

# Disrupted: Remote Work and Life under Lockdown during the Great COVID-19 Pause

Report on preliminary findings of a study by **Audra I. Mockaitis**<sup>1</sup> and **Christina L. Butler**<sup>2</sup>

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## Summary

This report outlines some of the preliminary findings of a multi-part and multi-period study being conducted by the authors during the COVID-19 pandemic, entitled “New Ways of Working and the Illusion of Flexibility”. This report focuses on the first data collection wave of the first study in our series.

## Acknowledgements

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## BACKGROUND

Recently topics around new ways of organizing have been receiving much attention. As organizations try to keep up with the rapid pace of technological change, they are implementing flatter structures, more flexibility, and more participatory styles. Organizations are emerging that are more fluid, and even boundaryless or borderless (Simões et al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic has thrust these shifts to the fore overnight for many organizations.

Organizations hire employees that are dispersed throughout the world. In our work, we have proposed that distributed forms of organizing are replacing or complementing the more traditional hierarchically-organized structures (Zander, Butler, Mockaitis, et al., 2015). These networked-type of organizations depend on employees working across multiple geographic, cultural, linguistic, functional and organizational boundaries, and who have the ability to deal with multiple internal and external stakeholders, for communication and knowledge flows. Telework and virtual participation lie at the heart of above organizational changes and have been gaining traction in the literature of late. Owing to the pandemic, these electronic forms of work have taken over as the only form of work for many, and can be expected to remain the norm for the duration of the pandemic with long-lasting consequences for the future of work.

These shifts in organizations and to the organization of work appear to bring many benefits. Organizations are more fluid; they can respond to crises, such as the pandemic, arising with little notice and involve multiple locations. The reliance on a distributed organization can save organizations time, costs, enhance innovation, creativity, diversity and social capital, enable knowledge to be spread quickly from different parts of the globe and access to key stakeholders, to name a few benefits (Zander et al., 2015).

Research that has been conducted on the benefits of new ways of working has, for the most part, focused on the benefits for organizations. Yet it is *employees* who implement and experience new ways of working. In distributed organizations, for example, increasing contact with members around the globe, and increasing access to multiple stakeholders actually poses greater challenges. Employees need to interact with and deal with multiple others across many different types of boundaries, focusing on their internal tasks but also on maintaining and managing now exclusively virtual relationships with stakeholders around the globe. We focus our research on the employee perspective.

We argue that increasing flexibility, although seen as beneficial to organizations, has potentially disruptive consequences for employees. We see workplace flexibility as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, pre-COVID, employees were increasingly able to choose where and how they worked (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018); on the other hand, increasing flexibility may impose growing demands on employees' time including ICT time, with the expectation that they be continuously available. In this pandemic moment, there is usually no choice of where and how to work, except from home, remotely, via technology.

In our studies, we cover different topics related to the demands placed on employees because of the COVID pandemic. We will explore the relationship between role demands, temporal demands and temporal conflicts among employees and between employees and their organizations, role overload, affectivity (mood and emotions), stress, burnout. We are interested in the interactions of these variables at the levels of the individual. We will examine the relationships over time and within different contexts.

The study will allow us to compare the effects of virtual work on various types of worker groups, as well as gauge reactions/responses to current remote working requirements among these different groups. Some types of workers, certain cultural groups and personality types may fare better than others. We aim to identify these differences, given that most of the workforce currently faces a similar dramatic disruption to their normal routines. Various implications for human resources, management and organization studies will be examined.

## **THE CURRENT STUDY**

The current study (Study 1) was begun in April 2020. Data collection took place over three waves. In Time 1, a sample of 421 respondents was recruited via personal and professional networks on social media in April and May 2020. We asked respondents to participate in two further studies, approximately two weeks apart. Respondents who agreed to participate in Time 2 were sent a further questionnaire and a reminder four days later. Time 3 questionnaires were sent after another two weeks, with reminders sent four days later. Over half of respondents (N=176) agreed to participate in follow-up studies. Of these, we received 98 responses in Time 2 and 81 in Time 3. Distribution of the study took place via social media networks; thus an effective response rate cannot be calculated.

The questionnaire consisted of various parts: a demographic section, a section in which respondents were asked to think about their work life prior to the COVID crisis, and a section asking respondents about their perceptions of their work and life during the current pandemic. We shortened the questionnaires at Time 2 and Time 3 to exclude demographic questions, and worded items to capture life as experienced under the COVID-19 restrictions. We also subsequently included measures of coping.

We present some of the preliminary results pertaining to the first data collection wave (Time 1).

### **Participant characteristics**

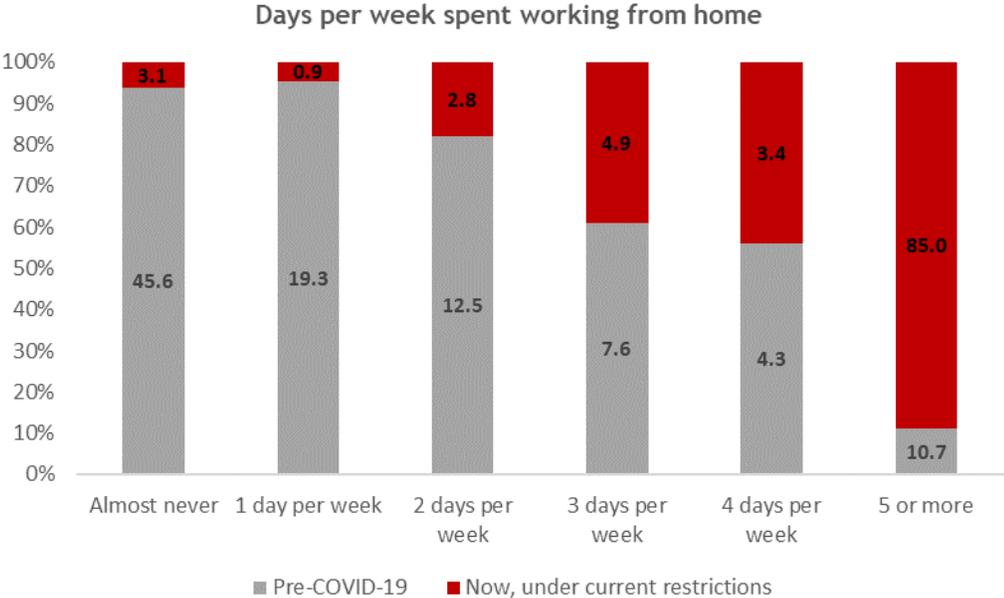
We retained 327 usable questionnaires after accounting for missing data. The gender composition of the sample was 61% female and 39% male; the median age was 46 years. Respondents were well educated - 88.4% had a formal university education, and most respondents (63.8%) held a graduate degree. Most respondents (76%) work full-time, and 88.3% were still in employment during the COVID pandemic. Only a few respondents (just under 5%) reported losing their jobs due to COVID.

TABLE 1. SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS.

Item	N	%	Min	Max	Mode	Mean	SD
Gender	326	99.7	0	1	0	.39	.49
0 Female	198	60.6					
1 Male	128	39.1					
Generation	325	99	1	3	2	1.93	.77
1 Millennials	107	32.7					
2 Gen X	133	40.9					
3 Boomers	85	26.2					
Live alone	326	99	0	1	1	.83	.37
0 Yes	54	16.6					
1 No with others	272	83.4					
Carer responsibilities	326	99	0	1	1	.57	.50
0 No	84	31.1					
1 Yes	186	68.9					
Education	325	99.4	1	6	5	4.59	1.16
1 No formal qualifications	1	0.3					
2 Secondary education	13	3.9					
3 Undergraduate university degree	75	22.9					
4 Professional qualification	24	7.3					
5 Postgraduate university degree	152	45.5					
6 Doctoral degree	60	18.3					
Employment type	326	99.7	1	6	1		
1 Full-time	248	75.8					
2 Part-time	27	8.3					
3 Self-employed	35	10.7					
4 Formal contract employee	8	2.4					
5 Zero-hour worker	5	1.5					
6 Gig economy worker	3	.9					
Currently working	325	99.4	0	1	1	.88	.32
0 No	38	11.6					
1 Yes	287	87.8					
Lost job to COVID	38	11.6	0	1	0	.42	.50
0 No	22	6.7					
1 Yes	16	4.9					
Key worker	324	99.1	0	1	0	.31	.47
0 No	222	67.9					
1 Yes	102	31.2					
Normally work remotely	324	99.1	0	1	0	.35	.48
0 No	211	64.5					
1 Yes	113	34.6					
Work in virtual teams	327	100	0	1	1	.64	.48
0 No	117	35.8					
1 Yes	210	64.2					
Do you volunteer	327	100	0	1	0	.16	.37
0 No	274	83.8					
1 Yes	53	16.2					

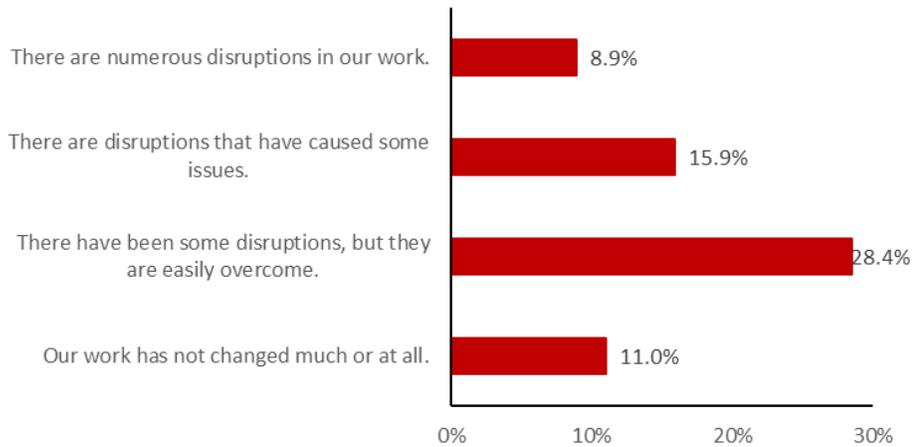
Only 16.6% reported that they live alone. Of those living in households with others, 69% reported having carer responsibilities, with a median of one child in their care. In addition, we were interested in whether some respondents are considered key workers, in distinguishing between those forced to stay at home and those required to be physically present. Just over 31% indicated that they were considered by their governments to be key workers. Some respondents might also venture out of the house during lockdown as volunteers - 16.2% of the sample indicated that they do, however, of these, 61% indicated that they volunteer remotely from home.

We asked respondents whether they normally work remotely (i.e., before the COVID crisis). Only 35% stated that they did. The figure compares the numbers of days people typically worked from home during an average week before and during the pandemic.



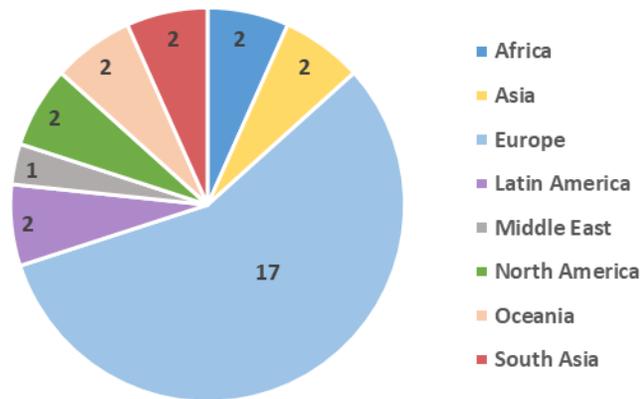
The leap from under 11% of people regularly working from home over an entire week to 85% is not unexpected, but indicates that there might be many individuals who are not used to working from home or virtually. However, 64% of respondents stated that they have experience with virtual work and normally work or have worked in one or more virtual teams. We asked respondents about the extent to which the COVID restrictions have disrupted their work in virtual teams. Only 11% of respondents indicated that their work has not changed much at all, while for the rest, the pandemic has caused some issues. For 24.8% of the total sample, the disruptions have caused some issues and associated hassles.

### Extent of disruption to virtual teams



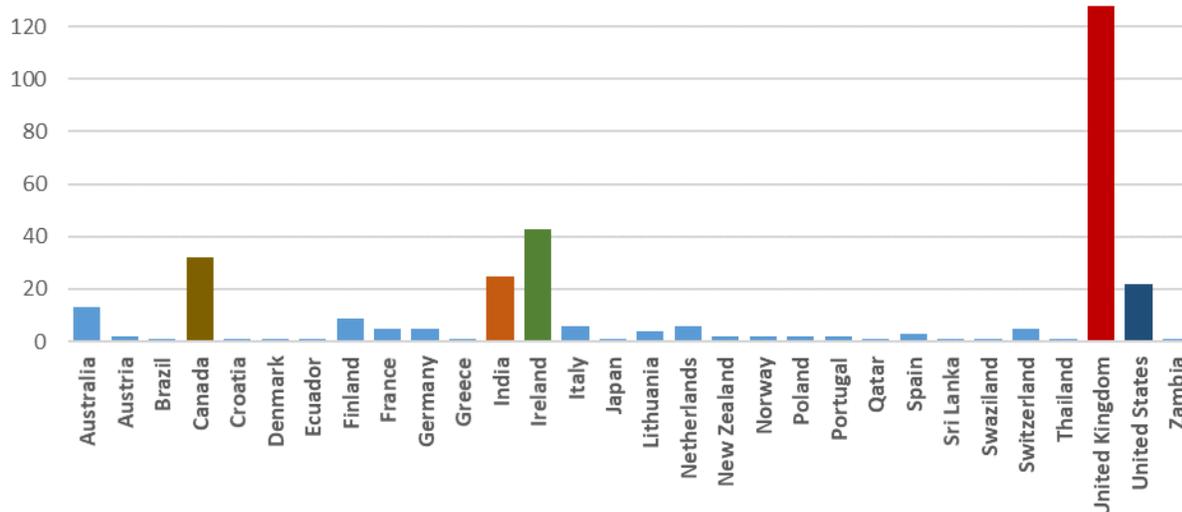
Where are the respondents from? They resided in 30 countries. The figure shows the numbers of countries represented within each world region. By far, European countries are the most represented.

### Count of countries represented by region



The following figure presents a breakdown of respondents by country. Most of the respondents (39%, N=128) came from the United Kingdom, followed by Ireland (13.2%, N=43), Canada (9.8%, N=32), India (7.7%, N=25), the US (6.7%, N=22) and Australia (4%, N=13). Thus, the majority of the sample (73.4%) comes from Anglo countries (N=240). However, the nationalities of respondents were more varied, with 65.4% from Anglo cultures and 41 countries represented.

Numbers of respondents residing in each country

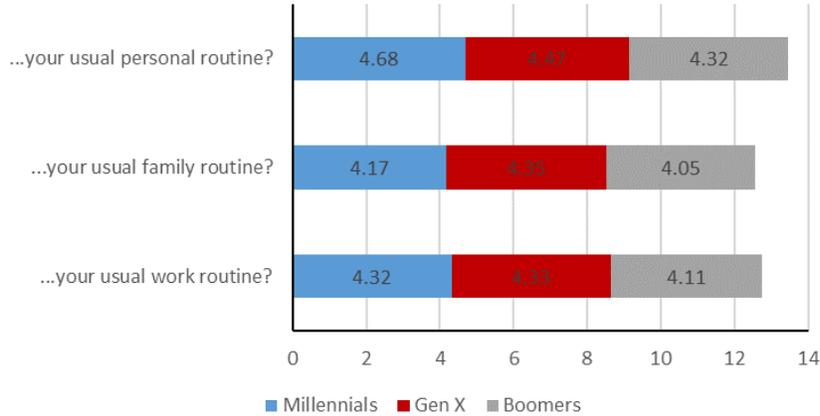


We divided the sample into three groups to represent three distinct generations as follows: (1) Millennials (N=107) included people aged 24-40, (2) Generation X (N=133) included people aged from 41 to 55, and (3) Boomers (N=85) included those aged from 56 to 74. These ages in 2020 correspond to the three cohorts. We were interested in differences between groups. We also checked to see whether there are any differences on the demographic variables across generations. Chi-square tests of independence were conducted between demographic characteristics and generation groups. There was a statistically significant association between gender and generation,  $\chi^2 (2, N = 324) = 11.42, p < .01$  (Cramer's V = .188), between nationality and generation,  $\chi^2 (2, N = 325) = 25.70, p < .001$  (Cramer's V = .281) and carer status and generation,  $\chi^2 (2, N = 268) = 24.22, p < .001$  (Cramer's V = .301).

## COMPARING THE GENERATIONS

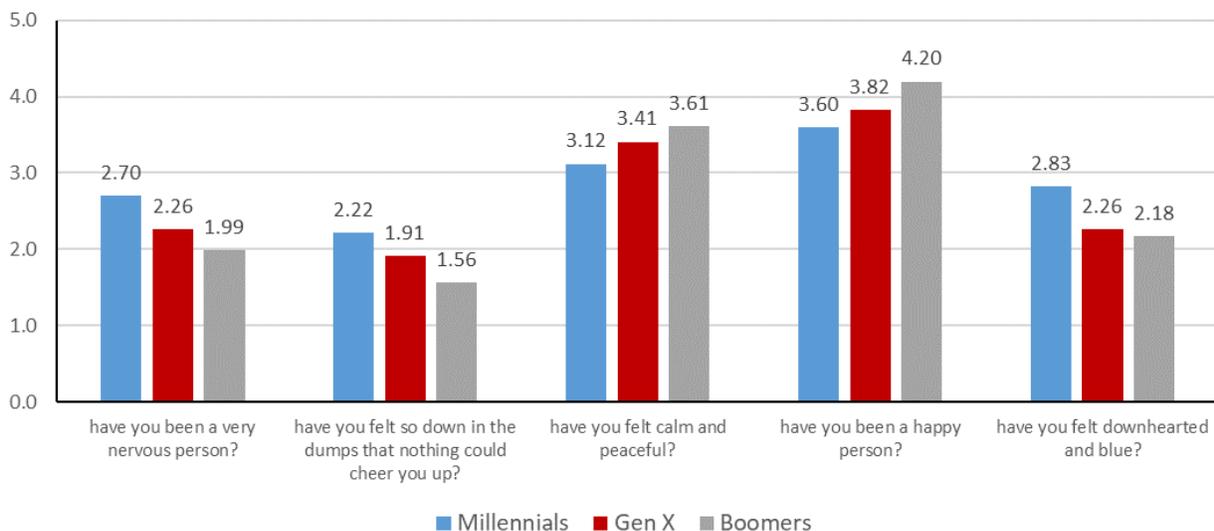
**Disruptions.** We compared generations on various measures and found that there were significant differences between them. There were no differences regarding the extent to which the COVID pandemic has disrupted people's lives (see figure), however, there were differences in the extent to which people from different generations handled the disruptions. We asked about the extent to which the COVID-19 crisis has disrupted respondents' usual work routines, family routines and personal routines. Although Millennials report higher scores for disruptions to personal routines, and Generation X to family routines, overall, there are no statistically significant differences between the generations.

### How much has the COVID-19 crisis disrupted...

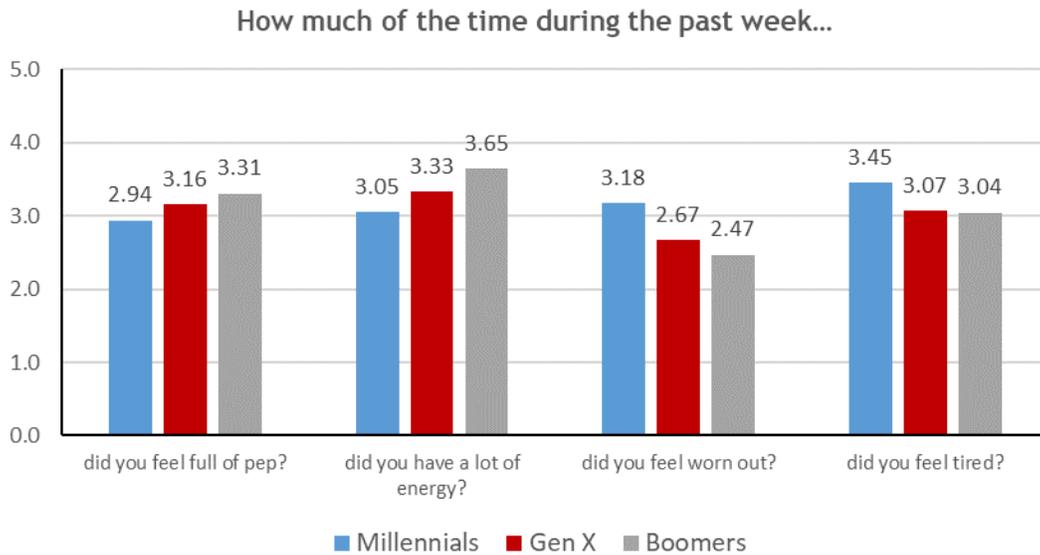


**Handling the crisis.** We asked several questions to measure levels of stress during the pandemic. The questionnaire was first distributed about one month after lockdown restrictions were implemented in most countries. Thus, some time had elapsed, giving people some time to get used to new ways of working and living. Differences in responses to levels of stress across generations were significant ( $F=14.72$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and there were differences between Millennials and both of the other generations with respect to levels of general stress. The figure shows the differences in responses to questions measuring stress. Millennials reported significantly higher levels of overall stress compared to both Generation X ( $p<.01$ ) and Boomers ( $p<.001$ ), but there were no significant differences between Generation X and Boomers. The figure shows that overall, Millennials are the most nervous, depressed, and least happy of the three groups.

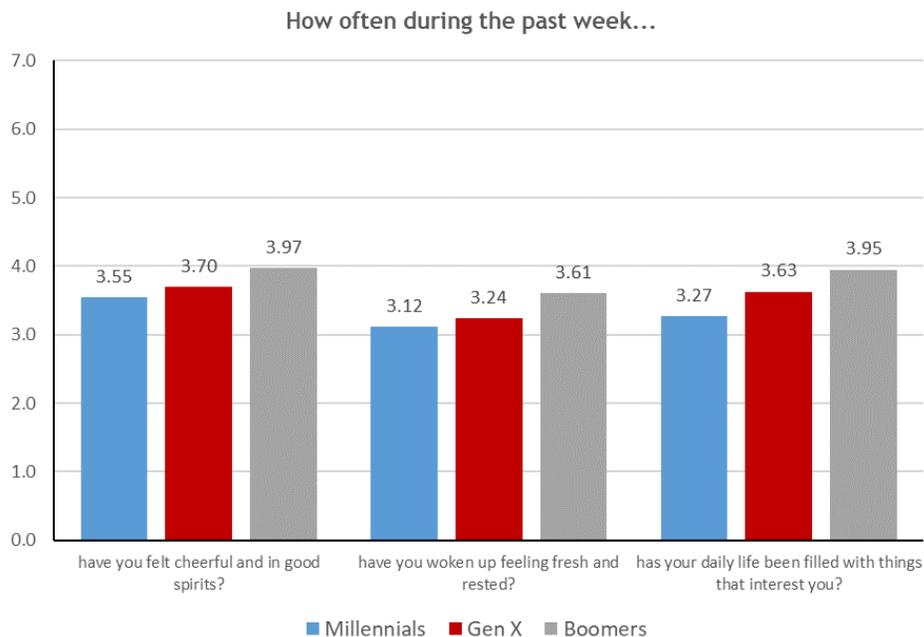
### How much of the time during the past week...



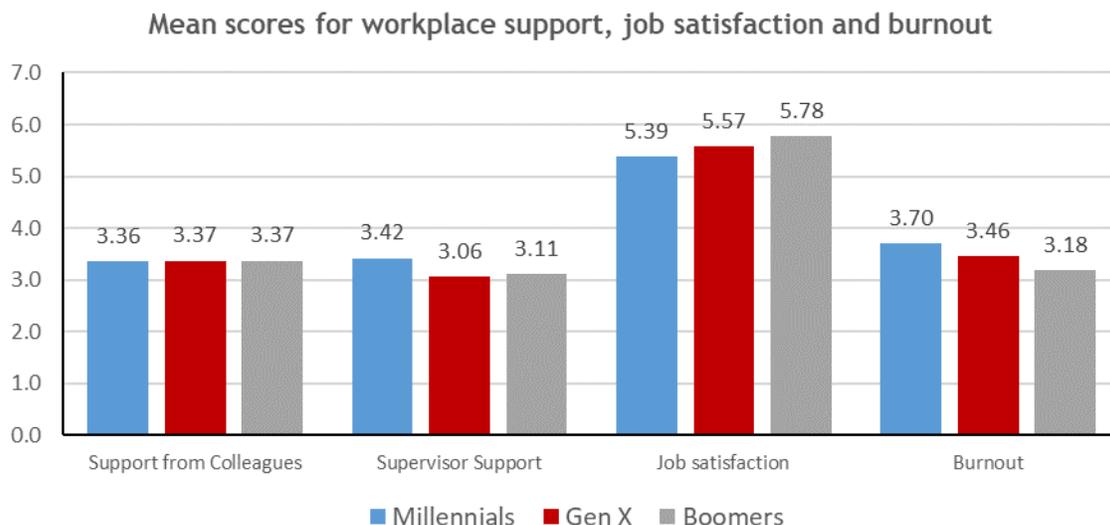
Paradoxically, Millennials also had the lowest levels of energy of the three groups. They felt the most tired and worn out as well. Again, there were significant differences between Millennials and Generation X ( $p < .05$ ) and Boomers ( $p < .01$ ). The largest differences were between Millennials and Boomers - Boomers had significantly higher levels of **vitality** than the Millennials.



Overall **wellbeing** followed a similar pattern. In the figure, we can see that Millennials scored the lowest on all of the items, followed by Generation X and Boomers - the highest. Here there were significant differences only between Millennials and Boomers ( $p < .01$ ), but not between any of the other generation groups.



**Job factors.** In addition to wellbeing and resilience, we looked at perceptions about different work-related variables. In the following tables, we present the overall mean scores for constructs pertaining to three positive workplace facets (or job resources) support in the workplace, job satisfaction and one negative aspect - burnout. These work-related measures were included to capture respondents' work perceptions under "normal" pre-COVID working conditions. To measure **Support from Colleagues**, we used the social support measure from the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire versions 1 and 2 (COPSOQ; Pejtersen, Kristensen, Borg & Bjorner, 2010; Kristensen, Hanner, Hogh & Borg, 2005). Three items on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*) measured how often support was received at work from colleagues (e.g., "How often are your colleagues willing to listen to your problems at work?"). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this measure was .71. **Supervisor support** was also measured with a 3-item scale from the COPSOQ 1 and 2 (Pejtersen et al., 2010; Kristensen et al., 2005) using the same frequency scale (1-5) as above (e.g., "How often do you get help and support from your immediate superior?"). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this measure was .86. To measure **Job Satisfaction**, we used a 3-item scale from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (OAQ) by Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins and Klesh (1983). A sample item from this 7-point scale is "Overall, I enjoy my work." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .88. **Burnout** was measured using the 16-item Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLI; Demerouti Mostert & Bakker, 2010). A sample item is: "There are days when I feel tired before I even start work." Cronbach's alpha for the measure was .88.



ANOVA revealed generation effects for only two of the variables: Supervisor support ( $F=4.22$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and Burnout ( $F=8.11$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Post hoc tests of differences in responses between generations reveal that despite usually perceiving significantly higher levels of supervisor support at work than

Generation X ( $p < .05$ ), Millennials still experience high levels of burnout. The level of burnout is significantly higher than reported by Boomers ( $p < .001$ ).

### Concluding comment

We set out to explore some of the ways in which people are coping under the sudden onset of the pandemic and associated restrictions on work and personal life. This is the first in a series of studies, and we have only briefly reported on some of the key descriptive findings. We are interested in examining the impact of the pandemic over time as well as relationships between our key variables. However, already we see that the pandemic is not affecting all people equally. Intuitively, one would expect that Generation X representatives, who are mid-life, and have added pressures of carer responsibilities (children, elderly parents), as well as job-related and career pressures. Instead, it is paradoxical that Millennials, who are characterized by being technologically savvy, are having the hardest time coping with the pandemic. All of our respondents reported similar degrees of disruption to their lives as a result of COVID. Members of other generations appear to be getting on with their lives better than Millennials, despite having relatively more responsibility (e.g., balancing work and family or supervisory roles). They report higher levels of wellbeing and less stress. However, our research suggests that in comparison to other generations, Millennials may need more attention from supervisors (in the form of support and encouragement), who are less available now. Organizations need to respond to this leadership paradox now to move successfully from COVID to the “new normal”.

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