

Breathe – sleep – eat – move – meet people

Notes on the NCCR dfab – SVIN-Webinar “The New Normal”

28. October – 2. December 2020

When we – Kaitlin, Linda and Nora – began planning The New Normal Webinar during lockdown last spring, we had many questions and knew we would encounter many more on the way. One of those questions – aside from the obvious ones concerning whom to invite as speakers and how to structure the event – was this: will anyone be interested in a webinar on the “new normal” after the lockdown and other exceptional pandemic regulations are over, and the “old normal” is back again? It turned out that they were. Only now do we realize that we never even attempted to define what exactly we meant by the “new normal”. And that one of the reasons why people were and still are interested in discussing a new normal is that we still don’t know what it actually is or might be in the future.

There were some things, however, that we were sure of: firstly, we wanted the webinar to provide participants with relevant information and concrete ideas about the nature of the new normal and its assumed or real effects on women in the AEC. We hoped that participants might learn about strategies to conceptualize the new normal as an auspicious turning point that fueled many changes for a better, more gender-equal work-life. Secondly, we intended to give participants an occasion to connect and share their experiences in and of the new normal. Whether we managed to achieve these goals remains an open question. But looking back on six sessions filled with networking, polls on little and big questions, presentations of cutting-edge research, exchanges of ideas, lively discussions, and, last but not least, those personal Tales from the Home Office, we can surely say that our participants and speakers chose to play a very active role in this webinar. We appreciated – and enjoyed! – this a lot.

Recordings of all presentations and the final panel discussion are available on the [NCCR Digital Fabrications’ YouTube channel](#). Below we have extracted some main takeaways from the 6-week series:

Background facts

- In Switzerland, nearly 75% of young families still use a form of the breadwinner family model, while only 20% are egalitarian: 80% of fathers work 100%, while over 80% of mothers work 60% or less.
- In the workplace there is openness towards flexibility and compatibility with work and family but few companies have effectively implemented tools and work formats that are adequate, viable and sustainable for balancing work and family.

The Impact of Lockdown on Women in Switzerland

- Homelife during lockdown:
 - In Switzerland, 27% of women (compared to 16% of men) reduced their working hours due to closed day-care centres and schools.
 - Financial considerations played a major role, so did perceived competence for providing childcare.
 - Effectively reinforced the image of the father as the breadwinner: increasing existing gender bias and disproportionately burdening women.
 - The situation has risked a step back in the equality of men and women but has also made daily care work more visible.
- Impact on Women's work:
 - Women in Switzerland reported a decrease in work- and life-satisfaction during the pandemic.
 - Women who work part-time struggled more with lockdown than women who work full-time.
 - Increased existing inequalities: women generally earn less and are more likely to lose their jobs, even though they more often have system-relevant professions (food retail, social services, hospitals, kindergartens and day-care).

The Challenges of New (remote) Work

- Flexibility can be a double-edged sword between expectations of constant availability and more self-determined ways/hours of working, resulting in more stress and less productivity.
- Setting boundaries is difficult, leading to overwork, skipped breaks, and a blurred line between work and private life.
- Communication and connection is a challenge but also a chance in home office:
 - There is a need to create a sense of belonging in the team,
 - Balancing meeting marathons ("over-communicating") with the need to stay connected with colleagues,
 - Establishing virtual spaces to create meaningful communication,
 - Opportunities to work closer with new/ different colleagues.
- The trust issue: employer's find it difficult to trust that employees are effective and motivated during remote work, and employees feel this.
 - Accurate employee performance evaluation as a manager is difficult because managers no longer "see" their employees.
 - The more uncertainty and less information managers have, the larger the influence of unconscious biases on expectations, which in turn affect performance evaluations.

The Impact of New (remote) Work on Women

- Remote work/ home office is not an option for many system-relevant professions often held by women.
- Home office is not per se better for women/ mothers/ parents because it often results in a blending of housework and office work, adding stress with simultaneous yet opposing responsibilities (e.g. child care vs. conference calls).
- Potential biases while working remotely may hit female employees harder:
 - Often the basis of promotion for men is their perceived potential, while for women it is their performance.
 - In Switzerland, women perform most of the house and care work in nearly 70% of heterosexual households. Managers might expect them to be distracted by this at home and evaluate them more negatively.
 - Women may work during untraditional times, leading their overwhelmed managers to believe they're not actually doing their share.

"Women might not get full credit for their remote work and their performance may be evaluated more negatively than men's. During a crisis, the stakes are particularly high."

- Nora Keller, Competence Centre for Diversity & Inclusion (CCDI)

Solutions for Leaders

- The strongest indicator of success in the "new normal" is a transactional and inspirational leadership model characterised by: concrete goals and priorities, control results, open feedback, appreciation and recognition, role modelling, inspiring motivation, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, support and coaching.
- What can managers do to avoid the trap of biased performance reviews during remote work?
 - Check your biases
 - Carefully ask: what do you need from me regarding communication? (e.g., set time each week or as-needed)
 - (Re)define criteria for performance evaluation clearly and transparently (quality over quantity) and involve employees
 - Provide practical and moral support for remote working
 - Ask for input, feedback and advice from your employees
 - Check in with people rather than checking up
 - Model these behaviours from the very top
- Only if companies (management) are willing to change, is change possible. The "new" leadership tools exist, and their effectiveness has been demonstrated, but many companies still lack the necessary mindset to implement them.
- Finally, after lockdown we will need to reflect on what works and what doesn't for remote work to be sure we are doing the right things in the future.

Solutions for individuals

- Become aware of all the possibilities and potential solutions for new work.
- Be really honest as an employee about what you need.
- It's ok to say this is not the year for amazing amounts of growth or progress.
- Be more imaginative about reaching out to others and staying connected.
- Women in particular need to:
 - Dare to ask for resources and responsibility,
 - Voice concerns, individual needs and expectations more openly, and
 - Use the opportunity to divide labor at home more equally: contrary to what men often profess, mothers do not just need "support" from fathers - both are parents!

Finally, yet importantly, I want to refer back to the words in the title of this article – cited from the final panel discussion. They indicate an important (if obvious) takeaway: as human beings, we have certain basic needs that have to be met for us to thrive and perform. The COVID-19 crisis and all its effects on our work- and private-lives make meeting our needs ever more difficult. We owe it to ourselves to stay aware of those needs in order to create a context in which we can thrive – in all areas of our lives.

Further information and contact

The 6 part-webinar «The New Normal. Perspectives for the AEC» was co-organized by the SVIN and the SVIN-member NCCR digital fabrication and took place on Wednesdays 28th October – 2nd December 2020, 10-12am. It explored the question of what the "new normal" is for Swiss women working in the Architecture, Engineering and Construction industry. The series was based on exchanging experiences and strategies to create a better "new normal". Practitioners and academics discussed current and potential solutions for improving policies to better balance work and private life. The webinar was held in English.

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