Implications for Future Work - Knowledge Workers' Work from Home (WFH) Experiences Following COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic witnessed by the world was unprecedented in the history of life and work. Governments across the world mandated lockdown measures in early 2020, including social distancing norms to curb the spread of the pandemic. Businesses and workplaces were ordered to shut down and, as a result, work from home was implemented globally on a wide scale. Yet, employees faced challenges and issues brought on by the sudden transition to working from home (WFH) for extended periods. This qualitative study was conducted to examine the lockdown-induced work from home experiences of knowledge workers in New Zealand. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample size of 22 participants from sectors such as banking and finance, law, education, and the public service. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed through NVivo software and manual analysis and resulted in three key themes:

- Enablers of and adaptation to work from home combined with challenges.
- Varying impact on productivity, health, job and career aspects.
- Flexibility as a key requirement for future working.

This study highlighted how employer, employee, and technology related factors have an important role to play in facilitating WFH, as this pattern of work is becoming normalised and has implications for the future of work.

Keywords: Work From Home, Knowledge Workers, COVID-19, Future of Work, Perceptions, Experiences.

INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic that started in around 2019 has not only brought human suffering and hardships but has also redefined how we live, work, interact and conduct our businesses. A huge breakthrough for working from home (WFH) was seen, with employees being required to WFH by organisations across the world due to lockdowns (Henriques, 2020; Henschel & Cross, 2020; Knutson, 2020).

New Zealand adopted a nationwide lockdown on 26 March 2020 when the whole country moved to alert level 4 (Trevett, 2020; Wade, 2020). Organisations, businesses, and educational institutions were compelled to close their offices and, where possible, implement WFH arrangements, also referred to as telecommuting, teleworking, or remote working. According to

Olsen (2020) over 1.3m workers could continue to work in New Zealand. This included 727,000 workers (29% of the total workforce) primarily in the communications and technology, financial, administrative, professional, and public service sectors. who could WFH. The remaining 620,000 workers, classed as essential services by the government, did not WFH. During the pandemic, organisations made the remarkable transition to WFH since the lockdown was imposed in a critical situation. However, since this transition had been spontaneous and involved housebound households as a whole, there was a greater potential for workers to experience increased hours of work, as well as increased tensions between work and life (Choudhary & Jain, 2021). Stats NZ (2020) discovered that the WFH trend was short-lived because, as the alert levels decreased, there was a slow return to work at the office but some workers continued to work remotely. This provided a good opportunity to explore the experiences of employees as most of them had seen both sides of the world—remote working and working in the office.

This study explores the experiences and perceptions of knowledge workers on relationship quality with employers and co-workers, job satisfaction, turnover intention, health and stress, transition back to the workplace and the implications it will have on the future of work. Knowledge workers are defined as employees who acquire, create, and apply more theoretical or abstract knowledge for their work (e.g., employees working in IT, finance, and research) (Davenport et al., 1996; Frenkel et al., 1995). A study by Stats NZ (2020) found that most of the people likely to WFH during the lockdown at COVID-19 alert levels 4 and 3 were from financial and insurance services (71%), information media and telecommunications (66%), professional, scientific, technical, administrative and support services (59%), and real estate services (58%). This prompted the researchers to investigate the perspectives of knowledge workers in New Zealand to assess the influence of WFH during COVID-19 and on the future of work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work From Home

The concept of WFH started in the 1970s in the USA because of the national oil crisis when Jack Nillies, a former NASA engineer, introduced the term 'telecommuting' to conserve non-renewable resources. It was then proposed to set up satellite offices or hubs for clerical staff to reduce travel time and energy consumption (Gan, 2015). However, critics of WFH in 1979 believed that it would reduce employers' ability to check on employees' work, as well as create distractions at home and lead to fewer interactions with co-workers (Weiler Reynolds et al., 2017). However, several studies found WFH helps to increase job performance and job satisfaction, and reduce employee stress levels (Anderson et al., 2015; Contreras et al., 2020; Vega et al., 2015).

WFH, also known as flexible working, telecommuting, telework, remote working, or virtual work, gained momentum and has become more common over the past 40 years (McAlpine, 2018; Nakrošienė et al., 2019). Telework appeared to be a more common term and was used in research before the pandemic. Telework is defined as:

…a work practice that involves members of an organisation substituting a portion of their typical work hours (ranging from a few hours per week to nearly full-time) to work away from a central workplace typically principally from home using technology to interact with others as needed to conduct work task (Allen et al., 2015).

Vargas-Llave et al., (2020) defined telework as a work arrangement characterised by working from more than one place, enabled by information and communications technology (ICT). The main reasons for the shift in relation to the way of working are identified as the changing nature of work, longer working lives, the shift away from manual work, the increasing international workforce, individuals having more than one career, and the increasing use of digital tools, (Dewe & Cooper, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2018; Henman, 2019; Nof, 2009). The effectiveness of WFH

was also boosted by the rising demand for work-life balance as a result of the growing number of single parents and the rapid development of ICT (Baruch, 2003; Bentley, et al., 2016).

WFH Experiences pre-and post-Pandemic

Research before the pandemic on WFH experiences focused on finding outcomes that are important to both managers and employees, such as job satisfaction, productivity, trust, leadership, networking, role stress, and innovation. (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Greer & Payne, 2014; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012;). Some studies have also investigated human resource management issues such as staff well-being, work-life balance, and health and safety (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012).

According to Martin and MacDonnell (2012), there is a positive correlation between telework and work performance and productivity, and if telework is an option, employees' loyalty to an organisation may rise, particularly among the younger workforce. Gajendra and Harrison (2007) reported that telecommuting leads to better work-life balance, and that it positively affects job satisfaction.

Duxbury et al. (2018) shed some light on potential issues for those employees who moved swiftly to remote work, such as role stress and role overload from juggling work and family obligations. Golden and Veiga (2008) emphasised the importance of teleworkers' worries about social isolation in terms of job satisfaction, arguing that such issues can only be resolved if the teleworker has a good connection with their management. According to Maruyama and Tieze (2012) teleworkers are afraid that their career opportunities may suffer as a result of their reduced visibility in the office.

Many studies which took place during the pandemic provided some insight into perceived stress, work-related burnout, and the challenges of WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. When employees were moved to WFH during the lockdown, the home was not an empty space waiting to be filled by work; it was a space configured around the needs and practices of employees' personal life. With the implementation of Level 4 lockdown, employees were plunged into a dual world of work and home responsibilities, regardless of their circumstances, cultural environment or prescribed domestic roles.

O'Kane et al. (2020) reported that productivity levels increased. However, this abrupt transition to WFH affected employees' performance, health, and safety. Employees faced challenges such as childcare distractions, inability to switch off from work, lack of collaboration with colleagues, and lack of proper equipment and designated workspaces. Jain and Choudhary's (2022) study on working parents revealed employees encountered substantial difficulties as a result of excessive work hours, blurred work-life boundaries, the added load of childcare and schooling, as well as stress and anxiety associated with the epidemic. Studies by Hayes et al. (2020) and Maurer (2020) suggest that WFH employees worked longer hours, resulting in negative connotations towards work. Issues included conflict created by bringing work into private lives, increased work demands, lack of established boundaries, reduced breaks, and burnout. Horsley and Anton (2022) claimed that organisations were unprepared for the effects on participants of explicit cultural and gender norms practised within the home during lockdown-induced WFH.

Hayes et al. (2020) concluded that the average perceived stress levels increased for all participants, especially for female employees and people who did not have the flexibility to WFH before the pandemic. The survey by O'Kane et al. (2020) with 2,560 participants mostly from New Zealand, found mental well-being was a challenge for respondents due to COVID-19 related anxiety, the stress of virtual communication, and balancing work and family life. Hayes et al. (2020) found that numerous studies failed to consider the impacts of the abrupt switch to working remotely and from home on people who had little to no prior experience with this style of operation.

As concluded by Demirkaya and Aydin (2006), a crisis might create unexpected opportunities for organisations. Some researchers have argued that the COVID-19 lockdown and subsequent

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WFH have provided organisations, employers, and employees the chance to consider a new way of working. Instead of debating whether to implement flexibility in workplace or not, the emphasis should be on understanding how to maximise the advantages of flexible work arrangements (Hamouche, 2020; Henschel & Cross, 2020; Hite & McDonald, 2020; Jain & Choudhary, 2022; Maurer, 2020). Studies have found that, despite its challenges, working remotely offers employees the option of flexible hours, saves commuting time, boosts professional autonomy, and helps employees gain proficiency with cutting-edge ICT (Prasad & Vaidya, 2020). It offers companies the option to maximise the utilisation of and save costs of resources, such as office space. In fact, non-contact industries like telecommunication, remote support, and online education provide business sectors the chance to flourish (Liu et al., 2020). COVID-19 has presented organisations with opportunities to strengthen their digital capabilities, broaden their vision of the development of their employees' skills and assist people in working more independently. It has facilitated the transition from traditional face-to-face socialising tactics to virtual ones, such as virtual meetings, lunches, and coffee breaks (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach

This qualitative research examined the WFH experiences and perceptions of knowledge workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in New Zealand. As stated by Aspers and Corte (2019), qualitative research is used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas of research. It involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data to gather participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviour; hence, the researchers found this technique appropriate for this study to investigate employees' perspectives during COVID-19-induced WFH.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen as the qualitative approach as it allows researchers to understand how individuals make sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009); and it is rooted in interpretivist, phenomenological epistemology which suggests that reality is socially constructed (Ponterotto, 2005). Aligned with an IPA approach, our study examines individual perceptions in their unique contexts.

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences on working from home during Covid-19 in New Zealand.

This study explored whether at this stage knowledge workers see any long-term changes in their work patterns and ways of working, as well as how they perceive these changes vis-à-vis their life situation. The research questions (RQ) were:

RQ1: How do knowledge workers perceive the impact of WFH during the COVID-19 crisis on their (exchange) relationships with employers or colleagues or family examining factors such as relationship quality with supervisors and co-workers, and work-life balance?

RQ2: How do knowledge workers perceive the impact of WFH during the COVID-19 crisis on various job and career aspects, such as job satisfaction, productivity, turnover intention, and career upskilling?

RQ3: How do knowledge workers perceive the impact of WFH on their health and well-being?

RQ4: To what extent has the COVID-19 crisis impacted knowledge workers' personal views and intentions to keep WFH in the future?

Sample

Aligned with IPA, the study used a purposive sampling technique (Smith and Osborn, 2008) using pre – selected criteria relevant to our research objective - 'knowledge workers' who had been working from home three or more days of the week during the Covid-19 crisis. Further, a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was used, in which participants refer researchers to their networks as potential participants (Patton, 2002). Sectors likely to have a high

representation of knowledge workers who worked from home during the crisis as well as prior to this period were chosen: information technology (IT), telecommunication, education and professional services in the Wellington region (Stats NZ, 2020). Guest et al. (2006) posits that "if the goal (of research) is to describe a shared perception, belief or behaviour among a relatively homogenous group, then a sample of twelve participants will likely be sufficient..." (pp. 76). While our sample was homogenous in relation to criteria of knowledge workers working from home during COVID-19 period, there was also a level of heterogeneity as we analysed different sectors. Therefore, twenty-two interviews were deemed sufficient based on the characteristics of our participant profile. Table 1 shows the demography of the participants.

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Data collection and analysis

Ethics approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand in 2020. The application process included careful consideration of the potential emotional impact on participants, and measures to ensure their well-being throughout the study. Additionally, participants were provided with an information sheet and a consent form to participate. The respondents who provided consent were approached and interviews were conducted in 2021 (February–August). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and confirmed with participants before use. The interview transcripts were organised and analysed using an NVivo software package for qualitative research and supplemented with manual thematic analysis. The transcripts were analysed based on the IPA process outlined by Smith and Osborn (2008). The analysis resulted in three key themes, which are discussed in the findings section.

Table 1: Demographic details of research participants

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Age range	Sector
P1	Female	European	56-65	Public
P2	Male	Pasifika	36-45	Public
P3	Female	European	46-55	Public
P4	Female	American	56-65	Public
P5	Male	European	56-65	Education
P6	Female	European	56-65	Education
P7	Male	Asian	36-45	Education
P8	Female	Asian Indian	26-35	Energy
P9	Male	Indian/NZ European	26-35	Insurance
P10	Male	Asian (Indian)	36-45	Education
P11	Male	European	46-55	Technology
P12	Female	European	36-45	Education
P13	Female	Latin American	26-35	Education
P14	Female	European	56-65	Education
P15	Female	Pasifika/Asian	46-55	Banking
P16	Female	Asian Indian	36-45	Education
P17	Female	British/German	46-55	Transport
P18	Female	Māori	46-55	Transport
P19	Female	European	46-55	Legal
P20	Female	European	36-45	Legal
P21	Female	European	36-45	Legal
P22	Male	Asian (Indian)	36-45	Sports

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FINDINGS

There were 22 completed interviews, and the participants are identified as P1 to P22 as shown in Table 1. The three key themes are described below.

Theme 1: Enablers and Adaptation to Work from Home combined with Challenges

This theme captures the distinct views of participants on the key role of connectedness, which was perceived to be important. Connectedness was available both through virtual tools and through positive employer support during Covid-10 lockdown WFH. However, there was an adaptation curve involved particularly with making one's way through this changed work landscape, and also learning new ways of communicating and collaborating. Participants also expressed challenges in adjusting to working in the same shared space with other family members, as well as initial challenges in managing the boundaries between work and family life. Certain unique situations faced by participants also aggravated the negative effects of lockdown WFH.

1.1 Virtual Tools Aided Connections and Collaborations

Participants expressed ease of communications and collaborations through virtual tools such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. However, However, some participants felt disconnected, as not everyone is comfortable using virtual tools to collaborate.. In contrast, other participants shared that they perceived an improvement in connections and collaborations over the period of lockdown WFH, as workplaces held routine catchups to keep teams connected and to seek updates on work as well as general well-being. These catch ups included planned activities such as karakia, themed team meetings, team quizzes and so on to enable bonding. Using virtual tools such as MS Teams was thought to play an important role in mimicking face-to-face interactions as well as possible. The quotes below illustrate these points.

> So I got to know these two women in Auckland as well, so all in all, in terms of connectedness I felt really connected, I didn't feel isolated at all and I actually got to know people in the other locations in Auckland and Hamilton much better. It was a very positive experience in terms of that. (P14)

> During lockdown I actually saw more of my team than prior to lockdown because we were using all those remote tools and everyone was able to find some time to get together and just cut the breeze for half an hour. I hadn't socially met many of my colleagues before because they're in a different city, so the interaction with the team improved because we found we were all available and we were always on a collaboration platform. (P11)

1.2 Employer Support

Employees perceived positive organisational support for WFH in terms of organisational preparedness for WFH, communication and coordination. Employers offered WFH trials, set staff up to WFH, provided the required equipment, offered consideration for working parents and family situations by providing flexible hours and split work hours, allowed discretionary leave, and monitored staff health and well-being. Overall, employees viewed the transition to WFH arrangements favourably, and this experience made them remain with the organisation.
The quotes below illustrate the participants' perception of employer support:
Our organisation with the COVID response, the COVID communication, everything COVID related has just been 100% perfect, just really good around the equipment, the communications

that came out, the compassion that they've got, the flexibility. Everything has been really good and I keep going back to the fact that before we went into lockdown, which was on a Monday, the Wednesday prior they asked the whole office to WFH as a test if we are ever to go into lockdown. (P8)

I think our organisation has responded very well to helping people WFH and they are very focused on wellbeing so they have a lot of things in place to help you, and to help you socially, emotionally, psychologically but also your physical well-being. For that I admire the organisation and would stay here. (P1)

P15 felt that her employer showed understanding, 'the kids were home and work was very good in terms of "If you've got young kids at home you don't need to work a full day, just take it as you can."'

1.3 Adaptation Curve

The participants expressed that a learning curve, along with adaptation, personal discipline, and strategy were involved with WFH. The main points covered setting boundaries between work and home, making time for family, adopting self-discipline for health and well-being, creating a proper workspace at home, making sure family is aware of your work needs, ensuring availability for teamwork, upskilling to use technology, shifting perceptions, and accepting new ways of working.
This was expressed in the quotes below:

You just have to be disciplined to ensure you take care of yourself physically, make sure you communicate with your team, and make sure you don't close off and not be available … I just made sure I set aside work time and anything outside work had to be really important before I'd pick up the tools and do something after hours. Just a bit of personal discipline on that. (P11)

I found that I gave things a go more often instead of just turning around and asking somebody to do it for me. It would take them five minutes and if I had to do it, it would take me an hour. So I did give it a go and that has developed my skills a lot. (P13)

I had always been reluctant to read emails on my phone because I think I'm at home, work no longer matters, but I just think that it's good to stay connected to people and if that means a quick response to an email that you read on your phone at 7.00pm then that's OK. Just a bit more open to different ways of working. (P21)

1.4 Work-Life Balance Struggles

The participants expressed challenges associated with work-life balance as they experienced more intense and extended work during lockdown WFH. Job demands increased, work imposed on personal space, and there was an intrinsic pressure to do well in both spheres, work and family life. The total experience of WFH was perceived to be chaotic, with work-life balance struggles clearly evident. This experience is exemplified by the following quotes:
P3 said, 'During lockdown the WFH, it was constant and quite long hours because the priority on my work actually went up so it was more intense at home.'
P1 explained, 'I don't have a separate office, so I'm working on my dining room table, so there's a huge imposition of my work equipment on my relaxation space.'

Again, it's that separation between home and work. I struggle myself personally to do that because I feel a huge responsibility for the team that I lead and also the work that we do, but

also the family come into it as well. The challenge for me personally is having boundaries and being present in the times you're working, and then being able to close the office door and say "Now I'm going to be present with my kids and family." It's so easy to blur it, and no one is putting that pressure on me but myself. (P15)

It was savage, it was mayhem. Initially it took me at least a week to settle down, to figure out what has happened. We have never been in a lockdown situation before and with kids learning from home, and my wife WFH, household chores and all that stuff – there were no rules, no daily ritual or routines, nothing for a week. (P22)

1.4 Individual Situations Exacerbated Lockdown WFH

Participants mentioned that their unique situations aggravated the negative effects of lockdown WFH. Some mentioned that experiencing organisational restructuring and being in a new team created challenges with the WFH lockdown situation. Others mentioned living intergenerationally, and said that they found it hard to balance work and family needs due to these increased demands. There were also unique struggles facing participants with young or school-going children, as they were juggling full-time work along with managing childcare and schooling responsibilities. Another participant mentioned the lockdown WFH period coincided with her return to work post-maternity leave and this was not the best situation to be in. The quotes below illustrate these views.

I actually have to confess that WFH was incredibly stressful for me. I had a new team and we hadn't established relationships or ways of working or policies and procedures about how they would treat me as their line manager, and what my expectations were on them. We had just been through a restructure and were a new team and I was a colleague of people before I became the team leader. And that's quite an interesting dynamic. (P1)

… however it was a tricky time for me because I had just come back from maternity leave for a year in February and the lockdown started in March or April, so I had only been in the office for a month. (P8)

You've got three or four generations living in the home, particularly with the oldies because they're so revered in all of our ethnic cultures and making sure they're OK, and then having to deal with the school kids and preschool kids, it was really was challenging for the parents. (P18)

I work a 32-hour week and my husband is also a full-time worker and at that time we had two young kids, my son was four and my daughter had just turned one … So that was really tough because we had these children that require attention ... I think I really struggled emotionally and it was a really hard time for me ... The whole problem with WFH is WFH with children. If you don't have the children, it's fine. (P8)

Other individual situations mentioned were having no separate WFH space in the home, moving and settling into a new home, and medical conditions such as having emergency surgery during lockdown.

Theme 2: Varying Impact on Productivity, Health, Job and Career Aspects

This theme reflects the idea that participants experienced varying impacts of WFH on indicators such as productivity, health and well-being, and job and career aspects. The impacts were not unidirectional and therefore both positive and negative effects of lockdown WFH on job and career aspects were noted by participants.

2.1 Impact on Productivity

Participants reported that, while WFH during the COVID lockdown period, the impact on productivity was both positive and negative. Overall, participants reported working consistently and achieving high and satisfactory productivity during lockdown WFH, even delivering more than expected.

Several participants emphasised WFH can be more productive due to focussed hours and lack of office interruptions and distractions. Being able to plan and arrange one's time can be more efficient because it helps to get more done, faster:

> Overall, I think I got more done during the day, fewer interruptions and less distractions that I had to stop working for. Also, I was a little bit more relaxed and when I needed to take a break it wasn't that hard to step away, and there was no work interference as well. I sat in the kitchen and had a coffee and looked out over the backyard for a bit. I think I stayed as productive as I would have at the workplace. (P11)

P11 further said, 'I think we were 100% effective. I think I spent less effort doing the same work, so I was probably a bit more productive in some ways than I might have been prior to lockdown.'

Some participants reported that productivity was affected in the initial phase of lockdown due to working with children at home and facing distractions, not having the right equipment, and the additional stresses of COVID uncertainty.

> … the additional stresses of COVID and the uncertainty that created externally did mean that I probably wasn't as productive as I might have been, but I think that was not WFH that did that, it was the COVID stuff that affected that. (P6)

> During lockdown with a kid at home, I felt my productivity level wasn't really good, maybe at 50%. That changed when my son went back to school and also when I had different equipment at hand. When I changed to the company laptop which has an instant remote connection, it's basically like working in the office and before that wasn't, that made a big change as well to my effectiveness. (P17).

2.2 Impact on Health and Well-Being

Participants reported that there were negative and positive impacts on health and well-being during COVID-19-induced WFH.

Some participants reported experiencing stressors unique to the COVID-19 situation, such as stress contagion, aggravation of stressors and anxiety for overseas family. Participants also expressed that stress arose from work-overload and exerting themselves to get work done, but it was harder to get things done because of sudden changes in the way they worked. Participants also reported that physical health was adversely affected as activity and movement levels were cut down during lockdown WFH, and were difficult to replace.

> It's about those restrictions, what you can and can't do, it's not just the lockdown, it's everything else. Particularly in the first Level 4 lockdown when we had no idea whether this was going to be a big thing or a flash in the pan, we all sat around waiting for the 1.00 pm broadcast. It creates a whole different set of stresses and those did definitely affect me. (P6)

P1 said, 'I just got bombarded by emails. I found that very stressful. I actually have to confess that WFH was incredibly stressful for me.'

However, participants also experienced gains from lockdown WFH, such as increased levels of well-being, and positive effects on emotional and physical stress.. Participants also reported being able to pause and slow down, and gain resilience under pressure, especially when there was a lot of emotional stress.

> I feel so much better. It really makes me feel good to just be able to get up, not worry about commuting, I can look after my daughter, get her to school, I can have a nice breakfast, I've relaxed and then I can just get into work and it's peaceful here. (P1)
> … feeling of freedom for me personally creates huge well-being just knowing that I'm free to do the things that I want to do while working hard, but also freeing yourself up to do other things that are important in your life. (P21)

2.3 Impact on Job and Career Aspects

This sub-theme discusses the negative and positive impacts on job satisfaction, career growth and upskilling.

From the perspective of job satisfaction, participants reported that, given the pandemic-related circumstances, it was a pretty good work experience; they were happy to work at home, save on travel time and other stressors. However, it was also reported that they experienced anxiety, distress, and disappointment with the initial period of lockdown WFH. The two quotes below illustrate these contrasting perspectives.

As quoted by P18 'the job satisfaction that I have felt since lockdown is the best year of my working life in 26 years.'

P22 said 'as for job satisfaction, I was dissatisfied just because of the fact that I was anxious about the future and I was getting stressed about what's happening.'

Regarding career aspects and upskilling, several participants expressed positive views of WFH, such as gaining skills to WFH on a regular basis as part of a new normal, getting recognised as a leader, acquiring qualifications, attending training courses, and learning to work under pressure. Participants also developed comfort with using IT tools, and this learning became embedded with regular practice. This was useful and transferable to any new role.

P11 said, 'Because a lot of training and qualifications can now be taken at home or from a remote office site, it's been easier to do qualifications or attend courses and things that I wouldn't have necessarily gone to.'

> … when Zoom was probably unheard of in the Public Sector, so that's something I've picked up and the functionality around Zoom and online tools like Jamboards, Miro, Trello, MS Teams, so I've picked up quite a few things that I wouldn't have used otherwise and how to effectively run strings and scrums virtually. How to have hybrid events. Those are some skills I've learned that would be quite useful and could transfer into any new role as well. (P2)

In contrast, another set of participants reported that there was hardly any time for upskilling amidst lockdown, and that learning new skills related to online technology was not valued, but might be helpful for the future if similar situations arise. The two quotes below reflect these views.

According to P16, 'lockdown was a period where we could not think about upskilling ourselves, it was sailing through just to get to the other end of the tunnel.'

> Yes, I feel I'm a competent Zoom online teacher for all levels now, so I would say I learned some new skills, but they're not skills I care about a lot. I've always known how to teach and now I can teach online. It's not a skill I value, it's just something I can do if I need to. If this happens again, I'll know what to do and therefore it'll be so much more easier, but it's not something I want to do day-to-day. (P5)

Theme 3: Flexibility as a Key Requirement for Future Working

This main theme reflected the idea that, despite perceived challenges with WFH, which participants found difficult to navigate, there were also clear opportunities, which appear to tip the balance in favour of WFH in some form. Participants overwhelmingly reported their preferences for WFH, including hybrid work and having the flexibility and choice to WFH when needed. This clearly signals the direction in which work arrangements are emerging post COVID-19-induced lockdown WFH.

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3.1 Perceived Challenges with WFH

Participants mentioned a range of challenges with WFH, including challenges of fully engaging, connecting, and collaborating through virtual tools. These actions take place naturally in person. Further, maintaining good physical health, taking enough breaks, and ensuring that adequate movement forms part of daily life was harder at home. The nature of work also posed a problem for certain tasks, such as when research or project work required collaboration or brainstorming to facilitate effective work outcomes. From a mental health perspective, it was noted that human connection is important, even for introverted people, in the long term. The four quotes below illustrate these challenges as expressed by participants:

> Zoom is a sort of replacement, but it doesn't work as well as delivering training face-to-face. That is still the most effective way to do that. Zoom requires a lot more energy, both from the person providing but also from the recipients, and the energy it consumes for the amount of time isn't as good as when you're in a face-to-face meeting. (P3)

> Giving yourself enough breaks from screens. Actually, getting up and making sure you are making cups of tea or doing a couple of laps of the lounge or something because you can find you've been sitting down for a long time. Being able to give yourself plenty of breaks is harder at home. (P12)

> … but we do also love the whole idea of the college, the community and that ability to engage that way is just so important for the wider issue of research, getting that off-the-cuff response to what you are doing, the ability to bounce an idea. The number of research ideas that come out of a bit of brainstorming over a coffee or something like that, it's really difficult to get those sorts of things because you're not actually physically together. (P6)

> I think there's a real mental health challenge WFH if you're not seeing people daily, and not just your partner, people outside. I think that's a huge challenge even for introverts that human connection and touch, all those things are just so important that to do it for a month, okay we did it, but as a long-term thing? (P12)

3.2 Perceived Opportunities with WFH

Participants narrated various opportunities with WFH, including no unproductive commute time, increased flexibility, and freedom, which help to structure and integrate one's life and promote a healthy work-life balance. Another set of participants perceived WFH as fostering work from anywhere, including from overseas, in different time zones and for employers based outside their location. Participants mentioned that WFH suits employees with introverted personalities. The below quotes reflect these opportunities with WFH:

> The flexibility. You're not spending time travelling. If you're leaving after 10.00am you won't find much traffic but if you're leaving around 7.30 or 8.00am, you will be spending one

hour travelling. And it's the same case when you come back. If you leave early, it's good, otherwise it would take another one hour to reach home. The advantage is that you can spend those two hours constructively either at home working on housework or for your office work depending on what the situation is. (P16)

You can also get the odd load of washing on. You can adjust your timing so that if the kids have a practice or a sport to go to, you can do that … I just think it was fantastic. Being able to do all of those things makes you enjoy your job so much more. And if you need to take yourself off for a walk or go and have your nails done or something like that to make yourself feel better, your well-being is greatly improved. (P21)

One, you can work from anywhere. Even if you have to travel with your family somewhere else, or look after someone who is sick, you can still work. You can still deliver what you are doing while staying away from work. Plus, you can work for any organisation remotely. You do not have to be in that country to work for that organisation. It has opened up a new paradigm where you can work for some Australian company. Though they don't have a base in New Zealand, you can still work for them there and they can still pay you here. You don't have to have a Work Permit or travel over there. (P7)

P4 said 'yes, in general I find my stress level is much better WFH. I can control my environment. Again, that comes from being introverted; needing to have quiet space, thinking space and all of those sort of things.'

Other wider opportunities perceived regarding WFH were growing the economy, positive environmental impact, good for women's careers, and business continuity in emergency situations. Overall, WFH is of value to people's lives in many ways.

3.3 Emergence of and Preferences for New Forms of Work Arrangements

Participants expressed a preference for a mix of WFH and working from office. It emerged that WFH has its upsides and downsides, so a hybrid form of work is preferred. WFH is intended for flexibility and quiet and focussed work, whereas work from office oriented towards social connections and building relationships. Participants also mentioned that there has been a mindset change regarding WFH as an acceptable way of working; it was felt that some tasks have become redundant and there is a realisation that WFH can be effective when one has the right work space for it. Employers are also more flexible now and encourage adoption of WFH, and provide changes in contractual terms to accommodate flexible work. Employees also prefer to work for an employer who provides flexible working arrangements.

I feel that a hybrid situation is working best where you've got times in the office and times working at home … honestly I wouldn't like to have a just remote job. This whole lockdown with WFH the whole time, I wouldn't enjoy that. But these two or three days in the office and two or three days WFH, this is perfect. (P17)

P17 also stated 'it has absolutely changed my view of WFH, seeing its benefits, seeing its downside like connectedness, and I feel that a hybrid situation is working best where you've got times in the office and times working at home.'

I can't print at home but what I discovered while working during lockdown is that actually I don't need to print anything, I can truly do all my work on a screen which is a bit of a revelation really because you don't need to print off screeds of paper to do the job. (P21)

I would say it has changed it quite drastically and it has made me realise that if you have a proper set up and a dedicated space other than your bedroom to go and work, I think WFH can be really effective … It has brought about the realisation that I need a separate space to work

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in at home to work more effectively and keep my mental balance in place and well-being in place. (P7)

I am encouraging my team to actually think about WFH, and as a group we have said that our team will work from the office on Mondays and Fridays, and between Tuesday and Thursday they can take two days off WFH, so we're providing that option for the team as well. (P2)

I probably wouldn't go and work for a client if I thought they were going to be really inflexible and insist on set hours and all in the office. That wouldn't work for me. I like people who trust me to fit the work in around other commitments which can vary from week to week. (P19)

IMPLICATIONS

This study provides an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of employees during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of their relationship quality with colleagues, job and career aspects, health and well-being, personal views and intention to carry on WFH in the future.

It emerged from the study findings that lockdown WFH was a unique experience for participants and was facilitated by virtual tools to connect and collaborate, as well as by employer support helping to navigate the challenging situation. Employees adopted learning curves by not only learning new skills, but also self-discipline and coping strategies to manage work and home life. There were, however, unique situations that exaggerated the lockdown WFH, as well as challenges related to the nature of the job. Participants reported difficulties in truly engaging through virtual tools, as well as in maintaining good physical health. Work-life balance struggles were also highlighted in terms of overlapping work and home spaces, and also related to meeting the demands of both spheres of life. In terms of productivity— job satisfaction, career upskilling, and health and well-being—both positive and negative effects were noted, though positives outweighed the negatives.

Based on the participant interviews, here are the key discussion points that emerged in regard to normalisation of WFH, what this would mean for employees and organisations going forward, and how it can be an opportunity to shape a better future for work and work-life balance:

While organisations are encouraging employees to WFH to an extent since lockdown, there are questions about a cutback of this trend with organisations asking employees to return to workplaces and curtailing the freedoms related to working arrangements.

It raises questions around the requirements of future housing and the possibility of incorporating workspaces in private housing.

In view of an ageing population, questions arise about when to work and when to slow down gradually and work less, and the implications for WFH or working in the office.

There are also questions about efficiency and maintaining multiple workplaces for individuals. While this works well in terms of personal choice and freedom; it may not be efficient resource utilisation.

COVID-19-induced lockdown WFH has opened the opportunity to rethink the future of work and both employees and employers are adopting/adapting to the new way of working. Organisations have understood that flexibility is key and that it is required for a sustainable future. However, this will require a paradigm shift and a better alignment between employer, employee, and technology to appreciate the benefits of flexible work arrangements for all. It appears that WFH is here to stay, and that new forms of work, such as hybrid work, are being adopted, encouraged, and preferred by employees.

CONCLUSION

Given the unique circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring the WFH experiences of knowledge worker became imperative. This study delved into understanding employees' experiences and its implications for the evolving landscape of future workplaces.

It became clear that COVID –induced work from home presented a uniquely unprecedented situation in the history of world of work. There was a sudden transition to work from home for large populations and, like any transformational change, this involved a huge learning curve and new ways of working for both employees and employers. This move was facilitated by technological means and supportive employers. However, as this new way of working involved households studying, living, and working together, there were work-life balance challenges particularly for employees with young families who faced added parenting and schooling responsibilities alongside their regular work commitments. This was further compounded by the stress and anxiety induced by the pandemic. There were varied effects felt on health and well-being, job satisfaction, career upskilling, and productivity but there were also some clear advantages in terms of regained focus on health, improved productivity and ease of framing work in the larger context of one's personal life. Consequently, there has been a widespread acceptance of flexible work practices, including hybrid and remote work models, with both employers and employees favouring the flexibility they afford.

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