A new study by Fraunhofer IAO identifies factors influencing willingness to return to the office

Whether as proof of vaccination, test or recovery, many different types of COVID certificate have been issued around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. These rely on different centralized verification systems, both small and large, and are based on different technical standards and guidelines. The GCCN Trust Registry Network aims to ensure the reliable interoperability of these ecosystems on a global scale. The solution could also serve as a blueprint for other certificates.

The widespread shift to working from home in the early 2020s has seen a »new normal« take root – one that places changed demands on the daily work routine and sets new standards for employees’ perceived productivity in the workplace. However, this now-imminent return to the office also poses a number of questions: What role will the office play in the future? What effects does working from home have on employees’ individual and structural working conditions? And what conclusions and developments can be made from this for the working world once the pandemic is over? What are the biggest hurdles and incentives when it comes to returning to the office? Answers to these questions have now been provided by the »Work-from-home experience 2.0 – changes, developments and experiences of working from home during the coronavirus pandemic« study conducted by the Fraunhofer Institute for Industrial Engineering IAO in connection with the Office 21® innovation network. The study’s results are based on information provided by some 1700 respondents working in office or scientific environments, who took part in an anonymous online survey between May and August 2021.

The new survey follows on seamlessly from a study published in October 2020 entitled »Work-from-home experience – an empirical study from the user perspective during the coronavirus pandemic.« While the earlier study showed the results of the working from home situation, the latest study focuses on the incentives that boost willingness to return to the office, along with changes in individual success factors compared to the previous year.

Clear differences in perceived productivity in the workplace

Compared to the earlier study, the latest survey results now show two distinct trends as regards perceived productivity at work, as this has further increased both when working from home and from the office. In contrast, the number of respondents who did not notice a difference between the two places of work fell sharply. »We can now distinguish two camps, in which employees feel more productive either working from home or working from the office,« explained study author Milena Bockstahler from Fraunhofer IAO. According to the respondents, since the pandemic began it has also been easier to achieve a good work-life balance both when working from home and from the office.
The study also clearly shows that there is a willingness to return to the office. In future, employees would like to spend around half of their working time in the office. In particular, the opportunity for teamwork and cooperation, as well as informal exchanges with colleagues, play a major role for employees in this decision. »For that to happen, however, colleagues would also have to be on site. We are pulling one another back into the office, so to speak« said Milena Bockstahler. However, the quality of technical and ergonomic equipment when working from home is also a decisive motivating factor when choosing a work location. Respondents who are unhappy with their working-from-home setup tend to prefer to work at the office. »We also found that a good relationship with the company and good catering are among the biggest incentives for many to return to the office,« Bockstahler added.

In future, the office environment must also be seen as worthwhile when compared with working from home. Given the time involved in commuting, companies will have to engage more with innovative office concepts as well as experience- and learning-oriented office forms to make returning to the office more attractive. It is particularly important for employees to have a place where they can retreat to so that they can engage in productive, focused work since up to now, in-office staff have often felt disturbed. Hybrid and generously-sized meeting and project rooms should also be firmly anchored in new office concepts. To promote informal social exchanges, lounge-like open spaces where people can meet and interact also help. The office of the future can thus be seen as an important meeting place for social interaction and a creative driver for generating ideas.

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