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What Ireland has to say about unemployment during the pandemic

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'When asked for their views on how employers, businesses and the government responded to the crisis, respondents generally focused more on the government response'

Analysis: new research looks at how Irish people experienced work-disruption and unemployment during the recent lockdown

By Joe Whelan, Fiona Dukelow and Tom Boland, UCC

It is worth pausing to remember some things as Ireland begins the tentative process of opening up with the full and sweeping lockdown behind us for now at least. The disruption to work we have just experienced was unlike anything previously seen. A huge proportion of the workforce found themselves unemployed and in need of state support virtually overnight, which necessitated an immediate and far reaching political and social policy response.

While we know that we have just been through and continue to experience a major event collectively, people's everyday experiences are less clear. A team of social researchers from UCC have launched the first a series of surveys designed to capture lived experiences of work and work disruption as they unfold.

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From RTÉ News, report on how unemployment reached record levels in April due to Covid-19

The survey was launched on April 21st and aimed to capture the following themes:

- People’s experiences of stopping work or losing a job

- How people were spending their time since the COVID-19 crisis

- People’s hopes for the future in terms of work and employment

- People's thoughts of the government response to the loss of jobs in the crisis

- People’s opinions on work/life balance in light of the crisis.

Here are some examples of responses to questions on these themes, which give a sense of how Irish people experienced being unemployed because of a pandemic.

'Surreal is the only word I can use to describe this experience'

Unsurprisingly, many of the respondents found the initial onset of the lockdown unsettling and tinged with a sense of the surreal

Surreal is the only word I can use to describe this whole experience. It's as if a Hollywood B-movie suddenly became real.

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From RTÉ 2fm's Dave Fanning Show, chef JP McMahon on Ireland's lockdown mania for flour

Some found positives in the initial stages of lockdown, finding the time to 'catch up' with family members and with things like housework, exercise and gardening:

I have been enjoying the extra time with the children, doing normal household tasks, gardening, allotment, exercising in the house etc.

I have been able to spend time gardening and clearing out junk both inside the house and the garden.

But lockdown posed significant challenges for many others who found it to be a stressful and difficult time.

Disorientated, insecure, pessimistic. Lost track of time, routines lost, sleeping a lot more.

Staying at home is hard on the brain.

Stress levels are through the bloody roof.

Looking to the future

Reflecting on work/life balance, many respondents saw the potential for transformative change:

I would like to think that Covid-19 may help to bring about transformative societal change...It may change attitudes to unnecessary travel for work purposes. It will change online/remote working practices for sure.

I think this experience has shown that for my particular role anyway, I can work just as easily remotely from home as I could sitting in an office on-site.

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From RTÉ Radio 1's This Week, Carole Coleman reports on the fears many young people have in relation to their working futures

For others, the lockdown served as a prompt for reflection on how they would like to approach work in the future:

I'm seriously considering cutting my work-days down to 3 days. Using a 4th day for some voluntary work...

I thought I loved my job, but I'm very happy at home and I don't want to go back to work. This space is a wonderful gift...and I'm appreciating every moment.

'I'm proud of how the government and country has responded'

When asked for their views on how employers, businesses and the government responded to the crisis, respondents generally focused more on the government response. There was an overall sense from the vast majority of respondents that the government handled the early crisis well

I think the government has done pretty well so far by setting the emergency payment as €350 a week.

Overall, I'm proud of how the government and country as a whole has responded.

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From RTÉ Radio 1's Morning Ireland in March 2020, RTÉ Industry and Employment Correspondent Ingrid Miley on the introduction of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment

There was also generally widespread agreement amongst the respondents that the Pandemic Unemployment Payment of €350 was a needed and effective measure

Government were right to issue the €350 payment - warts and all to allow people to keep going.

I particularly was grateful that they quickly put in place a financial emergency payment to help support me and my family when I lost my income.

The Covid unemployment payment goes a long way to help me. It means that I can pay my rent and should be able to re-open my business from the day it is permitted.

There were some dissenting voices in respect to the rate of payment and the way in which the scheme was administered, though these were in the minority.

What does it all mean?

This is just a snippet of the data generated by the survey, but it gives a sense of the actual experience of work disruption for people in Ireland. In some instances, it has shown that those who responded to the survey have been provided with an opportunity to reflect on work and on work/life balance, though there is a clear sense of the difficulty and pain of uncertainty.

In general, respondents were very happy with the early government response, with the pandemic unemployment payment offering certainty at a time when certainty was in short supply. As pandemic unemployment goes on, however, it will be very important that the design and level of payment continue to provide certainty and security. These are principles which

arguably should underpin all unemployment payments, not just those associated with the pandemic.

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