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Working from home: Findings and prospects for further research

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Abstract

Working from home has not only attracted attention during the Covid-19 pandemic but has been researched for a long time in connection with topics such as the flexibilization of work, digitalisation and changing values. Central issues around the organisational and societal phenomenon of working from home are linked to the resources and strains of employees. This has direct consequences for the leadership and management of human resources. In this article, we review the results of research contributions available in this issue and at the same time show that working from home raises even broader questions, for example about the emergence of new hybrid forms of organisation and employment or social justice or new infrastructures for living and working.

Keywords

Covid-19, flexible work, hybrid work, remote work, working from home

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Introduction: Some remarks on the relevance of remote work

The phenomenon of working from home (WFH) is linked to a variety of megatrends that companies have confronted over many years. These include demographic change, leading to shortages of skilled workers in many regions and professions; the individualisation of needs and lifestyles as a result of changing values; and most particularly, the digitalisation of the world of work (Schmoll and Süß, 2019). The latter manifests itself in digital products and processes, but also, for many employees, changing experiences of work itself. This encompasses both the subject of work, and also the time and place of work. Digital technology opens up the possibility that knowledge workers can perform their work at any time and from any place (Bader and Kaiser, 2017). The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing trends, shifting the work of millions of employees worldwide into the home office (Kniffin et al., 2021).

Such a shift involves much more than a change in the location of work, from centralised and dedicated work-sites, such as offices, to other locations: whether the home, cafes, mobile locations or, increasingly popular, co-working spaces. This shift is also consequential for workers' perception of and attitude towards work. For example, insofar as decentralisation makes spontaneous interactions more difficult or eliminates them altogether, creative processes can be inhibited and if work is no longer able to fulfil social needs, something that is important for many people, the result may be professional isolation (Golden et al., 2008). Working from home also alters the relationship between the formal and informal organisational structures. For instance, online meetings, which require invitations and are typically highly structured, make it more difficult to establish informal relational work. This may be especially important for new employees, for whom the development of new collegial relations is a critical part of the informal induction processes.

Leadership interactions have also been changed with new demands on managers to develop ways of leading that extend beyond personal presence and interaction, through digital channels and that are effective from a distance (Contreras et al., 2020). In addition, digital work harbours new potential stressors. First and foremost, there are technostresses that have been identified as resulting from intensive technology use and the dissolution of boundaries between work and private life (Tarafdar et al., 2007). Although some perceive this greater integration of spheres as positive, allowing for a more wholistic or flexible relationship between home and work, for others it represents a challenge and burden (Kreiner, 2006). This can be related, for example, to the fact that many workers have difficulty recovering from work because they find it problematic to disconnect from work at home (Wendsche et al., 2021). This in turn raises issues for the health and well-being of employees who work from home. Because we know that psychological detachment from work in non-work time is important for maintaining health and well-being (Karabinski et al., 2021).

This Special Issue addresses working from home, its possibilities and challenges. Entitled, 'Remote Work: How working from home affects individuals, leadership, organisation of work and human resource practices', it addresses topics that have been made more topical, relevant (and at times explosive) by the pandemic, but which were already

the subject of intense scientific discussion pre-pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is therefore an accelerator of this discussion and of research on working from home, but not its spark (Kniffin et al., 2021).

The vitality of this field of scientific research is reflected in the large number of high-quality submissions to this Special Issue and the range of topics addressed. This range also speaks to the intensive but varied ways HR and labour researchers approach the topic of remote work. In this respect, this Special Issue of the German Journal of Human Resource Management is bringing together varied approaches and interests in different facets of remote work. A central focus is the consequences of digital or mobile work for employees and managers. But the research also provides suggestions about ways forward, including ideas about how the challenges of working from home can be overcome.

Overview of the contributions collected in special issue

In the first article of this issue, *Cara Kossen* and *Alexandra von der Berg* deal with the dark side of working from home. In their article '*When the exception becomes the norm - A quantitative analysis of the dark side of work from home*' they point out that besides the many advantages that remote working can bring, there are clear disadvantages associated with increased working from home. They build on theories of social identity, which highlight the need to belong, and use a moderated mediation model to test how increased WFH affects feelings of isolation and influences employees' organisational identification. They find that higher levels of WFH during the COVID-19 lockdown led to more social isolation and less organisational identification. However, the authors also show that task interdependence, that is the extent to which members of an organisation must rely on each other to complete their work tasks, significantly weakens the correlation between increased levels of WFH and social isolation. The study concludes, therefore, that companies should integrate their employees who do a lot of work from home, into organisational routines to reduce feelings of social isolation and increase organisational identification.

The second article, '*Forced to go virtual. Working-from-home arrangements and their effect on team communication during COVID-19 lockdown*' is by *Marcel Maurer*. It has as its starting point the observation that the COVID-19 pandemic meant that teams that previously did not work virtually were forced to interact and communicate virtually. The author uses a unique data set comprising network analysis of email communication and qualitative interviews before and during the COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020 to analyse changes in the intra-team communication of four teams in a German medium-sized company. He shows that flat hierarchies and self-managed processes helped team members to mitigate negative effects of spatial and temporal dispersion. In addition, his analysis identifies the emergence of faultlines in teams, while suggesting that team cohesion, identification with the team and individuals engaging in brokerage roles reduce the negative effects of these faultlines. The study makes an important contribution to research on coordination and communication in virtual teams, incorporating contextual, organisational and team-related, as well as individual factors, in analysing successful outcomes.

Verena Haun, *Chiara Rimmel* and *Sascha Haun* ask how blurred boundaries between work and private life impact the recovery of teleworkers. The article, '*Boundary*

Management and Recovery when Working from Home: The Moderating Roles of Segmentation Preference and Availability Demands examines teleworkers' temporal, physical, communicative, and technological boundary tactics and how these act as predictors of recovery experiences and outcomes. It is hypothesised that individual preferences for the division of work and leisure (a personal factor) and availability demands (a situational factor) moderate the relationship between boundary tactics and recovery. A hierarchical regression analysis is used and shows that the use of temporal demarcation tactics is positively associated with psychological detachment, control and lower fatigue, while the use of technological demarcation tactics is associated with higher psychological detachment. Overall, the authors' study improves our understanding of teleworkers' recovery processes, outlining techniques which may help teleworkers to facilitate and sustain recovery.

The fourth paper, *How do employees cope with mandatory working from home during COVID-19?* by *Andreea Dicu, Irma Rybnikova and Thomas Steger*, first asks how employees forced to work from home during COVID-19 coped with what was an unprecedented situation and, second, how they manage related stress. Based on the Job Demand Resources (JD-R) model and the literature on coping, the authors analyse empirical qualitative material drawn from two-stage interviews and online diaries of 15 employees in Romania. They identify four initial coping types in relation to compulsory homeworking: 'explorers', 'statics', 'chaotics' and 'irremediabiles'. Interestingly, however, during their field research, as the pandemic persists, the authors found that the 'chaotic' type of coping disappeared.

Eva-Helen Krehl and Marion Büttgen reflect on the role of leaders in their contribution *'Uncovering the complexities of remote leadership and the usage of digital tools during the COVID-19 pandemic - A qualitative diary study'*. They note that the sudden changes in work due to COVID-19 meant that leaders were confronted with new challenges and feared losing control or demotivated teams. Based on a study of the daily experiences of managers, seeking effective ways to work remotely, the paper seeks to provide an understanding of how managers coped with the complexity of remote work, by using digital tools. Specifically, the authors ask: (1) What practices do leaders adopt to manage the complexity of everyday leadership? (2) How do different digital tools fit with different leadership practices? (3) What promotes and inhibits leadership effectiveness? Longitudinal data from leaders' diaries are used to answer these questions and identify leadership practices. They find that leaders have a broad repertoire of leadership practices, and that leaders tend to focus on relation-oriented leadership practices. Furthermore, leaders focus on operational and team-oriented leadership practices, while finding it challenging to choose the right digital tool to fit their message. For instance, video conferencing is seen as particularly appropriate to support remote leadership practices.

The sixth contribution is entitled *'The joint role of HRM and leadership for teleworker well-being - An analysis during the COVID-19 pandemic'*. In this study, *Niklas Günther, Sven Hauff and Philip Dorsel* explore whether the sudden and widespread introduction of telework at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic jeopardised employee well-being. They identify a set of specific HRM practices and leadership behaviours and explore how these relate to teleworkers' perceptions of happiness in terms of work

engagement and job satisfaction. In doing so, they consider the mediating roles of social isolation (as an indicator of social well-being) and psychological distress (as an indicator of health well-being). They find that HRM and leadership have differentiated and complementary effects. In particular, health care oriented HRM practices contributed most to the relationship between HRM and social isolation and well-being. Leadership had an impact on teleworkers' feelings of happiness, mainly through reducing strain, by ensuring communication and information exchange between teleworkers.

A final contribution deals with the phenomenon of online video meetings, something that has become widespread since COVID-19. In their contribution '*Remote Work Video Meetings: Workers' Emotional Exhaustion and Practices for Greater Well-Being*' Betty Johnson and Beth Mabry examine 'Zoom fatigue'. The authors examine workers' perceptions about the experience of video meetings and how these relate to or produce emotional exhaustion. Based on a mixed-method study, they show that workers feel psychologically depleted by a range of issues: video meeting load, the excess load needed for their job, video meetings that are not beneficial to them, video meetings that take up the time and energy needed to perform other job responsibilities or fulfil their home responsibilities, and the perceived necessity to surface act during meetings. The data show these factors produce diminished well-being characterised by emotional exhaustion. The researchers were also curious about workers ideas about ways to make video meetings less tiring and more beneficial. These insights inform practical suggestions about how leaders and organisations can reduce stress and the emotional fatigue of video meetings. Finally, the research suggests that supportive practices related to planning and inclusion and supportive interaction also ease video meeting exhaustion.

Outlooks on further research needs

Of course, the topic 'Working from Home' is not exhausted by the articles in this special issue. These articles focus on the stresses and strains that arise from remote working for both employees and managers and suggest initial solutions and coping strategies. But it is likely that more comprehensive changes will occur as increased working from home persists. These will need to be considered by further human resources and organisational research. We here identify four topics that we believe it will be necessary for future analysis of WFH to pick up.

The first topic might be broadly understood as the rise of 'hybrid work' (Xie et al., 2019). This occurs where there is a mix of working in the organisation's office and from home. This will shape the future of work in several ways. First, individual employees may switch back and forth between their home and office workplaces, requiring that interaction and communication with colleagues and managers also switches between analogue (face-to-face) and digital media. At organisational level this will lead to a situation where, at any point, one part of the workforce is on-site at the company and another working from home, with the part that is in each location varying across days or weeks. This form of hybrid work will present new challenges and opportunities for the coordination of work-sharing.

Secondly, both in this Special Issue and across wider academic and popular media accounts, we observe that intensive working from home changes the social bond and

organisational identification of employees. In the USA it has been suggested that this underpins the phenomena commonly described as the ‘Great Resignation’ or ‘Big Quit’ (Sull et al., 2022). Over the long term, remote working may therefore have the potential to change the systems of work and employment and our engagement with these even more. On the one hand, this could manifest in consistently higher turnover rates and lower job tenure. On the other hand, advancing digitalisation alongside the modularisation of work, may combine with decreased organisational belonging, and mean we see increasing numbers of work tasks mediated via platforms, producing an increase in gig work.

Third, in this discussion it is critical we remember that it is not possible for all occupational groups and sectors to perform work tasks from home and many workers occupy homes that are not suitable sites for work (Kossek and Lautsch, 2018). Consequently, there will be employees who, must work from home, and employees who may not or cannot do so. This has the potential to produce divided workforces at the level of individual companies, but also society-level divisions. These issues are closely related to issues of justice and freedom. Namely, if there is a more divided workforce, one part of the workforce does achieve disproportionately greater freedom in their work life.

Following from the above, questions arise whether employees whose jobs mean that they cannot work from home must be compensated for this. For instance, provided with expenses sufficient to cover commuting costs or a supplement that enables them to live in what may be relatively high-cost neighbourhoods, proximate to worksites. Conversely should employees who are expected to work from home be compensated for the costs involved, for instance for the provision of working space, for relevant technologies or utility bills. Another key question here is how increased expectations about home-working might exclude already disadvantaged groups whose housing or domestic arrangements are poorly suited to WFH. We already know that women found it much harder than men to carve out time from family life during COVID-19’s enforced WFH period (Xue and McMunn, 2021). Similarly, those in multiple-occupancy accommodation or whose accommodation is limited in size or is noisy may not have the appropriate surroundings to engage in WFH insofar as this requires their homes be used as workplaces. Additionally, as our understanding of ‘the office’ changes, as some employees occupy a home office and a company office or, in the future, only an online office so organisations need to rethink work-life policies and ask new questions about what will attract and retain employees. As part of this, they may need to re-examine and perhaps re-value physical and blended work office environments, identifying within these mechanisms that provide opportunities for community learning and relational work.

Finally, there are aspects of working from home that leave the sphere of management research far behind. This includes, for example, issues around new infrastructural demands in conurbations that will occur with increased remote working, but also decreased infrastructural demands in inner-city areas, with high preponderances of office buildings (Bereitschaft and Scheller, 2020). WFH changes may impact, for instance, the requirements for housing, with additional space increasingly a standard requirement. It might also mean that forms of transport could be cut back. Rural areas might benefit from new residents, while companies based in locations that were previously unattractive to employees might become now be able to recruit employees based

in more attractive locations. As part of this are complex effects on sustainability, which it will be essential to assess. Most of these are not obviously topics for HR research, but many relate to central challenges of HR management, such as staff recruitment.

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