

# CIPD

*Championing better  
work and working lives*

**CIPD Applied Research Conference 2018**

**The shifting landscape of work and working lives**

## **What does the future hold? Investigating the benefits and challenges of agile and remote working**

**Conference paper**

**Dr Claire Stone, Shannon Horan and Dr Paul Flaxman**  
City, University of London

---

The author retains the copyright in this paper and is responsible for the accuracy of its content.

## Summary

This study explores the benefits and challenges of agile and remote working in EDF Energy, a UK energy company. Findings from 741 responses to an online survey revealed the benefits experienced by this workforce, such as increased work engagement, as well as resulting organisational outcomes, such as increased organisational commitment. Related challenges were also captured, including levels of workplace isolation and loneliness experienced by different demographic groups. Of particular note is the group spending 80–100% of their time working remotely, which reported significantly higher levels of loneliness and workplace isolation, while exhibiting the lowest intention to quit. Insights on overcoming challenges and ‘making new ways of working work’ were also gathered. Policy implications for the organisation are presented and the practical implications for managers and individuals are discussed.

## Introduction

This study took place in a large energy company. EDF Energy is the UK’s largest producer of low-carbon electricity, meeting around a fifth of the country’s demand and supplying millions of customers and businesses with electricity and gas. The company employs around 13,000 people at locations across England and Scotland, including 8 nuclear power stations and more than 30 wind farms.

In the years leading up to the study, location changes and office closures – combined with the introduction of newer working practices (such as hot-desking) – had given rise to a sudden growth in the agile and remote employee population. The company describes this practice as follows:

*‘Agile Working provides a framework for modernising the way we work. It’s about working flexibly, securely and appropriately from an EDF Energy site, from home or other location. Agile working encourages teams and individuals, where appropriate, to take a fresh look at where, how and when work is carried out.’*

In the annual employee engagement survey carried out in Q4 2017, 35% of participants (over 3,500 people) reported having either a formal or informal agile working arrangement in place. The survey results from this group aligned with external research findings from Gallup<sup>1</sup> that ‘employees who spend at least some (but not all) of their time working remotely have higher engagement than those who don’t ever work remotely’. However, a growing number of work-related ill-health cases amongst this population were shown to be work-aggravated, raising possible areas of concern.

## Research focus, rationale and questions

These factors prompted the organisation to seek a better understanding of the experiences and needs of this growing workforce. As such, our research agenda focused on two different ‘levels’ of outcomes:

- organisational outcomes of agile and remote working, including organisational commitment and loyalty
- individual outcomes of agile and remote working, including well-being and workplace isolation.

We also sought to capture the everyday benefits and challenges reported by this population, at work and at home, along with the ‘best practices’ that they had developed to overcome their challenges. Key literature surrounding these areas and the resulting research questions will be explored in turn.

## Organisational outcomes

The organisational benefits of 'working anywhere' – including increased productivity, improved well-being, improved retention and reduced property costs – have been widely observed.<sup>2</sup>

In assessing the growth and consequences of remote working, Felstead and Henseke<sup>3</sup> highlighted the productivity and strong work ethic of this growing population. They concluded that remote workers are '*more committed, enthusiastic and satisfied with their job than their conventionally located counterparts*' in return for the opportunity to work more flexibly (in line with social exchange theory). Findings from Gallup<sup>4</sup> describing the engagement of this population *combined with* their 'degree of remoteness' (or contact time with colleagues) had resonated with the organisation. As such, our research questions were:

- Is the agile and remote population more engaged than other employees – in line with external research?
- Are these employees more committed as a result? Are they more likely to stay with the organisation?

Established organisational and work engagement scales<sup>5</sup> were employed to help us better understand these areas, along with outcomes measures from related studies.

## Individual outcomes

Recent publications such as 'Invisible therefore isolated',<sup>6</sup> 'Out of sight, out of mind',<sup>7</sup> and 'Five ways to address loneliness at work'<sup>8</sup> were starting to alert us to possible adverse impacts of agile and remote working. Media coverage about loneliness amongst the wider population, including 'The surprising effects of loneliness on health'<sup>9</sup> and [the Campaign to End Loneliness](#) had compounded these concerns and prompted us to explore aspects of loneliness and isolation.

In a systematic literature review of 63 studies evaluating the outcomes of different dimensions of well-being amongst 'remote e-workers', results were not clear-cut. While both negative and positive associations were found, Charalampous et al<sup>10</sup> concluded that '*there is still a greater consensus towards a beneficial impact of this working arrangement*'. Clarke and Holdsworth<sup>11</sup> also reported a complex picture and came to similar conclusions. As such, our research questions were:

- Are any adverse impacts (such as loneliness or workplace isolation) evident?
- How is everyday well-being (such as happiness and anxiety) affected in this organisation?

Established loneliness and workplace isolation scales<sup>12</sup> were used to explore these areas, along with single-item affective well-being measures of happiness and anxiety.

# Research methods

## Survey instrument

Data was gathered through a structured online questionnaire that was administered by research experts from City, University of London. All responses were anonymous and confidential. It took around 20 minutes to complete and contained qualitative and quantitative items, including the validated scales in Table 1.

**Table 1: Survey instrument scales**

Measure	Focus	Authors
Organisational Engagement <i>6-item scale</i>	An individual's wider role and sense of purpose as a member of the organisation	Saks <sup>13</sup>
Utrecht Work Engagement Scale <i>17-item scale</i>	The 'vigour, dedication and absorption' an individual experiences carrying out their work	Schaufeli and Bakker <sup>14</sup>
Organisational Commitment <i>6-item scale</i>	An individual's sense of belonging or attachment to the organisation	Rhoades et al <sup>15</sup>
Intention to Quit <i>3-item scale</i>	An individual's intentions to stay with or leave the organisation 'one year from now'	Colarelli <sup>16</sup>
Workplace Isolation <i>10-item scale</i>	The strength of relationships and support between (a) colleagues and (b) the wider company	Marshall et al <sup>17</sup>
UCLA Loneliness Scale <i>3-Item scale</i>	The frequency of feelings experienced about isolation, lack of companionship and exclusion	Hughes et al <sup>18</sup>

In addition, qualitative items gathered detail on benefits and challenges experienced by agile or remote workers in their working life and their home life – as well as 'top tips' for overcoming these challenges, for anyone just starting to work in these newer, less traditional ways.

### Survey participants

Participants were recruited through a company-wide communications campaign, primarily through news stories on the company intranet. This was supplemented by communications to the target workforce (around 1,500 employees) through relevant channels – including emails, texts and internal social media. Response rates were monitored daily and reminders were issued to maximise participation.

A total of 741 employees responded fully during a three-week survey window, providing a response rate of just below 50%. All levels of seniority were represented; respondents came from all age and 'length of service' groups. There was a good mix of gender (59% males, 36% females, 5% 'prefer not to say'). Other protected characteristics groups were well represented.

Twenty-one per cent of respondents had a formal agile working arrangement in place; 61% worked in this way on a more informal basis. Around a third of respondents had instigated changes themselves by requesting a flexible working arrangement; around a quarter had a role which dictated that they work remotely and a fifth had changed their practices in response to business needs.

Company changes were reflected in response to the question 'How long have you been working in this way?' Twenty-five per cent of respondents replied 'less than a year'; 37% 'between one and three years'; 12% 'between three and five years' and 26% 'over five years'. The largest group of respondents (40%) worked remotely less than 20% of the time; the second largest group (29%) 20–40% of the time; the third largest group (15%) 80–100% of the time.

## Research findings

### Quantitative data

Quantitative data indicated that agile and remote working provides a great number of benefits to individuals and the organisation. The agile and remote working population was found to be more engaged, in line with Gallup's research.<sup>19</sup> Those with formal or informal agile working

## The benefits and challenges of agile working

arrangements had significantly higher scores for both work engagement and organisational engagement compared with those working in a more traditional way. In addition, those with a formal arrangement in place had significantly higher scores for organisational commitment. Results for intention to quit did not differ to a statistically significant degree.

In terms of individual outcomes, people with formal or informal agile working arrangements in place reported significantly lower scores of loneliness and workplace isolation compared with those working on a more traditional basis. The only 'hotspot' was for people spending 80–100% of their time working remotely, who reported significantly higher levels of loneliness and workplace isolation than other groups, although – interestingly – they also had the lowest intention to quit. No statistically significant difference was found with regard to everyday well-being for either of the (single-item) happiness or anxiety questions.

### Qualitative data

Many of the top work-related benefits of agile and remote working contained reference to better use of time – that is, 'having more time to get work done' (cited by 51% of respondents); 'reduced travel' (33%); 'increased productivity' (32%); and 'fewer distractions' (26%). The most common home life benefits echoed this, linked with a greater work–life balance – that is, 'having more time to get work done' (44%), leading to 'being able to spend more time with family members' (37%), 'reduced travel' (26%), 'increased flexibility' (23%) and greater ability to meet personal commitments (20%).

The most common work-related challenges were related to technology, including IT and mobile phone coverage (31%). 'Less interaction with colleagues' was highlighted in 27% of responses, alongside trouble in accessing other locations (18%) and a lack of consistent office space (16%). There were fewer comments on home life challenges; 'no challenges' was the most common response (27%). 'Balancing time and setting boundaries' between home and working life was the most frequently cited challenge (in 26% of responses); followed by 'physical home-working environment' (17%) and 'family demands' (13%).

The survey was also designed to explore how this workforce is overcoming challenges and 'making new ways of working work'. Respondents were asked to provide 'top tips' for people new to agile and remote working, and nearly 1,700 ideas were received. The strongest themes (by percentage of comments) included:

#### Planning your day-to-day approach and setting boundaries

- 275 suggestions (17% of the total) focused on day-to-day planning and setting boundaries to separate work and home life – either through routines to mark the start/end of a working day or in discussions with family and friends. Being disciplined and flexible, to meet business needs, were also key themes.

#### Connecting with others and combatting isolation

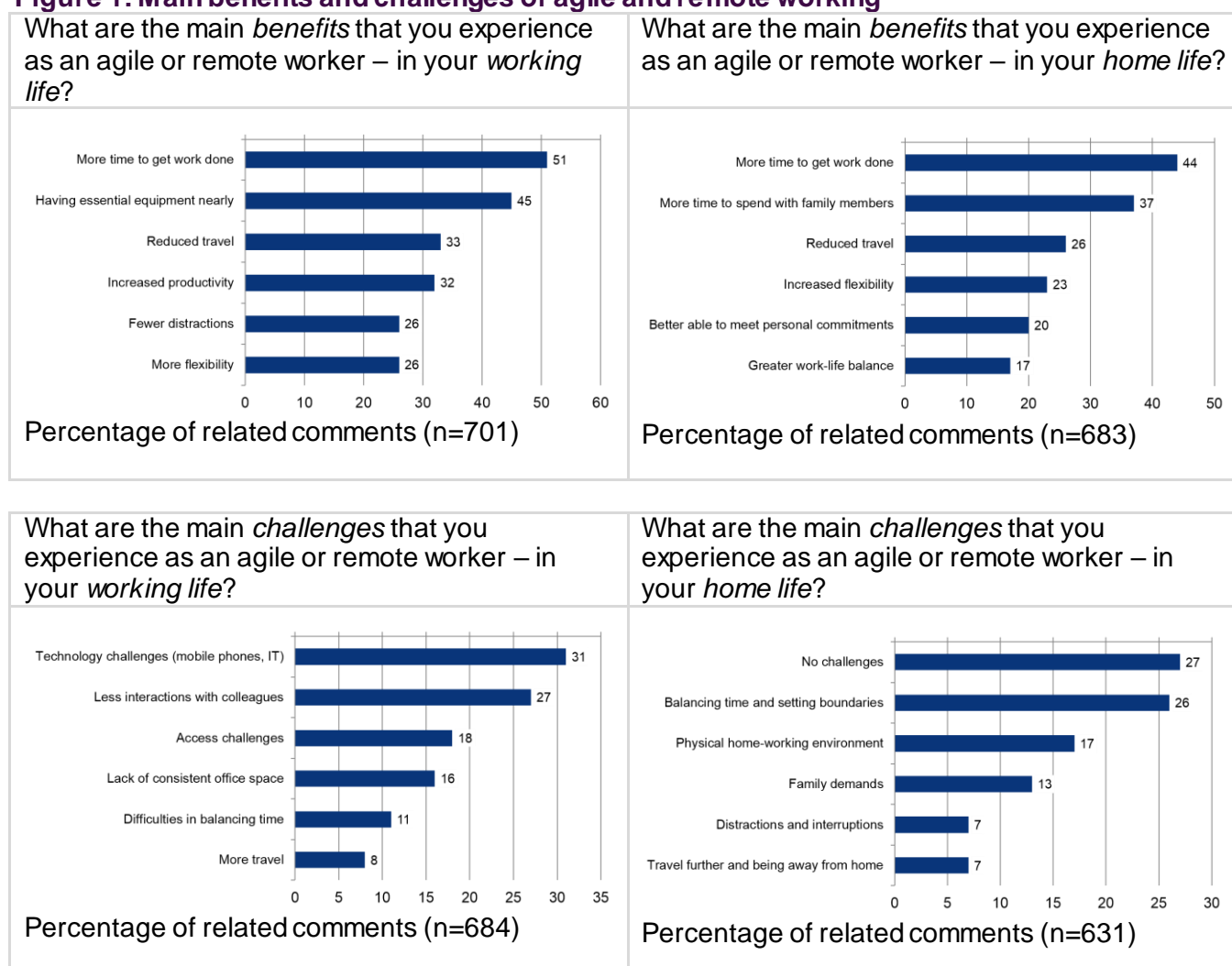
- Sixteen per cent of suggestions talked about the importance of developing a good support network and keeping in touch with colleagues regularly on social as well as work-related topics. Attending team events, regular phone calls and using video call technology to 'check in' were all helping people to feel more connected.

#### Managing your time and organising your week

- 260 comments (16% of the total) focused on managing time and organising your week, including matching the right type of work with the right type of environment in advance. Knowing your working preferences, structuring your day and developing a weekly routine were all seen as important factors.

## The benefits and challenges of agile working

**Figure 1: Main benefits and challenges of agile and remote working**



### Establishing a home working environment and the right technology

- Fifteen per cent of suggestions addressed creating a separate, safe, distraction-free working environment – in order to segregate work life and home life. Following good display screen equipment principles was deemed to be essential. A further 13% of suggestions focused on having the right IT/equipment in place.

### Looking after your health and well-being

- 175 suggestions (10% of the total) focused on individuals' health and well-being. Over half of these emphasised the importance of taking regular breaks and moving around (preferably in fresh air); lots of people also mentioned keeping warm, staying hydrated and/or well nourished as part of their response.

A further 150 suggestions (8% of the total) addressed setting up an agile or remote working arrangement and 'making it work'. Respondents suggested assessing 'whether this way of working is right for you' and considering the suitability of work that needs to be undertaken – as well as impact on colleagues and family members. They referred to agreeing working arrangements with line managers, setting expectations and 'ground rules' (and exactly what they mean in practice) and then making a formal application. There was useful advice on the transition from traditional to remote working, including trying out a variety of options.



The importance of building honest, trusting and supportive relationships between agile and remote workers and their line managers was a key theme. Discussing the level of autonomy needed plus how and when support could be provided was felt to be an important area to address in advance. The remaining 5% of suggestions focused further on change and ‘managing colleague and stakeholder expectations’. Example responses from each of these themes appear in the Appendix.

## Practical importance and policy implications

### Company-wide activity

The research findings provide valuable insight for HR policy and guidance around optimum working arrangements. Having a formal arrangement in place is linked with more positive outcomes than having an informal arrangement; working remotely 40–60% of the time is linked with the greatest benefits to both the organisation and to individuals in terms of engagement, connectedness and perceived support.

Both qualitative and quantitative research data provides concrete evidence of the benefits experienced by the company’s agile and remote working population – and the productivity-focused mindset and positive organisational outcomes received in return. These mirror findings by Felstead and Henseke<sup>20</sup> and provide further evidence to support the business case for newer working practices.

### Equipping managers

The research highlights that people working remotely 80–100% of the time experience higher levels of workplace isolation and loneliness than other groups. Reinforcing the importance of building strong relationships with employees through ongoing good management practices, including regular one-to-one meetings and stress risk assessments, can help to mitigate these risks.

The findings provide useful and bespoke contributions to the organisation’s leadership development curriculum around ‘managing remote workers’. They also provide a catalyst for updating the content of team and individual stress risk assessment conversations, with new insights on interpreting the HSE Stress Management Standards for an agile and remote population, along with tangible support of ‘best practices’.

### Equipping individuals

The tried-and-tested ‘top tips’ from participants provided an impactful output from this study. This part of the research identified a number of practical challenges being experienced across the company, such as having the right IT equipment to hand and having skills to connect with others using new technology, which were shared with specialist ‘owners’ who could improve or resolve issues.

In communicating the survey findings, a summary of the ‘top tips’ was published within a specially created online Yammer community – which sparked further, ongoing conversations and knowledge-sharing. As such, the organisation is already facilitating a greater sense of connection across this growing population and increasing the level of support between individuals right across the company.

## Conclusion

As with all cross-sectional studies, we have captured a snapshot in time rather than a longitudinal view. However, with a large and representative sample that incorporates the views and wisdom from nearly 750 employees, the results are robust and some useful findings are already being put to practical use by all sorts of teams – both at a strategic and day-to-day level. There is more work to do at an organisational level, by managers and by individuals themselves, but there is a great willingness to build on the benefits, overcome the challenges and to make newer ways of working work *even more* successfully.



## Appendix

Research findings published in EDF Energy's company magazine in November 2018

### HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



# Working in an agile way

Do you have an agile working arrangement in place? More than a third of employees do and, whilst the wider benefits are clear, some concerns have emerged about loneliness and ill-health. Connect reports on a recent survey, shares top tips – and talks to Jessica Roberts about her agile working patterns

#### Increasing numbers of employees spend at least some of their time working remotely.

This is true at EDF Energy – as elsewhere – as offices close down and Modern Ways of Working are introduced.

In the last employee engagement survey MyEDF, 35% of respondents reported having a formal or informal agile working arrangement in place.

Overall, research has revealed that agile and remote working provides great benefits to individuals, and to EDF Energy.

Employees who spend some of their time working remotely tend to be positive, engaged and committed.

However, people spending 80-100% of their

time away from colleagues report higher levels of loneliness and isolation and increased instances of work-related ill-health.

To explore the topic in more depth, EDF Energy – together with university researchers – carried out a major survey earlier this year.

#### SUPPORTIVE NETWORK

Nearly 750 people took part, sharing their experiences of working in an agile or remote way.

One of the survey's richest outcomes was the wealth of tips provided by respondents – an impressive 1,700 suggestions in all. Some examples are shared below.

Analysts have grouped them into six categories, making it easier to share them with employees

who work in a host of different ways including home-based, field-based or splitting their time between different locations.

Next steps are to continue efforts to build a supportive network – and the sharing of the top tips is part of that. A Yammer group, Remote and Agile, has been set up to help people swap advice and information.

All the evidence suggests that it is crucial for agile and remote workers to feel connected to the company, to colleagues and to fellow team members.

At the same time, the survey highlighted the need for more work to be done to promote and maintain the health and well-being of this growing workforce.

## EMPLOYEES' TOP TIPS



1  
Setting up an agile or remote working arrangement and making it work

"Do a three-month trial before fully committing to this style of working – it doesn't suit everyone"

"Develop clear objectives for your role, this can help you to demonstrate that you are meeting all that you need to for your role"



2  
Planning your day-to-day approach and setting boundaries

"Establish a go-to-work and come-home-from-work routine – i.e. I use a treadmill to 'walk' to and from work"

"Self-discipline to divide work and home life; try to make a conscious break between work and home activities if at all possible"



3  
Connecting with colleagues and managing others' expectations

"Pick up the phone and talk to people, email exchanges aren't the solution for everything. This will also keep you in contact with your work friends and make you feel less out of the loop"

"Utilise tools like WhatsApp, Skype and Yammer effectively. They can supply those 'water cooler' moments of informal chat and banter that remind you that you are not alone"

## JESSICA'S STORY

Jessica Roberts started a new role in 2015 as Change, Communication & Performance Lead, Employee Services HR, working across the South East. Previously, she was based in Atlantic House, Crawley, but when she took up the new position she changed her base location to Hove.

Every week is different for Jessica and she plans her days according to the requirements of the job. If she travels to a different site, she makes the most of her time there by fitting in as many face-to-face meetings as she can. Improved technology generally means that she can "sit down and plug in" – and start work in five minutes. "It's so much easier than it used to be," she says.

**"I DIDN'T MIND THE CLUTTER SO MUCH – IT'S MORE ABOUT FEELING THAT YOU ARE NOT TRESPASSING"**

“At first I definitely struggled when I changed my location to Hove as there were very few members of my wider Employee Services team on site.

I remember feeling that I had nowhere on site that I 'belonged' to and I was always borrowing or inadvertently using someone else's desk, mug, or chair.

Modern Ways of Working has significantly helped with that, including the little things like being able to make a cup of tea wherever I am, and not sitting on a desk surrounded by trinkets, post-its and someone else's treasured personal items, which I then had to spend the day carefully manoeuvring around! I didn't mind the clutter so much – it's more about feeling that you are not trespassing and that you belong where you are.

I'm part of a team of three and we all work at different locations across the UK. One colleague is in East Kilbride and my manager is based up in Torness.

We try to reduce travel as much as possible so we only physically come together as a team every few months, but tools like Skype (instant messaging, screen sharing and calls), Yammer

and WhatsApp definitely help us feel more like a team in between times, as well as providing opportunities to collaborate.

I generally don't like working from home as I find it quite isolating but I keep this option in reserve for when I'm in desperate need of some uninterrupted working, thinking and planning time. ”



### 4 Managing your time and organising your week

“Ask yourself: what work needs to be done in the office where collaboration/discussion is key versus what can be done at home in undisturbed solitude?”

“Structure your day as if you were in the office (start and end times, meal times, break times)”



### 5 Establishing a home working environment and the right technology

“Ensure you establish good habits – find a suitable space to work in where you won't be distracted by family or home life; set yourself up a routine”

“Make sure you have the equipment and set-up you need to effectively work in an agile way – there is nothing more frustrating than IT or network issues”



### 6 Looking after your health and well-being

“Ensure you take regular breaks, away from your workstation, giving your eyes a rest from the screen...it's very easy to get totally engrossed in something and not move for hours!”

“Get up and get out. Make sure that you leave and go for a walk... Getting out really splits up your day and it makes the cabin fever vanish!”

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Gallup. (2017). [State of the American workplace](https://news.gallup.com/reports/1999617.aspx). Available at: <https://news.gallup.com/reports/1999617.aspx>.
- <sup>2</sup> The Work Foundation. (2016) [Working anywhere: a winning formula for good work?](http://www.theworkfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/398_Working-Anywhere.pdf) London: The Work Foundation. Available at: [www.theworkfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/398\\_Working-Anywhere.pdf](http://www.theworkfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/398_Working-Anywhere.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> Felstead, A. and Henseke, G. (2017) Assessing the growth of remote working and its consequences for effort, well-being and work–life balance. *New Technology, Work and Employment*. Vol 32, No 3.
- <sup>4</sup> Gallup (2017).
- <sup>5</sup> Saks, A.M. (2006) Antecedents and consequences of employee engagement. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*. Vol 21. pp600–619;  
Schaufeli, W.B. and Bakker, A.B. (2003) UWES – Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. Preliminary *Manual – Version 1, November 2003*. Available at: [www.schaufeli.com](http://www.schaufeli.com).
- <sup>6</sup> Orhan, M.A., Rijsman, J.B. and van Dijk, G.M. (2016) Invisible, therefore isolated: comparative effects of team virtuality with task virtuality on workplace isolation and work outcomes. *Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*. Vol 32, No 2. pp109–22.
- <sup>7</sup> Nielsen, K., Daniels, K., Nayani, R., Donaldson-Feilder, E. and Lewis, R. (2017) *Out of sight, out of mind? Research into the occupational safety and health of distributed workers*. IOSH Research Report. Leicestershire: Institute of Occupational Health and Safety. Available at: [www.iosh.co.uk/outofsight](http://www.iosh.co.uk/outofsight)
- <sup>8</sup> Matovu, K. (2018) [Five ways to address loneliness at work](#). *People Management*. 2 February.
- <sup>9</sup> Brody, J.E. (2017) The surprising effects of loneliness on health. *New York Times*. 11 December.
- <sup>10</sup> Charalampous, M., Grant, C., Tramontano, C. and Michailidis, E. (2018) Systematically reviewing remote e-workers' well-being at work: a multidimensional approach. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*. doi: 10.1080/1359432X.2018.1541886
- <sup>11</sup> Clarke, S. and Holdsworth, L. (2017) *Flexibility in the workplace: implications of flexible work arrangements for individuals, teams and organisations*. London: ACAS.
- <sup>12</sup> Hughes, M.E., Waite, L.J., Hawkey, L.C. and Cacioppo, J.T. (2004) A short scale for measuring loneliness in large surveys: results from two population-based studies. *Research on Ageing*. Vol 26, No 6. pp655–72;  
Marshall, G.W., Michaels, C.E. and Mulki, J.P. (2007) Workplace isolation: exploring the construct and its measurement. *Psychology and Marketing*. Vol 24, No 3. pp195–223.
- <sup>13</sup> Saks (2006).
- <sup>14</sup> Schaufeli and Bakker (2003).  
Schaufeli, W.B. and Bakker, A.B. (2010) Defining and measuring work engagement: bringing clarity to the concept. In: Bakker, A.B. and Leiter, M.P. (eds) *Work engagement: a handbook of essential theory and research* (pp10–24). East Sussex: Psychology Press.
- <sup>15</sup> Rhoades, L., Eisenberger, R. and Armeli, S. (2001) Affective commitment to the organisation: the contribution of perceived organisational support. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Vol 86. pp825–36.
- <sup>16</sup> Colarelli, S.M. (1984) Methods of communication and mediating processes in realistic job previews. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Vol 69. pp633–42.
- <sup>17</sup> Marshall et al (2007).
- <sup>18</sup> Hughes et al (2004).
- <sup>19</sup> Gallup (2017).
- <sup>20</sup> Felstead and Henseke (2017).