Emergent practices of working from home for leadership

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Abstract

Since March 2020, when the coronavirus became pandemic, organizations around the globe were forced to switch to working from home (WFH) en masse. Much is known about the short-term challenges of WFH but the long-term effects are still unknown. As this situation has been going on for more than a year now, this study aims to investigate the experiences of homeworkers to identify how they cope with WFH. In particular, the focus is on the concepts of caring and perceived control (PC). These factors affect the experiences of homeworkers in terms of their functioning, health, and well-being.

To investigate the experiences of homeworkers, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Jitsi Meet, an online video conferencing tool, to comply with social distancing regulations. The study took place from April until June 2021. The sample included 30 participants who were WFH in the Netherlands, were at least aged 18 years, WFH for at least two workdays per week, and had been WFH for at least three months before the interviews.

The findings revealed that homeworkers experienced (1) higher job autonomy, (2) a lack of social support, (3) changes concerning their lifestyle, and (4) challenges with job resources.

For leadership, this has several implications. Firstly, the higher perceived autonomy led to the expectation that employees should also be available outside of their regular working hours by other colleagues. Leadership should set specific rules to prevent the work-life interface from blurring even further. Secondly, they should provide homeworkers the possibility to have regular one-on-one meetings to discuss personal matters and online team activities. Thirdly, leadership should offer homeworkers a financial incentive to exercise and eat more healthily. Lastly, leadership should devise arrangements for homeworkers so that they have access to adequate job resources, such as flexible workspaces, compensations for using personal computers, and the internet.

Keywords: working from home, WFH, caring, perceived control, PC, emergent practices, leadership, homeworkers, job autonomy, social support, lifestyle, job resources.

1. Introduction

On 12 March 2020, after an increasing number of COVID-19 infections caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2 and the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring COVID-19 a pandemic the day before, the Dutch government announced a partial lockdown. Dutch citizens were urged to observe social distancing and work from home as much as possible or stagger their working hours (RIVM, 2020).

The measures that have been imposed by the national government to combat the pandemic involved some radical changes for how work is organized. Millions of people went from working at the office to working from home (WFH). TNO (1998) defines it as work that is carried out at a distance (remotely) from the employer or client using information and communication technology.

The effect of WFH on employees, their productivity, and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the necessity to comprehend in what way managers should lead and manage in a virtual setting to bolster the mental health and performance of their subordinates (Adenle, 2020; Giurge & Bohns, 2020). For many leaders, it was the ultimate leadership test in which they had to cope with unimaginable demands. Employees looked to them for direction, while they were grappling with many new questions to which they did not have answers. Such as how to care for employees who are WFH, how to control and monitor their daily progress, and how to learn and manage the changing demands in the required competencies?

This led to the rise of emergent practices. Magno (2015) describes these as practices that are identified as necessary to be realized in their context by a team or organization. This is not per se a new practice that is invented by such a team or organization. Snowden and Boone (2007) explain that emergent practices arise out of complex contexts, meaning unordered situations where the relationship between cause and effect can only be explained afterward. This makes an extensive analysis beforehand impossible, meaning teams have to figure out how to deal with the situation as they go. In a complex context, the correct course of action would be to start by probing, sensing what is happening, and responding to the situation (Snowden & Boone, 2007). This context is often the case in situational change, which is caused by the measures to combat the pandemic.

This study aims to identify emergent practices of working from home (WFH) during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of employees. By identifying these emergent practices a more sophisticated understanding can be gained of how organizations cope with changes caused by the pandemic. The findings of this study may contribute to developing managerial recommendations for coping with WFH, which is essential for managers who need to implement new ways of working. The scientific relevance of this study is that a new context has arisen in the form of WFH. There is a research gap in what is known about what the experiences of homeworkers are in this new context. This qualitative paper provides an insight into the experiences of WFH among employees working from home in the Netherlands and the circumstances inducing these experiences.

Research question:
How do employees cope with the challenges of WFH in terms of care and control during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Literature review

2.1 Working from home

When the pandemic struck in March 2020, WFH became the reality for millions of workers. Although this phenomenon has been around for quite some time since Nilles (1975) coined the term 'telecommuting', which later became known as teleworking in popular culture (Woody, 1995), the fear of the virus and the uncertainty involved with coping with COVID-19 created a unique situation.

The existing literature on WFH in the pre-COVID-19 era indicates that homeworkers are significantly more productive, less inclined to leave the employer, earn more profit per person, and help reduce the tenancy costs of having business premises (Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2015). The positive consequences for society include the reduction of traffic congestions, travel times, and environmental pollution. (Bloom et al., 2015).

However, there are negative implications of WFH as well. Homeworkers are known to experience increased feelings of isolation and solitude (Bussing, 1998), their career advancement chances are likely to reduce (Perin, 1991), their work-life balance may be distorted due to the vague boundary between home and work (Harpaz, 2002). For organizations, centralized management becomes more difficult, new training and supervision methods are required, organizational commitment and identification are harmed, the transition to WFH involves costs (Harpaz, 2002). Baruch (2001) even warns that society may become more autistic due to a lack of social contact with others and public institutions.

Nevertheless, the impact of the pandemic on these factors is not well known. The reduction of the risk of contracting and spreading the disease became one of the major perceived advantages of WFH, besides reducing the commuting time and allowing for greater flexibility (Ipsen, Van Veldhoven, Kirchner, & Hansen, 2021). Some of the negative implications became very evident as well. Ipsen et al. (2021) concluded that missing colleagues, missing getting out of the home, and poor physical working conditions in the home office are common denominators that most employees experience.

A study by the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (Dutch: TNO) demonstrated that the pandemic also impacted the working conditions of employees (TNO, 2021). At end of 2020, almost half of the employees worked from home in the Netherlands. The working conditions of the home workers have changed as they work more overtime and perform more sedentary work. While the number of employees who have started working overtime only slightly increased, the number of hours worked overtime almost doubled compared to the end of 2019. So those working overtime did so to a larger extent in 2020 (TNO, 2021).

The physical working conditions of the home workers have not changed for the better, with more repetitive movements, screen time, and being seated outside of work. Approximately 9 out of 10 employees spent more than 6 hours a day in front of a computer screen, often without taking regular short breaks. The home workers also sat down more outside of work. However, the home workplace is more often ergonomically responsible, although about two-thirds of home workers do not yet have all the necessary resources (TNO, 2021).

A positive outcome of WFH during the pandemic was the strong decline in undesirable behavior (TNO, 2021). This was the case for both external and internal undesirable behavior. External undesirable behavior involves external parties such as clients, passengers, and students (TNO, 2021). Internal undesirable behavior involves supervisors or colleagues (TNO, 2021).

The employees who worked from home varied in their wishes in the work location when all measures were lifted. Almost half of the home workers would like to combine WFH with working on location in the future. More than 1 in 3 employees who worked from home indicated that they wanted to work largely or entirely on location, while almost 1 in 4 indicated that they would largely continue to work from home (TNO, 2021).

Table 1 – Significant changes that impact our way of working (TNO, 2021)

Aspect	Situation in 2019	Situation in 2020
Working from home	37%	48%
Hours worked from home	6 hours	29 hours
Average overtime worked	4.6 hours	9.8 hours
Sedentary (seated) work	87%	89%
Screen time	6.3 hours	7.9 hours
Repetitive movements	19.4%	36.7%
Being seated during leisure time	3.3 hours	5 hours
Undesirable behavior	ca. 20%	ca. 9%

2.2 Challenges for leadership

According to Kirchner, Ipsen, and Hansen (2021), WFH appeared to be more challenging for managers than for employees. Not only in terms of the length of the average workday but also the number of meetings, fewer breaks, and the settings of online meetings that follow the default sequence of the calendar program (Kirchner et al., 2021). Some of the main challenges were related to the organization of work, the communication with the employees, the digitalization of work processes, distance leadership, the lack of face-to-face communication, and missing informal contacts (Kirchner et al., 2021).

WFH introduced many employees and managers to distance management and distance work (Kirchner et al., 2021). As a consequence, leaders became virtual leaders. Virtual leaders can be defined as "those leaders that are in charge of managing virtual teams and virtual workers, helping them to be as productive as possible" (Schmidt, 2014, p. 182). In this case, virtual refers to the condition of being geographically distributed, requiring cooperation through electronic means with minimal face-to-face interaction (Malhotra, Majchrzak, & Rosen, 2007).

Malhotra et al. (2007) lucidly describe the implications for virtual leaders. Since employees are no longer working in a central workspace, it becomes more difficult for virtual leaders to physically observe when the team is becoming passive, determine whether an intervention is necessary to restore and strengthen the team's motivation, help the members to redirect their focus on the work, and provide them the resources needed to carry out the imminent task (Malhotra et al., 2007). This requires virtual leaders to be creative in arranging structures and processes to monitor these expectations. They cannot simply assume that members are prepared for virtual meetings or that silence during virtual meetings means obedience instead of heedlessness. Besides, leaders must ensure that the potential and insight of each follower are entirely exploited (Malhotra et al., 2007).

From the challenges mentioned before, two aspects prominently arise concerning virtual leadership, namely caring and perceived control. Both these aspects are likely to affect the functioning of employees (Amendolair, 2012; Wallston, Wallston, Smith, & Dobbins, 1987). When WFH, it is plausible that it is more difficult for managers to control their work environment (e.g.,

what their subordinates are doing) but it is likely also more difficult to care for them due to the physical distance between them. Hence, this research will be limited to the aspects of care and control in virtual leadership to keep the study comprehensible.

2.3 Caring

Caring is the first aspect of virtual leadership that affects the job satisfaction (functioning) and well-being of employees (Amendolair, 2012). According to Poulsen and Ipsen (2017), employees' health, resilience, and well-being are essential when WFH in order to maintain business operations and preserve performance.

Firstly, employee well-being is defined as the "overall quality of an employee's experience of work and performance." (Warr, 1987). Employee well-being is related to performance, where happier workers are slightly more productive, although the effect is minimal (Vroom, 1964; Iaffaldano & Muchinsky, 1985; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001).

Secondly, resilience refers to the "ability of an individual to rebound or recover from adversity" (De Terte, Stephens, & Huddleston, 2014; p. 416; Leipold & Greve, 2009) or the "ability to maintain psychological and physical health despite exposure to a traumatic event." (De Terte et al., 2014, p. 416; Bonanno, 2004). Caring is an important aspect in resilience-building activities to reduce clinician burnout and psychological issues (Wei, Hardin, & Watson, 2021).

Thirdly, health is defined as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being" (World Health Organization, 1948). This definition of health implies that it does not only mean the absence of disease or injury. Caring has a positive effect on health in terms of reducing the risk for mental and physical health problems (Beach, Schulz, Yee, & Jackson, 2000). These problems in include health-risk behaviors, anxiety symptoms, and depression symptoms (Beach et al., 2000).

According to Weiner and Auster (2007), caring is "a sustained emotional investment in an individual's well-being, characterized by a desire to take actions that will benefit that person." (Weiner & Auster, 2007, p. 126). Much of the literature on caring comes from the nursing field (Kyle, 1995; McFarlane, 1988; Leininger, 1981; Watson, 1979). Leininger (1981), the founder of transcultural nursing, defines generic caring as "those assistive, supportive, or facilitative acts toward or for another individual or group with evident or anticipated needs to ameliorate or improve a human condition or lifeway…" (Leininger, 1981, p. 900). Cultural backgrounds strongly affect the caring behaviors of individuals (Leininger, 1981).

The definitions demonstrate that caring centers around an array of deeds, behaviors, or processes (Gaut, 1984). This is in line with the modern meaning of caring as the act of showing care, from the verb 'to care', meaning to take care of someone (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). This distinguishes caring from empathy, as empathy does not necessarily involve caring. Being capable of feeling or understanding one's needs is not the same as reacting in a responsive way to one's needs (Weiner & Auster, 2007).

More specifically, founded in the nursing literature, caring behaviors may include talking with others, encouraging others, showing concern for others, and helping others overcome difficulties (Wu, Larrabee, & Putman, 2006). Weiner and Auster (2007) propose that caring is manifested by asking the "right" questions (i.e. from a perspective of knowledge about the context) and then listening precisely to what is said in a non-judgmental state.

When it comes to responding to the needs of another, the topic of social support comes into play. Social support refers to the "provision of assistance or comfort to others, typically to help them cope with biological, psychological, and social stressors." (American Psychological Association, n.d.). More specifically, the social support that an employee receives from a manager, is known as perceived supervisor support. This refers to the extent to which employees form general impressions that their supervisor appreciates their work efforts and recognizes their well-being (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002). This feeling of

appreciation and recognition is important to the functioning of an employee within an organization in terms of employee engagement and productivity (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Supervisors are held responsible for managing and assessing employees' performance, causing employees to consider their supervisor's attitude toward them as symbolic of the support of the organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Levinson, 1965). Furthermore, employees are aware that supervisors report their performance to upper management and affect their views, further contributing to the worker's link of supervisor support with organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 2002).

The lack of this social support may lead to social isolation. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), abbreviated CDC, social isolation refers to a lack of social connections, which may be the result of not seeing any colleagues at the office. Social isolation is not the same concept as loneliness, which refers to the feeling of being alone, regardless of the amount of social contact (CDC, 2021). Although social isolation may lead to loneliness in some persons, it is also possible that one can feel lonely without being socially isolated (CDC, 2021).

2.4 Perceived control

Perceived control (PC) is the second aspect in virtual leadership that affects the functioning of employees, especially in terms of their health (Wallston et al., 1987).
PC refers to "the belief that one can determine one's own internal states and behavior, influence one's environment, and/or bring about desired outcomes" (Wallston et al., 1987, p. 5). They delineate two dimensions of PC.

The first is time, so whether the object of control is situated in the past or the future. Past experiences determine how individuals infer causes for consequences that have happened in the past. This is based on attribution theory (Harvey & Weary, 1984; Kelley & Michela, 1980). Expectancies determine how individuals perceive future causes and outcomes. This is based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977a; Rotter, 1954).

The second dimension is the type of object of control. The object can be an outcome, a behavior, or a process. If the object is an outcome, the expectancies about the outcomes are leading. The outcome expectancy is known as locus of control (LOC). Individuals with an internal LOC orientation likely believe their behavior affects the outcomes, whereas individuals with an external LOC orientation believe that consequences are governed by external factors such as random circumstances or powerful individuals. If the object is a behavior, then the beliefs in self-efficacy (an individual's belief that one can engage in a specific behavior; in other words, control of behavior) determine the behavior of an individual (Wallston et al., 1987). If the object is a process, the perceptions of an individual's "control over the process of a situation or event are influenced by certain characteristics of the situation" (Wallston et al., 1987, p. 14).

Wallston et al. (1987) mention that the health implications of PC come in two shapes. Firstly, PC may affect health behavior, such as dieting and exercising. Secondly, PC may affect health status, such as weight loss or corpulence (Wallston et al., 1987). In this sense, PC seems to play an essential role in the lifestyle of individuals.

Based on the PC theory, one can imagine that when managers are WFH and can no longer physically see what the employees are doing, the PC will decrease. As a result, managers have three control choices to make, which are (1) communicating, (2) empowering, and (3) executing vision (Abernethy, Bouwens, & Van Lent, 2009). These control choices depend on the style of leadership of management.

Firstly, communicating involves the interactive use of planning and control systems (PCS) to translate the vision of the manager into operational goals and objectives. Abernethy et al. (2009)

consider the use of PCS for communication along a continuum where (a) PCS are used in a somewhat educational setup where objectives are detailed and performance is measured against these goals, and (b) PCSs are used as a means to ease better informal and interpersonal communication between and among management and employees.

The second control choice is the empowerment of employees by deciding to delegate decision rights to them. The extent to which managers entrust decision rights to employees is an unambiguous choice. Leana (1986) asserts that managers who consider their roles principally as rendering guidance to employees (high in dominance) will delegate less than those who regard the personal development of employees (low in dominance) as substantial to their role.

This is where job autonomy plays a role. Job autonomy refers to the freedom of an individual to determine what work is performed, and how this is done (Dobbin & Boychuk, 1999). Job autonomy is by no means synonymous with job independence. Job autonomy is related to job control, which refers to an individual's ability to influence what happens in one's work environment (Bond & Bunce, 2003). In short, it is about having control over work tasks, the work pace, and freedom from supervision.

The third control choice is executing the vision by using performance measurement systems (PMS) for accountability. This system is used to monitor the behavior and assess performance. It is the foundation for compensation and promotion decisions within the organization. This system is preferred mostly by top management who are heavily involved in the initiating structure dimension. As this system is about controlling the behavior of employees, employee monitoring comes to the foreground. Employee monitoring is defined as the digital compilation, archiving, examination, and reporting of information about productive activities by employees (Peters, 1999). Studies have shown an association between employee monitoring and mental and physical health issues (Hartman, 1998). These include anger, depression, extreme anxiety, high tension, increased disinterest, severe fatigue, and musculoskeletal problems (Hartman, 1998).

So caring and PC seem to affect the experiences of employees with WFH. To discover what the experiences of homeworkers are concerning these aspects, qualitative research will be conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews. The information from the interviews will serve as the basis for identifying emergent practices for leadership. These emergent practices will provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences of WFH to both the academic field as well as the management.

3. Methodology

3.1 Procedure

To answer the research question of this study, it is necessary to explore this underexposed topic in more detail. For this reason, qualitative research was selected. There was a need to gain a more in-depth understanding of the experiences that homeworkers had accumulated since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Firstly, a literature review was performed to identify relevant aspects of WFH. Based on this review, two relevant aspects in the realm of virtual leadership were identified. These are caring and perceived control.

After the literature review, semi-structured in-depth interviews were prepared with the aim to investigate the meaning of the experiences of homeworkers with WFH. Open-ended questions were formulated in consultation with two expert supervisors to evaluate the content and detect any conceivable misconceptions in the formulation of the interview questions. This type of interview enables the researcher to have a dialogue with the participant following a flexible interview protocol that is supplemented by follow-up questions, probes, and comments (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This allowed for the proper dynamic where the sequence of the questions could be altered easily depending on the course of the interview.

Consequently, starting in April 2021, participants were approached and recruited from the researcher's social network and via snowball sampling. This was mainly done via WhatsApp and e-mail. The participants were required to fulfill some specific selection criteria. These will be discussed in subsection 3.3.

The interviews were conducted online via Jitsi Meet to comply with the prevalent restrictions on social and physical interactions concerning the COVID-19 outbreak. Jitsi Meet is a web browser-based video conferencing tool that does not require any account or installation so that virtually anyone can join. The first two interviews were trial interviews to help streamline the interview procedure. After some minor tweaks to (the sequence of) the questions, the rest of the interviews was planned from May to June 2021. The length of the interviews was on average 41 minutes. With the explicit permission of the participants, the interviews were recorded with Jitsi Meet. All participants verbally agreed to the interview being recorded. The recordings were stored in a local folder and deleted upon the completion of the analysis of the qualitative data.

3.2 Interview

The interview itself included a brief introduction of the purpose of the interview without disclosing too much information about the study to prevent the participants from being biased. The purpose was to gather their experiences with WFH since the start of the pandemic to discover how they coped with this novel situation. During this stage, the informed consent was discussed which included their options concerning the withdrawal from research and the processing of the data. The participant's permission to record the session was also asked during this stage.

After the introduction, some socio-demographic questions were asked about their gender, nationality, household size and situation, age, educational background, whether they have full-time or part-time employment, and how long they had been WFH. The interview questions were contrived in such a way that the interview started with open-ended questions about what kind of work the participant is doing, what a normal working day looks like, and how they had experienced WFH so far. This gave the interview a more informal character and gave the participant some time

to get comfortable. This increased the willingness of the participant to discuss more sensitive topics later on in the interviews.

The questions were not necessarily asked in a fixed order which allowed the interviews to be conducted flexibly and enabled asking follow-up questions concerning their experiences more easily. Then more specific questions were asked about the difficulties they experienced, what changed for them, how they coped with the changes, how and what they felt during this period, and how they saw the future in terms of WFH. Finally, the recording of the interview was stopped and the interview was concluded with some informal talk and offering gratitude to the participants for their participation.

3.3 Sample

The sample of this study consists of 30 participants that have had experience with WFH in the Netherlands. The selection criteria dictated that the participants had to be at least 18 years of age at the time of the interview, had been working from home for at least three consecutive months, and had worked from home for at least two workdays per week since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. The latter means that the number of hours worked may vary to include those that worked part-time. Participants that fit the selection criteria were recruited via snowball sampling in the researcher's social network from April to June 2021.

An overview of the sample characteristics can be found in table 2. The sample included 22 men and 8 women. 28 participants held Dutch nationality, one held Polish nationality, and one held German nationality. The age of the sample ranged from 27 to 60 years with a mean age of 39.5 years. 16 out of the 30 participants attained a bachelor's degree, five attained a master's degree, one attained a PhD, seven completed vocational education, and one finished secondary education. Most participants (23) had a full-time employment contract. In the Netherlands, this means that they worked for at least 35 hours a week or more (CBS, 2021). The remaining seven (7) participants worked a part-time job. According to Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV), a part-time job means working at least 12 to 35 hours a week (FNV, n. d.). 21 participants fully worked from home during the peak of the pandemic, including all part-time workers. The mean days that the participants worked from home during the peak of the pandemic was 4.33 days. This number may be slightly biased as one part-time worker indicated she worked 20 hours a week spread over five days of four-hour shifts. Concerning the size of the household of the participants, 7 were alone, 10 lived with a partner, and 13 had (started) a family.
13 participants had children at home during the peak of the pandemic, with a mode of two (2) children per participant.

3.4 Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed using Amberscript, a tool that converts audio to text. Then thematic analysis was conducted. This involved coding all the data before identifying and reviewing recurring themes. A specific analytical tool called ATLAS.ti was employed for coding the interviews and keeping a codebook. Responses of the participants were interpreted into a total of 36 codes. The codes were filtered out based on two criteria. The first criterium was whether the code had an apparent relationship with caring and PC (e. g. work adaptation is not related to either one). The second criterium was that codes with a count below five were consequently filtered out. The remaining codes with a count of five or higher were then categorized into 13 sub-themes. The sub-themes were then further arranged into four main themes that act as umbrella terms for the sub-themes. Each theme was then examined to gain an understanding of participants' experiences with

WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic. An overview of the key themes and the sub-themes can be found in table 3.

3.5 Quality assurance

To guarantee the research quality, significant emphasis should be placed on the concepts of reliability, generalizability, and validity. The significance of reliability concerning qualitative research boils down to consistency (Carcary, 2009). In this study, this is addressed through the implementation of interrater reliability. This refers to the degree to which two or more observers (raters) agree with the analysis of the qualitative data. In this study, a second rater was asked to separately code the quotes selected from three random interviews, which equals 10%. Then a statistical test was run to measure interrater reliability, which was Cohen's kappa in this case. The results of this test were 0.72, which indicates substantial agreement.

Validity is safeguarded through the constant comparative method. Interviews involve participants that support different values, understandings, and perceptions of leadership and WFH. This approach produces a premise for 'systematically organizing, comparing, and understanding the similarities and differences between those perceptions' (Mathison, 2015). The analysis and coding of a unit of data (the interview transcripts) into themes reflect an analytic understanding of the coded entities, not the entities themselves. This allows for systematic comparison of each unit with previously collected and analyzed data. This is repeated until all angles of the topic are exhausted. The accuracy of the sources must be verified in respect of accepted procedure and the framework with constant comparison (George & Apter, 2004), either alone or with peers (Patton, 1999).

In terms of the generalizability of qualitative research studies, Leung (2015) mentions that these types of studies are meant to "study a specific issue or phenomenon in a certain population or ethnic group, of a focused locality in a particular context" (Leung, 2015, p. 326). Hence the generalizability of qualitative research data is normally not an anticipated feature (Leung, 2015). Since the aim is, in this case, to study the experiences homeworkers have with WFH in the COVID-19 pandemic, which is such a specific particularity, the generalizability is not this study is meaningless.

Table 2 – Overview of the sample characteristics

Participant	Gender	Nationality	Household	Children at home	Age	Education	Employment	Days WFH
1	Male	German	1	0	31	Master	Fulltime	5
2	Male	Dutch	2	0	30	Bachelor	Fulltime	5
3	Male	Dutch	2	0	60	Bachelor	Fulltime	5
4	Male	Dutch	3	1	30	Bachelor	Fulltime	3,5
5	Female	Dutch	2	0	28	Bachelor	Fulltime	5
6	Female	Dutch	3	1	28	Bachelor	Parttime	3
7	Male	Dutch	2	0	30	Bachelor	Fulltime	4,5
8	Male	Dutch	2	0	30	Master	Fulltime	4,5
9	Female	Dutch	4	2	47	Vocational	Parttime	4
10	Male	Dutch	4	2	49	Bachelor	Fulltime	5
11	Male	Dutch	2	0	52	Bachelor	Fulltime	5
12	Male	Dutch	3	1	51	Vocational	Fulltime	3
13	Male	Dutch	1	0	28	Bachelor	Fulltime	5
14	Male	Dutch	4	2	47	Vocational	Fulltime	3
15	Male	Dutch	2	0	56	Bachelor	Fulltime	5
16	Male	Dutch	4	2	38	Vocational	Fulltime	5
17	Female	Dutch	1	0	60	Bachelor	Parttime	4
18	Male	Dutch	2	0	27	PhD	Fulltime	3
19	Female	Dutch	2	0	34	Vocational	Parttime	4
20	Male	Dutch	3	1	33	Bachelor	Fulltime	5
21	Female	Polish	1	0	30	Master	Fulltime	5
22	Male	Dutch	3	1	34	Bachelor	Fulltime	5
23	Female	Dutch	1	0	36	Vocational	Fulltime	5
24	Male	Dutch	2	0	42	Bachelor	Fulltime	5
25	Male	Dutch	5	3	38	Master	Fulltime	5
26	Male	Dutch	1	0	29	Bachelor	Fulltime	5
27	Male	Dutch	3	1	39	Bachelor	Fulltime	2
28	Female	Dutch	1	0	60	Secondary	Parttime	5
29	Male	Dutch	4	2	44	Master	Fulltime	4
30	Male	Dutch	5	3	44	Vocational	Fulltime	2,5

Table 3 – Overview of the codes, sub-themes, and main themes from thematic analysis

Codes	Count	Sub-themes	Main themes
Acceptance	1		
Activities	2		
Advantages	2		
Autonomy	12		
Breaks	10		
Care	14		
Change in communicative behavior	32		
Change in expectations	5		
Concentration and distraction	6		
Control	19		
Coping	25		
Digitalization of processes	13	Variable working hours	
Disruption	1	Agenda-setting	Job autonomy
Eating habit	8	Informal contacts	
Effects on work tasks	3	Face-to-face interaction	Social support
Efficiency	4	Isolation/loneliness	
Exercise	11	Work-life interface/balance	
Experience WFH	11	Exercise	Lifestyle
Face-to-face communication	13	Breaks	
Compensation	13	Eating habits	
Future WFH	17	Physical resources	
Happiness	1	Financial compensation	Job resources
Induction (onboarding)	2		
Informal/personal contacts	11		
Isolation	5		
Loneliness	7		
Mental aspect	1		
Organization of work	1		
Resources	27		
Social aspect	2		
Social support	4		
Technical issues	4		
Trust	1		
Variety	1		
Work adaptation	1		
Work division	2		
Work-life balance	22		

4. Results

After thematic analysis of the transcripts of the interviews, four main themes were identified that are supported by numerous quotes that will be discussed in this section.

4.1 Higher job autonomy

The participants indicated they experienced a strong sense of freedom while doing their work from home. More specifically, they indicated being more flexible to start at variable working hours and being able to set their agenda and priorities as they see fit. Some participants mentioned taking longer breaks in the afternoon to continue working in the evening.

"I value the freedom I get... I can start [work] between 7.30 and 9:00 in the morning and stop between 16:00 and 17:30" (Participant 4).

The above quote demonstrates that the homeworkers experienced more freedom to decide when to start working, granting them variable working hours.

"I often cycle during the day for an hour and a half and then I continue in the evening, especially with the nice weather, then I would rather do something during the day and then continue in the evening for an hour or two than waiting for the evening when the weather is getting less attractive." (Participant 22)

Not only the time that homeworkers start and stop working are variable. As the above quote illustrates, some participants were able to undertake activities during the day as long as they worked the contractual hours over the day.

"I can start and stop at variable times as long as I stick to those clock times. I look at my head of department, he just says: make sure you finish your work, then I'm fine with it." (Participant 7).

Naturally, these variable working hours need to be accounted for by finishing the work in consultation with the manager.

"...we clock in together at 9 o'clock, so then we consult with each other. So you have to be there, but if you have to go to the dentist and you are there at 9:15, nobody cares. But sometimes, like just now, I had to boot up my computer and I already checked my mail for tomorrow, you know, you do that too." (Participant 6)

So despite the homeworkers experiencing high job autonomy, this seems to affect the times homeworkers work as they also sometimes work in the evening.

"...I can set my own agenda, I can decide for myself what to prioritize and whatnot." (Participant 10).

4.2 Social support is missed

The majority of participants indicated that they miss the social support from others at work. This includes missing informal contacts, missing face-to-face interactions, and even experiencing some

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form of loneliness or isolation. This was predominantly the case for homeworkers who lived in single-person households, who reported feeling some form of loneliness due to working at home alone.

The participants mentioned missing informal contacts as the below quotes demonstrate:

"I thrive on social contacts, I just miss that when I don't have colleagues around me or someone to drink a cup of tea with." (Participant 6).

"At work, … someone comes to you with a question, then you also ask how things are going privately…. As a manager, I also think that it is important for me that you also get a feeling of how things are going with your people. So I always try to do that and that's also the part of contact I miss the most." (Participant 11).

"[I miss] especially that you can't briefly talk to each other informally at the front or the back." (Participant 13).

Although the use of digital conferencing tools increased, participants indicated that it was not the same as an informal talk as mainly work-related topics were discussed.

"… you have less contact with colleagues so you can share less, you have fewer moments to discuss things. You now only have those Zoom calls and telephone conversations, so that is often just about business." (Participant 25).

Besides missing informal contacts, the participants also indicated that they missed having face-to-face interaction with others from work. The participant below, who works as a buyer, misses face-to-face contact with suppliers and colleagues.

"I must say that it is wonderful to sit with or have a visit from a supplier and then just be able to look someone straight in the eye. But that's also the case with colleagues, that's just quite a loss." (Participant 10)

This participant, who works in a healthcare institution, has to tell the patient and/or relatives that the patient has to be admitted over the phone.

"Go and tell someone they need to be admitted [to a care institution] over the phone…"
(Participant 6)

Another aspect of (a lack of) social support is loneliness and/or social isolation. The participants below mention they felt rather lonely. Mostly the participants who live in single-person households mentioned loneliness, but those living with a partner or family (participant 4) also experienced some form of loneliness or isolation.

"I can't stand working from home continuously, that's just not for me… [That's because] you do have a certain form of loneliness." (Participant 4).

"So you don't see your colleagues anymore and then you just call someone. So it's a bit of a lonely existence in itself because you don't see them anymore." (Participant 17).

"I do talk to people on the phone, but I don't know them... I felt very lonely at times."
(Participant 28).

When it comes to dealing with the lack of social support, homeworkers, and also managers, were quite creative. The below participant mentions that he organized online drinks with colleagues to compensate for the lack of physical gatherings.

"I once did that with two direct colleagues, but I did that on Friday around noon when I was going to close my week because I was free in the afternoon, that we have a cup of coffee together in a Teams meeting and then you also actually discuss the trifles and the informal matters of work. The gossip was thrown on the table so to speak" (Participant 4).

To show appreciation for what the homeworkers are doing for the organization, managers often sent gifts to thank them for their effort and support:

"We were sent quite often, coincidentally I have one here, those gifts at home with [messages like] 'thanks for the helping hand' and things like that." (Participant 6).

Participants also mentioned discussing work-related issues with their family to cope with the lack of contact with colleagues:

"You know, exchanging ideas with someone [soundboarding], that's really gone and that's something I personally miss a lot. What can I do if I work from home five days a week? Then I have to tell my children and my wife at the kitchen table in the evening. They have no idea what I'm talking about." (Participant 10)

Others, such as the participant below, mentioned that they were not alone and could rely on their family to prevent feelings of loneliness.

"I am not alone, I have my family. And I realize very well that if you have a family, you can fall back on each other, and then you can discuss your day at the dinner table in the evening, and then you can share things with each other." (Participant 9).

4.3 Changes in lifestyle

From the responses of the participants concerning their lifestyle, it became apparent that it changed dramatically since they had been WFH. This broad concept consists of the work-life interface, exercise, breaks, and eating habits. The major change occurred in the work-life interface of the homeworkers. As their workplace was now at home, participants indicated that it was harder for them to separate their private lives from their work, as the quote below demonstrates:

"At one point, the workplace was at the dining table, so in the evening when you sit on the couch, you are looking at your workplace. Then you see that, when you walk past it, there

are still notes and then you think: oh, yes, I'll have to think about that tomorrow', so you are still really busy with work in your free moments." (Participant 6).

Since employees were WFH en masse, the whole concept of commuting to work disappeared as well. The time used to commute from work to home gave many employees a means to process the working day, enabling them to let go of work once they arrived at home.

> ***"Previously I had to travel an hour from home to the office and back. That hour was ideal for letting go of work."*** (Participant 8).

The new situation also caused a shift in the expectations concerning work-life interface as colleagues and customers used to work at variable hours. It became more common to conduct business outside of the normal opening hours.

> ***"On the other hand, you also notice that people from your work suddenly know how to approach you at different times and actually hope for an answer in the evening."***
> (Participant 9).

Not only the work-life interface changed, also exercising. Participants indicated that they exercised more when WFH. When asked if physical exercise became less, the following response was quoted:

> ***"On the contrary. I took a stroll every evening, I walked in the afternoon, I went running a lot. Cycling as well."*** (Participant 9).

Other participants mentioned similar outcomes in the quotes below.

> ***"But I try to do it [exercising] fairly consistently. When I work from home, I go outside for a while."*** (Participant 7).

> ***"Everyone felt the need to go for a walk then, so we really went for a walk twice a week in the evening."*** (Participant 6).

> ***"...I walk more than an hour every day. Before, I walked to the station and walked to the office. And nowadays I just walk here in nature for an hour."*** (Participant 25).

So in the perception of homeworkers, they were quite involved in regular exercise, even though the literature (TNO, 2021) indicated that exercise has become less. That may be explained by the given that physical exercise also includes other forms of movement that disappeared due to the sedentary nature of WFH. The below quote illustrates this:

> ***"Normally, of course, I stand in front of the class and then I walk through the class and then I move in front of the blackboard. Now I sat quietly behind the laptop."*** (Participant 5).

Although the literature (TNO, 2021) mentions that homeworkers take fewer and shorter breaks, the participants seem to take their regular breaks even more than before. Perhaps this difference can be explained by the time difference between the TNO study and interviews. By now, homeworkers have adjusted to WFH and the situation of the pandemic has also changed.

"I started taking more breaks. I had lunch with my wife every afternoon. That was initially from 12:30 to 13:30, but eventually it took from 12:00 to 14:00. So that got a lot longer." (Participant 3).

"...when I work from home I always take a real break in the afternoon." (Participant 6).

"Now I go downstairs to drink a cup of coffee with the missus instead of at the office." (Participant 20)

"I take my breaks, I get a regular cup of coffee downstairs, I go outside and take a seat in the backyard." (Participant 29)

Last, but not least, eating habits have changed since employees started WFH. Participants indicated that they started eating somewhat more irregular and unhealthy since the pandemic started. The quotes below support this finding.

"I do notice that you are going to live a little unhealthy. You start eating more. You know, you're home with your partner all day all of the sudden. So sometimes a tompouce is brought that would otherwise not be brought." (Participant 3).

"I had gastric bypass surgery two years ago and I have to eat and drink pretty regularly ... and I find that when I'm at home, I sometimes let that slip a bit more than when I'm at work, so to speak." (Participant 14).

4.4 Job resources are challenging

The provision of adequate job resources has proven difficult for many employees. Job resources include resources such as workspace, compensations, and equipment. The provision of these resources was a challenge in particular, as the participants demonstrated. The quote below shows the lack of workspace at home, a common problem for the participants.

"Furnishing an extra [home] office with a separate desk chair and a separate desk just didn't work for us, because we just don't have that space." (Participant 4).

Resources such as equipment for work were also an issue. The below quote demonstrates that.

"I think they couldn't do that [arrange equipment] right away because they just didn't have the materials for that and at some point, we got a message on our intranet that it could be requested for people who were still working from home and then I immediately applied for it all." (Participant 6)

Finally, the quote below indicates that the financial compensations for resources were also lackluster.

"...the only compensation we can get is office furniture, so just resources. You can get a chair and desk and a monitor. That's it. I happened to be working on it just today because it's

furniture from IKEA... the chair I bought is forty euros. Well, then you might as well get a subscription at the physio. Bloody awful." (Participant 10).

5. Discussion

5.1 Implications

The study investigated the experiences of employees with WFH. For homeworkers, the increased job autonomy has resulted in the expectation that employees should also be available outside of their regular working hours by other colleagues. Homeworkers look for ways to discuss work-related topics by sending emails or messages in the evening. This is detrimental to the work-life interface. For leadership, this means that it should establish clear rules and guidelines for homeworkers of what is expected and how the quality of private life is safeguarded.

Secondly, as social support was missed, managers should do more than send gifts as a sign of appreciation. By offering homeworkers regular one-on-one meetings to discuss personal matters, and arranging online team activities, the lack of social support can be reduced.

Thirdly, due to the sedentary nature of WFH, leadership would do well to offer homeworkers a financial incentive to exercise and eat more healthily. This could be done by simple deeds like sending fruit baskets or implementing reminders to take regular breaks to achieve a more healthy and regular eating habit.

Lastly, the lack of job resources, mainly workspace at home, should be taken into consideration by offering those homeworkers with a lack of workspace the opportunity to either go to the office or work at a flexible workspace. Furthermore, arrangements should be made so that homeworkers are compensated for using their personally-owned equipment and the internet for work-related purposes.

5.2 Limitations

There are some limitations to this research. Firstly, the data was collected from participants working in the Netherlands. This makes it hard to account for the experiences of employees working in other countries due to national differences in the measures that were taken to combat the pandemic. Then there are also cultural differences and technical infrastructure that affect how homeworkers experienced WFH.

Secondly, the participants were working in various industrial sectors that were not considered in detail. The type of organization and the culture within the organization are likely to affect the experiences of employees with WFH.

Another limitation may be the lack of respondent validation after the first two trial interviews. Respondent validation allows participants to read through the data and provide feedback on the interpretations of the researcher (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004).

5.3 Recommendations

First, any future research into the experiences of home workers with WFH should address the limitations as discussed in the previous section. Perhaps a large-scale study into these experiences with a focus on various groups of home workers would yield more generalizable results that can be used to draw better inferences to the population.

Secondly, more research into the constructs of caring and perceived control and their effects on employees' experiences when WFH. The first step is to develop measures (scales) for the two constructs so that the degree of the two constructs can be measured on a scale. With the help of quantitative research, participants could then be placed along the two axes of the model as this research was not aimed at measuring the level of caring and PC among the participants.

5.4 Conclusion

This study aimed to gain an understanding of employees' experiences of WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic as a consequence of them becoming homeworkers. Based on the analysis of the responses from 30 participants working in the Netherlands, it was revealed that (1) homeworkers experienced higher job autonomy, (2) they experienced a lack of social support, (3) they faced changes concerning their lifestyle, and (4) had challenges with getting adequate job resources. For leadership, this means that they should provide homeworkers the possibility to have regular one-on-one meetings to discuss personal matters, setting specific rules to prevent the work-life interface from blurring even further, and devising arrangements for homeworkers so that they have access to adequate job resources (i.e. flexible workspaces, compensations for using personal computer and internet).

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Appendices

Appendix A – Interview procedure

Introduction
As part of my thesis, I am researching the experiences of employees working from home since the start of the pandemic to discover how homeworkers cope with this way of working. The interviews are entirely voluntary. You can withdraw at any time. If you do not want the interview to be used for research afterward, you can inform me via mail or WhatsApp. The data from these conversations will be processed in the thesis anonymously and in the strictest confidence. Do you agree that the interview will be recorded?

Table A - Demographic variables

Gender	The gender of the participant (female, male, other)
Household size	Number of people the participant lives with at home
Children at home	Number of children the participant lives with at home
Age	The age of the participant
Education	The highest completed level of education by the participant (primary, secondary, vocational training, associate degree, bachelor, master, doctorate, other)
Work from home experience	The number of days (or hours) per workweek

Table B - Main questions for the interview

#	Question
1	What do you do (for a living)?
2	Are you still working from home regularly?
3	How do you experience working from home?
4	What does a normal workday look like for you now? (What did a normal workday looked like for you during the pandemic?)
5	What are the changes compared to the situation before the pandemic? Can you describe the experiences with the changes?
6	What difficulties did you run into when adapting to working from home?
7	How did you cope with these difficulties? Was there any support from your employer?
8	How would you describe how you are doing considering the changed working circumstances?
9	How do you see the future? Do you think the situation will become as before the pandemic?

Table C – Other topics to be discussed during the interview

Topics	Questions
Work-life balance	Working hours, breaks, exercise
Communication behavior	Direct and informal contact (personal conversations), meetings, appointments, visits
Organization of work	Division of labor, recruitment, (technical) support, resources
Care and guidance	Manager, colleagues, employer, social support, financial support
Control and monitoring	Manager, colleagues, employer (social control)