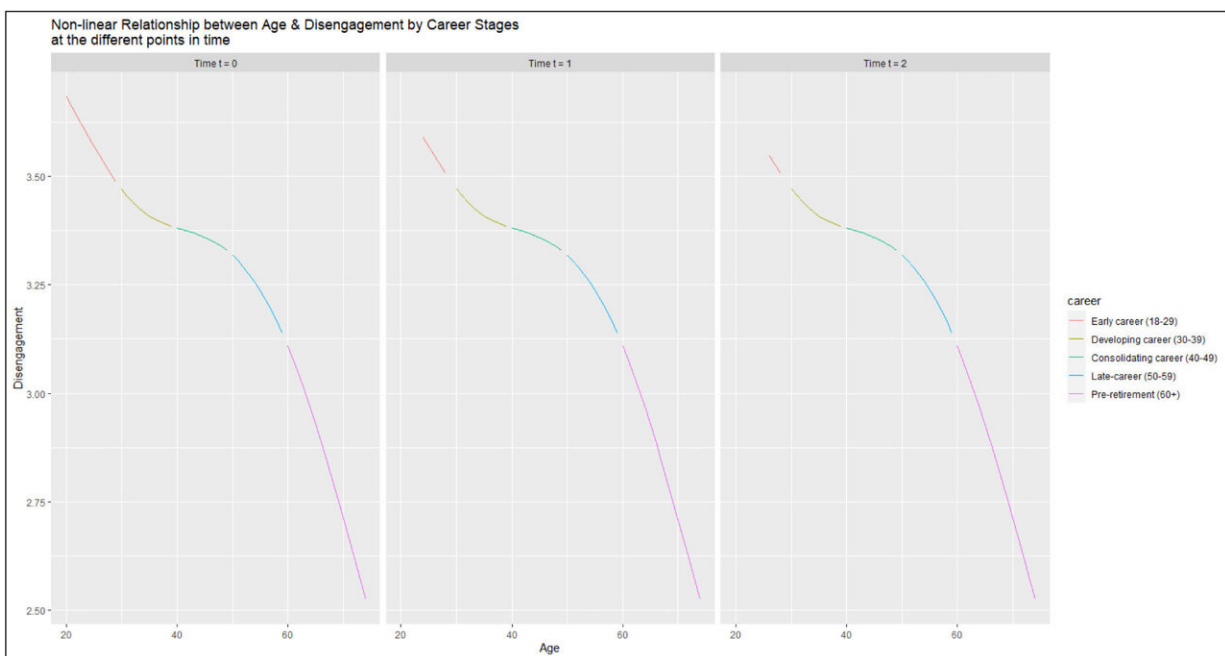


Younger generation experienced most workplace stress during COVID-19 pandemic, research finds

November 14 2022



Spline curves of predicted disengagement for ages at the three time points.
Credit: *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (2022). DOI: 10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103768

A study undertaken by management experts at Kingston University's Business School and Maynooth University in Ireland has shown people in the early stages of their careers were more likely to be impacted by workplace stress during the COVID-19 pandemic than senior colleagues.

The [pandemic](#) had been widely reported to impact negatively on the mental health of whole populations, particularly [younger people](#), researcher Dr. Christina Butler, an associate professor from Kingston Business School, said. In response, the study aimed to understand how individuals at different stages of their lives and careers were affected and what resources had a positive impact on their well-being.

The research focused on people at five career stages—from early on when they were finding themselves vocationally to pre-retirement, when there was less emphasis on [career advancement](#). They found differences in how those groups reacted to the continued pandemic-related disruptions of 2020 and adjusted over time.

The researchers first surveyed people in 30 different countries in April 2020, shortly after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic, then at fortnightly intervals for eight weeks.

The resulting paper, COVID-19 Pandemic Disruptions to Working Lives: A Multi-level Examination of Impacts across Career Stages, which has been published in the *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, revealed that people at the start of their careers were most likely to feel stressed, Dr. Butler said.

"Work and [personal lives](#) underwent enormous disruption during the pandemic, with people working from home experiencing increased loneliness and a range of mental health issues. Under normal circumstances, the younger generations of workers need additional support from their managers and that was exacerbated during the pandemic, when we saw that relative newcomers to the workforce did not cope as well under the pressures of remote working," Dr. Butler said.

The research also revealed that early career workers were more likely to disengage during the pandemic. This could manifest as the [employee](#) showing a lack of interest and becoming cynical about work as a way of coping and distancing, Dr. Butler explained. Meanwhile, mid-career workers—categorized as those settled in a career and building on those foundations—were prone to exhaustion during the pandemic. In some cases this was because of juggling other responsibilities, such as home schooling due to school closures.

"Employers faced even more of a challenge than usual in how to engage [young people](#) and keep them supported at work so they didn't burn out. Disengagement is a clear marker of burnout and exhaustion is the other," she said.

Becoming over-tired and disengaged could also have contributed to a national trend in which highly skilled employees in the over-50s were leaving their professions before retirement, Dr. Butler said.

"This group is in danger of leaving work prematurely in what is sometimes referred to as the great resignation or engaging in what is known as quiet quitting," she explained. "They have been reassessing their lives, particularly during the pandemic and, while they may not leave work completely, they may change career, move out of the city or work fewer hours, resulting in organizations losing a wealth of experience."

As well as examining the well-being of staff, the study also investigated factors that could mitigate stress or exhaustion, such as giving employees higher levels of autonomy at work.

The researchers found there appeared to be a shift in attitudes towards organizational support, which had traditionally been viewed as positive.

"During the pandemic there was often a lot of organizational support that people could find interfering and tiring, such as having a large number of online meetings, which sometimes took people away from their work and led to lots of screen time," Dr. Butler said. "When organizational support is positive it's seen as a resource that's helpful to manage work, but it might have felt like more of a demand placed on people during the pandemic."

As the world moved to living with COVID-19, and the likelihood of another pandemic rising due to globalization, greater understanding of how pandemics affect the working lives and well-being of employees at different stages of life was needed, Dr. Butler said.

"Organizations must pay attention to the types of support needed by employees to help them through a crisis," Dr. Butler said. "Extra support is clearly needed to help the younger generation of employees, who don't cope as well under the new pressures, balance job demands while working remotely. More emphasis on this will help achieve a productive workforce through people having greater connectivity and a sense of well-being at work," she added.

Research project lead Professor Audra Mockaitis, an expert in [international business](#) at Maynooth University, agreed that, with the return to hybrid or in-person working, it was important to assess whether well-being improves for employees most affected.

"The pandemic, and organizations' responses to it, affected working lives dramatically—each person has their own story of pandemic trauma," she said. "Unfortunately, poor organizational response and support means that the effects of the pandemic will linger for longer for many. Organizations must do better with respect to their employees at all [career](#) stages."

More information: Audra I. Mockaitis et al, COVID-19 pandemic disruptions to working lives: A multilevel examination of impacts across career stages, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103768](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103768)

Provided by Kingston University, London

Citation: Younger generation experienced most workplace stress during COVID-19 pandemic, research finds (2022, November 14) retrieved 13 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-11-younger-generation-experienced-workplace-stress.html>

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