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How remote working inhibits employee engagement: A qualitative study of British workers during the pandemic

Abstract

Purpose – Through the lens of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study explores how remote working inhibits employee engagement. We offer a fresh perspective on the most salient work- and nonwork-related risk factors that make remote working particularly challenging in the context of Covid-19.

Design/methodology/approach – We use data from semi-structured interviews with thirty two employees working from home during the Covid-19 lockdown. Based on our interpretivist philosophical approach, we offer new insights on how employees can optimize work- and nonwork-related experiences when working remotely.

Findings – We show that the sudden transition from in-person to online modes of working during the pandemic brought about work intensification, online presenteeism, employment insecurity, and poor adaptation to new ways of working from home. These stress factors are capable of depleting vital social and personal resources, thereby impacting negatively on employee engagement levels.

Practical Implications – Employers, leaders, and human resource teams should be more thoughtful about the risks and challenges employees face when working from home. They must ensure employees are properly equipped with the relevant resources and support to perform their jobs more effectively.

Originality/value – While previous research has focused on the benefits of remote working, the current study explores how it might be detrimental for employee engagement during a pandemic. The study provides new evidence on the most salient risks and challenges faced by remote workers, and how the unique Covid-19 context has made them more pronounced.

Keywords: Remote working, employee engagement, COR theory, working from home, Covid-19, virtual working.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is unlike anything we have ever experienced in recent times. It has had devastating effects on people's mental health and well-being, and caused serious problems for families and communities around the world (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). Many people have lost their jobs and source of income; others, particularly those in developed economies, have been furloughed or forced to rely on government support (Gursoy and Chi, 2020). The pandemic has also taken a huge toll on the global economy (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020; Song and Zhou, 2020). We are seeing a steady decline in revenue generation as organizations continue to reduce costs, cut staff benefits, and invest less on human capital expenditure (Bryce et al., 2020). These socioeconomic challenges were brought about by national lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, and other social distancing measures introduced to curb the spread of the virus. While such restrictions have been successful at minimizing person-to-person transmission of the disease, many workers were forced to make the abrupt shift to remote working. As these changes could have far-reaching consequences for both individuals and organizations, questions remain as to whether or not remote working is actually beneficial to employee engagement.

Research has shown that remote working has benefits for most employees. It offers the flexibility for people to work from anywhere, at any time. Employees are able to make savings on travel costs, spend less time commuting, and strike the right balance between their work- and family-related duties (De Menezes and Kelliher, 2011; Felstead and Henseke, 2017). Notwithstanding, there are several limitations of remote working, including poor communication among teams, more distractions, reduced work motivation, lack of in-person collaboration, possible data security problems, and the difficulty of monitoring performance (Golden and Gajendran, 2019; Vander Elst et al., 2017). These issues represent real problems for many employees and ultimately their employers. In particular, employees' work

engagement could suffer due to reduced opportunities for workplace participation and conflicting work- and nonwork-related demands. Yet, there is a lack of qualitative evidence on whether remote working inhibits employee engagement, and if so how. As the Covid-19 crisis continues to wreak havoc, and the permanence of remote working becomes more and more apparent, we need to better understand employees' lived experiences and develop new strategies for mitigating any adverse effects on their work engagement levels.

Using an interpretivist philosophical approach, the current research advances knowledge on whether the widespread implementation of remote working amid the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened employee engagement levels. As a multidimensional construct with both psychological and behavioural components, employee engagement reflects a person's sense of passion, drive and enthusiasm for work (Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot, 2017). It is a job-related characteristic induced by workers' positive affective state, energy and psychological attachment towards the job (Biggs et al., 2014; Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot, 2017; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010). Extant research has often distinguished employee engagement from other related constructs such as workaholism (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010), job satisfaction (Christian et al., 2011), affective commitment, job involvement (Vigoda-Gadot et al. (2013), and psychological empowerment (Lambert, 2011). These studies highlight the conceptual differences with 'employee disengagement', considered one of the most debilitating factors for organizational performance. In fact, a disengaged employee is less dedicated, withdrawn from his/her role, and more reluctant to physically, emotionally and cognitively execute work-related tasks more effectively. Given the unique context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the current study improves the conceptual and practical yield of future work in this research area

We draw on insights from Conservation of Resources theory (COR: Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll, 2001). As a stress-based theoretical framework, COR theory highlights the systematic nature of human experiences and behaviour following the need to acquire and

conserve valuable resources for survival. The primary assumption is that individuals are more likely to consume key resources as a response to stressful or demanding events. Because resource loss is disproportionately more salient than the resource gain, those experiencing stressful events may struggle to build and sustain reservoirs of vital resources, leading ultimately to poor attitudes and behaviours (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014). The COR model is broad in scope, heuristic in nature, and therefore critical for exploring how different work- and nonwork-related risk factors can be detrimental to employee engagement levels. We apply this theory towards a better understanding of remote workers' lived experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. We develop our arguments in the context of Britain's national lockdown that forced millions of people to work from home and maintain little or no social interactions with others from outside their households.

The article is structured as follows. The first section outlines the conceptual basis of employee engagement, followed by a discussion of the study's theoretical background. Thereafter, we describe our interpretivist research methodology and outline the findings of our empirical inquiry. In the penultimate section, we present the discussion and interpretations of our findings, including the most salient implications for theory and practice. We conclude by acknowledging the study's limitations and outlining some recommendations for future research.

Conceptualising employee engagement

Over the past years, the concept of employee engagement has gained prominence in management research, partly due to its critical role in promoting positive individual and organizational outcomes (Bailey, 2016; Harter et al., 2002; May et al., 2004; Saks and Gruman, 2014). Though widely studied, the meaning of employee engagement is often debated among academics and practitioners. Among academics, one of the most widely used definitions of employee engagement is "a positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind that

is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption” (Schaufeli et al, 2002: 74). From this, employee engagement is seen not only as individuals’ positive disposition towards the job, but also their levels of passion, enthusiasm, and willingness to perform above and beyond their employer’s expectations. Schaufeli and Bakker (2010) further argued there is more to employee engagement than simply being committed and satisfied with one’s job. An engaged worker is someone who cares about improving the overall quality of his/her job, and therefore eager to execute assigned tasks in ways that make a difference to organizational success. In other words, when employee engagement levels are high, there is a potential increase in work dedication, work involvement, and greater identification with organizational values (Harter et al., 2002; May et al., 2004; Saks and Gruman, 2014).

Among practitioners, employee engagement is typically measured by assessing largescale individual- and organisational-level data through workplace attitudinal surveys (Bailey, 2016). The Gallup survey, for example, is one of the most widely used practitioner instruments for measuring employee engagement (Harter et al., 2002; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010). It comprises twelve key questions assessing different workplace resources (e.g., sense of support, voice and empowerment) that enable employees to invest their time, energy and attention towards performing their jobs better (Bailey, 2016; Rayton et al., 2012). Practitioner measures of engagement are often contrasted with academic definitions, as the latter is more concerned with individuals’ propensity to express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances (Bailey, 2016; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010). In this vein, employee engagement is said to improve when there are adequate amounts of social (e.g., co-worker support, joint decision-making, and friendship) and personal resources (self-efficacy, and optimism) to foster positive work- and nonwork-related experiences (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). In the absence of these resources, however, employee engagement levels are likely to depreciate (Kahn, 1992; Schaufeli et al, 2002).

In the current study, we focus on the academic definition of employee engagement, given its widespread application across different work- and nonwork-related contexts (Bailey, 2016; May et al., 2004; Ogbonnaya and Babalola, 2020; Rich et al., 2010; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010). The academic definition is particularly relevant to us as our research seeks to identify the most salient work- and nonwork-related risk factors that make remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic more demanding and detrimental to work engagement. We therefore recognize that employee engagement can be measured from either a quantitative or qualitative perspective, provided emphasis is placed on the corresponding attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. A notable qualitative assessment of employee engagement, relevant to the current study, is Kahn's (1990) definition: "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's preferred self in task behaviours that promote connections to work, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional) and active full performances" (p. 700). Accordingly, employee engagement represents a motivational expression of key personal characteristics that make employees' job role more challenging, creative and meaningful.

The literature has also outlined key determinants of employee engagement. According to Saks (2006), employee engagement is influenced by various job characteristics that enable employees to exercise discretionary effort at work. These job characteristics, including sense of autonomy, task identity, skill variety and task significance, inspire employees to make the most of effective use of their skills towards improving the overall quality of what they do at work (Saks, 2006). In other words, employees are more likely engaged if key aspects of their jobs or assigned tasks are perceived to be significant, useful, and worthwhile (Chaudhary, 2019). Other studies have associated various forms of support, including organisational, supervisory, collegial, and familial support, with higher levels of employee engagement (Anitha, 2014; Bakker et al., 2011; Ogbonnaya and Babalola, 2020; Rich et al., 2010). Perceived organizational support, for example, is an indication that the employer is concerned

about employee wellbeing, values their efforts, and treats them both fairly and respectfully (Ogbonnaya and Babalola, 2020; Saks, 2006). This type of support promotes employees' sense of obligation to reciprocate via positive actions directed towards improving organizational performance (Harter et al., 2002; May et al., 2004). Similarly, perceived levels of support from a co-worker, friend, or member of a person's immediate household (e.g., spouse) are said to be important determinants of employee engagement (Bakker et al., 2011; Freaney and Fellenz, 2013; Rich et al., 2010).

Employee engagement and remote working during a pandemic

Having defined employee engagement and discussed some of its key determinants, the following section explores how remote working inhibits employee engagement. For many workers, working from home during the Covid-19 lockdown was associated with social isolation, long working hours, and conflicting work-family demands. These stress-related factors generate psychological strain and place considerable demands on people's mental health and wellbeing. COR theory (Hobfoll, 2002) is an important theoretical framework for contextualizing the attitudinal and behavioural impacts of work- and nonwork-related stress factors. The fundamental premise is that individuals strive to retain, foster, and preserve valuable resources or anything perceived as being helpful in attaining desirable outcomes. Among these valuable resources are material (e.g., money, status, shelter, or physical environment), social (e.g., interpersonal support and mutual respect), and personal (e.g., positive self-regard and optimism) factors that improve well-being and promote a sense of meaning in life (Hobfoll et al., 2003). Although investing in these resources allow people to gain further resources, a significant loss of resources generates psychological strain and creates a downward spiral of resource loss. As a consequence, individuals may enter into a type of defensive mode to preserve whatever resources they have left (Halbesleben et al.,

2014; Hobfoll, 2002). When this happens, individuals are more likely to report dysfunctional outcomes such as poor levels of work engagement.

Going by COR theory, we argue that working from home during the unique and unprecedented context of the Covid-19 pandemic is capable of depleting valuable social and personal resources, thereby compromising a person's ability to thrive and achieve desired outcomes. In the work context, social and personal resources entail having a sense of purpose and meaning in one's job, being able to build and nurture positive interpersonal collaborations with co-workers, feeling personally responsible for specific work-related tasks and outcomes, and having a network of individuals that a person can consult with for assistance in times of need. These resources enable individuals to gain new resources, bolster existing resource reservoirs, and ultimately achieve greater performance improvements (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Van Veldhoven et al., 2020). However, these social and personal resources are finite, which implies they can be lost or depleted during when exposed to distressful events (e.g., a global public health crisis). For many employees, the resource-depleting effects of remote working emanate from a wide variety of factors, including poor interpersonal interactions, feelings of professional isolation, and having less frequent touch points with your colleagues or supervisors (Cooper and Kurland, 2002). Indeed, these stress factors present major risks and challenges for remote workers because they influence employees' perceptions that their efforts and opinions are not valued by their colleagues and the organization (Collins et al., 2016; Morganson et al., 2010). If managed poorly, these stress factors could ultimately inhibit employee engagement.

COR theorists have also recognized conflicting work-family demands as a major stress factor among remote workers; not least because they are capable of depleting vital social and personal resources and impacting negatively on work engagement levels. Work-home conflict is a type of inter-role stress factor whereby the role demands stemming from

the work domain are incompatible with role demands stemming from the family domain (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Wood et al., 2020) . From a COR theory perspective, work-to-home conflict could arise when the completion of work-related tasks is impeded by domestic chores (e.g., cooking and cleaning), child-care responsibilities, and the distraction from family members (Van Veldhoven et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2020). Work-to-home conflict may also arise from poor access to digital technologies, small working spaces at home, and distracting noises within a person’s household or from the neighbours next door. These factors crease psychological tension that are capable of depleting finite social and personal resources, thereby impacting negatively on work engagement (Rothbard, 2001).

To summarize, Hobfoll’s (1989) COR theory has long been an important theoretical frame for understanding the attitudinal and behavioural outcomes of work- and nonwork-related stressors. It offers a useful theoretical lens for exploring how remote working in the context of Covid-19 represents a serious threat to the loss of valuable social and personal resources, thereby inhibiting work engagement levels. Because the availability and development of social and personal resources are critical for positive work experiences, they enable individuals to execute tasks more effectively (Albrecht et al., 2018; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). However, when working remotely or away from centralized offices, particularly during a pandemic, employees are faced with work- and nonwork-related stressors that redefine the social context of work. Under such conditions, individual experience greater psychological strain and tension, which ultimately reduces their levels of work engagement.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Methodology

Our study is based on an interpretivist philosophical approach designed to explore participants’ subjective experiences of remote working in the context of Covid-19. Interpretivism allows researchers to observe, collate, and deduce information by drawing inferences from occurring patterns during an event (Saunders et al., 2016). There are two

reasons for adopting this qualitative research approach in the current study: i) it enables a deeper exploration into the subjective knowledge and choices associated with a particular lived experience (Cassell, 2009); and ii) it complements previous studies on remote working and employee engagement, the majority of which have employed quantitative methods that tend to overlook the various decision-making nuances within human experiences. Our choice of an interpretivist philosophical framework is further reinforced by the need to generate findings that reflect a range of personal behaviours, emotions, and feelings attached to working from home during a global pandemic.

We employed a snowballing technique to recruit participants from the initial participants who were recruited at the beginning of our research. Our recruitment strategy was further strengthened by a purposive sampling technique aimed at ensuring our selected sample was representative of the study population (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The eligibility criteria for our research were that participants must include male and female respondents who were resident in the UK and working from home as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown and stay-at-home orders. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews where participants voluntarily discussed their work- and nonwork-related experiences in the context of Covid-19. The participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and guaranteed our research presents no risks to physical or psychological harm. All the participants signed the consent forms before the commencement of the interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were further strengthened by ascribing pseudonyms to conceal participants' real names. A total of thirty-two employees agreed to participate in the study. The participants come from different sectors and occupations, including UK higher education, accounting and finance, sales, marketing and project management (see demographic details in Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here

The semi-structured interviews took place between July and September 2020, with a duration of thirty and forty-five minutes. The interviews focused primarily on how participants' work engagement levels had been affected adversely since they were forced to work from home due to the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. Specifically, participants were asked to reflect on and discuss the following issues: i) their personal understanding of the concept of work engagement; ii) how working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic has affected their work engagement levels; iii) what aspects of their work- and nonwork-related experiences has changed due to the Covid-19 stay-at-home orders; and iv) what kinds of resources were available to mitigate any adverse effects of working from home during the Covid-19 lockdown. In strict adherence to the UK government's social distancing restrictions, all interviews were conducted using a variety of digitally-assisted technologies (specifically, Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams). Prior to the interviews, each participant received an email explaining the research questions, the reasons for conducting the study, as well as our methodological strategy. This introductory email helped in establishing initial rapport with the participants and ensuring they share the same common view of the research process (Farooq and De Villiers, 2017). Our approach also helped in creating a comfortable environment that enabled participants to speak openly and freely during the interviews. We were able to schedule the interviews more appropriately, in line with the personal preferences of both the research team and participants.

The interview data were analysed by the research team to transcribe qualitative information, assign preliminary codes, identify recurring themes, and verify reliability and validity of results. Our approach is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide to performing and applying thematic analysis. Our approach is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide to performing and applying thematic analysis. Thus, rather than applying preconceived codes to the data, an open-coding process was employed to

assess recurring information as they emerged throughout the data. Relevant information from the data were analysed systematically until the point of data saturation. This is the point where further coding was deemed no longer feasible as no new themes could emerge from subsequent evaluation of the data (Glaser and Strauss, 2017; Saunders et al., 2018). To generate deeper insights from the data, we compared emerging the qualitative themes against participants' demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, and marital status); thus, embedding our findings within a more practical context. As a further reliability check, a research assistant was invited to re-assess the interview transcripts and verify our research themes independently. These independent codes were then compared to our original research themes and found to be consistent without any research biases or discrepancies.

Results

Four key themes emerged from our analysis, namely: i) work intensification and employee engagement; ii) online presenteeism and employee engagement; iii) employment insecurity and employee engagement; and iv) poor adaptation to new ways of working from home. These themes reflect the different kinds of work and nonwork stress factors that inhibit work engagement levels among those working from home. The varied nature of our findings provides clear evidence on how remote working in the context of Covid-19 could be debilitating for employees' capacity to perform their jobs well.

Work intensification and employee engagement

All participants reported that their workloads had intensified since the Covid-19 lockdown and stay-at-home orders forced them to work from home. They were required to take on more tasks, despite having to manage extra family-related duties (e.g., home schooling and childcare responsibilities) and cope with the sudden transition to remote working. These changes increased the amount of effort that participants had to invest in their jobs, which ultimately reduced their work engagement levels. Participants also reported that

time pressure had increased, particularly between March and June of 2020 when the first UK national lockdown was introduced. For example, Daniella, a lecturer in the UK Higher Education, explained how the national lockdown reduced her levels of work engagement:

The lockdown was not pleasant, especially the first one, which was a total lockdown. Everyone was at home, and it was really difficult to be fully engaged with work as my kids were around me all the time...they were literally all over me. My workload was doubled because some colleagues had been made redundant and I had to take up extra teaching and administrative duties...household work was also all in my face...It was crazy – my work engagement was not even half of what it used to be. I think the second lockdown was better (Daniella, University Lecturer).

Another prototype of this theme came from Cristiana, a Sales Manager. She commented on the sudden demands posed by home schooling her children during the pandemic. Cristiana described this as a period of ‘fragmented engagement’ as many parents experienced conflicting work, family, and child-care demands. She commented:

It was very difficult to be fully engaged with work activities with everyone sequestered at home. I had to attend to work activities (which became more intense), I had to attend to household chores, and I had to help the children with their online schooling...it was a period of fragmented engagement. Sometimes, I would be on my laptop working, one child would ask for help with schoolwork and another would ask for food or something. It was physically, mentally, and emotionally taxing – really difficult to concentrate and be engaged. The second lockdown was a little better because the kids were in school (Cristiana, Sales Manager).

Echoing Cristiana’s experience, another participant described how remote working during the Covid-19 lockdown impacted negatively on her mental health and well-being. Her comments are consistent with COR theory’s key proposition that exposure to a stressful situation

reduces valuable resources, thereby disrupting a person's ability to cope or self-regulate (Halbesleben et al., 2014).. She commented:

I experienced a drastic increase in telephone calls, emails, online meetings, and training...at some point, I was on the verge of breaking down. It really affected my health and engagement...the tasks were enormous, and I sometimes felt less motivated to work (Jolly, Accountant).

Among the most salient reasons for increased work intensification was greater staff shortages due to job loss and redundancies. The Covid-19 lockdown and stay-at-home orders meant that several employees were laid off, as those who remained employed were forced to take on more job responsibilities. This issue, coupled with extra family-related responsibilities (e.g., home schooling), led to poor levels of work engagement among the majority of study participants. In all, our findings are consistent with Chanana and Sangeeta's (2020) argument that the prevalence of work intensification had increased during the pandemic.

Online presenteeism and employee engagement

The Covid-19 outbreak is often described as the world's largest experiment of virtual working; not least because millions of workers around the world were forced to spend extended periods of time on digital platforms (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft teams, and Skype). Although virtual working has benefits for most workers, it could be detrimental for those who did not work virtually prior to the pandemic. Many workers experienced 'online presenteeism' (i.e., a situation where employees feel under pressure to always be available online and responding to work-related tasks) during the Covid-19 lockdown. This type of work-related experience has negative consequences, including longer working hours, never-ending virtual meetings, and constant pressure to check/respond to work-related emails or messages outside of working hours. Moreover, some participants felt compelled to stay

visible online just to demonstrate they were not shirking their work responsibilities while working from home. One participant commented:

I am always glued to my laptop – from as early as 7am until very late in the night. Many times, this is later than 7pm, because after the official working hours, I still need to work on my research. I used to work virtually before the pandemic but not this much. Covid-19 has moved everything online...that has drastically increased my virtual presence and has reduced my engagement because of tiredness and humdrum as a result of being glued to the computer all day (Juliet, University Lecturer).

Although online presenteeism reduced Juliet's work drive and performance, Monica dissatisfaction resulted more from her employer's tendency to constantly monitor her online presence:

COVID-19 has created new virtual workplace...I am logged in and locked online for at least twelve hours – sometimes fourteen – every day. Otherwise, it will look as if I am not working. My manager once called me on my mobile phone to ask where I was because I was not visible online. I felt monitored and hounded and that really hit my engagement and vigour to work hard (Monica, Cyber Analyst).

Other participants commented on how online presenteeism during the Covid-19 was exacerbated by mistrust and poor interactions with co-workers, as well as difficulty creating fruitful work-related collaborations online. This argument is consistent with previous research that suggests poor interpersonal relations are capable of depleting valuable social and personal resources could (Jiang and Probst, 2017) and impairing a person's capacity to function optimally (Hu et al., 2017). In support, James, a University Lecturer, commented:

The virtual workplace has replaced my traditional office...now, work is no longer fun. For me, this kind of virtual working is not normal. Virtual meetings, virtual teaching, virtual collaborations, virtual training sessions, online student support, online supervision...it's crazy. It's like I'm in a

bubble, and it has negatively affected everything...my life, my family, my health, and my engagement with my work (James, University Lecturer).

Andrew, a financial analyst, further described how being constantly present online made his work experience more demanding, challenging, and disengaging:

The experience was unique. At first, I loved it, because I was not used to virtual working...it has since gone sour when my job demands and workload have increased as a result of the pandemic, and I am also being monitored...so I had to stay logged on at all times. That demotivated me and affected my work engagement (Andrew, financial analyst).

Employment insecurity and employee engagement

Employment insecurity also emerged as an important determinant of poor work engagement levels among study participants. Due to the huge socioeconomic toll of the pandemic, many employers took some form of cost-cutting actions aimed at decreasing staff benefits, reducing business operations, restructuring employees' jobs, and making some employees redundant. As a consequence, many workers experienced greater uncertainty regarding their employment conditions. More specifically, employees felt anxious about the prospects of being unemployed, which adversely affected their work engagement levels. Joel (an administrative officer) described the situation as unpleasant and uncertain:

It's such an unpleasant and uncertain time that I wouldn't like to ever experience again. Hardly will any minute pass without my thinking of losing my job, because we have been informed that two people will be made redundant in my unit. Unfortunately, due process (which stretched this period to a period of three months) has to be taken. I was also enveloped in the fear that I could contract COVID-19 and die...a few people that I know contracted it and die. I would say my engagement dropped to less than two out of twenty during this time...very difficult time (Joel, Admin officer).

Joel's experience was closely matched with the experiences of others who commented on how the fear of being made redundant impacted negatively on their mental health and well-being. They consequently lost their drive, passion, and enthusiasm for work. For example, Laura, a HR specialist, described how working from home during the pandemic was a period of uncertainty for herself and her colleagues:

It was a very terrible and tense period. No one except key workers (I mean doctors and nurses) have job security. My engagement is momentarily broken by the fear of losing my job...one minute I am engaged, the next minute I am disengaged, and this continued for more than three months (Laura, HR specialist).

While many participants decried the fear of being unemployed, others noted that the UK government's furlough scheme helped in reducing some of the mental health repercussions of employment insecurity. For others, however, the experience of psychological distress appeared to have increased despite government support:

The pressure was massively unbearable. You hear about people dying in hundreds on the television every day (I stopped watching television at some point) and no one is immune to contracting the virus. I became really down when I lost a colleague and my neighbour to Covid-19 within two weeks. My engagement, which was already at its lowest point, totally switched off (Rebecca, Project Manager).

Rebecca's account reflects COR theory's key tenet that the fear of losing vital resources (in this case, employment and source of income) may actually carry greater importance than the actual loss of such resources (Bilgin, 2012; Halbesleben et al., 2014). Nelson (2019), another COR theorist, further explained that feeling insecure about one's employment status could be detrimental to mental health and well-being, with serious repercussions for work engagement.

Poor adaptation to new ways of working from home

Our contemporary understanding of the work environment has changed since the Covid-19 crisis prompted a sudden shift to how and where work was conducted. Although some employees were able to adjust effectively, others (including those who had worked remotely prior to the pandemic) found it harder to adapt or maintain good routines while working from home. In fact, many employees struggled to convert their homes into dedicated and conducive working spaces. One participant explained:

The sudden switch of the home to work environment was weird, and I really struggled to adapt. Because it is home, and it can only be home, turning it to a work environment was difficult for me...it affected everything – my concentration, my engagement, and my productivity (Dora, Auditor).

Akin (a Business Analyst) also commented on how he was forced to turn a spare room into an office space, yet the main issues of work- and family-related conflict remained:

When the lockdown happened in March, I tried to convert one of the rooms in my home to a makeshift office, but it didn't work. Aside from the steady disturbance from the children, my mind just refused to completely switch the environment to that of an office. Consequently, my level of productivity and engagement deteriorated (Akin, Business Analyst).

Other participants experienced a situation whereby their minds could not accept the sudden reconfiguration of their homes into a dedicated working space. This issue emerged as a major source of psychological distress on workers' well-being and quality of life. Participants also discussed the adverse consequences for their work engagement levels, for example:

My mind just would not reconstruct the home as a work environment. It was like learning how to be left-handed in old age – very difficult. It really affected my engagement and productivity (Shade, University Lecturer).

In addition, Mohammad described how the space available in his home was clearly too small to accommodate both familial and work activities. His account resonates with the experiences of other participants:

I live in a two bedroom apartment with my children and my wife. The space is just not conducive for working, with me, my wife, and the children around. It badly affected my productivity throughout the first lockdown, but it's a bit better during the second lockdown. The environment cannot be the same as the work environment, because it's home (Mohammed, customer service attendant).

In line with COR theory, a person's home offers a wide variety of family-related resources (e.g., spousal intimacy, parenting support, family cohesion, and friendship) that enable optimal functioning (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Odle-Dusseau et al., 2012). However, when individuals are forced convert their homes into a dedicated working spaces, they lose significant amounts of social and personal resources, leading to profound negative attitudinal and behavioural consequences.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to explore how remote working in the context of Covid-19 inhibits employee engagement. Drawing on insights from COR theory, our results revealed that the sudden transition from in-person to online modes of working increased work intensification, online presenteeism, employment insecurity, and poor adaptation to new ways of working from home. Exposure to these stress factor were particularly threatening to participants' social and personal resources, which resulted in psychological strain and poor levels of work engagement. These findings offer a fresh perspective on the most salient work- and nonwork-related risk factors that make remote working especially demanding.

Theoretical and practical implications

Our research has direct implications for COR theory's key principle that stress-related events are more likely to create a loss spiral where initial depletion of social and personal resources creates further losses in valuable resources (Hobfoll, 2001; Halbesleben et al., 2014). Because resources are functional in achieving desired goals and stimulating personal growth, learning, and development, loss spirals weaken people's ability to function optimally. We identified remote working as a stress-related factor capable of depleting vital social and personal resources, thereby inhibiting work engagement levels. In fact, the sudden shift to online modes of working due to the Covid-19 lockdown and stay-at-home orders increased the amount of time, energy and efforts that individuals were forced to invest during the working day. Work intensification came primarily from staff shortages, redundancies, and other cost-cutting actions employed by management to mitigate the economic and financial consequences of the pandemic. Consequently, many employees worked longer hours and undertook more tasks in order to get work done. This situation was more distressing for those with greater family-related responsibilities, including routine domestic chores (e.g., cooking and cleaning) and home schooling for their children. As Van Veldhoven et al. (2020) and other COR theorists (Halbesleben et al., 2014) have observed, intensified workloads and longer working hours are critical components of the stress appraisal process. It is argued that conflicting work and family demands can overwhelm available resource reservoirs, and ultimately impair the accomplishment of desirable goals, including work engagement (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Kelly et al., 2020; Odle-Dusseau et al., 2012).

Working remotely and communicating in real-time through digital platforms added a variety of complications to people's daily routines. For many employees, virtual working has benefits in terms of the freedom to work anywhere at any time; nevertheless, our analysis identified 'online presenteeism' as a possible downside of working remotely during the

pandemic. With 24-hour access to the internet and digital platforms on their laptops and mobile phones, many study participants felt compelled to stay visible online, so as to prove their worth by working extra hours, demonstrate greater job dedication, or convince their employers that they were not shirking their duties while working from home. Online presenteeism was also associated with heightened levels of stress and anxiety, which not only impacted participants' mental health but also their performance and drive for work. In addition to online presenteeism, many participants felt worried about the prospects of being losing their jobs. They experienced greater levels of employment insecurity, which further compelled them to work too hard and for longer periods than usual. In many ways, therefore, our findings suggest that remote working fosters the means to reach a set of goals within a job; however, it could also reduce work engagement levels during a pandemic.

Furthermore, our research revealed that the pandemic forced individuals to reimagine their work roles and adapt to new ways of creating safe, productive, and enjoyable job-related experiences. Their traditional understanding of the 'work environment'—what it meant or represented—had changed as their homes became the new work environment during the pandemic. For many workers, it was really challenging to convert their homes into a dedicated working space. Other workers reported technology-related problems (e.g., poor internet connections) and difficulty keeping their workstations clean, organized and free from interruptions. These issues impacted negatively on workers performance and levels of work engagement. Clearly, the challenges posed by remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic are real, complex, and a puzzle for both individual and organizational post-pandemic recovery. Further research is therefore required to understand the role of remote work characteristics in shaping positive individual and organizational outcomes.

From a practical standpoint, organizations and human resource teams must consider the likely impacts of remote working on employees' work-related attitudes and behaviours.

Before the Covid-19 crisis, remote working was not extensively used in many organizations. The prevalence varied strongly across sectors, industries and occupations, with a higher uptake among the information and communications technology organizations. For other sectors, such as wholesale and retail, transportation, accommodation and food services, arts, entertainment, and recreation companies, remote working appeared to be a “luxury for the privileged few (Wang et al., 2021). Nevertheless, as digital technologies continue to advance in both efficacy and capability, remote working will play an extra-ordinary role in shaping the quality of work. Employers must recognize these changes and consider what kinds of job roles are more (or less) suitable for remote working. They must also understand that remote working poses serious challenges for employees’ well-being, and ultimately their work engagement levels. When delegating work, it is crucial to consider whether employees are properly equipped with the right resources and technologies, and if not, make reasonable adjustments to support them and enable them adapt more effectively to remote working.

Limitations and future research

While the current study has provided valuable insights on how remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic inhibits employee engagement, it is not without its limitations. One limitation concerns the possible generalisability of research findings. Given our relatively small sample size of thirty-two participants, our findings (though rich in qualitative insights) are not entirely representative of the population of those working from home. Therefore, future research may adopt a large-scale quantitative design involving a more representative sample size that complements our findings. Future studies may also obtain data from particular sectors and industries to examine the generalisability of COR theory and evaluate employees’ shared perceptions of work engagement.

Another possible limitation of our study is the use of virtual platforms (e.g. Skype, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams) as a medium for conducting the interviews. Such platforms

raise possible concerns around research ethics, non-verbal cues, and researcher-participant bias that could be avoided during face-to-face interviews. Nevertheless, existing Covid-19 lockdown and social distancing restrictions prevented us from conducting face-to-face interviews. Moreover, as suggested by Lo Iacono et al. (2016), the use of virtual platforms for qualitative research has benefits, including reduced costs and ability to reach a wider population regardless of time and location.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 crisis created a unique context where several workers were forced to make a sudden shift from traditional work to remote working amid strict lockdown and social distancing restrictions. The current study has shown that remote working in the Covid-19 context inhibited employee engagement due to a wide variety of factors such as work intensification, online presenteeism, employment insecurity, and difficulty adapting to new ways of working from home. The study therefore offers new insights on how individuals can best optimize their work-related experiences when working remotely amid a unique context.

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Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Marital status	Number of children	Occupation	Years of experience
Tim	43	Male	Married	2	Marketing executive	9
Akin	39	Male	Married	3	Business analyst	8
Bill	30	Male	Single	2	Marketing executive	7
Jolly	27	Female	Married	1	Accountant	4
James	47	Male	Married	3	University lecturer	10
Megan	29	Female	Married	3	Finance officer	5
Monica	33	Female	Single	2	Cyber analyst	7
Paul	31	Male	Married	2	Administrator	7
Daniella	36	Female	Married	3	University lecturer	5
Angela	33	Female	Single	1	Council officer	8
John	35	Male	Married	3	HR specialist	7
Perry	46	Female	Single	2	School manager	9
Michael	34	Male	Married	2	Accountant	7
Cristina	37	Female	Married	2	Sales manager	6
Jones	37	Male	Single	3	Client service officer	5
Laura	45	Female	Married	4	HR specialist	12
Andrew	42	Male	Married	2	Financial analyst	10
Jim	35	Male	Married	1	Lawyer	9
Shade	36	Female	Single	1	University lecturer	5
Joy	28	Female	Single	1	Admin officer	3
David	31	Male	Married	2	Lawyer	4
Rebecca	43	Female	Single	2	Project manager	8
Flora	27	Female	Single	1	Marketing officer	3
Faran	29	Male	Married	2	Administrator	5
Linda	42	Female	Married	4	HR specialist	7
Robert	44	Male	Married	2	School manager	8
Georgina	38	Female	Single	2	Sales/marketing officer	7
Dora	43	Female	Single	1	Auditor	10
Maria	25	Female	Single	0	Admin officer	3
Juliet	47	Female	Single	0	University lecturer	5
Joel	33	Male	Single	1	Admin officer	8
Mohammad	29	Male	Married	2	Customer service attendant	4