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# Guest editorial: Work from home (WFH), employee productivity and wellbeing: lessons from COVID-19 and future implications

Guest editorial

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The COVID-19 pandemic has tested the world's resilience and the balance sheets of many governments and organizations (PwC, 2020). As nations emerge from the public health crisis, few would find a silver lining in the aftermath of the pandemic. Economic challenges, supply chain problems and labour shortages continue to plague the global economy. Yet the COVID-19 outbreak forced businesses to rethink their working practices and organizational design, and for many office workers this meant the sudden implementation of remote working from home (WFH) or flexible working. Large enterprises have reported significant benefits of mandated home working, with reports of up to 70% increase in productivity for companies with above \$1b revenues (CapGemini, 2020). Such gains are attributed to less commuting time, flexible work schedules, and adoption of effective virtual collaboration tools. But even for small businesses, research shows that effective remote work practices can improve productivity, especially when managers trust remote workers and allow them more autonomy (Parker *et al.*, 2020). However, a continuing debate questions the effectiveness of the unexpected change in working circumstances and enforced WFH, the challenges it can bring, as well as the potential missed opportunities due to the lack of the "watercooler moment". Working from home has challenged the very definition of "productivity" as the "hours spent on business applications" in the digital economy (Bond-Smith and McCann, 2022).

Reviewing existing research, it emerges that optional or voluntary WFH can improve employees' well-being and performance. For example, it increases scheduling flexibility and autonomy (Kurland and Bailey, 1999), thus promoting greater work–family integration (Raghuram *et al.*, 2003), better work–life balance (Dockery and Bawa, 2018), and less work–family conflict (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007; Kelly *et al.*, 2014). It also improves job satisfaction (Castellacci and Viñas-Bardolete, 2019; Bloom *et al.*, 2015) and employment opportunities (Mello, 2015). Further, it reduces work stress (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007) and turnover intentions (Golden, 2006). Shorter commuting times also add to productivity gains by partially reducing costs associated with the health risks of long commutes (Rau and Hyland, 2002). Overall, WFH can lead to higher employee productivity, lower running costs, and other positive work-related outcomes, all strengthening firm financial performance (Bailyn, 1988; DuBrin, 1991; Council of Economic Advisors, 2010; Dutcher, 2012; Bloom *et al.*, 2015). However, WFH arrangements also expose organizations to cybercrime (Alsmadi and Prybutok, 2018), and using social platforms for work-related communication can increase end user victimization (Saridakis *et al.*, 2015; Benson *et al.*, 2015a; Hansen *et al.*, 2018). Further, WFH can also increase work–family conflict and is often associated with added work pressure, long hours (Craig and Powell, 2012; Noonan *et al.*, 2007; Golden *et al.*, 2006), slow career progression (Bloom *et al.*, 2015), and fewer opportunities for organizational or co-worker engagement (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007; Felstead *et al.*, 2002).

Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between "standard" or voluntary homeworking, and homeworking experiences specific to the pandemic. In knowledge-based organizations, WFH is commonly undertaken voluntarily after agreement between employers and employees



([Platts et al., 2022](#)). However, during the pandemic, many workers were asked to make rapid changes to their working patterns without consultation or training the essential skills for WFH, such as written communication, collaboration, focus, adaptation, and time management ([Pass and Ridgway, 2022](#); [Prossack, 2020](#)). As [Parry \(2020\)](#) points out, the negative implications of involuntary WFH are even more striking when employees are asked to adapt to new daily tasks and techniques during periods of significant organizational change. Recent research suggests that employees WFH experience a social deficit created by a lack of interpersonal contacts ([Parry et al., 2020](#)) and find it difficult switching off from work due to uninterrupted virtual access to online offices ([Parry, 2020](#)). They also struggle to juggle the competing demands of family roles and job tasks ([Khalid et al., 2022](#)). WFH further increases workplace stress and the risk of cyber-attacks, which threaten individuals' psychological well-being ([IBMsecurity, 2019](#); [Bailey and Kurland, 2002](#); [Baruch, 2000](#)) and firms' reputation and financial stability ([Benson et al., 2015b](#); [NCA, 2020](#)). Finally, besides training and technological costs, organizations might incur added employee monitoring costs as WFH arrangements challenge traditional supervision models ([Mello, 2015](#); [O'Neill et al., 2014](#)).

Undoubtedly, digital infrastructure played an essential role in normal organizational functioning when shifting to virtual work environments during COVID-19 ([Kniffin et al., 2021](#)). This includes offering virtual interactions among employers, employees, and customers as well as online services, sales, and support ([Richter, 2020](#)). Such a trend is likely to continue because digitalization features more prominently in government stimulus packages and in post-pandemic business investment plans. [Scharf and Weerda \(2022\)](#) note a large employee push towards WFH. With appropriate technological support, remote working is expected to become a widely accepted employment format ([McKinsey, 2021](#)). The potential benefits are clear: remote working can boost firms' technological innovation, ICT capacity, research and development (R&D), employees' technical skills, the efficiency of public services, and job creation. However, the crucial question whether work location matters for employee productivity and well-being remains largely unanswered.

### WFH special issue: contributions to a growing research agenda

Since the pandemic, remote working has attracted a large volume of research from various disciplines, alongside the expansion of WFH practices, academic and industry reports. [Gifford \(2022\)](#) notes that newspaper articles on WFH in the UK have increased from 150 per month pre-pandemic to almost 6,000 a month. Providing a systematic analysis and theory-building of academic research to make these discussions more informed and evidence-based needs to be a priority. Society and technology are now at a crossroad where WFH is changing the workplace and must be better understood.

This special issue of *Information Technology and People* addresses new themes and offers an emergent research agenda for the changing context of remote working due to the global pandemic. One theme, which attracted great interest from the call is the implications of a changing work environment for employees' work-related experience, including psychological well-being (e.g. job satisfaction, employee engagement), physical well-being (e.g. work intensification, job stress) and social well-being (e.g. social support, isolation and coordination).

Six articles deal with the impact of involuntary remote working on employee well-being. Based on the conservation of resource theory, Standaert, Thunus and Schoenaers examine the effect of virtual meetings on employee well-being in the enforced WFH context. Using 814 respondents from five Belgian universities, the authors argue that the impact of virtual meeting participation on well-being is paradoxical – producing both losses and gains. On one hand, too frequent and unnecessary meetings are associated with increased workload, higher levels of work-related stress and fatigue. On the other hand, virtual meetings give employees more influence at work. Singh and Verma explore COVID-19 awareness and the effects of

involuntary telework on employee functioning. Consistent with job demand-resource theory, their findings show that COVID-19 awareness (a job resource) correlates with reduced technological anxiety (a job demand) and positive attitudes, which in turn increase job satisfaction. Concerned with how compulsory remote work influences employees' feelings of isolation and alienation, Kakkar, Kuril, Singh, Saha and Dugar examine the effect of work communication on employee job satisfaction in the remote working environment. The authors find that work communication improves job satisfaction via reduced employee alienation. Work communication provides subtle social cues that help individuals to make sense of implicit workplace norms (e.g. trust and stability). Further, this mediated relationship is moderated by employees' belonging to organization with strong CSR associations.

Continuing with the main theme of employee wellbeing, Adisa, Ogbonnaya and Adekoya offer new insights on how employees can optimize work- and non-work-related experience when working remotely. Specifically, through the lens of conservation of resource theory, they explore how remote working inhibits employee engagement by examining the most salient work- and non-work-related challenges of COVID-19. Data from 32 semi-structured interviews show that the sudden transition from in-person to virtual working results in work intensification, online presenteeism, employment insecurity, and poor adaptation to the new form of working. These stress factors drain social and personal resources to the detriment of employee engagement. Schifano, Clark, Greiff, Vögele and D'Ambrosio also examine the association between WFH and subjective individual well-being. The study uses a unique dataset – four waves of longitudinal data across five European countries during the Covid-19 pandemic. The cross-sectional analysis shows that home-based teleworkers report worse well-being, whereas those who were not employed have the lowest well-being. The panel estimations, however, suggest relatively more promising results – a small drop in anxiety as individuals switch to home-based working. The authors suspect this difference may reflect the adaptation or selecting certain groups of employees into WFH. The well-being penalty associated with WFH is greater for the older, the better-educated, those with young children, and those with more crowded housing. Last, Rodrigues, Pavan Serafim, Filho and Anholon analyse the difficulties experienced by Brazilian managers in coordinating home-based working teams during the pandemic. They identify three main challenges faced by managers while working in a virtual environment. These include a difficulty in reconciling personal with professional life tasks, motivating collaborators while social isolation erodes employee mental health well-being, and keeping team members integrated. The findings provide insights on gaining organizational productivity and employees' quality of life in an atypical working environment.

Four papers in the special issue focus on how WFH affects individuals' job performance. Yu and Liu examine the job performance of remote workers in the Chinese financial industry during the lockdown. In particular, they explore how professional isolation and cynicism may influence teleworker's work performance. They conclude that professional isolation triggers employees' cynicism towards the meaningfulness of the job and the value of the organization. This in turn negatively affects job performance. Psychological hardiness shapes the strengths of the relationship by helping employees cope with isolation, and its damaging effect on task performance. The findings provide an important insight into the complexities of employee work performance in remote working settings. Damilova, Ulfsten, Eikebrokk, Iden, Johannessen and Johanson examine the drivers of individual job performance among involuntary home-based teleworkers that rely on the ICT platforms. Based on a survey of 1,183 respondents who engaged in large-scale WFH managements in Norwegian higher education, the authors find that home office setup and the reach and communication quality of ICT platforms impact positively on job performance. In contrast, professional isolation negatively impacts job performance. Their results also provide evidence on the role of digital technology in enabling WFH arrangements. Nayak, Dubey and Pandey elucidate the

implications of WFH for productivity in higher education institutes in India. The findings highlight the issues faced by faculty members during enforced WFH, including online teaching, a lack of technology acceptance, poor working environment, and work-life conflict. These challenges pose a threat to faculty productivity. However, information technology training mitigates these negative associations. Felstead and Reuschke consider a trend of growing homeworking since the early 1980s in the UK and examine the connection between homeworking and self-reported productivity during the pandemic. Using multi-sourced datasets, their findings reveal that home-based working has been on the rise for the past four decades. This shift is more pronounced among the highest paid, the better qualified, the skilled, and those living in economically prosperous areas. Surprisingly, productivity is not adversely affected among most employees, though it does vary by home schooling arrangements and nature of household duties.

Six papers consider ICT and its implication on work and non-work-related outcomes. Using affordance theory as a theoretical lens in understanding the interaction between human actors and technology, Mitchell explores the benefits and challenges resulting from virtual collaboration during the time of COVID-19. Based on a qualitative study of 55 graduate students, she identifies four collaboration technology affordances, including flexibility and productivity, social connectedness and culture, technology support and management and leadership, to ease virtual collaboration and achieve individual and organization success during and post-pandemic. Her study contributes to IS research on the efficacy of adopting virtual collaboration technologies on successful IT-associated organizational change. In a similar vein, Duan, Deng and Wibowo draw on technology affordance theory and boundary theory. The authors examine the effects of digital work on job performance, capturing digital technology affordance in the form of coordination, communication, knowledge sharing and decision-making. The findings reveal that digital technologies, which improve coordination and knowledge sharing between teleworkers, improve work-life balance and job performance. However, technology affordance for knowledge sharing communication and decision-making is not associated with WLB and job performance. Abhari, Pesavento and Williams inform our understanding of how ICT platforms promote employee-driven innovation that supports ideation and remote collaboration. They find that management support and innovation culture are important mediators in the process. Using IPT platforms (i.e. enterprise social media) plays a more critical role in fostering the two key indirect drivers of innovation rather than being an innovation platform or direct enabler itself. Abelsen, Vatne, Mikalef and Choudrie examine the use of ICTs during the pandemic and their impact on job performance and employee psychological well-being. The results suggest that high task-technology fit is associated with lower levels of feelings of loneliness and better job performance. The findings underline the role of well-designed ICTs in mitigating negative employee psychological states and improving work performance among teleworkers.

Cocosila, Farrelly and Trabelsi consider the role of ICT in the non-work context. Specifically, they assess whether mobile contact tracing applications curtailed COVID-19 transmission rates. Drawing on the theory of consumption values, the authors develop a conceptual model that outlines the drivers and challenges of using the mobile contract tracing app to prevent the spread of the diseases. The model is tested using a comparative study of 309 recent users and 306 non-users of the ABTraceTogether app offered by Government of the Province of Alberta, Canada. The findings show that utilitarian and social values, health information seeking, and perceived critical mass all drive the use of such application. Perceived privacy risk, in contrast, poses an obstacle to the usage. Chang and Benson propose and empirically test an extended unified theory of acceptance and use technology (UTAUT) model. The model integrates perceived costs and security to gain insights into user's motives for using mobile remittance services during the pandemic. Their research focuses on one user

group -Vietnamese migrant workers in Taiwan. The findings reveal four main drivers of users' behavioural intentions to adopt mobile applications: (1) performance expectancy; (2) effort expectancy; (3) perceived costs; and (4) perceived security influence. However, there is evidence that social influence and facilitating conditions relate to behavioural intentions.

The remaining two papers explore the future of the new "normal" work mode. Kim examines the association between the experience of "smart-work support service" and employees' continuance intention towards smart work. Drawing on the quality-value-loyalty chain and information system continuance model, the study explains how the quality and value of smart-work support service interact to influence one's continued engagement in smart-work. The findings highlight the role of service quality and user's perceptions of smart work value, which later determines their decision to continue smart work. Daneshfar, Asokan-Ajitha, Sharma and Malik provide an understanding of the dynamics of WFH in the pandemic. The multi-purpose study explores public sentiment towards the compulsory, quick, and communal transition from office-based working to home-based working. It further identifies the macro-, meso-, micro-level, and intervening factors that affect the transition to WFH. Fetching data from the Twitter posts related to WFH, the authors identify diverging opinions on enforced WFH between personal accounts and business accounts. While personal users post either neutral or negative thoughts (e.g. sharing stress and concerns on WFH), business account users mostly share positive tweets. Their research contributes to the literature by developing a framework to account for the macro- (e.g. government support), meso- (e.g. organizational support, ICT and cyber security) and micro-level (e.g. social connectedness and WLB) enablers and barriers of the effective outcomes of WFH. It also extends our understanding of the mediators (exhaustion and technostress) and moderators (e.g. health concerns, future uncertainty, social distancing, gender inequality and racism) in the process.

### **Discussion and implications**

The articles in this special issue demonstrate the evolving nature of remote working and the variety of aspects of employee's work experience and outcomes that it impinges upon. They also make several noteworthy contributions to research. First, remote working itself does not serve as a facilitator or a barrier that directly affects work-related well-being and work performance. Instead, it is the various opportunities and challenges associated with teleworking that have positive and negative implications for employee functioning and job performance. The scholarly contributions in this special issue treat these challenges and opportunities as work resources, work demands, mediators, or moderators that shape the outcomes of remote working. For instance, Abhari, Pesavento and Williams suggest that while the virtual meeting increases job influence, it also harms employee health well-being. Kakkar, Kuril, Singh, Saha and Dugar confirm the association between work communication and employee satisfaction via reduced employee alienation while working remotely. The strength of this association is further shaped by employees' belonging to organizations with strong CSR association. Similarly, Yu and Liu underscore the mediating role of employee cynicism and the moderating role of psychological hardiness in the link between professional isolation and job performance. Second, we must also recognize that ICT plays an essential role in the successful functioning of telecommuting, in coordinating tasks, sharing information, and getting feedback. A common thread of some articles in this special issue is that using technology and ICT platforms helps to achieve desirable employee and organizational level outcomes. For example, Abhari, Pesavento and Williams confirm that ICT platforms promote employee-driven innovation by supporting reflection and collaboration. Abelsen, Vatne, Mikalef and Choudrie show that well-designed ICTs can lessen negative employee psychosocial state and improve job performance among telecommuters. However, the efficacy of ICTs in organizations depends on digital technology affordance (see Michell's

paper and the paper by Duan, Deng and Wibowo). Third, the application of ICTs is not limited to work settings. It also includes reducing COVID-19 transmission rates (see Cocosila, Farrelly and Trabelsi) and promoting remittance services (see Chang and Benson). Fourth, the future of remote and hybrid working is promising, yet the dynamics of WFH is complex. Organizations need to develop an understanding of macro-, meso- and micro-level predictors, mediators, and moderators that drive, hinder and shape the process (see Kim's paper and the paper by Daneshfar, Asokan-Ajitha, Sharma and Malik).

Remote working looks set to become more embedded in contemporary organizational life; within this there are opportunities and challenges to manage. So, what can be done to support employees and effectively manage the shift from traditional working to new normal "work" mode in the post-pandemic era? For policy makers, there is an urgent need to address teleworking and its implication more actively and concretely. Institutional reforms should be considered to prevent this working arrangement from negatively affecting teleworker's comfort, health and security. Initiatives to incentivize organizations to promote this new form of working are also needed (Popovici and Popovici, 2020). For organizations, they need to prepare for a return to the workplace as well as a longer term move to teleworking and hybrid working. A pitfall of remote working is feelings of psychological isolation and loneliness that cannot be ignored. Organizations need to introduce communication, engagement, and collaboration initiatives that allow employees to share plans, experiences and feedback. Regular social and human connection opportunities to support team building are recommended forms of such initiatives (CIPD, 2022). Technology plays a crucial role in remote working. Therefore, firms need to support and train employees in fully using available technology and regularly reviewing and upgrading ICT systems. Importantly, training programs on digital well-being should target both employees and line managers (CIPD, 2022). For workers, such interventions help develop good health habits of using technology, such as mindfully disconnecting from work. Managers can develop an awareness of potential signals and symptoms of poor health and mental well-being among employees.

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