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Transitioning between Workplaces

Understanding white-collar workers' perspectives on working from home and working in the post-pandemic workplace based on the self-determination theory

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to the concept of “work from home” (WFH), where individuals can practice their profession from home through digital devices. This shift has dramatically changed the individual workplace environments, raising questions about which effects this will have on the post-pandemic workplace. Through eleven semi-structured interviews, this study gathers opinions and experiences of white-collar workers in different sectors. From the perspective of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness of the self-determination theory (SDT), the workplace satisfaction of white-collar workers related to the sudden change of workplace is investigated, and the way in which the post-pandemic workplace could look like in the future. The results of this study show that relatedness seems to be the toughest need to address while working from home, whereas more opportunities emerged to achieve competence and autonomy. The majority of employees prefer a hybrid mode of work in the future, to combine the advantages of both working in the office and working from home to maximise their social needs, flexibility and productivity.

Key words: Covid-19; Workplace transition; Work from home (WFH); White-collar workers; Motivation; Self-determination theory (SDT); Autonomy

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In March of 2020, the Dutch government imposed workplace restrictions in response to Covid-19, forcing employees throughout the country to transition into working from home. This involuntary transition to a new workplace, and thereby a change in the ways of working, could cause workers to respond negatively to their new work environment and display lower levels of job satisfaction or commitment (Powell, 2020). However, evidence also shows that workers who have been forced to work virtually are enjoying it and many state that they would like to continue to do so after the pandemic (Powell, 2020). Insights into the way Covid-19 affects employees' experiences in the workplace, as well as their perspective on the post-pandemic workplace, are of societal relevance because they may help to design and manage policies that prioritise employees' well-being and satisfaction with the working culture and environment.

Existing literature on 'work from home' (WFH) focuses on remote workers who voluntarily work from home (Waizenegger, 2020). In addition, existing knowledge has mostly been generated from a context in which remote working was only occasionally practised, which may result in different outcomes between individuals who work remotely infrequently and those who do it extensively (Wang et al., 2020). As previous research does not cover the enforced aspect of WFH, this research contributes to scientific literature on abrupt workplace change. Specifically, organisational change management will benefit from a further understanding of the challenges related to abrupt workplace transitions, which is a relatively new topic in scientific literature (Skogland & Hansen, 2017).

To investigate how WFH impacts employees' work experiences and their perspective on the future workplace, the self-determination theory (SDT) is used to better understand employee satisfaction. This theory of human motivation is an important framework in the field of organisational psychology and is based on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs (BNP): autonomy, competence and relatedness (Van den Broek et al., 2016). Satisfaction of these needs facilitate important work outcomes, including effective performance, psychological well-being and job satisfaction (Gagné & Deci, 2005). For organisations, supporting satisfaction of the BPN have become an obvious imperative (Dryselius & Pettersson, 2021). Understanding white-collar workers' home working experience is also essential in contributing to the remote working literature because it provides insights into the relationship between workplace and employee satisfaction and productivity.

This study focuses on white-collar workers because they will mostly suffer from the effects of quarantine and isolation, as they can continue their work from home during lockdown measures (Godderis, 2020). In contrast, many blue-collar and white coat workers must still go to their regular workplace to carry out their tasks. Moreover, the term ‘employees’ involves a high variety of jobs and therefore, varied experiences of work during the pandemic. Focusing on professional and semi-professional white-collar workers who primarily perform office and desk-bound work leads to a more targeted population and should result in more specific policy recommendations (Gibson & Papa, 2000).

1.2 Research problem

This study distinguishes two research aims. The first objective is to investigate how the transition from working at the conventional office to WFH influenced white-collar workers’ workplace satisfaction, based on the principles of the SDT. Secondly, these findings will be used to determine their perspective on the future workplace. This knowledge could help organisations to create optimal working environments that lead to greater job satisfaction. The main research question has been developed accordingly:

“How has the transition from working in the conventional office to WFH due to Covid-19 influenced white-collar workers’ workplace satisfaction based on the principles of the SDT?”

To examine the perspective of white-collar workers on the transition back to the office after the pandemic, the following sub-questions have been formulated:

1. How has WFH influenced the satisfaction of the need for autonomy for white-collar workers?
2. How has WFH influenced the satisfaction of the need for competence for white-collar workers?
3. How has WFH influenced the satisfaction of the need for relatedness for white-collar workers?
4. How do insights on the BPN satisfaction of white-collar workers during WFH influence perspectives on the post-pandemic workplace?

The questions above will be answered by analysing relevant literature connected to the SDT and the workplace, and a conceptual model is developed accordingly. Afterwards, a series of expectations are derived from the model and semi-structured interviews are used to research them. Further, the method of data collection and analysis are presented in the methodology.

Finally, the conclusion presents the most relevant findings, strengths and limitations of the study and recommendations for future policies and research.

2. Theoretical framework

This section presents the SDT in the context of the workplace, serving as a basis for the conceptual model. In addition, findings of previous research on the satisfaction of the BPN concerning remote work are presented, on which the expectations rely.

2.1 Self-determination theory in the workplace

The SDT is a macro-theory of personality, development, and well-being in social contexts that reflect upon different aspects of motivation across various domains, including the domain of motivation in the workplace (Gagné, 2014). The SDT proposes that the degree of motivation depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. The satisfaction of these three needs fosters well-being such as positive affect, vitality, and a sense of meaningfulness, even in times when insecurity prevails as during the Covid-19 crisis (Martela et al., 2021).

The SDT distinguishes between two types of motivation: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to people doing an activity because they find it interesting and derive satisfaction from the process (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Extrinsic motivation involves people doing an activity for a consequence separable from the activity itself, such as a reward, whereby satisfaction comes from the extrinsic consequences to which the activity leads and not from the activity itself (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Research has shown that intrinsic motivation leads to better performance, persistence and satisfaction in various domains than extrinsic motivation (Roca & Gagné, 2008). Autonomy and competence have been found to have the greatest influence on intrinsic motivation, however, relatedness is still crucial (Druselius & Pettersson, 2021).

2.1.1 Autonomy

In SDT, *autonomy* concerns the desire that one can act with a sense of choice and volition, that is, to be able to self-organise one's actions and feel psychologically free (Gagné & Deci, 2005). To illustrate, if employees perceive accomplishing tasks as fun, interesting or meaningful, they are likely to engage in them with a strong sense of volition and psychological freedom (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Events like threats, surveillance, evaluation and deadlines were shown to lead to decreased autonomy and thereby decreased intrinsic motivation (Druselius & Pettersson, 2021).

In contrast, providing choice and acknowledging people's inner experience was shown to increase intrinsic motivation (Dryselius & Pettersson, 2021).

Autonomy has often been associated with remote work. By working away from direct supervision, remote workers have greater autonomy to organise, plan and execute work-related activities compared to office workers (Standen et al., 1999). The flexibility regarding the location and timing of executing their tasks creates a productive environment to the satisfaction of employees' need for autonomy (Golden & Veiga, 2008).

2.1.2 Competence

The need for *competence* represents that individuals tend to be effective in their interactions with environments when they perform an activity, which is similar to the concept of self-efficacy (Roca & Gagné, 2008). Employees want to feel they can have the resources and skills to complete daily tasks successfully. It has been observed that social-contextual events such as communication, rewards and feedback can enhance intrinsic motivation for that action (Dryselius & Pettersson, 2021). Intrinsic motivation is enhanced by competence only if it is accompanied by a feeling of autonomy (Druselius & Pettersson, 2021).

Some aspects of working remotely may contribute to workers' feelings of competence. Studies demonstrate that employees tend to be more productive, efficient and organised when working from home (Morgan, 2004). In addition, the fact that remote workers save travel time and generally experience fewer disruptions than office workers could explain increased productivity (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). This productivity could in turn contribute to satisfaction of the need for competence.

2.1.3 Relatedness

The need for *relatedness* implies that individuals feel connected and supported by important people, such as team members and managers (Roca & Gagné, 2008). This need is also connected to intrinsic motivation. Employees who feel part of a team and feel free to express their joys and concerns are more likely to meet their need for relatedness compared to employees who feel lonely and lack social support (Van den Broeck et al., 2008).

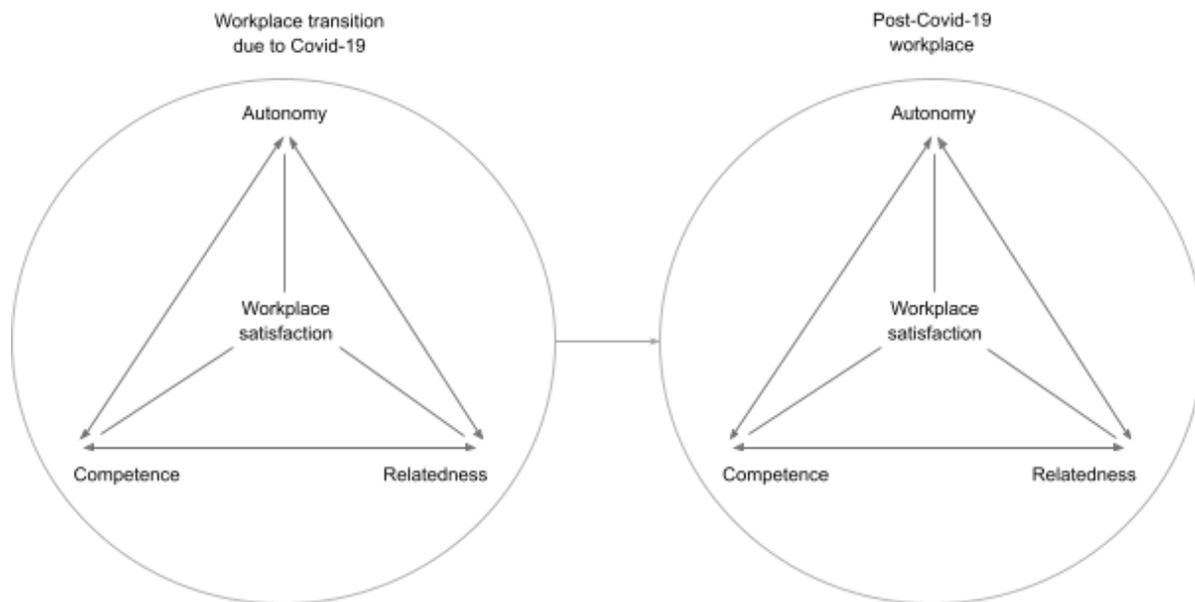
Because remote work comes with a reduction of in-person interactions and diminished social presence, interpersonal bonds with colleagues and managers may be weakened (Golden, 2006). The impersonal sphere is mainly driven by the use of digital devices; interactions become more formal and nonsynchronous when mediated by technology.

Furthermore, digital interactions are not as rich as face-to-face interactions as they restrict nonverbal expressions (e.g. facial expression, posture, intonation) (Sharma et al., 1981). Hence, the context of remote work can make communication and the development of work relationships harder while working from home.

2.2 Conceptual model

The conceptual model (Figure 1) is based on the basic psychological needs of the SDT. It provides a framework that illustrates the interactions between the satisfaction of the BPN, influencing workplace satisfaction of white-collar workers. Knowledge on how the perceived BPN have changed during the transition from working in the conventional office to WFH would lead insights into how the BPN could be achieved optimally in the post-Covid-19 workplace, facilitating workplace satisfaction.

Figure 1. Conceptual model



2.3 Expectations

As the Covid-19 pandemic forces employees to work from home, feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness in the workplace are expected to change. Four expectations have been formulated based on the literature covered, to answer the research questions:

1. Working from home provides white-collar workers more opportunities to satisfy the need for autonomy compared to working in the conventional office due to an increased feeling of psychological freedom.
2. Working from home provides white-collar workers more opportunities to satisfy the need for competence compared to working in the conventional office due to an increased perception of self-efficacy.
3. Working from home provides white-collar workers more challenges to satisfy the need for relatedness compared to working in the conventional office due to a decreased quality of communication between colleagues.
4. The future workplace will be a combination of onsite and at-home work, as white-collar workers could benefit from opportunities at home and in the office to satisfy the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

To capture the diversity and depth of white-collar workers' experiences regarding this fairly new research topic, a qualitative research design was applied. While much research on the SDT is based on self-report questionnaires to measure individuals' beliefs and views, in-depth interviews can provide a richer depiction of the situated experiences (Sjöblom et al., 2016). The in-depth aspect of the method is important as it reinforces the purpose of attaining a detailed insight into the research issue from the perspective of the participants themselves (Hennink et al., 2020).

3.2 Research population

The research is focused on the group of white-collar workers who primarily perform office and desk-bound work, including professional, semi-professional, part-time and full-time employees. The population concerns white-collar workers who were forced to work from home due to Covid-19.

Purposeful sampling was used to reach a maximum variation in age and profession. Snowball sampling was the primary strategy used to recruit participants. People from both sexes and all ages were recruited, based on a similar number of employees of every working generation, including baby boomers (1946-1964), generation X (1965-1980), millennials (1981-1995) and generation Z (1996-2010) (Leslie et al., 2021).

3.3 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, enabling the research to grasp white-collar workers' personal constructs and beliefs (Dryselius & Pettersson, 2021). Open questions using probes and prompts were used to elicit more detailed information. An interview guide (Appendix II) was developed according to the initial conceptual model (Appendix III) based on the study of home by Tanner et al. (2008) and applied to the concept of the workplace, considering three interrelated dimensions: the material, social and personal. Interviews were conducted in the native language of the interviewee (Dutch), allowing for capturing greater richness of an experience as opposed to non-native language (van Nes et al., 2010).

The interviews were scheduled at a convenient time for the participants. As the social distancing measures were still in effect, the in-depth interviews were performed online as much as possible. Some in-person interviews were conducted while sticking to Covid-19 guidelines imposed by the RIVM. The document "Doing fieldwork in a Pandemic" (Lupton, 2020) was consulted as a guideline for doing online interviews, which serves as an alternative source of social research materials if researchers decide to go down the path.

Several methodological experiments using in-depth interviews have shown that saturation can be reached at a small sample size, for instance, under twenty interviews (Hennink et al., 2020). This research was guided by the adequacy of data, in terms of richness, diversity, and saturation, rather than the number of participants. Eleven semi-structured interviews with a duration of twenty to thirty minutes each were considered sufficient to achieve saturation.

3.4 Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were then managed using Atlas.ti, a software package for qualitative data analysis. In the process of data analysis, inductive as well as deductive coding has been applied. First, deductive codes were developed based on the initial conceptual model (Appendix III).

In the initial stage of the analysis, many of the central themes and categories seemed to fall into the dimensions of the basic physical needs. Consequently, to increase the depth of the analysis, new deductive codes were applied based on the basic physical needs, which means they guide the process of data analysis. Inductive codes were developed afterwards, to identify themes and patterns raised by participants themselves which were not necessarily part of the existing theoretical framework. Data from the transcripts were labelled by applying the codes from the codebook (Appendix IV).

An essential aspect of the analysis was to interpret statements made by the participants to draw conclusions from it. A challenge with this process is prevention of extrapolating specific statements too far, attributing thoughts and feelings to interviewees that might be coloured by my personal bias. This problem is alleviated by presenting multiple quotes from participants and contrasting them with conflicting statements, allowing for a better representation of the data.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Steps were taken to make sure that ethical standards were upheld, both in the collection of data and in the analysis of the collected material. The guidelines of RUG Academic Integrity and the Dutch Code of Conduct for Scientific Practice (VSNU, 2014) were followed.

Ethical principles including informed consent, self-determination, minimisation of harm, anonymity and confidentiality were taken into account. Additionally, attention was given to the ethical rules amongst conduct, such as politeness, catering to the participants' wishes and preparing for emotions. The informed consent is included in Appendix I. Participants were well-informed about the purpose of the research, free to decide on participation and could choose to withdraw their answers at a later date. All interviews were audio-recorded, kept private and used for academic purposes only. Participants were aware that the data is only shared with research members, exclusively for educational purposes. To ensure that data is stored ethically, the participants were asked for permission of personal identifiers.

4. Results

The following section presents the findings of the interviews after data collection and analysis. The given quotes are translated from Dutch to English. Table 1 presents an overview of the individual characteristics of the participants. A short introduction is provided regarding the process of the workplace transition since March 2020. The findings are structured according to the themes autonomy, competence and relatedness, as presented in the conceptual model. Lastly, an overview is given of the interviewees' perspectives on the future workplace.

Table 1. Research participants and characteristics

Interviewee	Generation (age)	Gender	Function
Harm	Baby boom (67)	M	Various leadership positions
Dick	Baby boom (62)	M	Civil servant
Dorine	Baby boom (61)	F	Facility manager
Johan	Generation X (53)	M	Communication advisor
Sarah	Generation X (45)	F	Board secretary
Martijn	Generation X (43)	M	Marketing manager
Marleen	Millennial (32)	F	Marketing manager
Niek	Millennial (30)	M	Customer Due Diligence Analyst
Tom	Millennial (27)	M	Web developer
Roel	Generation Z (25)	M	Customer Due Diligence Analyst
Charles	Generation Z (24)	M	Appraiser

4.1 Workplace transition as a process

It is important to note that most of the interviewees worked full-time at the office before the lockdown initiated in March 2020. The number of workdays at the office before Covid-19 varied between the interviewees; the majority used to work four to five times a week at the office. At the time of the interviews, almost everyone performed all work from home; only one person has been working partly at home and partly at the office since the lockdown. Not everyone immediately started working from home when the lockdown measures were introduced:

“During the more flexible corona-period half a year ago, I sometimes worked in a café. Just for the [gezelligheid], for myself. Sometimes, we also had meetings at a hotel, since this location provided more space.” (Sarah)

It is thus important to take into account that the Covid-19 workplace location has not been the same since the start of the lockdown for everyone. As of now, some are already experiencing a gradual shift to more physical meetings, even though the government still advises to work from home:

“Essentially, since March last year, everything has become digital, and now, very gradually, some physical meetings start to reoccur. It sort of becomes a mixture of Zoom and Teams meetings on the one hand and physical meetings on the other.” (Harm)

For this research, the following results are based on employees’ experiences specifically at the home workplace during the Covid-19 lockdown and the office workplace before the Covid-19 measures were imposed.

4.2 *Autonomy* in the workplace

Observed in remote working literature is the change in job characteristics with increased *autonomy* in the planning of work (Dryselius & Pettersson, 2021). In this section, attention will be given to the degree to which the workplace gives the worker freedom and independence in determining how the work is performed and scheduled.

Before working from home, interviewees usually started a regular workday after having commuted to work between 7:30 AM and 9:00 AM and ended between 4:30 PM and 6:00 PM. Some interviewees indicated that mornings were hectic; they had to rush to get to work or bring children to school. During a working day, most interviewees had regular coffee breaks, lunch with their colleagues and walks outside.

The Covid-19 working from home situation led to a change in how the time was allocated between work and personal responsibilities. Increased flexibility is identified with work autonomy in which an employee can choose the most productive time to do its work obligations (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). Many found that not having to take part in commuting to work was a big reliever of stress in daily life. They mentioned feeling more relaxed in the morning and during the day because there is no travel time to and from work:

“Otherwise I always had to hurry in the morning to be on time at work. I don’t have that feeling anymore because the stress disappeared and I feel more relaxed now.” (Sarah)

According to Morganson et al. (2010), there is a sense of discretion and freedom that comes with working remotely, away from face-to-face supervision. As people feel more freedom to arrange their own time, different routines were formed during the workday: household chores, practising sports and going for more walks were integrated throughout the day more often. Before Covid-19, such activities were generally performed after a working day.

“One friend oftentimes says: ‘let’s have a walk together in the afternoon’ and so we do. Back in the days I could only do this in the evenings.” (Dorine)

Some participants report they experience work and private life blending together leading to a change in the work-life balance. Work-life balance is described as “the dilemma of managing work obligations and personal/family responsibilities” (Lockwood, 2003, p. 3). Participants without roommates experience this change differently than those living with their family. Some interviewees indicated spending less time with their family and acquaintances and spending more time with close friends. Families are enjoying the extra time they get to spend together and the home office seems to be a blessing for parents with little children:

“I think it’s nice to be able to go downstairs and see the children. Sometimes I only saw them in the evening, when I returned from work. It’s great that I can see them more easily now.” (Niek)

Although employees may experience opportunities for feeling autonomous while working from home, Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi (2020) state that it cannot be taken for granted. Findings by Sewell and Taskin (2015) suggested that new constraints can emerge, such as how to behave in a setting that was previously beyond the reach of managerial control. Several interviewees mentioned the digital work environment demands work exhaustion at the end of the day because people spend more time sitting in front of a screen compared to at the office.

“When you have seven meetings in one day - which was a common occurrence for me - I felt less tired of physical meetings than seven Teams meetings.” (Harm)

“Sometimes you have those days when you have Teams meetings after Teams meetings, making me exhausted because of spending much time behind the screen.” (Johan)

The quotes above illustrate that increased opportunities regarding job autonomy involve challenges in discretion to the individual scheduling of work. Two explanations for this are identified: on the one hand, some people have difficulties in taking breaks because there is no clear time set or social pressure from colleagues to go for a walk or have lunch together. On the other hand, some interviewees experience that many more meetings are planned in one day and they do not even have time for a break:

“Under the motto ‘we are present anyway’ you are tempted to just go through all nine meetings after another, without going for a walk or taking a break. Well, that is just unhealthy.” (Harm)

To overcome these challenges, several interviewees explained that they try to maintain the structure of a traditional working day, and to make a clear schedule in the agenda:

“Sometimes I have so many meetings, so I have to plan efficiently; making blocks in my agenda and not planning something at lunchtime, to go to the bathroom and have a drink.” (Marleen)

These results showed that WFH has given employees more prominent power over their work conditions, contributing to increased opportunities for workers to satisfy the need for autonomy. On the downside, when some find themselves doing too much work, a work overload could result in unhealthy psychological effects such as stress and burnout (Orsini & Rodrigues, 2020). Hence, providing structure through establishing and maintaining timeframes and setting limits would support employees in gaining a stronger sense of competence and self-efficacy (Orsini & Rodrigues, 2020), which will be discussed in-depth in the next section.

4.3 *Competence* in the workplace

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, competence is another important aspect of the SDT and it refers to people's effectiveness to work within their designated environment. The increased opportunities provided by the home office that support the need for autonomy also seems to affect competence. The interviewees reported that saved travel time combined with flexible working hours increased feelings of productivity, as they can enjoy extra leisure time and dedicate the most appropriate time for them to get the work done. Besides flexible time management as an indicator for competence, Ancillo et al. (2020) presented that competence might also increase because of less distraction. However, competence might also be challenged due to isolation from colleagues and disruption of a work-life balance.

The interviews revealed that the pre-pandemic workplace provided a setting to reach out to colleagues with ease. However, the transition to working from home has decreased the number of colleagues that they are in contact with and more effort is needed for contacting colleagues for work-related matters. This could lead to a detractor in competence, supporting the literature discussed earlier. Not only is communication slower, but workers also seem to rely more on their skills and hesitate to contact colleagues when they encounter a problem:

"When you had a question, you just asked the colleague sitting next to you and now you approach someone less easily and you try to figure it out yourself first - which oftentimes takes more time - or you make mistakes."

(Charles)

"When you start your job in a new team with people online, whom you have never seen before, one tends to see which way the wind blows. You are less direct, while in the physical office you can approach a colleague more easily. Now I have to give a call for every little question, which feels a bit whiny." (Roel)

The communication barriers also seem to impact employee competence negatively. Brainstorming is harder and people hesitate to contact colleagues because of the time it takes and the fear that they could be perceived as too dependent, which might make some more prone to mistakes.

Nevertheless, decreased communication with colleagues could also be an opportunity for feeling competent. Some interviewees stated that meetings are conducted more effectively, as there is less opportunity for small talk and other interruptions. Moreover, many stated that the social environment at the office was not beneficial for work efficiency because it acts more as a distraction than a tool. As posited by Wang et al. (2020) there are fewer distractions with WFH, so competence could be enhanced as a result of the new work environment. An interviewee stated:

“You could hear everybody talking and I’m a person that is easily distracted, so when I hear somebody talking, I immediately respond. I work much more efficiently from home where I don’t chat with people.” (Marleen)

The transition from the regular office environment to the home office seems to carry a trade-off between ease of communication and less distraction. White-collar employees value interaction with colleagues and the ability to brainstorm and ask questions easily, but they also seem to benefit from fewer social distractions at home.

Moreover, the issue of technology seemed to affect employee competence. Although employees were already familiar with technology, digital communication through the computer screen was uncharted territory for many. The use of the video camera was brought up by participants several times and people mentioned its importance and value for communication. In particular, good use of a video camera was necessary for identifying facial expressions, body language and making the meetings feel more personal. This aspect of online communication was highly regarded by employees, even though the conveniences of physical contact cannot be replicated entirely.

“I think it’s very much a drawback of the pandemic period that I cannot observe other people’s body language. By far, not everyone is capable of putting their ideas and feelings into words. Oftentimes their face speaks volumes and I always pay attention to that.” (Harm)

The previous quote suggests that some feelings and ideas are better transmitted *in-situ*. In management literature, this concept is referred to as the transmission of ‘tacit knowledge’ (Koskinen & Vanharanta, 2002). Tacit knowledge is harder to transmit digitally because it resides in social relations and depends on the context in which it is produced and the experiences of those producing it. Philosopher Polanyi encompasses the essence of tacit knowledge with the sentence: “we can know more than we can tell” (Polanyi & Sen, 2009, p.4). This indicates that the transition to a pandemic workplace complicated the transmission of some tacit knowledge, resulting in a challenge in satisfying the need for competence.

4.4 *Relatedness* in the workplace

As mentioned previously, the SDT concept of *relatedness* motivates employees by making them feel connected and supported by colleagues. Beyond collaborating to solve work-related tasks, individuals interact with their colleagues for purely social reasons. Findings regarding workplace relatedness showed that, before the pandemic, employees felt that this was a key aspect of the workplace. Interviewees mentioned that informal talks and social activities organised by the company contributed to social contact and thereby made them feel part of a greater entity with a common goal. In the traditional office, the coffee machine, the hallway and the canteen seem to symbolise places of spontaneous social exchange that often occurs between individual work and formal meetings. Physical activities such as walking with colleagues during lunchtime and Friday afternoon drinks were also mentioned as a valued means for informal contact with colleagues.

“Sometimes I went for a walk with colleagues, or I had conversations with them in the canteen. It is a very open environment, so I can just walk over to another department and have a chat, you know.” (Niek)

“Social contact was easier. Sometimes I just approached someone and asked: ‘how is it at home?’”
(Johan)

As highlighted in the previous quotes, spontaneous contact is valued by employees. Moreover, these quotes emphasise a type of interaction that might be harder to achieve digitally. According to Jawadi (2013), the context of remote work can make it harder to have conversations with colleagues while enhancing a sense of trust, a key pillar of healthy relationships. The forms of social interaction that take place in the traditional office are not only difficult to achieve at home, but also dearly missed by many interviewees. A related characteristic of social contact in the home office mentioned during interviews is that people are mostly in contact with colleagues they feel closest to or whom they have to collaborate with:

“Currently I mainly speak to colleagues whom I collaborate with, but when I’m at the office, I come across someone and I have a conversation in the hallway. Some colleagues I speak to rarely, which I would meet otherwise.” (Marleen)

Employees mentioned that another reason for a weaker connection to the organisation was the fact that one’s work has become much more individual and the diffusion of information, which is so often shared in informal ways, decreased. This finding is in line with research by Bailey and Kurland (2002), who state that employees might feel professionally isolated when working remotely as they do not know what is happening in their organisation and hence feel left out:

“The work is limited to what I’m doing myself. There are fewer side matters.” (Tom)

However, for many of the interviewees, the change in workplace connectedness was not as drastic. Explanations for this are diverse; some still have physical contact with closest colleagues, others explain that the organisation has introduced new ways of working that helps people remain feeling part of the team, and others feel the different ways of social contact with colleagues is not affecting their feelings of connectedness with the organisation. An interviewee highlighted:

“Besides the virtual situation, I think we are still relatively connected as a team: we ask each other everything and we call a lot, but it’s on a different level than when it would be physically.” (Roel)

Some organisations seem to be aware of the risks of social isolation for remote workers. New practices have emerged to meet the need for relatedness in the workplace, including online socialisation activities and the creation of forums where employees may engage each other for non-work-related topics. The interviewees showed appreciation for these opportunities to connect, but when asked whether it is possible to achieve similar feelings of togetherness digitally as opposed to the physical setting, doubts were expressed:

“Normally, I could see better if someone feels well, like: ‘is something wrong?’ Virtually it’s harder - especially with multiple colleagues - to see how somebody feels.” (Martijn)

Not having physical contact detracts from employees’ feelings of relatedness because it is harder to perceive body language and facial expressions through the screen. This impersonality and lack of access to such kinds of tacit knowledge are exacerbated for those who have not seen their colleagues in real life. Some employees who started a new job during the pandemic also mentioned that increased social contact with colleagues would help them feel more connected:

“Since most work is online, I feel less connected to the organisation. If I were able to see and speak to my colleagues physically, instead of only calling someone from home, I think creating a connection would be easier.”
(Sarah)

This finding shows that white-collar workers who started working during the pandemic and have not been able to collaborate physically with colleagues find it harder to achieve relatedness. Moreover, It can be stated that before the pandemic, tacit knowledge was more easily conveyed than during the transition to working from home, causing people’s sense of relatedness to be more challenging. This implies that the post-pandemic workplace could be in need of more in-situ interaction that more easily allows for the transmission of tacit knowledge and thus enhances opportunities to satisfy the need for relatedness.

4.5 Future workplace

In the interviews, people were also asked about their outlook on the future of the workplace. The majority prefer a hybrid work mode in the future because they could combine the advantages of both working in the office and from home to maximise their social needs, flexibility and productivity. Two interviewees mentioned the desire to return to the office entirely after Covid-19, of which one of them has a preference for more flexibility in time management. Generally, the preferred work time arrangement between home and office is fifty-fifty. Where people used to work five days a week at the office, now prefer to work two days at the office and three days at home. The following quote represents a commonly shared view amongst the interviewees:

“Digital meetings make time management more efficient; this will surely remain. On the other hand, for many matters, we need physical contact. We will blend it and that’s what the media will call: ‘the new normal’.”

(Harm)

The previous quote illustrates that, generally, people intend to benefit from increased opportunities for satisfaction of the need of autonomy and competence at home, and the satisfaction of the need relatedness experienced in the office. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the office compared to home still allow for satisfaction of the need for competence and autonomy, such as easy brainstorming sessions, transmission of tacit knowledge, work discretion and clear boundaries between work and life. Appendix V provides an overview of the expected future workplace that would lead to greater satisfaction of the BPN as compared to the conventional workplace, based on the results.

Some interviewees also expressed ideas about the design of the future office to increase intrinsic work motivation, but opinions differ. Inter-individual differences attached to different acquired needs seem to play a role in determining the extent to which satisfaction of that desired need is beneficial. For instance, individuals with a high desire for achievement are likely to be stimulated by an environment that allows for focus, whereas individuals with a higher desire for satisfying relations could be more satisfied with facilities supporting social interaction at work. Individual differences in the strength of needs are identified to serve as a moderator for the degree of need satisfaction. Yet, considering the degree to which individuals express a particular need is out of the scope of this research, as needs are postulated to be primary and innate propensities within SDT (Van den Broeck et al., 2008).

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of findings and policy recommendations

The current study distinguished two research aims. The first objective of this research was to provide an understanding into how the transition to working from home due to Covid-19 influenced workplace satisfaction based on the principles of the SDT. The second objective was to determine their perspective on the future workplace, based on the findings of the first objective. This was approached by asking eleven white-collar workers' of different generations questions on how the basic psychological needs of the SDT were achieved at the workplace before- and during Covid-19.

Results showed that the satisfaction of the BPN are achieved differently in the remote workplace. In accordance with the expectations, both satisfaction of the need for autonomy and competence can be achieved more easily at home, whereas achieving relatedness has been experienced challenging at home. Appendix V provides an overview of challenges and opportunities regarding satisfaction of the BPN, influencing workplace satisfaction.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the future workplace will most likely become a combination of onsite and at-home work (hybrid mode), as workers could benefit from the increased flexibility and productivity at home and social support in the office. This work mode will allow employees to enhance intrinsic motivation, facilitating important work outcomes, including effective performance, psychological well-being and job satisfaction.

With the working from home situation being novel for everyone, there seems to be a need for new norms for the balance between work and private lives. It is therefore recommended for organisations to start re-examine their conventional work expectations and policies to better adapt to the new and emerging reality of remote work. By paying attention to employees' needs and allowing for more desirable working conditions, organisations could stimulate optimal functioning of employees.

5.2 Strengths and limitations

Given that large-scale enforced teleworking is a recent phenomenon, not a lot of research has been conducted on this subject and the perspective of white-collar workers on the future workplace. Therefore, a quantitative approach has been undertaken to attain a rich understanding of employees' experiences in the home workplace.

Certain limitations must be taken into account. Snowball sampling made it so that participants were part of a small network, which might limit the heterogeneity of the narrative obtained from the interviewees. Additionally, the interview guide was not based on the SDT when collecting the data

and, as a consequence, some important aspects of the BPN in the workplace are left out in this research, i.e. task engagement and managerial support (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). In contrast, not knowing about the SDT before conducting the interviews reduced the risk of bias, which can be regarded as a strength in this research.

5.3 Recommendations for future research

Despite the limitations of this study, this research avenue seems a promising one that allows for making discoveries in the quest for knowledge concerning the future of the workplace. Future researchers could investigate in depth how working from home impacts employees' experience at work. Specifically, researchers could pay more attention to the influence of generational characteristics of white-collar workers on their perspective of the future workplace, because each generation has different values in the workplace as a source of work motivation (Mahmoud et al., 2020). In addition, inter-individual differences in the strength of needs could be taken into account for the degree of need satisfaction. Further research on the role of generational characteristics as well as inter-individual differences on the satisfaction of needs in the workplace could lead to more specific policy recommendations, contributing to successful management and enhanced employee satisfaction, performance and well-being.

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7. Appendices

I. Informed consent

Dear sir or madam,

First of all, thank you for considering participating in this interview. Through this document, I wish to explain my goals and clarify the interview process. As a third year student in Human Geography and Planning I have to write a bachelor's thesis. The aim of my research is to explore the perspective of employees on the return to the office after Covid-19. I expect that your knowledge on this subject can be of value in the process of answering my research question. In my interview, I will ask you about your experiences of working from home and your view on the future workplace. To find out what your preferences are regarding anonymity, I am asking you the following two questions:

- Would you allow me to record the interview?
- Am I allowed to use your first name in the thesis?

The interview would be recorded for the sole purpose of creating a transcript, after which the video file will be deleted. The thesis, including your input, will not be made public. It will, however, be viewed by a grading professor and presented to a group of fellow students.

The interview itself will happen via Google Meet, and it will take approximately 20 minutes. If you would like to see the general interview questions beforehand, this is possible. After having received your answers to the questions above, I will contact you again to arrange a suitable time for the interview. Lastly, you are entitled to a summary of my findings once the project is finished.

Hoping to have informed you sufficiently,

Eline de Preter

II. Interview guide

Inleiding

- Bedankt voor deelname, voorstellen
- Uitleg scriptieonderzoek
- Doel: inzicht krijgen op de toekomstperspectieven van werknemers op de terugkeer naar het traditionele kantoor
 - Deel 1 focus: werksituatie voor Covid-19
 - Deel 2 focus: huidige werksituatie
 - Deel 3 focus: toekomst
- Consent form ondertekend? Zijn er vragen voor start?

Achtergrond

- Mag ik vragen: wat is je leeftijd?
- Ik wil wat vragen over je werk:
 - Wat is je functie?
 - Wat zijn je werkzaamheden in deze functie?
 - Hoe lang ben je werkzaam in deze functie?
- Hoe bevalt het thuiswerken?

Werksituatie voor Covid-19

- Ging je vaak naar kantoor in tijden voor de Covid-19? Hoe vaak? Waarom? [algemeen]
- Werkte je vaak thuis voor Covid-19? Hoe vaak? Waarom? [algemeen]
- Waren er ook andere plaatsen waar je werkte? Zo ja, waar? Waarom? [algemeen]
- Zou je een omschrijving kunnen geven van jouw [meest voorkomende werkplek] voor Covid-19? [materieel]
- Zou je mij een voorbeeld kunnen geven van een reguliere werkdag voor de Covid-19? (Tijden, plaatsen, gewoontes, taken) [materieel]
- Hoe tevreden ben jij over de hoeveelheid persoonlijk contact met collega's/klanten in de werksituatie voor Covid-19? [sociaal]
- In hoeverre voelde jij je verbonden met het bedrijf/de organisatie voor Covid-19? Waarom? [persoonlijk]

Huidige werksituatie

- Vragen naar de huidige werksituatie: Hoe vaak ga je nu naar kantoor? Hoe vaak werk je nu thuis? Zijn er nog andere plaatsen waar je werkt? [algemeen]
- Zou je een omschrijving kunnen geven van jouw huidige meest voorkomende werkplek? (Evt. doorvragen op woonsituatie) [materieel]
- Hoe ziet een reguliere werkdag er momenteel voor jou uit? (Tijden, plaatsen, gewoontes, taken) [materieel]
- Zijn er bepaalde gewoontes die je mist door de veranderende werksituatie? Zo ja, welke? [materieel]
- Heb je momenteel een bepaalde strategie om in het werkritme te blijven? [materieel]
- Hoe tevreden ben jij over de hoeveelheid persoonlijk contact met collega's/klanten in de huidige werksituatie? [sociaal]
- In hoeverre voel jij je verbonden met het bedrijf/de organisatie gedurende Covid-19? [persoonlijk]

Evaluatie werkverandering en toekomstperspectief

- Welk aspect van de werksituatie vind jij het belangrijkste: fysieke werkomgeving, het sociale contact of de verbondenheid met het bedrijf? Waarom?
- Wat zijn voor jou de voordelen van de veranderende werksituatie (indien nog niet aan bod gekomen)? (Samenwerking, contact naasten, effectiviteit)
- Wat zijn voor jou de nadelen van de veranderende werksituatie (indien nog niet aan bod gekomen)? (Samenwerking, contact naasten, effectiviteit)
- Ervaar je een verandering in werkdruk? Zo ja, wat zijn factoren die hieraan bijdragen?
- Wat is jouw kijk op de ideale werksituatie in de toekomst, als Covid-19 voorbij is? (Kantoor, thuis, gedeeltelijk kantoor/thuis)

Afsluiting

- Is er nog iets dat je wilt toevoegen?
- Danken voor deelname aan interview

III. Interview-based conceptual model

Material, social and personal workplace

With respect to the workplace as a process, the meaning of the workplace is considered as a multidimensional concept. By comparing the meaning of the workplace before-and during the Covid-19 pandemic of white-collar workers, the perspective on the return to the conventional office can be determined (Figure 1). Three interrelated dimensions of the workplace are considered: the material, social and personal. These three dimensions are based on the study of home by Tanner et al. (2008) and applied to the broader concept of the workplace, as the home has become a place for white collar, knowledge-intensive work (Ciolfi et al., 2020).

Material workplace

The material workplace consists of the built environment, design and layout (Van der Klis & Karsten, 2009). The material aspects provide a basic setting from which a person can engage in activities in this location. It refers to the space that can be measured which plays a direct role in a person's experience of a place. The value of the physical aspects of the workplace are on the one hand found in the functionality they provide and on the other they are important as emotionally interpreted elements.

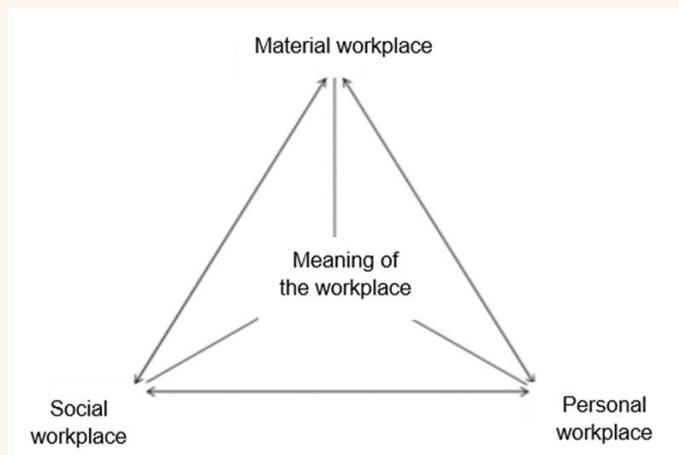
Social workplace

The social workplace encompasses social interactions with others at the workplace, such as colleagues, customers, suppliers, but also family members, friends and neighbours. Contacts with other people have an important impact on the experience of the workplace (Van der Klis & Karsten, 2009).

Personal workplace

The personal workplace gains meaning as a place of self-expression, as a familiar and secure point in a person's life (Van der Klis & Karsten, 2009). Day-to-day activities are an important part of a person's place-identity, because it reflects the individual's experiences in his or her environment. Identity is defined as how we make sense of ourselves, in relation to others, in everyday places (Hopkins and Pain, 2007). These activity patterns are an important part in the process of the production of domestic space, or 'making the workplace'. The behavioural rituals, such as taking a coffee break, links to this personal dimension of the workplace (Van der Klis & Karsten, 2009).

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the dimensions of the workplace



Sources:

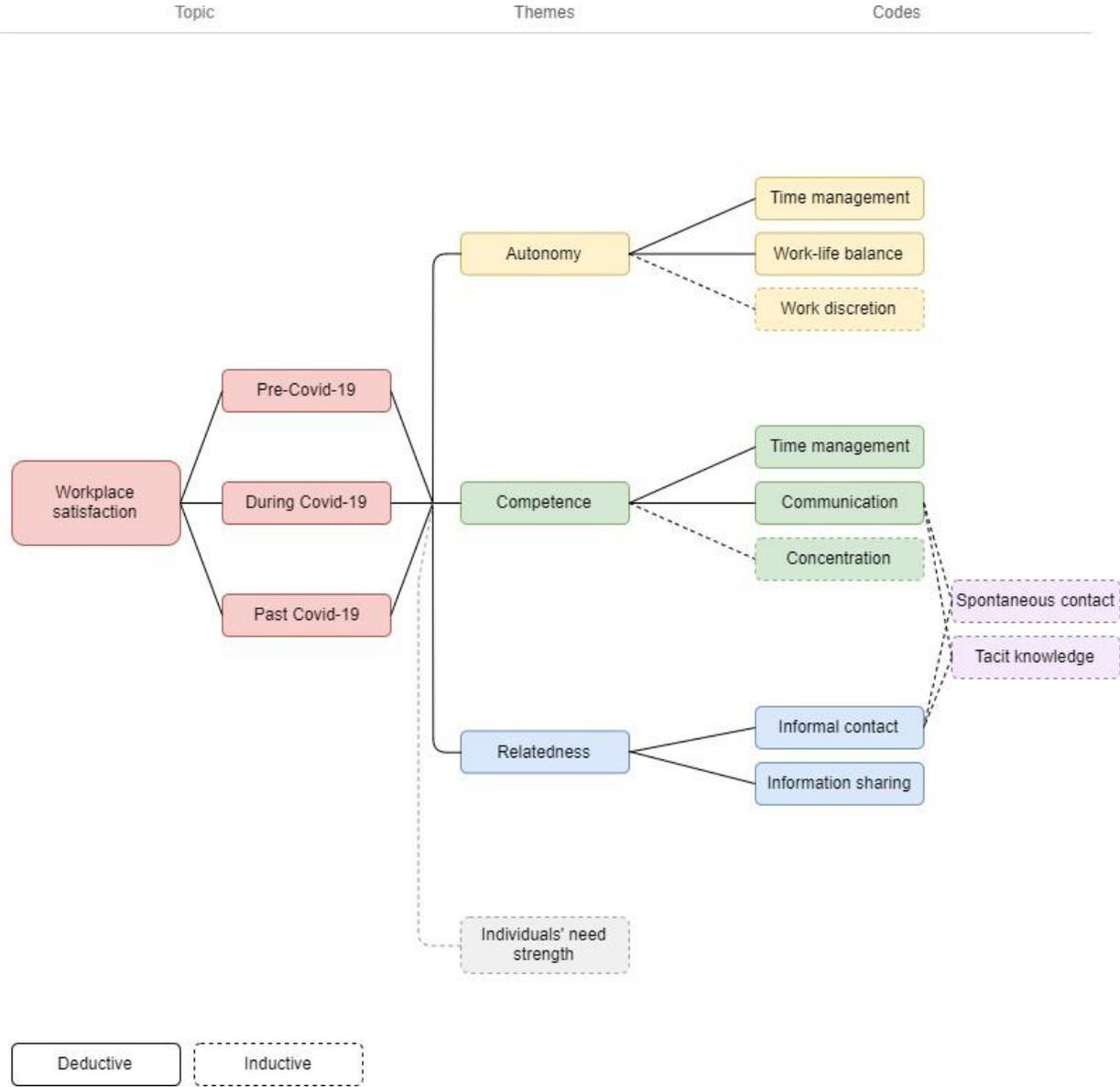
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IV. Codebook



V. Cross-categorization matrix of results

	Autonomy	Competence	Relatedness
Workplace change onsite to home office due to Covid-19	Increased flexibility in time management (affecting control to self-organise)	Increased flexibility in time management (affecting work performance)	Reduction of informal contact
	Increased time spending with friends/family	Increased efficiency in meetings through digital communication (less small-talk, interruptions)	The emergence of new ways for social contact (i.e. online forums)
	Decreased boundaries work-life balance	Absence of tacit knowledge through digital communication (affecting collaboration)	Absence of tacit knowledge through digital communication (affecting connectedness)
	Challenges in work discretion leading to (digital) work exhaustion	Increased effort work-related social contact	Decreased spontaneous contact (affecting confidentiality)
		Decreased social interruptions in the workplace	Decreased diffusion of information
Future workplace	Home workplace for flexibility in time management (affecting control to self-organise) and increased time spending with friends/family	Home workplace for flexibility in time management (affecting work performance), efficient meetings and fewer social interruptions	Home workplace when new ways of social contact satisfy the need for relatedness
	Office workplace for clear boundaries work-life balance and work discretion (leading to less exhaustion)	Office workplace for transmitting tacit knowledge and fast approach of colleagues	Office workplace for increased informal contact, transmission of tacit knowledge, spontaneous contact, information sharing