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DIGITAL ECONOMY RESEARCH

Workplace Wellbeing and the Internet

Final project report
October 2025

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

COBOT MAKER SPACE

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Summary

The Workplace Wellbeing and the Internet (W-WATI) project ran from September 2024 to October 2025 as part of the Horizon Digital Economy's Welfare Campaign. The project was founded on the recognition that the Internet can have both positive and negative impacts on wellbeing in the workplace. We brought together a team with expertise spanning computer science, robotics, engineering, social science, philosophy, psychology and linguistics in order to conduct a suite of activities to address different dimensions of wellbeing in the workplace as they relate to the Internet.

Following a review of existing literature we established a working definition of wellbeing to use across the project: an overall subjective feeling of satisfaction, optimism or happiness about life; functioning well and with a sense of purpose and feeling content about the activities we engage in. We drew on this definition run an online survey. Of 248 respondents 63.7% rated their workplace wellbeing as somewhat or extremely good. Thirty-six per cent (36%) said that Internet technologies affected their wellbeing positively and 15.3% negatively. A set of in-depth qualitative studies similarly found that participants viewed the Internet as having a largely positive influence on their working lives, but with some areas of detrimental impact. For instance, our participants told us that the Internet offers valuable flexibility in the workplace however too much time online can cause burnout and stress. Support from employers is vital in helping employees to manage an appropriate offline-online balance and technological tools can also assist with workload management and boundary setting. Some job roles inevitably require employees to come into contact with harmful online content or hostile online interactions. Employees differ in their preferences for how best to support wellbeing during these experiences but benefit from strategies that involve social support, mood improvement, burden reduction and exercising control to reduce risks.

In addition to investigating how the Internet impacts wellbeing in the workplace we also explored the potential for Internet-connected technologies to foster workplace wellbeing. We prototyped and tested two novel and promising interventions. The "Cheerbot" socially assistive robot is designed to boost feelings of wellbeing through fun, collaborative activities. The empathy training tool uses conversational AI to help managers and HR professionals practise empathetic communication.

These various research activities produced a range of insights which have informed a set of guidance for employers and employees on wellbeing in the workplace. Our guidance emphasises that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to wellbeing and that different preferences for wellbeing support should be respected. In addition, employers should engage meaningfully with wellbeing initiatives rather than viewing them as a tick box exercise, plus be mindful that employees may distrust technological solutions through fear they are being used for workplace surveillance. Looking to the future, the wellbeing impact of Internet-connected technologies depends less on the *nature* of the tools at our disposal, and more on the *ways* in which those tools are used. It is unhelpful to make sweeping generalisations about the relationships between the Internet, the workplace and wellbeing; instead, it is essential to understand the nuances involved.

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1. Project Aims and Overview

Existing research has shown that the Internet can have significant impacts on wellbeing in the workplace – for instance, constantly being connected to digital devices can reduce wellbeing, as can exposure to negative online content or interactions. Meanwhile, Internet-enabled technologies can sometimes be effective interventions to increase wellbeing.

We conducted the *Workplace Wellbeing and the Internet* project (W-WATI) to better understand the various connections between the Internet and workplace wellbeing.

Our key aims were to:

- Capture people's experiences and perceptions relating to the Internet, wellbeing and workplaces.
- Design and test novel technological interventions to foster wellbeing.
- Conduct future-scanning studies to advance understanding of emerging trends regarding relationships between the Internet, the workplace and dimensions of wellbeing.
- Produce guidance for employers and employees on how to foster wellbeing in the Internet connected workplace.

In order to meet these aims we brought together a large research team with expertise spanning a range of disciplines: computer science, robotics, engineering, social science, philosophy, psychology and linguistics. Our research activities combined technical work with quantitative and qualitative social research.

We began the project with a **review of existing academic literature** to identify how to define wellbeing as it relates to the workplace and the Internet in a range of workplace contexts. We used these definitions in a **workplace wellbeing survey**. This survey elicited 248 responses, providing insights into how using the Internet and Internet-based technologies can affect wellbeing for people in different kinds of workplace. The survey findings then informed the design of a series of **in-depth qualitative studies**, each focusing on a specific dimension of workplace wellbeing and the Internet: online-offline balance; hyperconnectivity; dealing with harmful online content and hostile online interactions. These interviews and focus groups were designed to each have a small number of participants (and our recruitment was hampered by the increasing problem of 'fake' participants) but nevertheless delivered detailed insights into the perceived relationships between workplace, wellbeing and the Internet and viewpoints on how workplace wellbeing can be best supported.

Alongside these activities we also conducted work on **novel Internet-based interventions to foster wellbeing**. Specifically, we developed and trialled "Cheerbot', an assistive robot for workplace wellbeing, and a conversational AI-based empathy training tool.

Towards the end of the project, we synthesised and reflected on the findings across all these sets of work in order to produce **guidance for employers and employees** on how

to support wellbeing in the workplace, and ran a **future scanning activity** to advance understanding of emerging trends regarding relationships between the Internet, the workplace and dimensions of wellbeing.

The table below summarises our project activities.

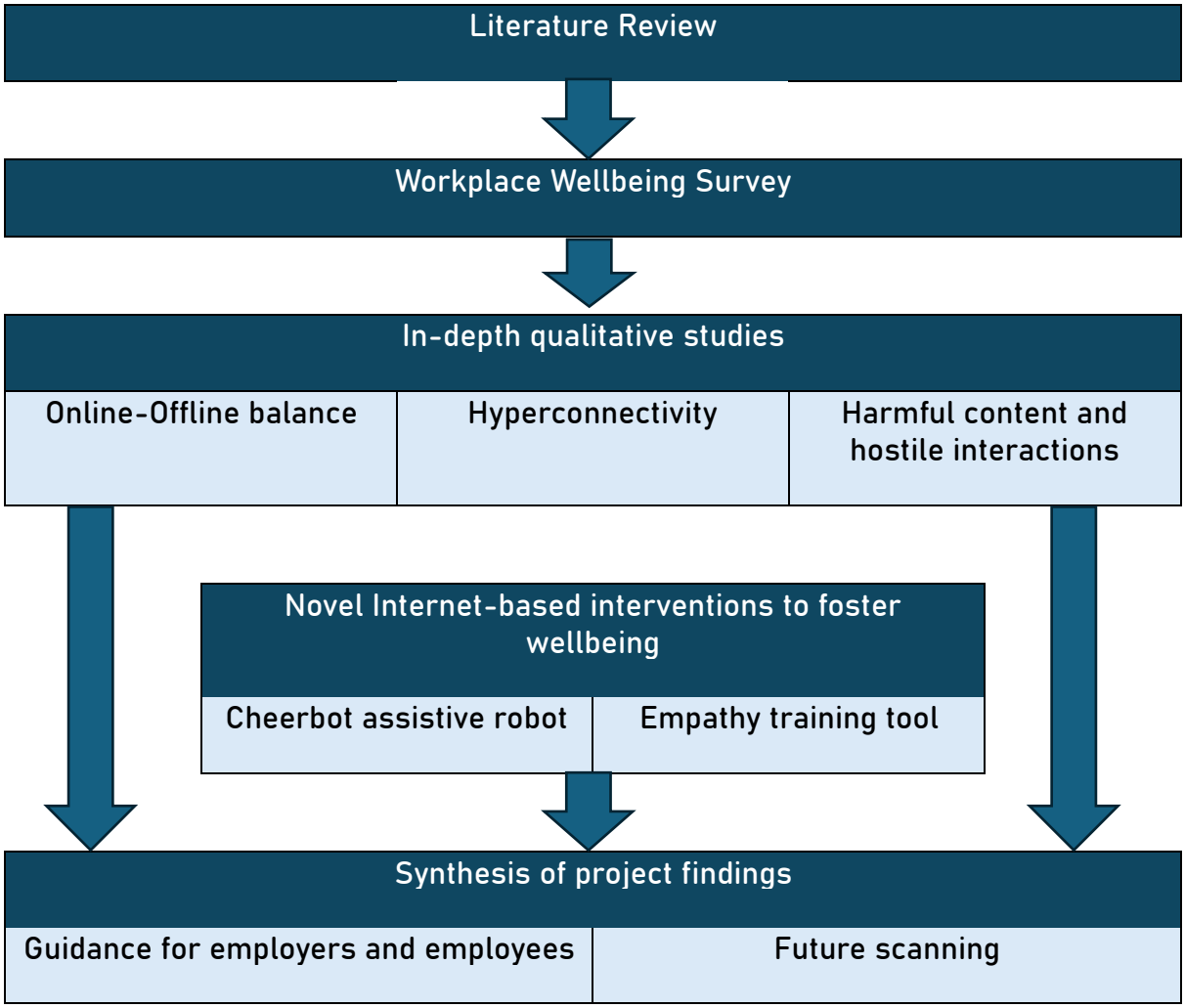

Table 1.1 Summary of W-WATI project activities

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2. Project Team

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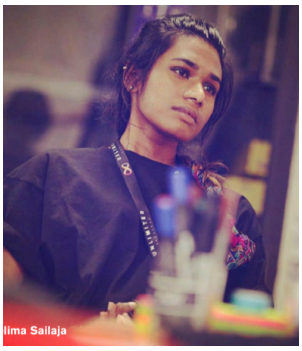

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3. What is Wellbeing?

Karen Lancaster and Alfie Cameron

We began the study with a review of current academic work on general wellbeing, and workplace wellbeing. This infographic summarises our main findings.

Image 3.1: Infographic summarising results of the literature review.

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4. Workplace Wellbeing Survey

Liz Dowthwaite and Elizabeth Marsh

Aims and methods

We ran an online questionnaire to elicit perspectives on how using the Internet and Internet-based technologies can affect wellbeing in the workplace. We asked questions related to demographics, job role, work time spent online and subjective feelings to wellbeing. We also included questions connected to the specific topics covered in other areas of the project. The questionnaire was open to adults living in the UK with a work role. We received 248 responses. Key findings are reported below and summarised in an infographic on page 9.

Results

Demographics: Of the 248 participants, 141 were female (56.85%) and 107 male (43.15%). The average age was 38 (range 18-71). In terms of employment 222 (89.5%) were employed full or part-time (n=169, 53 respectively), 18 (7.2%) were self-employed full or part-time (n=12, 6 respectively), 2 (0.8%) were in volunteer roles, and 6 (2.4%) selected more than one role, e.g. volunteer and employed.

We used **wellbeing scales** to elicit participants' subjective feelings of wellbeing. The average wellbeing score was moderate to high, a rating of 4 out of 6. Female respondents rated their wellbeing as slightly higher than male ones but there were no significant age differences. When asked how using Internet-enabled technologies for work affected their wellbeing, 91 participants (36.69%) indicated that they had a positive effect and 38 (15.32%) a negative effect. The remaining 119 (47.98%) no effect. Wellbeing was positively correlated to confidence in using Internet technologies and negatively correlated with stress and technostress.

Table 4.1 below shows how much time participants said they spend online for work and for leisure.

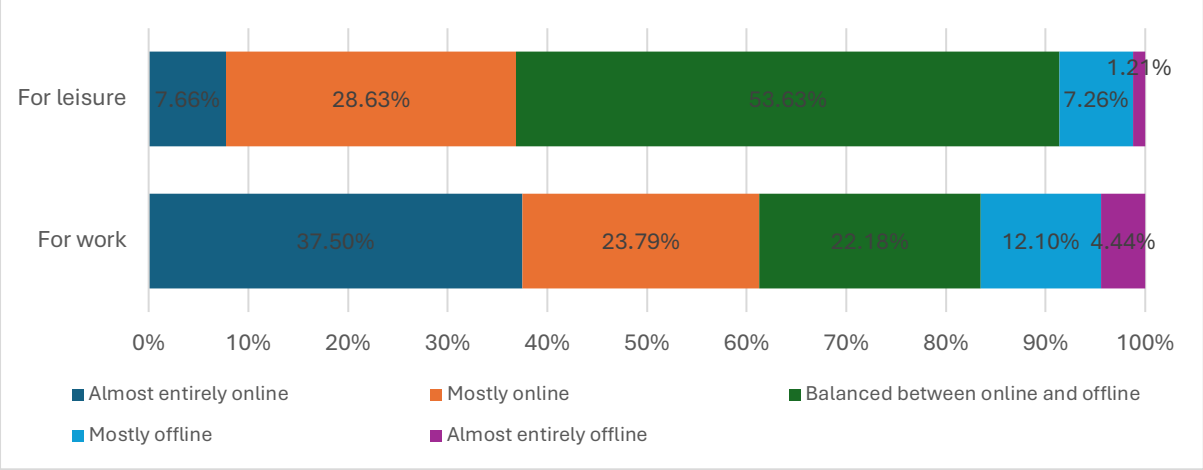

Table 4.1: Table showing participants' reported time spent online for work and leisure.

In addition, 100 participants (40.32%) said they felt that they had little or no control over the amount of time they spend connected to the Internet for work, and 80 (32.26%) felt

they had a lot of or total control. Most people (n=183, 73.79%) said that if they could not access the Internet at all for 48 hours, it would 'significantly' (n=101, 40.73%) or 'completely' (n=82, 33.06%) affect their ability to do their jobs.

85 (34.27%) participants said that their job involves **dealing with online content** sent by external people to communicate with their workplace. Of these, 26 (30.59%) said they had to do this for content that was excessively negative at least a few times a week. 20 (33.53%) said they had to deal with this kind of content a few times a year and a 18 (21.18%) a few times a month. Of those who work with online content, 30 (35.29%) indicated that their workplace provided support for staff who have to deal with excessively negative or hostile content, and 17 (56.67%) felt that this was mostly sufficient and 7 (23.33%) completely sufficient; 29 (34.12%) said there was no support and the rest were not sure.

When asked about **hyperconnectivity** ("pressure to always be available and the blurring of work-life boundaries caused by constant digital connectivity, like replying to emails after hours or staying online all the time") 54 (21.77%) participants stated they did not feel that they were hyperconnected at all, everyone else felt it to some degree, with 54 (21.77%) also reporting that they were hyperconnected a great deal or an extreme amount. Reported time spent online (for work and/or leisure) had no significant effects on reported wellbeing. Perceived levels of control over Internet use also had no significant effects on reported wellbeing.

Table 4.2 below summarises reported strategies to control Internet use.

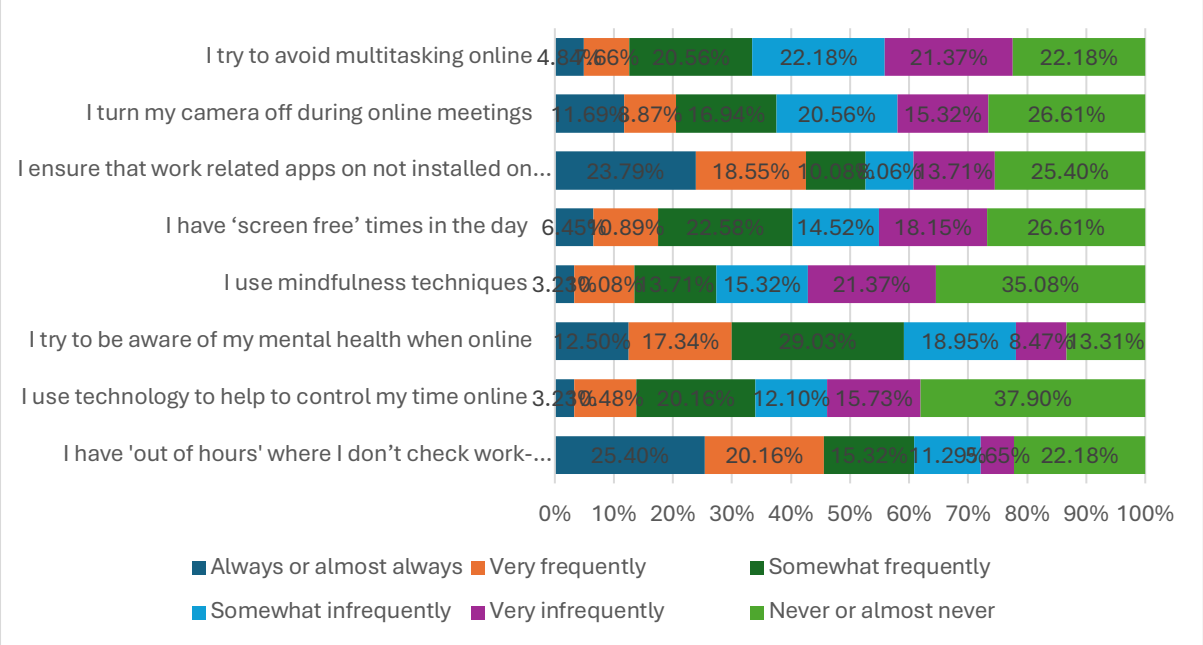

Table 4.2: Table summarising participants' reported activities to control time online.

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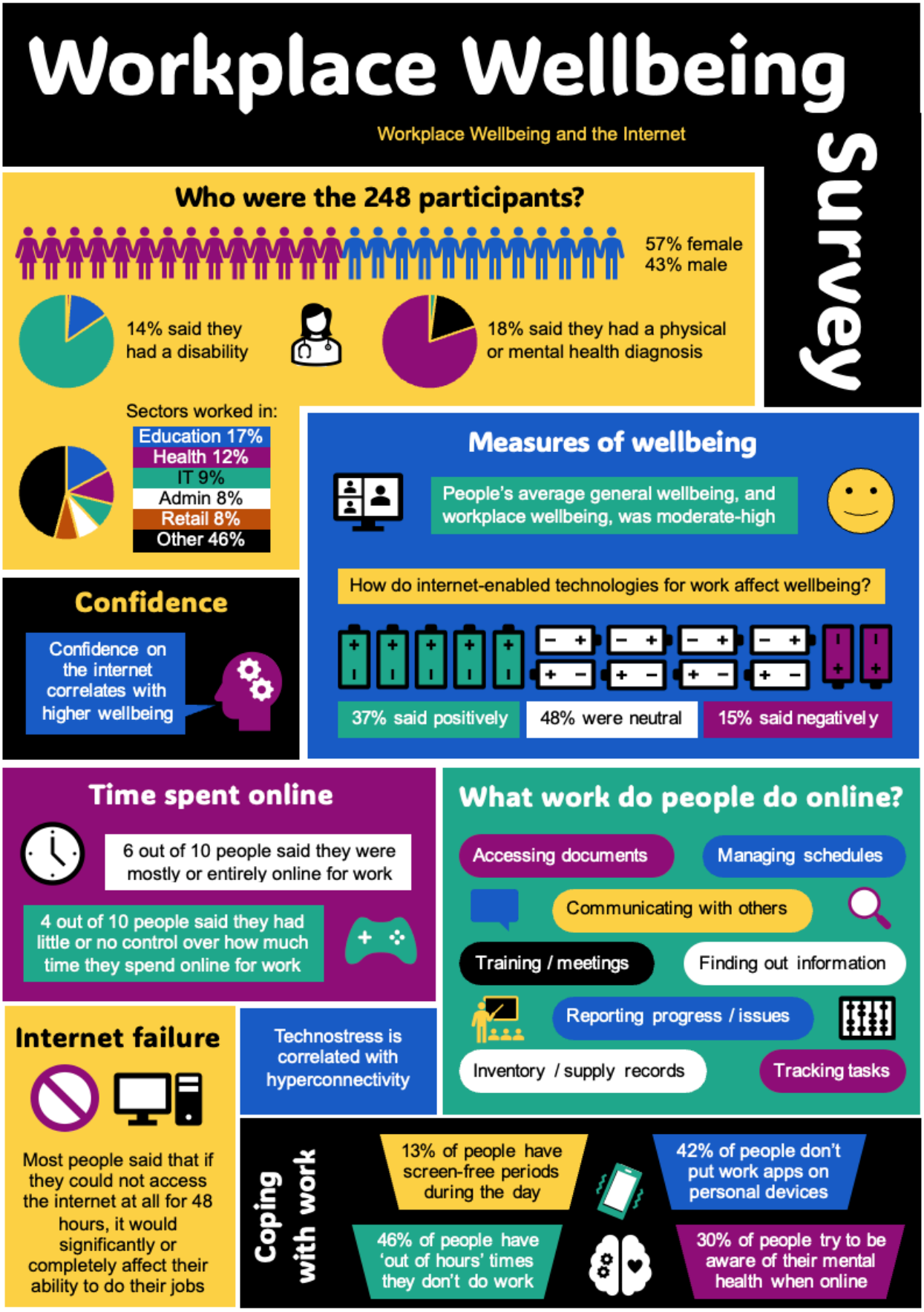
Image 4.1 Infographic summarising survey findings



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5. Online-Offline Balance

Emma McClaughlin, Pepita Barnard, Peter Craigon

Aims and methods

We explored online-offline balance and how this affects people's self-reported wellbeing. To do this, we conducted a series of five online focus groups with 20 participants (12 female, 8 male) aged between 23 and 61 (mean 38). We asked participants to identify the activities they carried out online; how much they used the Internet for work and leisure on 'ideal' and 'busy' days; reflections on these amounts; and available workplace support and implications for this. All participants used the Internet for over 75% of their work. Table 1 shows participant breakdown for the study, including their status as working centrally, remotely or hybrid.

Table 5.1 - Participants for focus groups on online-offline balance

	Central work	Hybrid work	Remote work	Grand Total
Female		**6**	**6**	**12**
Accountancy, banking and finance		1		1
Business, consulting and management		1		1
Charity and voluntary work			1	1
Public services and administration		2	1	3
Retail		1	1	2
Social care			2	2
Teacher training and education		1	1	2
Male	**2**	**4**	**2**	**8**
Accountancy, banking and finance		1	1	2
Business, consulting and management		2		2
communications	1			1
Healthcare	1			1
Manufacturing		1		1
Teacher training and education			1	1
Grand Total	**2**	**10**	**8**	**20**

Results

Participants worked online using a wide range of technology from basic email and communication to running organisations entirely online. Time spent online for work and leisure varied depending on the demands of the job. For some this wasn't optional or flexible, as their jobs couldn't be done without online technologies. For example:

'It's really variable and could be 15 hours or 55. I'm not shy about taking time to put offline time first when work allows. I know I will make up the time when work demands!'

'Because of the nature of the job – it can be difficult to balance online and offline time, as I am forced to be online much of the time even if I don't want to be'

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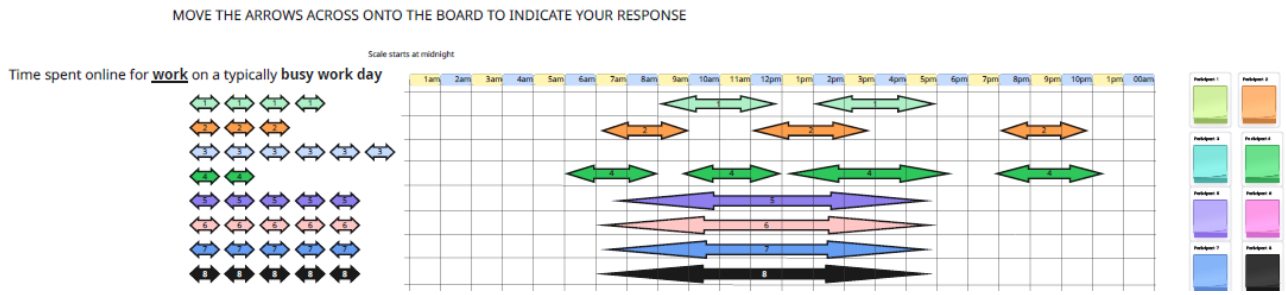

Figure 5.1 - Time spent online for work on a typically busy day by remote working participants

However, participants identified factors that helped them balance their time online; for example, help from their family:

'The main thing that would help me is my own support from my family. They help me with doing the normal day-to-day tasks so I can easily unwind from work.'

More technical measures helped participants set boundaries for themselves and their colleagues:

'[S]etting boundaries for myself and being clear with others what those boundaries are.'

'I use a personal time tracker app, to ensure I make some time for myself. I also make sure that I block out some time on my Outlook calendar so that my other colleagues know not "disturb" me when I am busy doing something.'

The majority of participants felt their **wellbeing was supported** by their employer:

'My employer has a fantastic range of support around wellbeing and we are a SME and wellbeing is emphasised by senior management. We get 8 wellbeing days per year to be used for going outside to support improve mental and physical health. These are different to our 31 days Annual leave'

However, some felt that **wellbeing was sometimes a secondary concern** at busy times:

'Wellbeing is great when they are no deadlines or busy periods'

Most employers offered **flexible working**, though often this was not set in policy and expectations for in-office work was increasing:

'My diary is my own as long as I do my job'

'There isn't a specific flexible working policy, but it's sort of a general understanding'

'I can choose to work completely remotely if I wanted to but I go to the office a few times a week to connect with my colleagues'

'We are becoming less flexible than we used to be - we are being asked to come to the office 4 days a week'

Most participants were **satisfied** with the conditions around flexible working:

'I am lucky in the sense that I can work from home when I want to, and I can come into the office when I want'

'The flexibility is what I enjoy'

Participants told us **they would consider leaving their roles** if their online-offline balance became suboptimal in future.

'I would consider [leaving] if I was in that situation and I know it's something my friends go through'

'When I feel that too much is being placed on me- that does make me slightly irritated and maybe reduce my output'

Conclusion

We found that the Internet is a largely positive influence in participants' working lives, offering them flexibility. The question of online-offline balance is therefore perhaps less crucial than how Internet technologies and the continuous connectivity they provide are used. Online activities underpinned by the Internet are so ubiquitous, embedded and necessary to everyday life, particularly work, that alternative distinctions to 'online/offline' may be more meaningful in considering wellbeing in this context.

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6. Hyperconnectivity

Liz Dowthwaite, Peter Craigon, Elizabeth Marsh

Aims and methods

This study aimed to understand how people manage hyperconnectivity, how they connect it to their wellbeing, and what institutional support they think should be in place to support them. We defined hyperconnectivity as "pressure to always be available and the blurring of work-life boundaries caused by constant digital connectivity, like replying to emails after hours or staying online all the time". We conducted semi-structured interviews online with five participants, recruited via a recruitment call open to anyone who felt that they were hyperconnected at work. Questions covered three main areas: **1) Job role**; **2) Managing hyperconnectivity**; and **3) Impacts of hyperconnectivity**.

Results

Participants used large range of Internet-connected tools and software day-to-day, which were vital to their jobs, especially when colleagues were not co-located, but also exacerbated the problem of overwork. They also often used Internet-connected services for listening to music or podcasts, connecting to people through WhatsApp and social media, and leisure activities; even during breaks participants were often still using screens and Internet-connected tools such as Netflix or Reddit. Such activities often helped to deal with the stress of work:

'It helps me just keep myself going'

Things that led to hyperconnectivity included working with colleagues in different time zones, needing to support inexperienced colleagues, being on call, and large jobs that need constant monitoring, as well as a constant stream of jobs being added to workloads. Participants often discussed hyperconnectivity in terms of pressure to be available and an expectation that they are online at all times, with *"round the clock connectivity"*. One participant gave a detailed description of what they saw as the issues with hyperconnectivity:

'[I]t means you are too connected to Internet, right and it is hyper in a sense that it is super active. [...T]he high volume of signals coming through in a short period of time which doesn't allow you to really focus on anything as much as a human brain needs to focus on something to understand it and communicate with it. And it's a toxic thing because we humans are not built for that kind of connections'.

Participants recognised that hyperconnectivity may not be good for their physical or mental wellbeing. They often talked about feeling 'overwhelmed' as they are 'constantly exposed to' emails, alerts, updates etc. leading to stress, and reducing focus. One participant mentioned that whilst 'at work' they did not feel the pressure of hyperconnectivity, but outside work hours they felt very stressed and like they could not have time off. Another, who worked in a particularly toxic environment exacerbated by 'always on' culture, described their experience as creating an internal 'numbness' that others interpreted as agitation or anger. Several participants discussed a harmful

degradation of personal relationships, such as not having time to speak to friends and family, and lost sleep due to long hours:

'I don't even come back as I spend the night at my workplace [...] So I'm always tired about it, really affects my wellbeing.'

Another participant told us:

'[T]he situation got very, like really insane. That, like, I couldn't even check on my dad. And so I would spend a whole day doing all the work and keep thinking in the back of my head that you know, I I can't check on him. I can't see how he is doing'.

One participant felt that many problems were not specifically related to being online, rather to the perils of having a desk job; in fact, being online made things easier because:

'I don't have to go and locate it anywhere. [...] I can work wherever there is an Internet connection.'

Others also felt the positives outweighed the negatives:

'I would dwell much on the positive impacts, which allows me to stay highly connected with colleagues across departments and locations, which makes collaboration very smoother and [...I can] track, document and respond to issues quickly.'

Strategies to manage hyperconnectivity often came down to efficient time management to minimise work outside hours, including using project management tools which helped them to prioritise work across multiple channels, and 'low tech' solutions like to-do lists and alarms, silencing notifications and blocking out calendar time to focus. Music and apps such as Calm were also used to help people feel better. Some participants mentioned that they tried to set *'boundaries outside of work'* rather than during the workday; this included not checking emails, turning off notifications, and making sure they are not *'constantly pulled into digital communication outside of working hours.'*

One participant made the point of separating work and personal devices, having a separate work phone and computer, and not installing work apps on personal devices:

'I like having the separation of like that being my PC that I use for gaming and that and this being where I do work...It's much easier to have like a separate phone which entirely purely work. And then you can just turn that off when you don't need to use it or be contacted anymore.'

Participants did not have much **institutional support** for hyperconnectivity, with workers mostly having to be *'self-reliant'* and manage themselves. Company policies for managing hyperconnectivity and overwork, including designated mental health platforms and support, were unpopular and seen as *'completely unenforceable',* with self-management seen as more practical. One strategy which was well-received was bonuses for additional work or additional pay for being on call: *'you're given the pressure, but you are rewarded for it.'*

One participant felt that additional work was well-defined by their workplace, with strict rules about working hours and shift work which helped them to not feel so hyperconnected despite being expected to respond to issues rapidly, and avoiding burnout. However, this attitude was not consistent across the company:

'I've heard of people in other areas of the organisation who believe that if you're not working until seven, you're not making all the money that you should be, and you're not putting in the effort.'

Several people felt that often, institutional strategies fail when applied in real life. For example one participant talked about a company policy reducing working hours one day a week, but this was sometimes counterproductive as they had *'very little time to do normal things, [...] I might, you know, cut my lunch break short or have my lunch at my desk.'* Another example was a *'Focus Friday'* with no meetings but *'Fridays were full, you know, filled with meetings [...] you know people are 'where are you? We need an answer right now'.'*

This participant described other measures their company put in place:

'[T]hey say they try to make your life easier. [...] Yeah, benefits and advantages like, but you would never enjoy any of them. You don't really care about any of them. And then like we had rooms for meditations, I never saw anybody in those rooms. They had like gym on site. I rarely saw anybody in those gyms, [...] they bring people to talk to us about [support strategies], but nobody had time to go.'

One participant also talked about support in terms of institutional trust*:*

'Yesterday I stepped away from my computer at like 5:45 because I was working on something [...] I'm trusted to do my work [...] But it also means, you know, I say like, oh, I've got to go and do this thing, you know, I'm going to need to leave half an hour early {I can].'

Participants who felt particularly negative hyperconnectivity tended to think that more should be done by their workplace to support them, such as more breaks and time off from their stressful roles, better communication, and more flexibility in ways of working, especially in workplaces where it was expected that *"everyone should be busy"* all the time.

Conclusion

Many people couldn't do their job without being Internet-connected and often the positives outweigh the negatives, especially when it enables them to work remotely and have flexible hours. However, there are limits to what is considered appropriate and when these limits are exceeded it leads to stress, burnout, an unhealthy work-life balance, and a degradation in personal relationships. Most participants in this study had some strategy for managing hyperconnectivity, often relating to time management and creating personal boundaries. Institutional support is generally lacking and unsatisfactory for those who feel the most stress, with suggestions for support related mostly to improved communication and flexibility.

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7. Support for Dealing with Harmful Online Content and Hostile Online Interactions

Helena Webb, Alfie Cameron, Peter Craigon

Aims and methods

Sometimes job roles require employees to come into contact with online content that is potentially harmful; for instance, viewing posts on websites, email or social media that are defamatory or offensive (racist, sexist, homophobic etc.). Or employees may be required to take part in hostile online interactions, experiencing communications over email, social media, video conferencing etc. that are experienced as strongly negative, disapproving or aggressive. These experiences can impact workplace wellbeing. We conducted a study to identify effective mechanisms to support wellbeing when employees are required to experience harmful online content and/or hostile online interactions. We began with a literature review to develop a 'taxonomy' of support approaches. We then conducted interviews with 5 participants who encounter harmful online content and/or hostile online interactions in their work. As part of these interviews we talked through 4 key support mechanisms and asked our participants about activities relating to each of them.

Results

We reviewed a **range of literature** relating to online harms and wellbeing strategies in the workplace. From this we identified that wellbeing support can target three areas, *systems*, *organisation* or *teams/ individuals,* with the most effective interventions targeting all three. Building on this, approaches to wellbeing support can be categorised into 4 key mechanisms. This is based on work by Reid et al.[1]:

- **Social Support**- Drawing on the support of your social network such as friends and family but also colleagues e.g. disconnecting, processing, switching off
- **Positivity and Mood Improvement**- Measures to help you feel more positive before, during and after online interactions e.g. mental preparation, positive reinforcement reframing content,
- **Burden Reduction** – Measures taken by an organisation to prevent or reduce the impact of harmful online interactions / hostile content e.g. employee assistance, policies, training
- **Control** –Actions to reduce the risks associated with harmful online content / hostile interactions. This includes technical measures such as reporting.

We prepared a visual **taxonomy** framework to combine the three target areas with the four approaches and added example activities sourced from the literature. The full taxonomy can be accessed here https://kumu.io/AlfieNotAlfie/w-wati-online-harms-taxonomy-v2. An example snapshot is shown in the figure below:

[1] Reid, E., Mandryk, R.L., Beres, N.A., Klarkowski, M. and Frommel, J., 2022. Feeling good and in control: In-game tools to support targets of toxicity. *Proceedings of the ACM on human-computer interaction*, *6*(CHI PLAY), pp.1-27.

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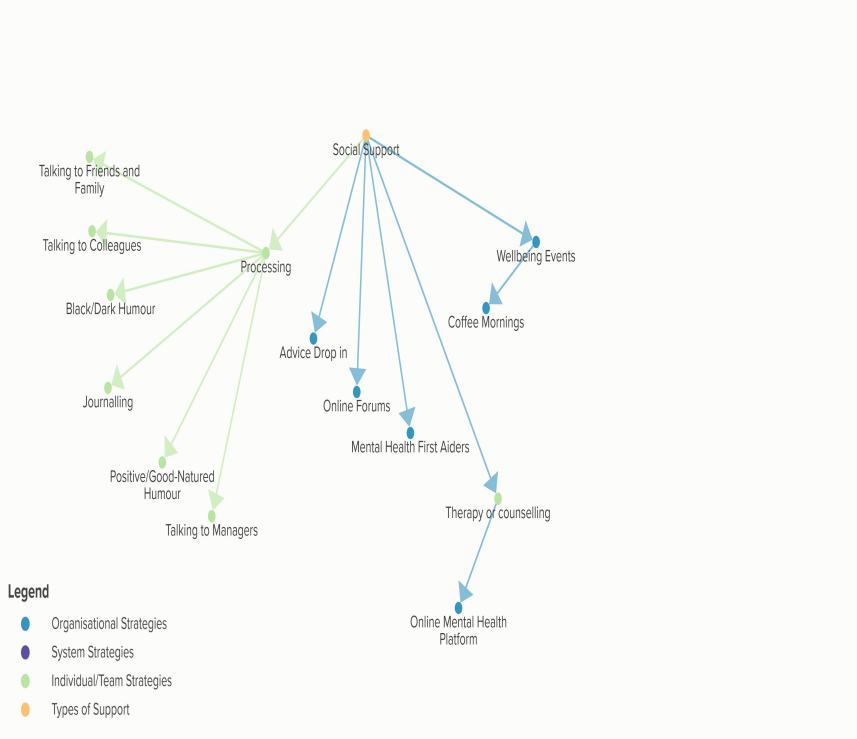

Figure 7.12: section of taxonomy showing activities for Social Support

Participants in our **interviews** had varied work roles and experiences. They emphasised that the experience of hostile content/interactions online is different to offline. Whilst online interactions can sometimes be quicker and offer more control (as calls can be ended more easily etc.) they are also more likely to become hostile. For example:

'I think sometimes if a customer is particularly upset about something and wants to unload …it can be better just to speak to them on the phone, because then you kind of de-escalate it and come to a solution together. Because sometimes you're behind a screen it's easier just to spurt off hostile words. Whereas on the phone you get that sense of talking to a person and you're much more amicable…'

To some extent, our participants viewed encountering harmful content or interactions as inevitable and something they increasingly got used to over time in their work:

'Whenever you're making content… you're always going to get feedback from it. I'm used to it by now, but you don't feel, it doesn't feel great.'

'I think earlier, earlier in my career, I probably would have taken them personally … but now I just look at them and think 'don't be ridiculous'. … It's not personal. It's just kind of something you have to put up with.'

However, they also said that these experiences caused stress, anger, frustration and emotional drain. This wore them down over time and caused one participant to quit their job.

'It did start to wear me down, I think towards the end of my career.'

Our participants identified activities for support matching all 4 mechanisms from our taxonomy. Their suggestions are summarised in the table below. However, they also emphasised that different approaches work best for different people or are context dependent. Activities which would be helpful in some contexts could be counterproductive in others; talking to colleagues can be a good way to de-stress and feel better but it can place a burden on others and cause them to feel 'wound up.'

Social support	**Positivity and mood improvement**
Informal debriefs with management Talking to colleagues Support from friends and family Public (online) support from peers Deliberately avoid talking about work in home life	Exercise Humour/black humour Finding the funny side of the situation Pets Meditation
Burden reduction	**Control**
Formal debriefs with management No tolerance policies in workplace and shared information about known difficult customers/service users De-escalation training Counselling and wellbeing packages Social media managers Social media training Trained hostile content officers Rotate staff who have to deal with difficult cases	Ability to choose to end an interaction Turn off comments on social media posts Use of banning and blocking features on platforms Limit the number of times a customer/service use can raise a case Ability to plan own day Ability to put interactional boundaries in place Limit who you give your contact details to

Table 7.1: Table summarising the support activities identified by our participants relating to each of the 4 wellbeing support mechanisms

Conclusion

The 4 approaches we identified formed a useful lens through which to view the individual experiences of our interviewees. Our interviews then elicited a range of activities relevant to each approach for wellbeing support. Despite our small number of participants, their variety of experiences and suggestions shows that support approaches should be individually and contextually sensitive, not applied as a 'one size fits all'. They also show that resilience is built up through experience, so experienced individuals may be able to support others. Further interviews and reflections can help us to identify more relevant activities for wellbeing as well as shine more light on the nuances that need to be taken into consideration when developing wellbeing strategies for employees who regularly have to deal with harmful online content or hostile online interactions. It is particularly crucial to consider embedding support mechanisms into systems and organisations, rather than expecting them to only occur at the individual or group level.

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8. Interventions for Wellbeing

8.1 Cheerbot

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Aims and methods

There are numerous ways in which workplace wellbeing can be improved, including technological interventions such as robots or apps. We developed a robotic intervention ("Cheerbot") aimed at serving such a function and trialled it in an office-based workplace. We also conducted research to assess the effectiveness of Cheerbot for improving staff wellbeing.

Cheerbot design and features

"Cheerbot" is a prototype socially assistive robot designed using the temi[2] mobile telepresence robot platform. It consists of bespoke interactive software added to the robot, and is intended for use in workplaces to promote wellbeing amongst staff. Initial development for Cheerbot took place in a previous research study. In this W-WATI project we conducted further development and assessed the value of Cheerbot through a trial at a workplace.

Early co-design sessions for Cheerbot with potential users identified that Cheerbot could usefully run collaborative activities to foster staff interaction and a sense of community in the workplace. However, users also strongly preferred Cheerbot not to collect or store any personal data; this was primarily motivated by a wish to avoid potential workplace surveillance. Subsequently, we developed Cheerbot to facilitate simple, fun activities to encourage collaboration without personal data being collected. Figure 8.1.1 below shows the activities Cheerbot was initially developed to perform.

- Cheerbot tells a **joke** or interesting **fact**
- '**Walk and talk**': Cheerbot follows a user whilst telling jokes/facts
- Users upload photographs to create a **communal collage**
- Users play a simple **video game**
- Users upload **song/film recommendations** to share with others
- Users select a colour to represent their current mood and Cheerbot creates a **communal mood board**
- Cheerbot facilitates a **telepresence meeting**, during which it tells

Figure 8.1.1: List of Cheerbot activities

[2] https://www.robotemi.com

Figure 8.1.2: Images showing the Cheerbot interface

Cheerbot deployment

We deployed Cheerbot for two weeks at a local workplace. This was an organisation employing 800+ staff. Cheerbot spent time in two office spaces, each with around 100 staff members in them. During the deployment we collected questionnaire, observational, mini-interview, and focus group data from staff. We analysed these data to assess how staff members at the organisation felt about Cheerbot and whether they thought it could benefit wellbeing. We particularly drew on constructs of the Almere model[3]. This enabled us to explore the extent to which Cheerbot was subjectively perceived by staff as useful and acceptable as a wellbeing aid.

The Almere model describes eleven constructs, which have the potential to determine the use, or intention to use, a system. Of these, seven are direct determinants: Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, Perceived Enjoyment, Trust, Attitude, Social Influence, and Facilitating Conditions. A further four indirect determinants connect to direct determinants: Anxiety, Perceived Sociability, Perceived Social Presence, and Perceived Adaptivity. Here we focus on the seven direct determinants.

Facilitating conditions
Factors such as the layout of offices and the positive attitude of management aided successful deployment. But Wi-Fi connectivity was inconsistent and sometimes caused Cheerbot to stop working.

Attitude
All staff we spoke to expressed some degree of positivity about Cheerbot, saying that it was fun, brought people together and could benefit wellbeing. For instance, all eight focus group participants agreed with the statements: *I think Cheerbot aided my feelings of wellbeing in the workplace; I think Cheerbot aided (some of) my colleagues' feelings of wellbeing in the workplace;* and *I think that (with some changes) Cheerbot could be a useful wellbeing aid in workplaces.* Another participant said:

> *'I saw a lot of smiles and laughter when people saw the Cheerbot moving around. The games gave people a good break from work and something to talk about.'*

[3] . Heerink, M., Kröse, B., Evers, V., Wielinga, B.: Assessing acceptance of assistive social agent technology by older adults: the Almere model. Int J of Soc Robotics **2**, 361–375 (2010)

Trust
Many staff used Cheerbot multiple times, indicating trust in it. However, some expressed concerns it was a 'spy' that was collecting data about them to pass to management.

Perceived Ease of Use
Staff sometimes found Cheerbot difficult to use at first and then easier as they became more familiar with it and/or were helped by others. The robot's low height also presented difficulties for taller members of staff, who had to stoop or crouch to use it.

Perceived Enjoyment
Staff described Cheerbot as '*a good break from work'* and '*amusing*'. Enjoyment often connected to its collaborative design that encourages interaction. Staff enjoyed competing against each other on the video game and 'walking' Cheerbot over to each other to begin an interaction.

Social Influence
We observed staff encouraging colleagues to use Cheerbot. But they also stressed that use should always be optional.

Perceived Usefulness
Staff were broadly positive about Cheerbot as a wellbeing aid and felt its usefulness could be increased with further activities: e.g. work and break reminders, information about staff clubs and workplace initiatives, message sending, celebration of workplace anniversaries and rewards. They felt that adding extra features to Cheerbot would ensure that the novelty of using it did not wear off, and they also felt that its usefulness could be enhanced by integrating its features more closely with company activities.

Conclusion

Our work so far indicates that Cheerbot has the capacity to positively influence workplace wellbeing. Its community-focused design helps to bring people together in ways that is often described as enjoyable and useful. Since the deployment we have begun adding further features to Cheerbot based on the feedback we have received. These features include: more video games, a function to share good news, the capacity for Cheerbot to provide information about special calendar days and celebrations, plus the capacity for Cheerbot to lead simple mindfulness and physical stretching exercises. We also intend to conduct further work to address causes of negative attitudes, anxiety and lack of trust that can hinder the usefulness and acceptance of Cheerbot as a wellbeing aid in the workplace. We presented our work on Cheerbot at the 2025 IEEE RO-MAN conference on human-robot interaction, and the 2025 ICSR (International Conference on Social Robotics and AI).

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8.2 Empathy Training Tool

Aly Maggasouba, Pepita Barnard, Praminda Caleb-Solly, Xingyou Liu, Aulia Nadila, Helena Webb, Kai Xu

Aims and methods

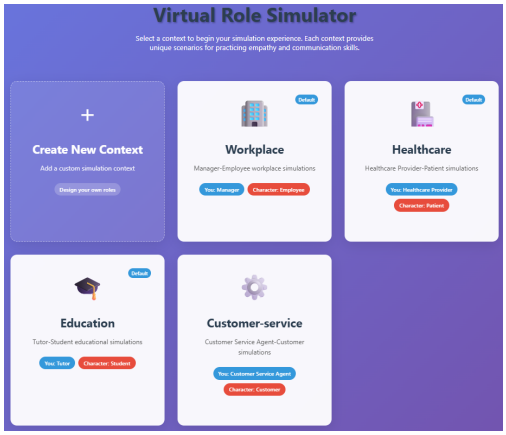

Figure 8.2.3 Empathy training tool

Empathy [4] relates to the ability to identify and respond appropriately to others' emotional states. In the workplace, empathetic leadership is linked to stronger team cohesion, increased trust, higher job satisfaction, and lower staff turnover. Traditional empathy training for managers typically involves workshops, role-playing, and scenario-based exercises. These are often time-intensive with limited scalability, and lack personalised or real-time feedback.

Conversational AI presents a promising alternative. An AI-driven empathy training chatbot can offer managers interactive, scenario-based practice tailored to real workplace challenges. These tools provide immediate feedback, adapt to individual learning needs, and are accessible any time, making empathy development more consistent and scalable. By simulating emotionally complex conversations, AI chatbots can help managers strengthen their emotional intelligence and foster more meaningful dialogue across teams. We developed an AI-powered simulation tool (see Fig. 8.2.3) to help managers and HR professionals practise empathetic communication.

The empathy training tool and early findings

Users interact with virtual characters powered by Large Language Models (LLMs) through either text-based chat or an immersive voice conversation featuring an animated avatar, across realistic workplace scenarios like performance reviews or conflict resolution. The system provides real-time and post-session feedback to support learning. The AI training tool is built around five core features designed to support effective, scalable, and emotionally intelligent communication practice for managers:

- **Safe Practice Space**: Let users explore different communication styles without real-world consequences, encouraging learning through trial and error.
- **Scenario-Based Skill Building:** Offer realistic, empathy-focused situations that managers can practice repeatedly to build confidence and competence.
- **Personalised Learning**: Adjust scenario difficulty and focus based on user performance to create tailored learning paths.
- **Realistic Interaction:** Use LLMs to generate emotionally rich, context-aware responses from avatars for immersive conversations.

[4] Main, A., Walle, E. A., Kho, C., & Halpern, J. (2017). The interpersonal functions of empathy: A relational perspective. Emotion Review, 9, 358–366. https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073916669440

- **Scalable and Accessible:** Run simulations on standard devices, making training easy to deploy without special equipment.

Our architecture integrates an LLM to simulate realistic employee conversations and assess empathetic communication. The chatbot is primarily powered by an LLM that responds to user input by combining it with task instructions, employee character persona prompts, and conversation history. This dialogue is carefully designed to be concise and natural, encouraging rapport-building.

To enhance user engagement, the application, as illustrated in Fig. 8.2.4, incorporates a multimodal interface. Voice interaction is enabled through Azure Speech Services for both Speech-to-Text (STT) and Text-to-Speech (TTS), while a 3D virtual avatar adds a visual dimension to the experience. This 3D virtual avatar embeds lip-sync functionality ensuring realistic mouth movements during speech playback.

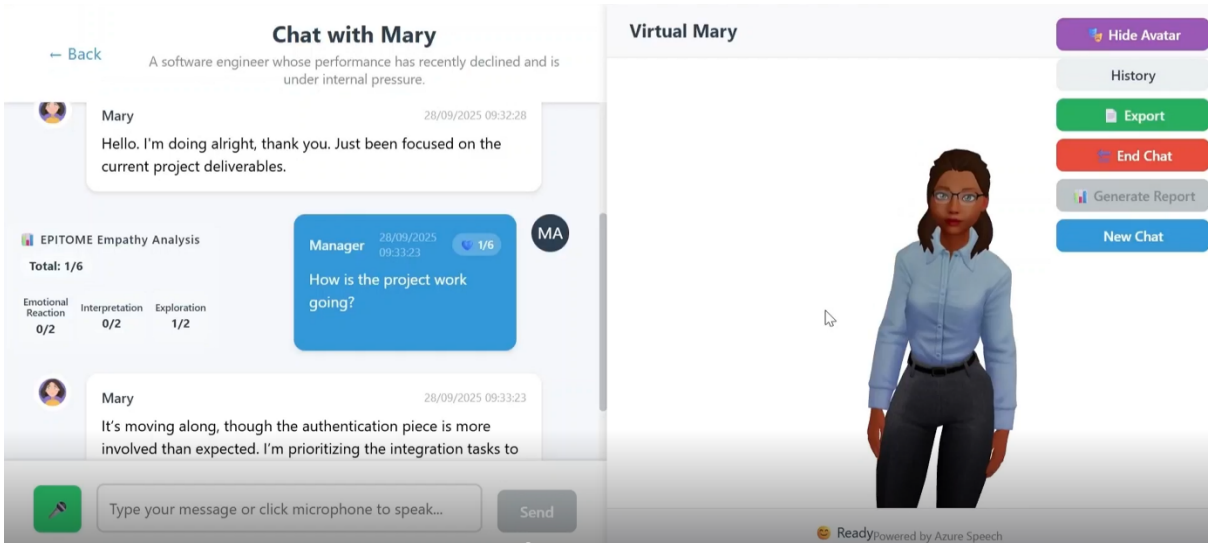

Figure 8.2.4 Empathy training tool interface which provides real-time feedback with an empathy score for each user's input.

During simulations, the system delivers real-time feedback by leveraging a Dynamic Scorer LLM that evaluates empathy in each user response. Every message from the user is assessed and paired with an empathy score, enabling immediate, context-sensitive guidance. This scoring mechanism is grounded in the EPITOME framework[5], developed by Sharma et al. (2020), which defines empathy through three key mechanisms:

- *Emotional Reactions* (expressions of compassion or concern)
- *Interpretations* (demonstrated understanding of the character's experience)
- *Explorations* (efforts to deepen understanding through relevant inquiry)

For each mechanism, the LLM annotates the user's response as demonstrating no, weak, or strong communication of empathy, using a 0–2 scale to quantify performance.

[5] Ashish Sharma, Adam Miner, David Atkins, and Tim Althoff. 2020. A Computational Approach to Understanding Empathy Expressed in Text-Based Mental Health Support. In *Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing (EMNLP)*, pages 5263–5276, Online. Association for Computational Linguistics.

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At the end of each session, the LLM, prompted as a “communication coach,” conducts a holistic assessment of the entire conversation transcript, generating a comprehensive evaluation on a 1–10 scale for each EPITOME dimension. At the end of each session, the LLM, prompted as a “communication coach,” conducts a holistic assessment of the entire conversation transcript, generating a comprehensive evaluation on a 1–10 scale for each EPITOME dimension (see Fig. 8.2.5). This includes detailed justifications with quoted examples, a summary of strengths and weaknesses, and personalized, actionable feedback, such as alternative phrasing suggestions, to support continued growth. This methodology not only strengthens empathy training but also generates valuable structured data to refine future training sessions.

We conducted a **preliminary study** involving over 30 professional participants to explore how empathy is expressed in workplace interactions. This took the form of an online survey. Findings highlighted *active listening* as a core skill for demonstrating empathy, particularly when paired with validating employees’ concerns, offering practical solutions, and responding with appropriate emotional understanding. Participants emphasized that employees often seek acknowledgment of their emotions, a safe space to express their feelings, and actionable support. Building on these findings, our AI-driven empathy training tool is especially valuable for preparing managers and colleagues to navigate conflict, handle difficult conversations, and support peers in distress. By simulating realistic workplace scenarios, such as resolving client-related issues, addressing interpersonal tensions, or responding to emotional challenges, the tool provides a safe, structured environment for practicing empathetic communication. Through real-time feedback and post-session analysis, it helps users strengthen their ability to listen, validate, and respond with care, skills that are essential for fostering trust and psychological safety in any team.

Figure 8.2.5 Automatically generated feedback from one training session

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9. How to Foster Wellbeing: Guidance for Employers and Employees

Virginia Portillo, Helena Webb

We have drawn on our study findings from a total over 300 participants across the project who took part in different research activities (e.g., surveys, focus groups, interviews), to compile some brief guidance for employers and employees on wellbeing in the workplace, in particular as it relates to the Internet.

For employers

1) Flexibility

- Allow employees some agency (e.g., over choice of days/week to work from home).
- Hybrid and remote work are highly valued (e.g., reduced travel, time and cost savings). If this was not allowed or suboptimal, some employees would leave their jobs.
- Avoid expectations of *"round the clock connectivity"* for employees.
- Allow more breaks if needed.

2) There is **no one-size-fits all** approach to support wellbeing. Organisational strategies should be:

- Pre-emptive and focus on building resilience, coping strategies, and mental health.
- Genuine. If perceived as a 'tick box' commitment, employees will not value them
- Not compulsory. Mandating that everyone does a specific activity for wellbeing can be unpopular, regardless of how potentially good that activity is.
- Contextual and tailored to individual needs.
- Embedded within other work activities rather than an add-on.
- Attentive to the wellbeing of all employees, and in particular to those who feel the most stress.

3) Support employees managing potential online harm and hostility:

- Where employees routinely experience harmful online content or hostile interactions, it is important to have organisational level strategies in place. This may include no tolerance policies, de-escalation training, formal debriefs or counselling packages.
- Technical controls support employee wellbeing by allowing them to end hostile interactions, block harmful content etc.
- Where possible, allow employees to choose communication strategies (e.g., phone calls or emails) for tasks according to which are least likely to risk harm.

4) Senior staff can be encouraged to **role model** following practices that emphasise wellbeing and encourage others to do the same. This establishes a workplace culture for wellbeing.

5) Use of **technology** to support wellbeing.

- Technological innovations can usefully support wellbeing: e.g. interventions to limit time online, digital wellbeing aids etc.
- AI-based innovations can offer new opportunities to support wellbeing through tailored training interventions, robotic assistants etc.
- However, employees can be distrustful of technological solutions and fear they are being used for workplace surveillance and productivity measurement.

6) All interventions for wellbeing should be used **responsibly**. This particularly includes AI-enabled technological interventions.
- Listen to employees' expressed concerns - for instance fears about workplace surveillance.
- Take time to reflect on the potential impacts of interventions. Anticipate unintended impacts that might have negative rather than positive consequences for wellbeing. Review interventions once they have been put in place for a period of time.
- Sustainability. Consider the immediate appeal vs the sustained value of an intervention. Does if offer more than novelty value?
- Transparency. Provide clear, simple explanations about how interventions are being used, particularly are collecting data from employees.

For employees

1) **Setting boundaries** is an important mechanism for wellbeing. E.g.
- Not working outside working hours, in particular for hybrid and remote working.
- Turning notifications for work apps off outside work hours.
- Time managements tools, including tools to limit time spent online.

2) "**Unwind** from work". Dedicating time to wellbeing outside of work activities can benefit workplace wellbeing. E.g.:
- Family and social support
- Exercise
- Online offline balance

3) Consider the range of support available if your work role necessitates handling **harmful online content or hostile online interactions.**
- Social support: from friends, family and colleagues.
- Positive attitude and mood improvement practices.
- Burden reduction. How can your workplace reduce the burden on you?
- Control. Are there technical measures you can use to block or limit content and interactions?

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10. Future Scanning

Karen Lancaster

Aims and methods

What are the potential future developments for Internet-connected technologies over the coming 10-20 years, and how could workplace wellbeing be affected? Whilst one can never be certain that technological or societal changes will occur, there is nevertheless good reason to believe that trends which are already occurring will continue on a similar trajectory.

Workers spend more time using Internet-enabled devices than ever before, and artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models (LLMs) are becoming increasingly utilised in the workplace. With AI now being embedded into a number of operating systems, it is increasingly difficult to separate AI from the Internet; we therefore consider technologies quite broadly, and consider how these may affect future wellbeing.

Pervasive technology

It has been over twenty years since technologists began suggesting that the Internet of Things (IoT) would connect smart devices within our homes and workplaces. Although we are not there just yet, it still seems quite likely to occur, and Internet-enabled technology will probably become increasingly pervasive in the future.

- **Smart workplace:** Internet-connected smart technologies could adapt to, respond to, or anticipate workers' needs, changing lighting, heating, music and suchlike accordingly. This may improve workers' wellbeing in some small way.
- **AI /LLMs:** These make life easier by enabling us to do more, and to do it more quickly; we are likely to see AI/LLM usage increase greatly over the coming decades. However, if jobs are made easier by AI and LLMs, it is doubtful that we will see an automatic increase in free time, but rather, an increase in the demands of our job roles (or losing our jobs altogether).
- **Hyperconnectivity:** This is already an issue today (see page 15) future workers may find themselves connected to the Internet to an even greater extent. Risks of this include the (further) erosion of work-life boundaries, increased cognitive overload, technostress, and burnout (plus physical problems such as back pain and eye strain).
- **Wearable technology:** Internet-connected phones and computers already cause frequent interruptions and distractions, and bring the expectation of always being contactable. Smart glasses and other wearables exacerbate this, allowing work notifications to literally pop up in our field of vision, making them inescapable and impossible to ignore.

Over-monitoring and measuring

The same technologies that promise insight and optimisation can also foster a sense of surveillance, as it becomes increasingly easy to monitor everything we do.

- **Smart furniture:** If workplaces adopt "smart" furniture and other smart devices, workers may feel watched from every angle. This is objectionable enough within

the workplace, but remote/hybrid workers may be monitored even in their own home. This can erode trust and privacy, and cause stress and anxiety.

- **Wellbeing tracking:** Paradoxically, attempting to monitor and improve wellbeing through technology may inadvertently *lower* wellbeing, e.g. if workers' heart rate, number of breaks, physical activity, and tone of voice are monitored, they may feel trapped, and may fear their data will be used against them.
- **Cyber-security risks:** When workers are excessively monitored, concerns about data breaches become more pressing, since there is so much personal information held about workers. So, if monitoring of workers increases, cyber-security will need to improve accordingly.

Performative and insincere focus on wellbeing

Whilst we want future workplaces to have greater focus on improving staff wellbeing, there is a danger that efforts may become performative or insincere.

- **Another task to do:** If wellbeing training or activities are mandated in future, workers may come to view them as just another task to be completed each day/week; thus, they will not reap the potential wellbeing rewards.
- **Carewashing:** Organisations may invest in technological wellbeing as a visible, inexpensive substitute for *genuine* structural reform: why address high workloads, poor conditions, or low pay when employers can instead purchase a wellbeing robot or a mental health chatbot? The public-facing 'concern' about staff wellbeing could become a façade, feeling insincere, performative, or even coercive, because it does not address the root cause of stress and low wellbeing at work.
- **Productivity:** Data suggests that increasing workers' wellbeing at work improves productivity; this can be a problem when it is the main or only reason that employers aim to improve workers' wellbeing: in future, one hopes that wellbeing is viewed as an end in itself.

Lack of human contact

Although Internet-connected technologies offer substantial gains such as remote working and AI / LLMs, the effects on workplace culture — and wellbeing — can be detrimental.

- **Working from home:** The Internet can be a great tool for connecting with others virtually when we are unable to do so physically, offering the convenience of avoiding commutes, balancing home or caring responsibilities, and enabling one to be employed by an organisation not within a commutable distance. Remote/hybrid working (via the Internet) is likely to increase over the coming decades, providing these benefits to workers.
- **Ghost ship workplaces:** Many workplaces which had been bustling and social prior to the covid-19 pandemic, have become empty and sterile post-pandemic. The "ghost ship" feel of workplaces may increase further in future, as remote / hybrid working (vie the Internet) increases, potentially lowering wellbeing.
- **Forming relationships:** Remote / hybrid working can increase loneliness, isolate people from colleagues, and cause worse mental health. Strong connections with supervisors and colleagues help to improve mental wellbeing at work, however. This tallies with what we discovered in our own research, where

'Cheerbot' (see page 21) was deployed into an office, and people enjoyed using it to connect with their colleagues by playing games together on it, or by walking it over to a colleague's desk. In future, employers will hopefully provide ways for remote (and on-site) workers to connect meaningfully with one another and form friendships.

- **Coffee-badging:** Compelling or forcing people to come into the office can be detrimental, however: it can lead to so-called 'coffee-badging' (where workers come into the workplace simply to meet a quota) or 'quiet quitting' (where workers do only the bare minimum of work).
- **AI bosses:** Although AI decision-making can potentially increase efficiency and consistency, workers could feel alienated if managerial roles are fully or partly automated. (However, interestingly, 20-40% of workers feel that AI would do a good job as their manager.[6] The fact so many people would prefer an AI boss may underscore the need for tools such as our Empathy Training Tool (see page 24) indeed, many people prefer to ask AI for help or guidance rather than ask their managers.

Conclusion

The wellbeing impact of Internet-connected technologies depends less on the *nature* of the tools at our disposal, and more on the *ways* in which those tools are used. It is unhelpful to make make sweeping generalisations or simplistic claims such as that the Internet lowers wellbeing — the truth is far more nuanced than that.

It is important not to be over-optimistic about the benefits of potential future Internet-connected technologies — but it is equally important not to assume that in future, increased use of the Internet for work would *automatically* mean reduced wellbeing. The same technology may improve wellbeing for some people, but reduce it for others, and this W-WATI project as a whole has highlighted the importance of avoiding a "one size fits all" approach to workplace wellbeing. One hopes that the future will bring a meaningful focus on workplace wellbeing, whether or not we are more connected to the Internet.

[6] Crist, C. (2025) "38% of Workers Would Rather Have an AI Manager than a Person, Survey Shows" *HR Dive* [online] available from <https://www.hrdive.com/news/workers-would-rather-have-an-ai-manager-than-a-person/757992/> [23 October 2025]; Saran, C. (2023) "Office Workers Feel AI Is Better than a Human Boss" *Computer Weekly* [online] available from <https://www.computerweekly.com/news/366542527/Office-workers-feel-AI-is-better-than-a-human-boss> [23 October 2025]

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11. Our Team Wellbeing

As a wellbeing project, it naturally seemed important that we considered our own wellbeing as a research team. As such, we collaboratively identified ways we would monitor, protect, and support our wellbeing throughout the project. We established several practices that we carefully maintained across the duration of our working together. We worked to ensure that our regular team meetings were conducted in a positive and supportive environment, celebrating our achievements and fostering peer support opportunities and knowledge exchange. At the end of each meeting, we shared examples of activities we each had undertaken since the last meeting to support our own wellbeing. We have documented these activities in an interactive map, which you can visit at https://kumu.io/AlfieNotAlfie/w-wati-wellbeing-practices.

We also allocated some of our project budget to team wellbeing activities and collaboratively ideated on how we would like to use these funds. We organised two group outings for our team wellbeing activities: one during the first six months of the project, and one in the latter six months. We decided that we wanted our activities to be active and communal, so our two outings were: a scavenger hunt at a local Country Park, and mini golf or boating at University Park.

For the scavenger hunt, we met at Colwick Country Park and planned a walking route that would take us around the lake and through a forested area. We had a list of things to take photos of such as berries, flowers, human-made structures, and a beautiful view. The scavenger hunt was intended to encourage mindfulness in looking at the details of our surroundings. You can see a collage of all the photos taken on the scavenger hunt below, or a larger version here: https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVIIn3yzo=/.

Image 11.1: photos from the W-WATI team scavenger hunt

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For our second group wellbeing activity, we met on the University Park campus and split into two groups — some to play mini golf, and some to go boating on the lake. These activities were primarily focused at getting us away from our desks and having fun together, without talking about work.

Image 11.2 W-WATI team members about to go boating or play mini-golf

It has been an insightful and exciting journey considering our own workplace wellbeing throughout this project. Our activities were a regular point of discussion in our bi-weekly meetings and offered us tangible ways to reflect on our own wellbeing. Some weeks, we had plenty of activities to discuss which led to meaningful conversations about art, hobbies, passions, and the difficulties of balancing work and home life in a modern, digital world. Other weeks, we struggled to find anything we had done recently for ourselves and instead prioritised planning for what we could do in the coming days.

Interestingly, most of our wellbeing activities involved stepping away from our screens and going outside, connecting with people face-to-face, and learning new, physical skills. As people in highly technology-dependent jobs, we found that addressing our wellbeing often relied on opposing our normative practices, which was often harder than we anticipated. It is our sincere intent to carry forward what we have learned from this project and prioritise creating time and space for our wellbeing practices at work.