

The Best Thing Today 1: Maija Taka II

Announcer: Aalto University podcast.

Maija Taka:

I have this campaign for myself, so I'm trying to have at least one small change to my working style every month. It doesn't have to be anything big, and it can't be anything big because it needs to be something that I can easily change and try.

Maria Törnroos:

Welcome to this podcast series, The Best Thing Today, hosted by the Aalto study psychologists. This is the second part of a two-part podcast on remote work in academia. In the first part, we talked about why remote work is so exhausting. In the second part, we'll continue with thinking about how to manage remote work and give some low hanging fruits for you to try in your research group and in your daily work. Your host is me, Maria Törnroos and I'm the psychologist for doctoral students here at Aalto. With me, I have Maija Taka, who is a post-doc project manager in doctoral education project [?? 00:01:08], in the Water and development research group at Aalto.

Jingle: The Best Thing Today, the podcast by Aalto University psychologists.

Maria:

Now we get to the point where we could think a little bit about the solutions. What could we do, what could our listeners do to improve their situation if they are struggling with remote work? So, based on our experience, we've made a list of the things that we think that could help improve. And the key advices are that first of all, it would be good if there would be no additional screen time. So, there comes the challenge of how to be together but not through yet another Teams or Zoom meeting, so genuine meetings. As the spring progresses, I think that walking meetings, meeting outside might help with this, so that we can see people live. But let's hope that this will also be temporary, that we then can go back to seeing people live at work after the summer.

Maija:

We've tried these walking meetings in our group, and they are actually quite fruitful for getting help to your research because when you have a walk, you can't show a PowerPoint at the same time. And we are actually always presenting our thoughts and ideas and results

and everything with PowerPoint. So, just like talking and saying what you have and what and what is your vision is really fresh nowadays. So, there's actually something good with the walk meetings as well.

Maria:

Yeah, and it sounds like a really good tip to improve elevator pitch. Like how to talk about your research without having the visual aids. That's a really good point. And what also needs to be done to the meeting standards, or we need to have new meetings standards, that's the issue. So, 45 minutes instead of 60 minutes, so that there is a 15-minute break where people can stand up and get a glass of water or go outside or something like that. And then, as I said before, it would be good to have a standard of having separate chit-chat meetings and actual business meetings. That sounds wrong, business meeting in a university, but you know what I mean. Both, both of these are important. We need the chit-chat, we need it to get to tell others how we feel and hear how others are feeling and see other people's dogs and cats and everything. But we also need to keep strict agenda meetings as agenda meetings.

Maija:

Some of our meetings do also have few minutes in the beginning where, what we call [foreign language 00:04:32], which is a complaining moment where anyone who has anything to complain, which means everyone, they can just like fully express what they feel and what they want to complain about, and that kind of cleans the air and also helps others to see that, okay, there is so much going on at the same time, so my problems are actually not that huge of a deal. So, I encourage people to try these [foreign language 00:05:01] sessions as well.

Maria:

Yeah. And there, we can see the difference between some, some people might not enjoy having these kinds of things in these regular meetings, while it works for others. So, it's important to see what kind of atmosphere there is in your research group or in your team, what works for you and what doesn't. And I really like the [foreign language 00:05:31] idea and also the fact that it's voluntary, that it's not like a "how are you feeling today" round, where everyone has to say something, but it's just, if you have something to complain about, then you can. And then, the second advice is that we need new ways to recover. So, the old ways might not work anymore. And we need new ways to detach from work because we are living at work. So, we are not able to physically, or sometimes even psychologically, detach from work. If, for example, our workstation is on the kitchen table and then we just move one metre to the right to eat dinner, but we constantly see the computer and all the articles and the papers and so on, we are constantly reminded of work.

So, we need ways to try and detach. And we also need to minimize interruptions during the day. Take more micro breaks or more breaks and move around in order to not have that serious repercussions on our body after this remote working is over.

Maija:

I love that UniSport, for example, is nowadays organizing these breakout exercises. I even have a calendar call of them, which encourages me to actually participate. Otherwise, I will probably be sitting on my desk for, I don't know, six hours, because if I go to a meeting, I don't have to walk to the meeting. I just log in and I'm right away in the meeting. So, just having some break exercises every now and then, but there's, as mentioned, there's great resources and help for that as well.

Maria:

Yeah, for example, there is this app called BREAK PRO, that is available to all Aalto. I think, I don't know if you have to be an employee or just have an Aalto email to be able to register for it. So, BREAK PRO, you can find it. And there are really short break exercises that I have been using now. And you can also put that to remind you, like every hour send a reminder that now roll your shoulders or something like that. So, I think that's a good idea. And then the third advice comes, I mentioned something in the second advice about work hygiene. So, we have to start to think about how to protect our home as a home, and not as our office. So, what could you do? Could you clean away the office things at the end of the day from your kitchen table? Could you organize a corner in some other room, so that you're not constantly reminded? Or can you turn your sauna into an office? Like anything that you can think of that could protect your home as a home, and not as an office.

Maija:

And it has a huge impact if you can even see your screen or a laptop or all of those piles of papers on your kitchen table, even though you're not working, you see the ghost of all those to-do things on your desk. So, having some place where you can actually hide the office, so that would be a great.

Maria:

And then, the fourth advice on our list is regular check-ins. And this is especially for doctoral students, or this advice is for supervisors or senior staff. Recognize that the students are struggling, don't push, be kind and supportive and you don't have to be a psychologist, you just have to listen without judgment and then refer them to the study psychologists, me or to the other resources available at Aalto. And there are a lot of resources available. So, if

you're a student, don't hesitate to contact me. And if you're an advisor, don't hesitate to suggest to your students to contact me or other well-being resources.

Maija:

I think this is one of the low hanging fruits on your list, because regular check-ins, like our group has a meeting every Thursday, and as it happens every single Thursday at the same time, it's really easy to just come and it's kind of a routine. It's one of the only sessions where we actually get to meet each other. And for the supervisors and the group leaders, it's really easy way to actually increase a belongingness of the group, getting peer support. So, breaking your group into smaller breakout rooms or something, so they can just check-in how they're doing, any kind of a communication tool is like highly respected. But for the supervisors, I kindly encourage them to value if someone actually opens up about how they're doing. So, if someone says how they are doing, do value that and help them in getting more advice on help with their situation. It's not easy to express yourself nowadays.

Maria:

Yeah. I think it's a really good idea to have these regular check-ins. And as you mentioned earlier, it's important that they are not always instigated by doctoral students, that they are instigated by senior staff also, to show that the department and the research group cares, and that they are really concerned with the doctoral students and their wellbeing and their progress. And what my colleague Sanni Saarimäki, who is a study psychologist here at Aalto, she had this great idea to offer a two-hour slot for students every Thursday to have two Pomodoros with her and I obviously, I'm going to steal that and start my own session for doctoral students, so that, I haven't yet decided on the day and when this will start, but basically her idea is that it's 15 minutes in the beginning for talking about what is a good goal and how to set good goals. And then there is a possibility to share what your goal for the Pomodoro will be. And then, 40 minutes work, then a break, possibility to share some thoughts and feelings, and then another 40 minutes Pomodoro, and at the end, possibility again to discuss a few minutes. And I think that this is a great idea. We have been using this in our Doctoral Thesis Booster course that we have been having with Sanni. We have had these write it up meetings every second week. And every second week in between those, we have these more theory-based lectures and discussions. And this has been, I think the students have really enjoyed this, because there have been a high percentage of attendance. So, I think that they have been really liking the fact that there is a certain day for, and they know that they get some information, some peer support and discussion, and then a Pomodoro to work on their thesis.

Maija:

We've been trying the same kind of sessions. In the beginning, we called them Online Writing, but then we realized that people are not only writing all the time. So, now they're called like Virtual Offices. And we also do goal setting and we share those goals and we try to challenge each other to maybe define a bit more precise goal or aim a bit higher, or somehow get more support into the goal setting. We do physical warmup, because we never roll our shoulders without someone else saying that we need to do that. And then we have a peaceful session in Zoom, everyone muted, but we can see the faces. So, it's as close to the virtual or the actual office we can get nowadays.

Maria:

I was thinking about naming this writing event as Thesis and Tomatoes. I don't know what you think about that name.

Maija:

That sounds perfect.

Maria:

Good. But stay tuned for more information about that.

Jingle: The Best Thing Today. The podcast by Aalto University psychologists. Today, Maria Törnroos and her special guest, Maija Taka.

Maria: And there we come to the fifth point on our advice list. So, that is about talking and sharing negative experiences and normalizing them. Obviously, it's really important also to celebrate successes, but also about talking about negative experiences, like you said, in the [foreign language 00:15:25], for example. But there might be other ideas also how to do this.

Maija: And even just having an atmosphere where you can express your uncertainties or insecurities and failures, it's really valuable to have a community like that. And even like having that as a starting point to identify how we're doing, nevertheless if we have any solutions for the difficulties, but even just to have an atmosphere where you can express yourself and understand how differently colleagues and individuals are reacting to the current situation.

Maria:

That's true. And while I was holding one of my small group discussions and counsellings with thesis supervisors, I told them about how I used to show my master's and bachelor's students, when I was a supervisor at the University of Helsinki [?? 00:16:23], I used to show them a picture of one of my manuscripts that had come back from my co-authors full of track changes, and it looked horrible, and I felt horrible. But just showing that I am not a, as a supervisor, I'm not perfect either, and I just have to understand that this is part of the process and this helps to improve my manuscript. So, normalizing feedback, obviously, we also have to practice how to give feedback, constructive feedback, but normalizing getting feedback and that getting criticism is totally normal, no text is perfect right away. So, these kinds of experiences supervisors might also share.

Maija:

And you don't know about those until you've gone through the process. Like, I love to see PhD students, the more advanced students, who actually tolerate feedback and criticism, so they don't take it personally, they understand that it's about their work and usually the feedback and comments are there to actually help them to improve the work and polish it. So, usually the first version is terrible. We call it a laughter version because it's not supposed to be for any criticism, it's just a very first idea, but understanding the purpose of getting comments and understanding how difficult it is to actually prepare a scientific publication or a paper, you don't know it until you've gone through the process.

Maria:

Laughter version, that's a really good name. I like it. I've also shared with several doctoral students about one of my articles that I called the shit article. I don't know if I'm allowed to say that word in this podcast, but...

Maija:

You just did.

Maria:

Because I called... Yeah, I just did. I called it that because it got accepted, I think, to the 11th journal, and it was four years. And it was excruciating, but I just kept on going. And because all these publication processes are different and journal processes are different, so you can't compare with anyone else than yourself and your own experiences actually. Because your colleagues might not be doing exactly the same research as you or publishing in exactly the

same journals. So, you have to just refocus when you get a rejection and then try the next journal instead.

Maija:

Usually, people say that if you get a rejection from the journal, congratulations, you're in the majority. So, people get loads of rejections all the time. But if you've gone through the process of submitting to 11 different journals and still like, I don't know, possibly enjoying the process, at least learning and creating more resilience, I think you should create a course about just that manuscript and the journey with it.

Maria:

Yeah. And obviously, it's not just about revising the article, it's also about going through the manuscript submission portals, which is horrible, and it takes so long to go through them and write the perfect cover letter and answer all the questions in the manuscript submission portal. So, it's a lot of work also, like hours of work, when you have 11 journals to do that for. So, now we come to the last point, the sixth points on our advice list, which resonates with several things that we've said today about belongingness. So, we are talking about more inclusion, more team activities, for example, peer mentoring, which I think would be a great idea, and I'm looking into this and hopefully get to start this also soon, peer mentoring for doctoral students at Aalto.

Maija:

That's a great idea because there's a lot of knowledge and people come from different backgrounds, their thesis is a unique journey, so everyone sees different things and learns and experiences different things. So, having peer support, or even just more communication about how other people see things, how they feel, what they find out, there's loads of knowledge, but it needs to be harvested. So, having these kind of peer sessions is a great idea and again, quite low hanging fruit to actually organize. So, about these inclusive team activities, we've also tried them a lot. There's people, as mentioned, who value these current times of working in isolation, working at home, seeing people less and they value that, but there's the other group who needs the people around them, and they need to have activities together. The past winter was quite challenging because it was super cold, so outdoor meetings, they didn't happen that easily. The phone ran out of battery, or my fingers were frozen after two minutes and it was just too cold. I'm really happy to have the spring here and also taking into account the restrictions, so there's a lot of restrictions and this atmosphere of what is allowed and what is not, so taking into account those has also at times been challenging. Lowering the barrier to ask for help or just to ask for a colleague to go for a walk or soon we can have lunch in the park, just lowering the bar for communicating and asking for company is really important nowadays.

Maria:

Yeah. I think you had a lot of good, low hanging fruits that you expressed during our discussion. For example, one thing that you talked about was the breakout rooms, where you get to talk with a small group of people, because often if we have this kind of Teams coffee, we are all, we might be 20 people there. And then, there are three people who are talking because no one else gets the chance. And all of this kind of spontaneous one-on-one sessions go away. Because if we're in a room with 20 people, we might turn to the person next to us and start talking with them. But this is not possible in Teams unless we make these specific breakout rooms for them. So, I think that's a good idea also.

Maija:

And I think that's a tool how to get as close to the old school coffee breaks as possible. Like if we had 20 colleagues in a coffee room back in the days, there were these "kukppikunnat", or we kind formed smaller groups, one of the groups showing dog pictures and other group talking about something in the news and so forth. And that doesn't happen in Zoom. But if we have these breakout rooms or a possibility to have maybe a bit more intimate, smaller group to have a chat that already helps a lot. And the final thing on my side is that, as mentioned, I'm still trying to learn how to work during these exceptional times. So, I have this campaign for myself. So, I'm trying to have at least one small change to my working style every month. It doesn't have to be anything big, and it can be anything big, because it needs to be something that I can easily change and try. And after a month, I can then do some small reflection or thinking backwards that, how did it actually go, did I enjoy something in a different way, like start working 30 minutes earlier or having a walk on my lunch break or having a different kind of an afternoon snack or whatever, setting myself busy in Teams, that helps a lot. So, just something really small then, I hope that a long time, I will create a lot more fruitful setting for me to work, even though if I have to still work at home.

Maria:

I love those ideas that you had. And I think there's a lot for our listeners to try from those. And myself, I'm trying to pay more attention to my ergonomics because my neck has been in pain. And also, my mental ergonomics by trying to change the scenery, so that I don't sit all day at my desk, but I move around and stare out the window to get a further gaze and to get my mind elsewhere. And also, I want to start sending these small, positive messages to my wonderful colleagues through our Teams channel. And then, I've also adapted, because, well, I call myself meme Maria, so I'm now trying to live up to that name by sending memes in our team group, our Teams group for the whole team of learning services. So, I hope they won't mind that every Monday they will get a new meme. And just trying to make sure that my colleagues also know that they are important to me and my well-being.

Maija:

And just think about how little input you have to make, just draft one message, which is obvious for you, but how big impact it can have on someone else's day. Someone will wake up to a crappy day, but when they open their Teams or email, they see your message and it can be a game-changer for that day. That sounds perfect.

Maria:

And I'd like to finish this great talk. Thank you, Maija, for being my guest here and this podcast, it's been great to talk with you. And I'd like to challenge our listeners. So, what is it you think that you or your colleagues could do to improve your situation? What is the smallest possible action you could take in order to increase your own well-being or the well-being of someone else? And there are a lot of low hanging fruits throughout our talk. So, if you missed them, then you just have to listen to us again. But do you have any final words, Maija?

Maija:

I thank you for having this discussion. It's been really helpful and fruitful, and I encourage everyone to start harvesting those low hanging fruits. Even the smallest thing can have the biggest impact and take care of your colleagues as well. Thank you. About those low hanging fruits, I would love to learn about from others' experience. So, where can I find those replies?

Maria:

So, if our audience, if you, listener, want to share what is the smallest possible action you are going to take to increase your own well-being or the well-being of someone else, then you can post in Instagram, in the account of PhD Pathfinder. And if you want to learn more about doctoral student well-being issues, then you can read my blog at www.mariatornroos.fi.

Maija:

And I highly recommend everyone to visit there. It's a collection of concrete blog posts with great examples and great tips for how to change your mindset, how to actually make an enjoyable path of your PhD.

Maria:

Thank you, Maija. Thank you to all our listeners. It's been a pleasure to talk about these issues. And I also hope that you've enjoyed listening to our discussion. One thing that our producer wanted me to say is that this has been a really Corona-friendly recording. We are not physically together. Maija is at home, I am at home and our producer is in a third, unspecified location. See you.

Maija:

Hope to see you soon.