in the beginning of the covid-19-pandemic, Dubey and Tripathi (2020) found the majority of tweets worldwide dominated by trust, anticipation and joy, giving evidence for people looking forward to working from home. Several month into the pandemic, this positive attitude is unbroken. When asked if the interviewees would proceed working from home voluntarily afterwards, I1 agreed: *“Yes, indeed. You realize that you have tasks that you can do best at home, or even better, because it is quieter there. But not full-time. You need the one, two, maybe even three days a week in the company. Simply because you also learn more about things that happen internally and you can talk properly with your colleagues again.”* (I1)

Table 6: Sample statements on perceived benefits of the working situation.

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| I3 | “I simply realized that when I'm here and I'm stuck on a problem, that I just can say, “Okay. I'm taking a break for half an hour. [...] And I have noticed that often in these breaks some ideas come up on how to solve this problem.” |
| I5 | “And on the other hand, the concentration at home, at least with me, is higher, because you are in your comfort zone and can concentrate fully on your work.” |

4 RESEARCH MODEL

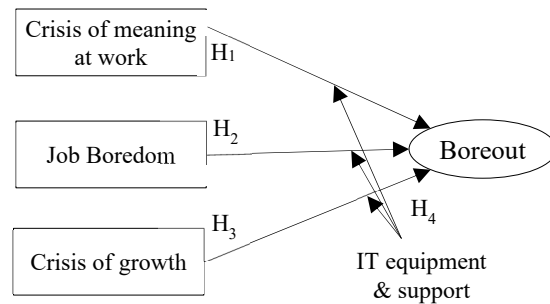


Figure 1: Research model.

The research model is leaning on Stock (2013, 2015, 2016) and was informed by these interviews. Kompanje (2018) points out the importance to consider working activities as meaningful, important and of relevance. If the tasks don't make sense or seem insignificant, motivation decreases. Stock (2013) coined the term “crisis of meaning at work” for this and identified it as one of three dimensions pointing towards boreout. In involuntary digital and distant working situations the feedback from superiors and co-workers is reduced, acknowledgement of achievements less noticeable. Especially young people, whose professional self-confidence is yet to be developed, are prone to develop a crisis of meaning under these circumstances, promoting a boreout (H₁).

Even though neither the amount of work nor the complexity of the tasks necessarily changes with a shift towards distant digital working, a lack of excitement, of challenge, of competition and of team spirit could lead to job boredom. According to (Stock 2015) a lack of excitement and on-the-job challenges can have a demotivating effect. Habituation increases and creativity impedes. Job boredom is another dimension of boreout (H₂) (Stock 2015).

Young people at the beginning of their working life are ambitious to grow within their working environment. In digital distant working situations, participating in the working routines of superiors and co-workers is limited and errors occurring during the learning process are less easily detected. If working in home-office is perceived to slow down the learning curve, this can lead to a “crisis of growth” (Stock 2013), favouring the occurrence of a boreout. This crisis of growth affects especially the ambitious and talented novices, whose hunger to prove themselves is more difficult to satisfy in digital distant working situations. A lack of opportunities to go beyond the expectations of superiors and co-workers and a lack

of challenges and stimulation could foster dissatisfaction and boreout (H₃).

IT-equipment & support are basic resources to complete the assigned tasks. As the interviews gave evidence for coping strategies relying on digital surrogates to compensate the lack of personal contact, the importance goes beyond the basic necessity towards a moderating effect (H₄).

5 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

As the covid-19-induced working situation is without precedence, the questionnaire (Appendix) was only loosely oriented on the Boredom scale (Stock 2015) and the Dutch Boredom Scale (Reijseger et al. 2013). An anonymous online survey was conducted as a pre-test for a broader survey. Questions to assess the workspace environment were followed by statements with a five-point Likert scale and space for additional comments. The housing situation (single, family, children to care for) points towards possible distractions. The aforementioned six categories (crisis of meaning, job boredom, crisis of growth, IT equipment and support, connectivity and benefits) defined the structure of the survey. All headers within were dismissed, to prevent terms like “crisis” influencing the interviewees.

A convenience sample of 65 datasets was collected, 25 of which were dismissed because the participants didn’t switch to home office during covid-19-pandemic. 77.5% of the remaining 40 participants were 20-30 years old. Due to the sample size, overstretching the interpretation would be inappropriate, therefore we conducted no in-depth analysis on these data sets.

Table 7: Percentages of mentionings.

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| H1 | While the majority of respondents (85%) say they have less contact with their colleagues and superiors, only 32.5% feel left alone by their employer or no longer feel part of a team. A large proportion (60%) still receive a similar amount of recognition for work performed as before the pandemic. |
| H2 | Although the majority of respondents (62.5%) stated that they do not work more slowly in the home office, an equally large proportion (62.5%) devote more time to private matters during regular working hours. For most of the participants neither the scope of tasks (67.5%) nor the difficulty (77.5%) has changed and they have no problems with organizing their daily work autonomously (62.5%). 65% feel neither bored nor under-challenged in home office. |

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| H3 | Interest and opportunities for professional development have not decreased for 77.5% and a vast majority (92.5%) can turn to colleagues and supervisors for help. A limitation of work processes was an issue for 45% and no issue for 47.5%. Half of the respondents claimed, creativity and morale had suffered as a result of isolation, while 35% tended to notice no change in this regard. |
| H4 | Employers have prepared and planned the transition to the home office in a structured manner in 70% of cases. The IT equipment has ensured that 92.5% of employees can do their work easily. For 77.5% digital surrogates avoided feeling isolated. |

The results of this pre-test gave insights on necessary minor adjustments to the questionnaire, e.g. the change of the header, to keep it neutral (“Job satisfaction within the Covid-19-pandemic”) and the use of inverted statements, to avoid bias.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The main focus of this paper was on boredom and boreout perceived by young people driven into home office due to the covid-19-pandemic. In home-offices the degree of them participating in the working routines of co-workers is limited and errors occurring during the learning process are less easily detected. They are less experienced in developing coping strategies and have a smaller network of professional contacts to carry them through. The aim of this paper was to gain insight on boreout within this specific situation on young people, to assist in mitigating its effect and to provide assistance in overturning it into fulfilling and satisfying digital working environments on a long-term basis. We contribute to the body of knowledge on job boredom and boreout by underlining the importance of the three dimensions as early indicators for boreout and of the moderating effect of IT-equipment and IT-support on establishing and maintaining connectivity.

Leaning on recent literature a qualitative analysis was conducted, that was used to derive a research model. An anonymous online survey was conducted to test the viability of our approach. To our relief, the initial hypothesis, that the digital distant working situation induced by the covid-19-pandemic would initiate a crisis of meaning, job boredom and a crisis of growth, thus would lay the ground for a boreout, could not be verified within our sample. Neither the qualitative nor the quantitative survey gave evidence for a boreout. Only spare indicators for a crisis of meaning were found, clear signals pointing towards

boredom and strong indicators for a crisis of growth. This crisis of growth is palpable and leads to discontent and frustration within the target group of young people at the beginning of their working life. A lack of connectivity was identified as a main issue. Intensified digital communication compensated the lack of personal communication and mitigated the negative effects.

The results show that all interviewees and almost all respondents to the online survey stated that they would like to continue or work more often in a home office after the pandemic at will. In particular, advantages such as the elimination of commuting, the better combination of leisure and work, and sometimes even higher productivity were given as reasons.

The interviews and the anonymous survey pointed towards the importance of digital surrogates to mitigate the negative effects. Coping strategies based on social network services, chats, etc. proliferated and avoided a feeling of isolation. This segues into management implications: „making sense“ and „giving purpose“ are managerial tasks, and a core element of leadership (Kempster et al. 2011) and so is maintaining connectivity. Making sure, that novice workers are included into the formal and informal communication network by all technical means, to keep them connected, well-informed and as part of a team, is crucial to avoid cutbacks in their personal development.

As the sample size is too small to provide reliable insights, further studies would be necessary to verify the results. Expanding the research on employees more advanced in their working careers could be worth some exploration, as well as taking different cultures and social milieus into account, who might cope differently with this pandemic. As the situation is exceptional, the stressor is episodic. Findings gained within this rather extreme situation could give valuable insights for home office communications in the aftermath of the pandemic.

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| I can easily contact my supervisors/colleagues if I need help. |
| My work processes are restricted. |
| My creativity/work ethic has suffered from the isolation. |
| The longer the pandemic/home office goes on, the more dissatisfied I become. |
| I am currently less willing to work overtime. |
| I am more dissatisfied with my job. |
| My employer prepared and planned the transition into home office in a structured way. |
| My employer has ensured, that I can work from home by providing software and hardware. |
| I have, by digital means, the feeling of being less isolated than without. |
| I can imagine working more often in a home office in the future. |
| I think that home offices will be used more often in the future. |

APPENDIX

Questionnaire

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| Are you working from home due to the covid-19-pandemic? (y/n) |
| How old are you? (<20,20-30, >30) |
| Which sex? (m/f/d) |
| Which industry? |
| How long do you work for your employer per week? (>35h/week, 15-35 h/week, <15 h/week) |
| How long are you working for your employer? (<1 year, 1-4 years, > 4 years) |
| What is your current housing situation? (single/family/other) |
| Children to care for? (y/n) |
| Did you have any experience working from home before the pandemic? (y/n) |
| I have less contact with my colleagues/supervisors. |
| I feel left alone by my employer because of the home office. / I no longer feel part of a team. |
| I receive no/less recognition for the work I do. |
| I do the same work slower in my home office. |
| I waste more of my working time on private matters than before. |
| I have problems with organizing my own working day. |
| I have to do fewer tasks than I did before. |
| My assigned tasks have become easier. |
| I feel increasingly bored or underchallenged. |
| I currently have no more interest/opportunities to improve my professional development. |