

# Physical and social isolation in various places of work

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## SUMMARY

Our results indicate that dealing with the consequences of physical and social isolation may be an issue not only for teleworkers but also for non-teleworkers. What is more, both types of isolation may manifest differently depending on the office type (single cell, shared cell, activity-based or open-plan) and the amount of time one works in the same room with co-workers.

## KEYWORDS

Physical isolation, social isolation, telework, different office types

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## Introduction

Where and how people work has changed noticeably in recent years due to various factors and this process has been inevitably intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, members of an organisation may be scattered across various places of work, ranging from individuals who are full-time with others in an open-plan office to people who work entirely from home, and all the options between. However, stemming from social identification theory (Ashforth, Mael, 1989), need-to-belong theory (Baumeister, Leary, 1995) and relational cohesion theory (Thye et al. 2014), individuals need to have a feeling of belongingness, common ground and meaningful relationships with others, and this also applies in the context of organizational behaviour.

Physical isolation and its consequences have been studied extensively in the context of telecommuting (e.g. Gajendran & Harrison, 2007 meta-study; Allen et al. 2015). However, previous research has so far not paid enough attention to the fact that non-telework may also entail more or less physical isolation due to office arrangements (e.g. if a person works in a single cell office), or that a person may be working with a different kind of timetable to most of their co-workers or their work tasks do not require regular contact with others.

In addition to physical isolation, social isolation can affect both teleworkers (e.g. Kurland and Cooper, 2002) and non-teleworkers (e.g. Wang et al. 2020). One can be in a room full of people but still feel lonely and, as Aizenberg and Oplatka (2019) suggest, “isolation is not necessarily connected to the number of people surrounding a person” (p. 996). Therefore, as far as we know, no research has been conducted about social isolation in different office types.

The aim of this article is to analyse physical and social isolation and their possible interactions in various places of work: open-plan offices, activity-based offices, shared or single cell offices, and at home. Similarly, we also differentiate what proportion of time a person works away from others (0%, 1–25%, 26–50%, 51–75%, more than 75%).

Based on an Estonia-wide study (n= 3,352) conducted in spring 2021, our data represents a broad assortment of sectors, organisations of different sizes, locations and other specifics. Factor analysis was used to capture the different dimensions of social isolation in addition to correlation analysis and analysis of variance. To measure social isolation we used eight statements (three of them

reverse scored). Social isolation falls under two factors: 1) negative (feeling excluded, having drifted apart, and lonely etc.) (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.82$ ) and 2) positive with all reverse scored items (easy to communicate with colleagues, have colleagues to share thoughts, and have colleagues to rely on in case of problems) (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

## Results

As expected, almost 80% of those respondents who spend more than 75% of the time working away from their co-workers work from home. Naturally, at home the physical distance from colleagues is high but the results revealed that this does not automatically mean that the perceived social isolation is high. In some cases – missing informal chats, feeling excluded and lonely, among others – social isolation at home is higher on average than in single and shared cell offices, but comparable with activity-based and open-plan offices. What is more, in some cases – having colleagues with whom to share thoughts and rely on in case of problems, among others – individuals working from home feel even less socially isolated than individuals in single and shared cell offices and small open-plan offices.

When considering respondents who work alongside others all the time, the same pattern appears. They have better results on average in respect to informal chats, among others, but they were more negative about having colleagues with whom to share thoughts and receive help when experiencing problems.

## Implications and points for future studies

The main implication from this study is that employers should seek person-job fit, and one-size-fits-all does not seem to be a viable solution. What is more, supportive and healthy relationships in different office environments should be the focus. In future studies there is a need to investigate further (possibly through a qualitative in-depth approach) the reasons why some people feel lonelier even when they are surrounded by others. Additionally, how people have dealt with isolation, including what allows some people to cope better than others is worth investigating further.

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