Article

Organizational Support of Working from Home: Aftermath of COVID-19 from the Perspective of Workers and Leaders

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Abstract: (1) The objective of this study is to analyze working from home (WFH) arrangements implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are focusing on: 1. The main challenges and differences in WFH arrangements, compared to regular work before the pandemic. 2. The scope of WFH workload and its potential negative effects on workers’ well-being and reconciliation of work and family. 3. Organizational support to workers WFH, including communication with co-workers, IT specialists, and leaders, and required competence to perform WFH. 4. Organization support of work process, including data access, provision of IT, and work supervision. (2) The research is based on structured interviews with 102 employees and leaders of WFH in the second wave of COVID-19 in Slovenia. (3) Results strongly confirm previous research and emphasize that the pandemic has suddenly completely changed the WFH by placing a much greater accent on work-family reconciliation, communication among co-workers and leaders, work organization, workload, and organizational support. (4) Identified WFH practices developed during the pandemic will help individuals and businesses to optimize WFH and hybrid work, which is on the rise.

Keywords: working from home; COVID-19; workers; leaders; organizational support

1. Introduction

Working from home arrangements are considered one of the most visible consequences of work organization in the COVID-19 pandemic because of its massive and unprecedented adoption [1]. The pandemic, combined with fast digitalization, home confinement, commanded work from home (WFH), and lockdown of kindergartens and schools, produced an increased incidence of homeworking. There are estimates that about 30 to 50 percent of people in the Western economies have worked remotely during the pandemic [2,3]. In many cases, WFH took place as unstructured virtual work [4], arising organically as part of the ongoing workflow. It often involved one-to-one interactions across space or time that began in a relatively ad hoc fashion, continued intermittently, were not actively supervised, and may not involve a commonly held goal [5].

WFH was researched in the past, but what we know about the impact of telework on job quality from pre-outbreak evidence may not apply to the peculiar crisis [1]. Mostly, because teleworkers analyzed by previous studies typically had a dedicated home office, proper digital devices, internet connection, and did not have to share digital devices with other family members. Even if they were teleworking regularly, they could still go to the office to do those tasks that could not be done efficiently from home. In addition, in most cases, they did not have to take care of their children during office hours. Research has also confirmed that having a choice to decide whether to work at home, rather than being coerced into it, has a positive impact on motivation and performance [6]. Therefore, the pandemic became a massive experiment of a full-time basis WFH and a customary mode of working for many employees who have never worked remotely or had limited previous experience in this under normal circumstances, encouraged by public health measures designed to stem the spread of COVID-19. By analyzing WFH data during the pandemic,
we contribute to the existing literature on this topic, and on the other hand, supplement it with data from Slovenia, which is specific, as it is one of the 10 EU countries in which schools have been closed for the longest time—more than 154 days [2]. Consequently, parents took care of their children and schooling, while at the same time, WFH for the longest time, and in this period, the organizational support was of vital importance.

The objective of this study is to analyze WFH arrangements implemented in the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in organizations, based on structured interviews with employees involved in WFH in Slovenia. We are interested in: 1. The main challenges and differences in WFH arrangements, compared to regular work before the pandemic. 2. The main changes in the scope of work, workload, and its potential negative effects on workers’ well-being and reconciliation of work and family. 3. Organizational support at the level of an individual employee, including support and communication with co-workers, IT specialists, and leaders, and required competence development. 4. Organization support of work process, including data access, provision of IT (computers, monitors, printers, mobile phones, etc.), and work supervision.

This study is relevant for three main reasons. First, it points out the specifics of WFH due to COVID-19 from the perspective of workers and leaders, which is still rare in the existing literature. Second, it provides the analysis of WFH arrangements during the long period of school closing, and their implications for the scope of work, workload, workers’ well-being, and reconciliation of work and family. Third, it highlights the importance of organizational support to employees and work process for WFH to minimize the negative effects on employees’ affective commitment and identifies good working practices that could be used by organizations in the future. The article is structured as follows. First, the academic literature on teleworking and WFH, and their characteristics in the COVID-19 context, is analyzed and the concept of perceived organizational support, representing the theoretical frame of our research on WFH, is presented. Second, the methodology and data analyses used in this study are explained. Third, the main results are presented regarding the characteristics of WFH, their effect on workers and leaders, the practices of organizational support used, and the challenges to adopting WFH. Finally, the contributions, practical implications, future research directions, and limitations of this research are discussed.

2. Homely Workspace, Telework, and Homework Concept

WFH is not a new phenomenon. Historically, the home acted as a key location of work in occupations associated with agriculture, crafts, and artisan skilled trades [7]. The institutional arrangements related to the industrial revolution aided the spatial fixity of economic activity and the division of labor between home and work [8]. The deindustrialization that followed was marked by a significant shift toward services in western societies [9]. The digital era has led to further changes in workplace location, characterized by its greater flexibility and diversity that extended beyond traditional settings [10,11], and by the (again) blurred separation between home and work [12]. In this process, two kinds of organizations developed. First are the organizations that have developed a homely workspace [13], meaning they use different methods of workspace redesign, which include the narratives of community, holidaying at work, play within work, and fun workplaces aimed to encourage creativity and innovation, identification with the organization, and to produce a sense of cohesion and belonging. The homely workspace is trying to break down the barriers between public and private life, so that people identify more closely with the organization in a positive way through the freedom of domesticity. Of course, although these new workspaces are very seductive, the experience of working in them may not so easily fit with the intentions of those who design and manage them. Fleming and Spicer [14] point to the one-sided blurring of these boundaries, such that work spills over into domestic time and space. Second are organizations that have recognized that significant cost savings can be achieved if your home becomes the primary place of consumption and production.
Costs of heating, power, broadband connectivity, printing, paper, and space rental have all been displaced to some extent from the corporation to workers’ homes and expenses [15].

2.1. Teleworking

Telework is a broad and complex phenomenon that lacks a commonly accepted definition. Teleworking, telecommuting, virtual work, home-based teleworking, mobile telework, distributed, remote work, etc. [16,17], refer to a form of organizing and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer’s premises, is carried out away from those premises. Since it is dislocated from these premises, it has been considered an alternative way of organizing work. As Madsen points out, the concept of telework depends on different telework characteristics [18] and can be defined considering [19]: (a) Telework intensity (how often?), according to the proportion of time an employee works from a place other than a traditional office space (full time, part time, ad hoc) [20,21]. (b) Telework timework (when?) deals with the question of whether teleworking occurs during traditional or non-traditional working hours, and is categorized according to whether or not a teleworker works during traditional or non-traditional working hours [22]. (c) Telework place (where?), which can be divided into multi-site telework, when it is partly based at home and partly at the office; tele-home working, when it is done fully from home, and where a teleworker has a work agreement for a single employer, and freelance telework, where a worker provides services for multiple contractors from home, and mobile telework, when telework is done from a variety of other places [23]. It is assumed that these telework characteristics can influence different telework outcomes [24].

Teleworking is also often conflated with WFH, but is broader in definition, referring to remote paid work, which takes place outside of the normal or main workplace. Common among growth areas of work outside of the traditional place of work is the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), including tablets, laptops and/or desktop computers, cloud computing, wireless technologies, and smartphones, which offer 24/7 connectivity, and both virtual and location-independent working [25]. In this variation of mobile telework, workers carry out their job from a fixed range of locations outside the employer’s premises and specifically use ICT to connect to share company computer systems. Different levels of telework/ICT mobile work intensity and range of places at which individuals work might potentially have different consequences for working conditions.

2.2. Homeworking

Changes in the labor market in recent decades before the COVID-19 pandemic have driven an increase in the incidence of homeworking, in particular, the form of home-based teleworking. Homeworking takes two main forms: (1) Industrial homeworking, for example, craft workers whose shop is also their residence, is a form of work, which has been present for millennia. In addition, a more recent phenomenon, (2) home-based teleworking, is growing. A sub-category of teleworking mentioned above is homeworking facilitated by ICTs among salaried, contract, and self-employed workers, and includes ad hoc homework among workers whose main workplace is in a standard employer premise, e.g., office in an urban location. While many homeworkers may not use advanced ICTs [26], the use of ICTs is now common among homeworkers in the majority of occupations [27]. Patterns reflect both homeworking among employees, but also perhaps more significantly, the growth in e-lancing and gig work.

Recent pre-pandemic homeworking statistics indicated incidence among employees as relatively low, at around 2–3%; however, a much greater proportion of the self-employed, around one-third, report their home as their primary workplace [28]. It should also be noted that growth in this form of work is found among those whose main workplace is relatively static and report working at home flexibly for one or two days per week or on an ad hoc or occasional basis [7].
2.3. Working from Home Outcomes

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, various authors had studied the relationship between theoretically grounded telework factors and various individual and organizational outcomes. According to Nakrošienė et al. [19], reduced communication with co-workers, supervisor’s trust and support, and suitability of the working place at home, were found to be the most important WFH factors impacting different WFH outcomes. The same study also points out that higher self-reported productivity in WFH arrangements was related to reduced time in communicating with co-workers, a suitable working place at home, and the possibility to take care of family members. WFH can be more productive because workers can work during their most productive time and be less distracted by co-workers [23,24]. Based on the literature review, Makarius et al. [4] emphasized the importance of individual behavioral skills as the main success factor of virtual and WFH work. Among them, especially important are the establishment of behavioral guidelines, developing trust, coordination of information, using media, organizational support, and managerial processes. Previous studies have also revealed several multifaceted implications and (dis)advantages of teleworking for workers and employers/organizations, presented in the table that follows.

The Table 1, describing advantages and disadvantages for workers that emerge, is quite multifaceted, partly diametrically opposite, and largely depending on workers’ occupation, working arrangements, family composition and caring roles, living space, and many others, that have important effects on each individual’s WFH arrangement.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of WFH.

| Advantages for Workers | Disadvantages for Workers |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| Lower stress [29]      | Stress and burnout due to higher workload and working longer hours [16,31,46] |
| More family and leisure time [18,30,31] | A higher degree of uncertainty and precarity in work [7,27] |
| Time planning freedom [32,33] | The blurring of the temporal and spatial boundaries between work and non-work negatively influences an individual’s work-life balance [47] |
| Increased autonomy [34] | Difficulties in creating a separation between work and the rest of our lives [42,48] |
| Less dependent on proximity to specific locations and a greater degree of choice over workplace location [35,36] | Lower degree of satisfaction with work and life overall among part-time and self-employed homeworkers [40–42] |
| Reduced informal communication [37] | Living space size and quality determines work satisfaction [40] |
| Improved productivity [16,23,24,29,38,39] | Lack of supervision and increased likelihood of miscommunication [48] |
| Increased job and life satisfaction among highly skilled employees [40–42] | Less visibility of achievement and lower prospects for promotion (e.g., reduced access to training) [18,24,37,48] |
| Reduced commuting time [43,44] | The loss of professional and social networks [49] |
| Reduced travel and other costs [33] | Mental health concerns and depression among those working alone [50] |
| Increased employment opportunities for women with children, students, and disabled persons [33] | Higher levels of unpaid overtime and reduced leisure time [49] |
| Reduced traffic congestion and air pollution [45] | Greater opportunities for IT-based surveillance and technical control [15,51] |

| Advantages for employers | Disadvantages for employers |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Performance increase [4] | “Shirking from home” [53] |
| Less sick days [52,53] | Weaken face-to-face communication with colleagues, as an important source of social interaction [30,57,58] |
| Higher retention, and savings with office, real estate, and commuting costs [34] | Weaken collaboration, the pace of work, and company culture [59] |
| Reduced transaction/fixed costs [55] | Fewer employee interactions [60] |
| More diverse talent base that may have been difficult to access if more standard workplace requirements were in place, e.g., due to workers’ preferences, caring responsibilities, or a disability [55] | Less effective team collaboration [60,61] |
| The growth in service employment and ICT developments have expanded the potential for homeworking [56] | Problems with knowledge sharing [60] |
|                          | Reduced creativity [60,61] |
|                          | Combining work and family obligations negatively influences employees’ work satisfaction and their overall productivity [16,31] |
3. The Role of Perceived Organizational Support

Our research is focused on organizational support as a vital part of employee resources when WFH. Perceived organizational support is one of the constitutive elements of the Job Demands-Resources theory [62] and refers to the extent to which organizations compensate employees for their efforts, help them when they need it, make their work interesting, and provide them with appropriate working conditions [63]. Employees interpret organizational support as a tangible manifestation of the organization’s respect for their contribution and concern for their well-being. According to the theory of social exchange [64], employees want to gain favorable treatment in exchange for helping the organization achieve its goals [65,66].

Perceived organizational support derives from the theory of social support [67] and assumes that employees develop general beliefs about how much their organization values their contribution and how much it cares about the well-being of the employee. It is especially important from the point of view of meeting the socio-emotional needs of the employee and determining the readiness of the organization to appreciate and reward increased employee engagement at work. Organizations are social entities made up of their representatives. Perceived supervisor support means the degree to which a superior (leader) values employee contributions and cares about their well-being [68] by providing assistance in obtaining necessary resources for work, deciding on the allocation of resources, and prioritizing tasks. The perceived support of the superior contains both instrumental and socio-emotional support, e.g., assistance to employees in the event of increased indebtedness and contribution to the performance of their duties.

Employees provided organizational support are proud to belong to the organization, which is reflected in their affiliation, job satisfaction [69], work performance, lower turnover [65,70], higher positive mood, increases in employee enthusiasm, the desire to help others [66], and building stocks of resources that can neutralize stressors in the workplace [70].

In an organization, organizational support is provided through human resource management policies [71,72], top management initiatives, and the extent of leaders’ support for employee inputs [63].

The importance of organizational support is not limited to traditional work settings in an organization. It has been proven to be extremely important in the context of WFH, as it improves employee satisfaction, reduces their psychological burden [73] and fear of isolation, and increases employee identification with the organization [74]. Bartel et al. [75] also found in pre-pandemic research that teleworkers value organizational support more than employees in an organization’s workplace.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Method and Sample

In our research, we are presenting changes in WFH, based on 102 structured interviews with employees and leaders of WFH in the second wave of COVID-19 in Slovenia. We used a random sample, inviting the respondents to interview via LinkedIn through multiple channels including personal, previous fieldwork, and snowball contacts. The focus is on those workers who have employment contracts with an organization and are fully WFH during traditional or non-traditional working hours in the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and who may or may not have had the experience of WFH before. The research does not cover independent workers and employees who were in a permanent telework arrangement before the COVID-19 crisis, as in our analysis we are interested in the organizational outcomes of WFH during the pandemic. We draw on findings from in-depth interviews conducted in February and March 2021 in Slovenia.

To get a comprehensive understanding of workers’ experiences with WFH during the confinement, we aimed at some heterogeneity both in terms of socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, age) and in terms of the characteristics of jobs (i.e., sectors of employment, organizational size, leadership position, and contractual arrangements).
Among 102 participants, 60 women (58.8%) and 42 men participated in our interviews. Interviewees mainly work in the private sector (61.8%). One-third were employed in big, one-third in medium-sized, and one-third in small organizations. Most interviewees (76) are workers, and 26 were in leadership positions. In the sample, there are 59 professionals, 12 managers, and high public servants, 10 technicians, 11 sellers and service workers, 7 public servants, and 3 other workers. By sector, 22 of our interviewees are from finance and insurance services, 11 work in sales, maintenance, and repair of motor vehicles, 11 in professional, scientific, and technical activities, 11 in education, and 11 in public administration and social services, 10 work in information and communication services, 6 in electricity, gas, and steam supply, 5 in other miscellaneous business activities, 4 in cultural, entertainment, and recreational activities, 3 in manufacturing, 3 in health services, and 3 in construction. On average, interviewees are 40 years old and have higher or tertiary education.

4.2. Data and Analysis

The interviews are all semi-structured, sharing a common script. The interview topics are as follows: (a) Challenges and organizational support when WFH, workload, and competencies required. (b) Communication and leaders’ support. (c) Challenges in WFH for the future. We have followed the grounded theory approach [76] to collect the data in steps. Interviews were conducted using Skype and lasted approximately one hour on average. Then, we adopted content analysis based on the theoretical frame of perceived organizational support, and we structurally analyzed the interview records to discover similarities and differences in answers, and to determine whether the behavior patterns are unique or common. Iterative analysis was performed on the qualitative data by moving back and forth between the raw data and then interview transcripts were coded. Axial (open) coding technique [77] that involves relating data together to reveal codes, categories, and subcategories was used in the first set of the coding process. It included phrases, terms, or descriptions offered by the participants in response to the semi-structured interviews. We began by reading the transcripts to identify the answers to the given questions. Then joint statements were drawn on to form provisional categories, and first-order codes were broken into sets of themes, called focused coding [78]. Altogether, we identified 48 codes (see Table 2) and 279 subcategories.

Table 2. List of the main codes.

|   | Implementation of WFH before COVID-19 |   |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| 2 | WFH adaptation                       | 26 | Organizational support |
| 3 | Childcare                            | 27 | Access to data |
| 4 | Elderly care                         | 28 | Access to data-difficulties |
| 5 | Challenges when WFH                  | 29 | Access to data-good practices |
| 6 | Leadership challenges                | 30 | Evidence of work performed |
| 7 | IT needed                            | 31 | Time frame of work implemented |
| 8 | Differences between traditional and WFH| 32 | Time frame of work-good practices |
| 9 | Workload                             | 33 | Time frame of work-bad practices |
| 10| Efforts                              | 34 | Right to disconnect |
| 11| Flexibility                          | 35 | Reconciliation of work and free time |
| 12| Responsiveness                       | 36 | Personal resources |
Table 2. Cont.

|   |                                                                 |
|---|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 13. | Directions from the employer received                           |
| 14. | Most common directions from the employer                        |
| 15. | Work information channels                                        |
| 16. | New communication channels implemented                          |
| 17. | Communication with co-workers                                    |
| 18. | Communication with leaders                                       |
| 19. | Competencies required                                            |
| 20. | Competence development tools                                     |
| 21. | Support in competence development                               |
| 22. | Leaders' support                                                 |
| 23. | Its’ support                                                     |
| 24. | Leaders’ evaluation of work                                      |
| 37. | Partners’ understanding                                          |
| 38. | Exhaustion                                                       |
| 39. | Lack of free time                                                |
| 40. | Anxiety                                                          |
| 41. | Stress                                                           |
| 42. | Inconsistency of work obligations                                 |
| 43. | Demanding leadership                                             |
| 44. | Challenges in WFH for the future                                 |
| 45. | Willingness to WFH                                               |
| 46. | Pros WFH                                                         |
| 47. | Cons WFH                                                         |
| 48. | Good practices WFH                                               |

5. Results

The results are presented according to the research questions and key content areas of organizational support discussed with the interviewees. Interview statements and frequent codes from the analyses are presented in italics to illustrate the most important inputs. Besides that, we use percentage (even though the analysis is qualitative) in some parts of the presentation of the results to clearly illustrate the number of respondents’ answers to the reader. The results are structured into three topics: 5.1 Organizational support to reconcile work and family, workload, and competencies required, 5.2 Communication and leaders’ support, and 5.3 Challenges in WFH for the future.

5.1. Organizational Support to Reconciliate Work and Family, Workload, and Competencies Required

WFH brings many difficulties and challenges to employees WFH that require organizational support. The biggest challenges are related to the blurred line between work and leisure, as WFH no longer makes it clear when it is time to work and when leisure time begins. Therefore, our interviewees report that it is difficult to reconcile family life (mostly schooling and childcare) with work. The classic work rhythm is disrupted. Consequently, the interviewees report it is more difficult to concentrate, organize, and allocate time in both areas.

Employees also report on many technical problems, like congestion of information systems, poor internet connection, and situations where the support of experts/IT services in troubleshooting is needed. They are even more difficult to solve in the companies that do not have their own IT support, or their IT teams are too small.

One-quarter of the interviewees have problems accessing data. Especially when secured access or data on shared servers is needed. Besides e-access to be efficient, some need physical archives or binders to which they do not have access, which further complicates their work. Another problem is that much of the material is not digitalized, so it is only accessible in physical form at another location.

Organizations that were successful in this area of WFH provided employees with remote data access solutions (e.g., in the cloud, remote desktop, Office 365, etc.). The companies digitized archives, upgraded hardware, and software, and provided equipment for work at home (computers, laptops, webcams, printers, office phones, chairs, monitors). They trained employees to use technology and programs and provided ongoing support to leaders, IT professionals, and technical teams to keep work running smoothly.

Concerning the workspace and IT equipment needed to work, many interviewees report their home space and equipment are inappropriate, inadequate, and incomparable to equipment at work (home computer is outdated, there is no photocopier, no printer, two
monitors that are necessary for work, they have only one laptop at home that has to be
shared among family members, etc.). As a result, they are less efficient at work, which is
reflected in the smaller volume of work performed per time unit.

The increase in the volume of work performed changed dramatically. Compared to
the time before the pandemic, 51.4% of employees WFH reported they do more work, and
the volume of their work has increased by 67.7%. Many workers also report that they have
difficulties disconnecting, since they need to be available (to customers) at all times.

Social contact with co-workers was limited, and consequently, communication and
coordinating work were difficult (example: in production, it takes longer to solve a problem,
as without a physical presence, based on the image, it is harder to fully understand what
happened). Certain processes were very difficult to implement remotely, which prolonged
the time for preparation of work (example: induction training of new employees is much
more complex and less efficient, as it is necessary to know the new work processes and
people intensively and to obtain new information for efficient work). Cooperation with
colleagues and communicating with them in solving problems is not so intense, the response
time of employees is longer, the boundaries between work and leisure are individually
different and, therefore, the work is often stretched throughout the day.

It is evident that efficient organizational support of work time strongly depends on the
agreements on the length of the working day in the organizations. Solutions are indicated in
setting the boundaries between work and leisure, agreeing on working hours with manage-
ment, reorganizing the work, communicating with colleagues, and support of professionals
(especially IT) and leaders. Here, organizations used different approaches: 1. The working
day is precisely defined and coincides with the normal working day. 2. There is no special
agreement on a working day, the work must be done, and the individual determines the
time of work. 3. There is no special agreement, and the individual is expected to be always
accessible in principle. Interviewees participating in the last approach to working time
report their self-organization of WFH is much worse and monotonous because they do not
change locations often.

The transition to WFH also severely encroached on the field of HRD and contributed to
employee competence development. To work effectively, WFH required familiarization and
training in the use of new forms of online communication tools and gaining new knowledge
of working with people, as communication was more complex and lacked personal contact.
As such, 42% of our respondents report they had to acquire new knowledge and competen-
cies in the field of using new programs (Teams, Zoom, Moodle). Where the organizations
supported this individual development, employees attended various organized webinars
and seminars on the use of new online ways of working and received help from managers
and technical teams. Besides that, many workers combined the provided organizational
support, or lack of it, with the help of acquaintances and family members.

Many of our respondents use their personal phones, a home screen (often because it is
bigger), a home printer while WFH, and report that the costs of the mobile phone up to
a certain amount (e.g. EUR 50), internet costs, and the use of home electronic devices are
supported by the organization through reimbursement.

Besides the disadvantages mentioned at the beginning, our respondents also pointed
out some advantages of WFH: flexibility (more flexible schedule) and independence from
location (you can work anywhere, based on your choice). Some emphasized WFH is calmer,
more relaxed, and allows for a less stressful work environment. WFH also allows for a
healthier work environment (intermediate exercise, walking, a healthier diet, more breaks).
Some of our respondents report that they do not waste time driving so they can start
working earlier and do not have to dress in business clothes. Among the positive effects
of WFH, a smaller proportion of respondents point out that they do the job easier and are
more efficient because they work alone and have more peace of mind. It must be mentioned
that these advantages greatly depend on the family situation, especially childcare while
WFH, individual preferences, and the existence of separate working space at home.
Solutions are indicated in setting the boundaries between work and leisure, agreeing on working hours with management, reorganizing the work, communicating with colleagues, and support of professionals (especially IT) and leaders.

5.2. Communication and Leaders’ Support

Most employees are in daily contact with co-workers and all of them at least once a week, and their communication takes place through networks that enable video communication, various forms of e-mail, or in person via a mobile phone. The amount of contact depends on the type of work.

The work is most often organized and divided at e-group video meetings, which take place one to three times a week. One finding is that 14% of our respondents state that they have not introduced new forms of virtual communication but have started to use the existing ones more intensively. They are conducted on various video conferencing platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, and internal programs used by the company.

From all the interviews, we can see that communication with managers is dominated by email and mobile phone, and employees usually receive information about work through at least two to three channels at a time. This shows that there is a need for “personal” communication between managers and co-workers. Weekly or daily e-meetings with leaders at previously agreed times are common to plan and delegate work, check progress, solve problems and issues, collect ideas, etc. Leaders and co-workers also point out that the volume of meetings has greatly increased.

One of the leaders says: “I let my colleagues know that I am always available even in these times and they can contact me at any time in case of any questions or dilemmas”. Some of them mentioned that insight into the work tasks and performance is limited. “When handing over the tasks to co-workers and directing their work, I do not have sufficient insight into the actual situation or the progress of the work process. Therefore, I am worried about whether the workers are doing their duties regularly, whether they are as conscientious as they are otherwise, what problems they face at work, and their openness about it”.

Interviewees report that leaders mostly understand and encourage employees, monitor their work, keep them informed of new developments, and are interested in whether the work is done. On the other hand, 55% of employees greatly miss physical contact with co-workers and their leaders.

The response time of the communication between employees and leaders is longer, and there is a lack of certain information (including “sharing hallway” information about events in the company, on projects, about customers). Coordination with colleagues is also more demanding, sometimes because new programs have been introduced that workers are unfamiliar with.

Leaders report about co-workers’ lack of motivation and of finding meaning in work at home, fatigue, need to withdraw from work and anxiety and stress due to simultaneous schooling of children.

5.3. Challenges in WFH for the Future

We also asked the interviewees if they would WFH after the end of the pandemic. More than half (54%) would work at the employer’s premises, 21% would combine and work a smaller part from home, 4.9% would combine and work a larger part from home, and only 19.1% would work entirely from home.

Concerning the challenges in WFH in the future, our research indicates that the biggest challenges affecting the efficient performance of WFH include reconciling work and family (especially care) obligations and greater workload.

The majority (96%) of interviewees say that the employer understands reconciling work and family. Nevertheless, there are several challenges in coordinating at the individual level, such as caring for and educating children (and preparing meals for them) during working hours, self-discipline in working, or concentrating on working in a room where
there are other family members. Care for children and family members is very limited when workers have a great workload and must provide quick responses and up-to-date answers at work at the same time. According to our respondents, balancing work and life is the most difficult in the flexitime schedule, and when there is a mismatch in the work obligations of partners.

On the other hand, many of our respondents report long working hours and related stress, anxiety, and inability to disconnect from work after the end of the working day, which afterwards, is transferred into the family.

6. Discussion, Future Research Directions, and Limitations

Our results show that the pandemic changed the nature of work and most negatively affected the lives of employees. Organizational responses to it intervened in the classic work rhythm and have additionally blurred the boundaries between work and leisure, which posed a difficult challenge, especially to the workers who perform caring roles at home. With an extremely increased volume and intensity of work that was performed from home, a household was simultaneously a place of work, care, and leisure activities. As a result, reconciling work and family responsibilities was extremely difficult, and at the same time, it was difficult for workers to concentrate, organize, and devote time to both areas of life. Besides that, many of our interviewees also report, on employers’ expectations, that they are constantly available to clients and customers, which makes it even more difficult to reconcile work and family.

Because WFH was introduced suddenly, workers were not sufficiently trained for it and had to acquire new competencies, especially in areas related to working with people and communicating remotely, with the support of ICT and online tools. In the absence of interpersonal contacts and training, employees referred to leaders, and technical support teams in organizations online, as resources of organizational support, and to acquaintances and family members. In this way, the support, which is usually provided by HR and mentors, was transferred to leaders and people outside the organization or at home. Thus, the domestic environment also took over the supporting roles of organizations, at least to some extent.

Leaders especially point out that one of the biggest challenges was the provision of organizational support through communication with workers and coordinating work. The division and organization of work have often been linked to the ability of employees to access remote databases. Therefore, online access to data, the level and extent of digitization of archives, the existence of shared servers, and the compatibility of home IT equipment with workplace equipment was an important characteristic of work process support. On the other hand, to ensure the work is done, employers also introduced reimbursement of costs for mobile communication, internet, and the use of domestic ICT, as a part of organizational support.

Communication in the organization has also changed significantly, as interpersonal communication took place mainly through the support of ICT with group e-meetings and e-mails. Physical distance represented a major change in workplace relationships and affected collaborative forms of work, monitoring of work, lack of certain information, response time in communication, coordination of work with colleagues, and problem solving in organizational processes. About these, respondents strongly emphasize the need for personal contact with colleagues and leaders.

With mobile phone communication and one-on-one video conversations, leaders supported, and mitigated, the lack of personal contact and interpersonal communication with workers. A big challenge for leadership during the epidemic was motivating workers and finding meaning in WFH. Especially as they, at the same time, observed an increase in mental distress of employees, expressed in fatigue, withdrawal from work, anxiety, and stress, and often stemmed from workers’ inability to coordinate work and care roles. For further research, it would be interesting to explore which of the findings were due to the stress of COVID-19, and which were due to WFH. These challenges will also require
further research, and much more attention from organizations in the future, through the development of organizational support prevention approaches, and a more active role of leaders.

WFH during the epidemic and the challenges it poses to organizations and leaders, forced the organizations to look for many new ways of working that contributed to successful adaptation to WFH and offered support to workers. The key to good organizational support practices identified involves constant communication between workers and leaders and finding individual solutions, such as the agreement on working hours and ways to reorganize work. For smooth and successful implementation of organizational processes, the constant support of IT experts, providing remote access to data, digitization of archives, and equipment for WFH, and training employees to work remotely is also vital. For further research on organizational support in this area, it would be interesting to explore which organizational tools and practices contribute most to efficient online communication, and when and how they could be efficiently combined with traditional face-to-face communication, as it was also revealed that workers missed personal communication with colleagues and identified limitations in online communication.

The negative consequences of WFH include long working hours, anxiety, and the inability to disconnect from work and to meet work and family obligations, which is transmitted and negatively reflected in family relationships. Although most survey participants report that the employers have an understanding of reconciling work and family responsibilities, the results point out that, due to increased workload, reconciling work and life represents a major challenge. It is most difficult in cases of flexitime schedules and work obligation time mismatches with partners. At the same time, it requires a lot of individual discipline, ability to concentrate, and provision of quick responses, especially in situations where children are schooling from home or where it is not possible to ensure a physical demarcation between work and other family members. Insights into the lack of supervision and maintenance of discipline, a task-oriented approach for long periods, could also be a way forward for future research.

The lack of personal contacts and the time mismatch between work and family obligations among co-workers also contribute to the greater complexity of solving the work and family reconciliation challenge. This affects the possibility and intensity of cooperation between employees, the ability of joint problem solving, the response time, and weakens organizational culture, teamwork, knowledge exchange, and creativity in the organization, as also highlighted by previous research. In many cases, it contributes to the extension of working hours.

Our research also points out that the workers’ ability to self-organize at WFH is weakened with time, due to monotony, isolation, and work within the same four walls. This leads to the discouragement of workers and lower productivity. Due to the lack of personal contacts and teamwork, the majority, or more than half of the participants in our survey, would work at the employer’s premises.

Our interviews also revealed some advantages of WFH arrangements, such as a more relaxed, less stressful, and calmer home environment, as these have a positive effect on work efficiency, more flexible working hours, independence from the location of work, and saved time spent driving. Among the advantages not highlighted in previous research, our research strongly emphasizes the fact that WFH contributes more to well-being and health, as it allows more breaks, and gives more opportunities for exercise and healthy eating. As we have already pointed out, these advantages greatly depend on the family situation, especially childcare while WFH, individual preferences, and the existence of a separate working space at home.

Similar to the previous research presented in Table 1, our research confirmed that WFH during a pandemic can have both negative and positive consequences for employees, and it is the organizational practices and organizational support to employees that ensure that the negative consequences do not prevail.
Our research also has some limitations worth mentioning. Among them is our methodological approach to data analyses and coding. Since the interviews were conducted in Slovenia, we were limited in using qualitative data analysis programs, including Nvivo or Atlas, which are more adapted to the use of text in English or other foreign languages. Although we followed the theoretical orientations in the data analysis and the coding process [77], the data may be consequently biased, limited by our views of the content under consideration.

On the other hand, we used a random sampling approach to provide the widest possible view of the topic. In this way, we attracted many interested respondents to the survey and consequently conducted an extensive number of interviews. However, this approach did not focus on the specific contextual characteristics of the organizations from which the respondents come and could significantly illustrate the process of organizational development, scope, and methods of organizational support during WHM, especially in relations between employees and managers working in the same organizations. This provides an opportunity for new research through case studies of organizations that could overcome these limitations.

In dealing with organizational support, we focused on only two aspects. On individual organizational support and organizational support to work processes provided by leaders and the organization as a whole (e.g., through IT experts). By doing that, we consciously limited our research and omitted other important stakeholders that provide individual and organizational support to work processes, including co-workers at the same level, managers, and external stakeholders, e.g., professional associations, experts, etc.

7. Conclusions

The objective of this study was to analyze WFH arrangements implemented in the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in organizations, based on structured interviews with employees involved in WFH in Slovenia.

Our first objective was to identify the main challenges and differences in WFH arrangements, compared to regular work before the pandemic. Based on the analyses, we can conclude that COVID-19, with restrictions on working at the employer’s premises, has led to a sudden transition to work from home, its virtualization, and digital disruption, at all levels of society, and brought many challenges to employees and employers. They also show that WFH in a pandemic is different from WFH before a pandemic. The classic work rhythm was suddenly broken. The boundaries between working and private time are blurred, and less clear with the intrusion of work into the home space.

We also identified the main changes in the scope of work and workload. Concerning this, we can conclude that many negative effects on workers’ well-being and reconciliation of work and family were reported. Due to the strengthened caring role of parents with younger children at the closure of kindergartens and schools, which took place simultaneously with work, the pressure of family activities on work (especially for women) was increased and the workload was much higher and sometimes lasted for the whole day. Therefore, organizational support that is oriented to policies that would contribute to the reconciliation of work and family obligations, and agreement on working time between employee and employer, is needed for WFH to be successful.

Further, we analyzed the support from and communication with co-workers, IT specialists, and leaders in WFH arrangements, and required competence development. Based on the results, it can be concluded that the transition to WFH required a radical reorganization of work, new ways of cooperation and communication, familiarization, and training of employees to use new forms of online communication tools, while strengthening the need for employers to understand and support reconciliation of work and family. At the individual level, the familiarity with online means of communication and the methods for their effective use, the scope of tasks that the worker must perform at home, and the ability to coordinate both areas are particularly important. In addition, here, it is evident that the company’s readiness for WFH and organizational support are the keys to the successful
implementation of WFH. This includes the technical side, the different ways and extent of support for employees, the (re-)transformation of work and working time arrangements, the provision of training and development of required competencies for WFH, and the supporting role of leaders. Listening to co-workers, as well as recognizing, understanding, and solving challenges related to increased workload, flexibility, and caring roles, are, once again, of exceptional help and support to employees in performing work, maintaining motivation, and satisfaction.

Besides that, when preparing organizational learning and training activities to support competence development and develop required competencies, differences in individual levels of current competencies must be taken into consideration, and a lot could be gained if these activities are based on cross-generational cooperation between employees.

Our results strongly emphasize the importance of organizational support of WFH, and frequent communication between co-workers and leaders that combines various communication tools, proper organization of work, and identification of good practices used by other organizations, which can contribute to the development of new and the improvement of current organizational practices and policies that would better support employees WFH.

Concerning the organization’s support of the work process, including data access, provision of IT, and work supervision, the most important is that all data needed for successful work could be accessed online, meaning that the archives and all documents have to be digitalized, and employees have to be supported by IT specialists and leaders in case they need assistance. On the other hand, also here, the development of required competencies that empower employees in the WFH process is vital.

As we can see, many challenges arise in this context, and organizations must have them in mind and address them appropriately to support their employees. On the other hand, many good practices within organizations, for which the transition to work from home did not cause major problems, are also identified in the interviews with employees and leaders. This will certainly help companies and employees looking for optimal ways to implement work from home in the future. Good WFH practices developed during the pandemic will also help individuals and businesses carry out hybrid work, which is on the rise.

Our interviews with employees during the pandemic confirm that most of them have become accustomed to WFH. They argue that the challenges of WFH are conditioned by the individual context of each employee and the organization’s support. Similar to the previous research presented in Table 1, our research shows that WFH during a pandemic has many negative, but also positive, consequences for employees, and it is organizational practices and organizational support to employees that ensure the negative consequences will not prevail in the future.

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