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Review Article

Experiences of Non-Voluntary Working from Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic entailed stay-at-home orders that prohibited normal daily activities such as going to work. This study aimed to explore how employees experienced working from home during COVID-19 and what it meant to their well-being, work performance and work-life balance. Methods: Qualitative study based on Ricoeur's hermeneutic-phenomenological approach. Data was collected during the spring 2021 and consisted of interviews with open questions. Three female participants from a large educational institution in Denmark were included. Results: Working non-voluntarily from home was associated with six themes. Working from home reduced the preparedness for work, working from home demands a new structure of the workplace, Structure of time when working from home is promoted by a cohabiting family, The difficult balance between disturbance and stimulation when working from home, The meaning of isolation for task solving and interaction when working from home, and Outreach management as a cohesive force. Conclusion: For the employee, the flexibility of being able to organize everyday life according to family and personal needs, the employee needs colleagues and the employee wants immersion in the working tasks. The leader can be an aware of the immersion and interaction between employees when working from home. Furthermore, the leader must be visible physically and virtually and create a working environment at home and at the physical working place considering personality type of employees.

Introduction

During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, countries around the world implemented public health measures, including physical distancing to limit the spread of coronavirus. These measures resulted in various home confinement directives and comprising stay-at-home orders, isolation requirements, and general lockdowns of activities in society. During the pandemic , many individuals transitioned rapidly to working from home [1,2]. However, these public health responses to control spread of infection can disrupt everyday life and impact negatively on health and well-being. Accordingly, in addition to coping with the immediate health threat of COVID-19, individuals also coped with sudden lifestyle adjustments as a result of employment change, often leading to economic hardship as well as home isolation [3]. These sudden lifestyle changes frequently manifested as psychosocial stressors with negative consequences for mental health [4,5], including increased reports of depression and anxiety during the first wave of COVID-19 in 2020 [6-12]. These reactions to the pandemic may have increased pre-existing inequities in health and social outcomes among vulnerable groups [13].

The involuntary social isolation for those required to work

from home, is likely to have had a negative impact. Prior research has shown that high-quality social interactions, including informal conversations among colleagues, are essential for mental and physical health. Handshakes that are also known to be valuable to establish social connection [14] were also restricted to prevent spread of the coronavirus. Both requirements to work from home and plans to de- densify workplaces to ensure physical distancing are likely to, at least to some degree, to harm the individual mental and physical health [15]. More insidious than the loss of social interactions, loneliness is a psychologically painful emotion resulting from subjective feelings of social needs not being adequately met [16]; prior to the pandemic, loneliness was already considered "an epidemic" [17,18]. Workplace loneliness has been shown to have a strong negative impact on employees' affective commitment, affiliative behaviors, and performance [19]. The absence of nonverbal cues when communication is online as well as the risk of misunderstandings are likely to increase employees' concerns about being interpersonally rejected, which contributes to loneliness [16].

Individuals handle the same situations differently, which is why personality plays a role. The Big Five personality traits1 [20] predict many work attitudes and behaviors, including those relevant to COVID-19, such as coping [21], work-life balance [22], and subjective well-being [23]. Quantitative reviews of more than 90 meta- analyses show that extraversion and conscientiousness play particularly important roles in successful adjustment to emotions and work goals. Extraversion contributes to adjustment by promoting more frequent experiences of higher levels of positive emotions as well as a richer repertoire of interpersonal skills [24]. Conscientiousness contributes to adjustment by fostering commitment and perseverance toward more predictable, nonimmediate work goals [25]. There is reason to expect that both traits have played key roles in workplace adjustments during the COVID-19 pandemic [26]. For example, the need for distancing among people may have increased tendencies toward introversion, which, in turn, has been associated with diminished positive emotions [27]. Furthermore, while conscientiousness offers potent workplace benefits, it is known that unpredictability increases job complexity, which, in turn, decreases the beneficial effects of conscientiousness [25].

Beyond the Big Five traits, other individual differences may also play a role. In working from home, Rothbard, Phillips, and Dumas [28] reported that "segmentors", meaning people who are less satisfied and committed to the organization, but when they have greater access to integrating policies they tend to enjoy work and perform better when they have a clear boundary between work and spare time. On the other hand, "integrators" tend to flourish when toggling between different activities across these boundaries. This distinction is useful because everyone may benefit from different adaptations in work routines. "Segmentors",

particularly those who live with others, may benefit from strategies that enable them to tolerate nonwork interruptions during work hours, whereas "integrators" may benefit from some segmentation in time and space [26].

Mette Mechlenborg, Senior Researcher at University of Aalborg points out that because the separation of work and spare time is so fundamental to our sense of home, a reorganization of our working life requires not only a reorientation of employment policies and the labor market, but a rethinking of housing policy, housing development and our perception of home in the aftermath of COVID-19 [29].

Evidence suggests that working conditions have deteriorated for many employees [26]. COVID-19 has contributed to a greater risk of burnout among employees including permanent feelings of exhaustion and a distant attitude toward work [30]. Moreover, the continuous exposure to COVID-19 in the media fostered rumination, repetitively and passively focusing on symptoms of distress and the possible causes and consequences of these symptoms [31]. In a way, the COVID-19 lockdown kick-started a movement away from the home as our personal paradise towards a place for community, local connection, and a complete everyday life. This means that in the new normal after COVID-19 when working from home, the employee's personality is important, and we must understand what it means for people to work from home to develop a sustainable future for the non- voluntary home workplace.

Aim

This study aimed to explore how employees experienced working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and what it meant to well-being, work performance and work-life balance.

Methods

Design

This qualitative study is based on Ricoeur's hermeneutic-phenomenological approach [32], which facilitates access to participants' experiences through open interviews.

Participants and data collection

Data were collected during spring 2021 through interviews. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed. Three female participants from a large educational institution were included based on their own perception. The interviews were conducted virtually due to COVID-19.

Data analysis and interpretation

Building on Ricoeur's philosophy on how to understand peoples' world , we conducted a three-level interpretation process based on his theory of interpretation [33] to explore the

meaning of the participants' experiences. The process included a circular process of naïve reading, structural analysis, and critical understanding. According to Ricoeur, this process builds on the dialectical movement between explanation and understanding. Thus, interpretation moves from what the text says to what the text is about [33]. This provides an understanding of the text as a whole and what it adds to our understanding of the world.

In the first phase, naïve reading, the text was read several times to achieve an immediate understanding of the content. Ricoeur emphasizes that this phase is initial and must be validated by subsequent structural analysis.

In the structural analysis, the text was read sentence by sentence to decide what the text said and what it was about. This allowed us to achieve a deeper understanding of the text in terms of themes and subthemes.

Finally, interpretation was conducted as a critical analysis that entailed revising, broadening and deepening the awareness through critical reflection [33]. The themes derived from the texts in the structural analysis became the basis of the comprehensive understanding [33]. In the discussion, the themes that were the most probable were related to relevant theoretical perspectives and existing research was included to achieve new insights, thus creating new knowledge about employees' experiences of non-voluntary working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethical considerations

The study was registered at Aarhus University and approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency (Journal no. 2016-051-000001). The participants were informed both verbally and in writing about the purpose of the study. They were assured that participation was voluntary, that they would be able to withdraw from the study at any time, and that all data would be anonymized [34]. According to Danish law, approval from the Central Denmark Committee on Health Research Ethics was not required.

Results

When the traditional workspace changed because of employees' non-voluntary working from home during COVID-19, it changed the physical, mental, and social space for work, as well as habits and structure of everyday life. This impacted on the well-being of the employees working non-voluntary from home and their work performance. In the following, six themes are unfolded on how employees experienced working from home during COVID-19. The themes were: Working from home reduced the preparedness for work, working from home demands a new structure of the workplace, Structure of time when working from home is promoted by a cohabiting family, The difficult balance between disturbance and stimulation when working from home, The meaning of isolation for task solving and interaction when working from home, and Outreach management as a cohesive force.

1. Working from home reduced the preparedness for work

When working non-voluntarily from home, the framework of everyday life disappeared, and the employees' normal habits that used to support their work focus were lost. The normal routine of leaving home for work had structured time including habits such as getting dressed and having breakfast. The loss of this structure reduced the experience of becoming physically and mentally ready for work. This implied lack of walking, bicycling, or driving to work, which used to mark the transition between home and work and could limit the employee's mental preparedness for work.

"I need my bike ride and getting away from my house and coming to work and I can't turn that around". Thus, the employee could miss transportation and the change from their own home to the physical workplace. This lack of routine, transportation and environmental change to the physical workplace meant that the employee was still exposed to the demands of the private life, lacking mental preparedness for the working day and ability to focus on the work.

However, the positive aspect of working at home could reduce morning stress, especially if the employee lived with a family. This reduced the usual stress of the family where everybody has to be ready to leave the home at a specific time.

2. Working from home demands a new structure of the workplace

Homework implied a lack of the traditional frame for the work environment with colleagues, and a fixed time. Therefore, the employee had to find a way of organizing the non-voluntary workplace at home. This could entail creation of a fixed physical workspace in the home.

The fixed workplace was a specific physical space where working tasks were carried out. This could be a special room dedicated for work if the employee had room for that. Then the fixed workplace in the home meant that the physical space would be a kind of office where there was room for a height-adjustable desk, office chair and a desktop computer.

"Our work requires immersion, so we cannot be moved in and out of tasks. So, in that way, at least I am, very efficient in our way of working"

Such a space would provide a working environment with peace and focusing on ergonomics and enable an experience of going on and off work. Establishing a physical space where the work tasks are completed could contribute to provide a mental

readiness for the working tasks and the working day. However, for some employees it was not a solution, as such a space gave the experience of isolation. Even if there was space in the home for the fixed workplace, the employee might choose the floating home workplace. This meant that the employee found a space in the living room or bedroom for work, because the space enabled them to feel more stimulated and motivated to work.

"Something happens all the time. Some people come by outside by the road and a bird comes by and eats and so... So, I sit at my dining table".

However, working in the floating home workplace also made it difficult to separate working hours and spare time. Work became visible during both working hours and spare time. For those who did not have a dedicated space in a separate room for an office, the beneficial stimulation and motivation could instead be experienced as disturbance and distraction.

3. Structure of time when working from home is promoted by a cohabiting family

Working from home, time could be floating with no fixed beginning or end of the working day. However, for employees living with a family, the non-voluntary home workplace involved family conditions and practical chores. These impacted on how working tasks were carried out. This meant that time during the working day was not only spent on the specific work tasks, but also on doing practical chores and help children with non-voluntary classrooms at home. Therefore, a new structure of the working day was required:

"I hold more frequent breaks, but no longer breaks. I take several breaks and it's typically to do laundry or something like that"

When the employee needed time for something else than work during the day, it was important to count the hours to document the work performance. To compensate for more breaks during the working day, the employee logged on the computer earlier e.g., at the beginning of the usual transport time.

"I log on my computer maybe already between 7-8 am and start working at 8 am. So, it will be the case that I am online for longer time from 8-15 pm sometimes to 15.30 pm"

However, this also meant that the needs of a cohabiting family helped to structure the working day, systematizing working hours and making sure that the working tasks were completed.

4. The difficult balance between disturbance and stimulation when working from home

Although the cohabiting family promoted structuring of work, the family could also be disturbing, and their needs

interruptive to the work performance and possibility to immerse into the work task.

"You can say that the interruptions at home, it's something about helping with some schoolwork or something and it also makes good sense, but it doesn't make much sense in relation to the work"

Despite the effort to plan for supporting the family during the working day, the cohabiting family meant noise around the work. This reduced the immersion that otherwise could contribute to creating more quality in the work.

5. The meaning of isolation for task solving and interaction when working from home

Working from home at the non-voluntary workplace was characterized by a separation from colleagues and interdisciplinary collaboration, which could lead to experiences of isolation. This isolation affected the employee's well-being and had implications for the value of the working community.

For an employee who did not live together with a family, the non-voluntary home workplace could contribute to feelings of isolation and maybe even loneliness. The work task became the meeting place instead of the physical workplace, the computer could then be experienced as a bridge connecting to the world.

"You're really living your own life without interaction. The computer becomes like the lifeblood".

This resulted in employees finding distractions from both colleagues and other interactions life-giving and necessary for their well-being. If this was central for the joy of work, this interaction was missed and experienced as a great loss.

"So, I simply miss my colleagues and it means a lot for my working life and that's really what I go to work for. I am not motivated because I have no colleagues. I have lost the job satisfaction not having any colleagues"

The isolation and absence of colleagues entailed that the joy of solving tasks was reduced. The joy was reduced if the tasks had elements of organizing and the lack of collegial interaction reduced mutual engagement, motivation and cocreation. Therefore, tasks could become random and tedious without the interaction with colleagues.

Even employees with cohabitant families experienced that they have lost the relationship with their colleagues because they lacked a sense of flow and balance with other people. This contributed to a mental exhaustion and an experience of isolation.

"Well, there's no small talk at all. It is missing. That part of small talk and certain things you can solve just over a cup of coffee or in the kitchen when you're a colleague. Now you only turn to a

colleague if there is a specific thing you need to know"

Employees experienced the perception of each other as an important element in connection with being able to talk to each other about both working tasks and private matters. The social community at the physical workplace was formed in the informal conversations among colleagues, which most often took place at informal spaces e.g., at the coffee machine.

6. Outreach management as a cohesive force

Working at home increased the number of emails. This was experienced as an interruption adding to the time needed to do the tasks. Simultaneously, these disturbances were also pointed out as contributing to the task at hand and therefore they were also experienced as meaningful. Thus, the interruptions from colleagues were experienced as positive, not least because they bridged the gap of distance from colleagues. However, the employees emphasied that there was a difference between writing, speaking and sitting in the same room when communicating. The employees experienced it as an obstacle not to have a physical interaction, which created an insecurity in communication.

"Because the writing and the short messages are so very different than when you're sitting together. Because then you sit and discuss it a bit together"

The co-creation from discussions with colleagues was lacking in the non-voluntary home workplace, which affected the professional exchange of the task. In the virtual workspace at home, employees pointed out that the dialogue between employees cannot only take place through emails.

Here the leader could take an active role to maintain interaction between the employees. Virtual meetings created and maintained some structure. This could provide a specific time or point of reference during the day and support the framework of the working day. But on the other hand, the employees also experienced that the virtual coffee meetings were good, but that something important was lost in the relationships because a lot of the employees were quiet.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how employees experienced working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and what it meant to well-being, work performance and work-life balance. Our study confirms that if society is supposed to support the well-being, work performance and work-life balance of employees working from home, we must understand what it means for people to work at home.

Our study revealed that employees' readiness and motivation for work can be inhibited when the usual habits of everyday life are not maintained due to working at home. Rites of passage are also referred to as a transition. Transition is among other things an inner adaptation to an external influence, and it is individual how we experience and respond to a change [35]. This means that if the employee is used to spending 20 minutes in the morning bicycling or driving to work, then this rite of passage should be maintained even if the work takes place at home. However, our study showed that employees with cohabiting families prioritized the usual rites of passage of logging on the computer earlier to compensate for more breaks during the day. Journalist and director of the company TAKE BACK TIME Pernille Garde Abildgaard points out that COVID-19 has contributed to a change in the number of hours spent at work being equal to quality of the work [36]. Pernille Abildgaard points out that this understanding is a tradition in the industrial society and is harmful to a knowledge society. Our study showed that the non-voluntary working from home for some employees was experienced as less stressful during the working day because the employee had the opportunity to do household chores during the working day. Data from 29 European countries from an online survey on the experiences of knowledge workers indicated that most people had a more positive rather than negative experience of working at home during COVID-19 [37]. The survey pointed out that for some people with high levels of socioeconomic security, the lack of commuting, changed to education and work activities, and increased time with family, which potentially could have reduced stress and increased mental health and wellbeing [37]. The corona crisis has thus opened our eyes to articulate whether we have arranged our lives as we wish. A working week with more flexibility in where we work, and work environment may potentially help reduce the general stress level in the population.

Our study showed that the employees' mental readiness was affected because the line between the working day and everyday life was blurred because the manager was not present in the virtual workplace and in the framing of working from home. A rapid review pointed out that, as a minimum, employees should have the opportunity for regular communication between the leader and colleagues to reduce the negative impacts associated with feeling isolated whilst working from home [38]. Oakman illuminates that the leader's role in the virtual workplace will be to facilitate and frame meeting management, sparring, team building and building trust among colleagues who rarely see each other. It is reassuring to know that leadership can also work effectively from a distance [39] and among the more specific leader activities that will be important to consider in relation to COVID-19 is how assessment systems function [26]. For example, without being able to directly monitor employees in the office setting, there may be a shift to result-focused assessment [26]. However, The Consultancy - New Stories, which has more than 40 years of experience with management and organizational development, indicates that a generally more flexible organization of work tasks and working

hours contribute to recruiting and retaining skilled employees in the younger generations [40]. This could indicate that the experience from COVID-19 regarding the flexibility in the organization of working hours and work location can help to retain and recruit employees. On the other hand, the future hybrid workplace must also consider the importance of social communities as well as how employees achieve results. The workplace of the future does not exist in a one size fits all version.

Our study showed that the employees experienced mental exhaustion by working from home non- voluntarily and the social interactions with colleagues was lacking. The Industry Community for the Working Environment for Welfare and Public Administration in Denmark points out that the manager must systematize contact with employees both personally and jointly [41]. The manager's role regarding the employee's psychological dissatisfaction is thus also to identify whether the problem is the culture or the framework for social interactions when working from home. The psychological dissatisfaction of employees is worrying in relation to the large proportion of the population who live alone and where colleagues make up most of the daily network. Our study showed that there are considerable differences in the relationship employees have with their colleagues. Some employees considered some of their colleagues as family. Anne Knudsen, Doctor in Anthropology, contrasts the culture of a workplace with the culture of the family. These are two cultures that most of us know and that are and preferably should be very different. In many workplaces, especially smaller workplaces and in departments or teams where you have worked together for many years, there is a tendency for the psychological work environment to be too family-like [42].

Thus, it can become a problem if colleagues have taken over family status when working from home. With working from home, this problem becomes opposite and the lack of colleagues and the close relationships impact on the employees' well-being and interactions with colleagues are replaced by virtual coffee meetings and distanced communication.

Our study showed that physical well-being may be related to the employee's personality type, which affects choice of the preferred room for working from home. Employees who have outgoing jobs interacting with other people chose to work in a room in the home where they could somehow interact with others. For higher introvert employees who had a job that was document based, chose working in a room that allowed focus on the work task. This could indicate that personality is important for the choice of physical work environment when working from home. It has long been known that certain personalities match certain jobs. Companies have for many years used the DISC-model (Dominance, Influence, Stability, Competent) developed by psychologist William Moulton Marston in 1928, which is a tool to assess employee behavior [43]. This could indicate that knowledge about personality types can be used by the manager to create well-being in the physical work environment in the home and facilitate different workspaces [44].

Limitations

This study included three female participants from a large educational institute in Denmark. No males were represented which may limit our understanding of differences related to gender. The study provides an understanding of how working from home was experienced differently between study participants. The interviews were conducted virtually, which may have influenced data collection because of the lack of physical presence between the participants and interviewer.

Conclusion

The experiences have led to an evaluation of the traditional way of working and thoughts about how to maintain the positive aspects of working from home. The results of this study contribute with perspectives of the employee and the leader, which may have an impact on the employees' well-being, work-life-balance, and work performance. Employees find the flexibility of being able to organize everyday life according to family and personal needs, the employees need to interact with colleagues and employees want to immerse in the working tasks. The leader's task can be to be aware of the paradox between immersion and interaction between employees when working from home. Furthermore, the leader must be visible physically and virtually and create a working environment at home and at the physical workplace based on the employees' personality type.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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