

FLEXIBLE WORK AND THE FAMILY

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FLEXIBLE WORK AND THE FAMILY

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FOREWORD

With the availability of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the extension of digital infrastructures, employees increasingly have more control over when and where they work. Moreover, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, which for many meant a shift to working from home to reduce the spread of the virus, more workers and employers than ever before experienced such flexibility. *Flexiplace* arrangements (also referred to as teleworking, working from home, or remote working) and *flexitime* (flexible starting/finishing times and the option to interrupt work as needed to attend to other responsibilities) offer employees more leeway in work location as well as in scheduling tasks during the traditional work week. These two forms of flexible work are the main focus this volume.

The consequences of work flexibility on an employee's family life are currently being debated: Does such flexibility help to better align the competing demands of work and family,¹ or does it harm family well-being by allowing work to invade the employee's personal sphere? According to *resource perspectives*, work flexibility allows employees to respond to predictable and unpredictable family needs. In turn, relationship quality in families and women's careers might be sustained despite work and family obligations, and men might experience additional opportunities to become more involved in care and household tasks. In contrast, *demand perspectives* suggest that flexible working increases the likelihood that work will invade the employee's family sphere. The timing and location of work may not be clearly set or separated, thus blurring work–life boundaries, and/or employers might use flexible work in their own interests to realize high work demands.

Regarding the implications of flexitime and flexiplace for employees' families, the research findings have been inconsistent, suggesting that there is no uniform relationship. This volume aims to contribute a more nuanced understanding of the interrelation of flexible work and the family. The contents are divided into three sections. The first section, "Flexible Work and the Family During the COVID-19 Pandemic," provides insights into the relationship between work and family while working from home during the pandemic. The authors not only suggest that the implications of flexible working are context-dependent but also point to the various facilitators and barriers present in the work and family spheres. The second section, "Gender, Parenthood, and Status-Specific Patterns of Flexible Work and the Family," acknowledges and emphasizes group differences when it comes to the ways in which flexible work is experienced. Moreover, it provides some evidence that these patterns have been sustained during the pandemic. In

the third section, “Linked-Lives Perspective on Flexible Work and the Family,” the contributing authors go beyond the individual experiences of work–family conflict or balance and discuss the implications of work flexibility for partners’ well-being and parenting behavior.

Throughout this volume, the research on the interrelationships of flexible work and the family represents contexts from different countries, including Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, thus revealing a broad spectrum of similarities and differences.

Section 1: Flexible Work and the Family During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The first three chapters provide insights into the work–family balance and work–family conflicts experienced by employees who were working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. They offer lessons learned about potential facilitators and barriers with regard to flexible working arrangements that could help employees to better align their work and family demands. In “When Home Becomes the Workplace: Work–Life Balance Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic”, Samantha Metselaar, Laura den Dulk, and Brenda Vermeeren applied a mixed-methods design to study how Dutch government employees perceived their work–life balance during the pandemic as compared with the pre-pandemic situation, as well as how to explain differences in what these employees were experiencing. The results indicate that the combined demands and resources at work, at home, and at the personal level shaped whether working from home facilitated work–life balance. In particular, respondents’ control over their boundary management and strategies helped them distinguish between different roles across their life domains and were important in their achieving a satisfactory work–life balance. Family demands, such as care responsibilities and homeschooling, were found to hinder an individual’s ability to achieve such balance but only in the absence of coping resources, such as sharing a task with a partner. Working parents reported experiences of family enrichment, since working entirely from home gave them more time to spend with their partners and children.

In “Working from Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned About the Relationship Between Flexible Work and Work–Family Conflict”, Mareike Reimann used a sample of employees who worked from home taken from German linked employer–employee data, collected in spring 2021, and shows that pronounced caring obligations were associated with more work–family conflicts. However, temporal flexibility, job autonomy, and the existence of fixed rules and a supportive supervisor were identified as workplace facilitators that contributed to fewer work–family conflicts among the employees working from home irrespectively of family obligations. Autonomy was even more beneficial for individuals who cared for other relatives, since it was associated with fewer work–family conflicts.

In “Working Remotely During the COVID 19-Pandemic: Work and Non-Work Antecedents of Work–Life Balance Development,” Liisa Mäkelä, Heini Pensar, Samu Kempainen, and Hilpi Kangas used longitudinal data from a multinational company in Finland that were collected in May/June 2020 and December 2020.

In studying remote workers' work–life balance, these authors showed that time saved by not having to commute facilitated a better work–life balance. Investigating how work–life balance has changed over time during the pandemic, they noted a general reduction in work–life balance, which could be explained by an increase in the employees' quantitative workload. Beyond the initial differences in the experiences of work–life balance – that is, less work–life balance among mothers at the beginning of the pandemic, the decreases reported during the pandemic did not differ by gender or number of children in the household.

Section 2: Gender, Parenthood, and Status-Specific Patterns of Flexible Work and the Family

Whereas previous research has identified gender, parenthood, and status-specific patterns in the use of work from home, two of the chapters investigate these patterns to determine variation in the implications of flexible work for work-to-family conflicts and improvements in the temporal alignment of work and private life. In “Does Telework Mediate the Impact of Occupational Status on Work-to-Family Conflicts? An Investigation of Conditional Effects of Gender and the COVID-19 Pandemic”, Antje Schwarz, Ayhan Adams, and Katrin Golsch used data from two waves (2017–2020) of the German Family Panel. The results showed that work-to-family conflicts among parents did not change during the pandemic but that work-to-family conflicts were in general higher among parents who telework and who have a higher status. In general, the conflict-enhancing implications of telework seemed to be more pronounced for mothers than for fathers. Stronger conflicts among higher-status employees were also found to be mediated by telework, especially for mothers before and during the pandemic.

In “Does Working from Home Improve the Temporal Alignment of Work and Private Life? Differences Between Telework and Informal Overtime at Home by Gender and Family Responsibilities”, Alexandra Mergener, Ines Entgelmeier, and Timothy Rinke found that formally recognized telework is more likely to be a resource that contributes to a temporal alignment of work and private life when compared with informal overtime at home. They also identified the gender- and parenthood-specific implications of telework. Based on their results using data from the German BIBB/BAuA Employment Survey 2018, these researchers concluded that mothers did not benefit from telework during regular working hours in particular; however, when they worked informal overtime at home, their temporal alignment of work and private life was found to be worse than that for the other groups studied.

Section 3: Linked-Lives Perspective on Flexible Work and the Family

The two final chapters contribute a linked-lives perspective on the implications of flexible work for the family. Whereas previous research focused mainly on the importance of flexible working in terms of the individual employee's experiences of work–family conflict or balance, these researchers investigated the meaning of flexible working for other family members. In “Individual and Cross-partner Transitions to Flexitime and Teleworking and Cognitive Subjective Well-Being,”

Aneesa F. Qadri used British Understanding Society data from 2009 to 2019 to investigate transitions to flexitime and teleworking by employees and how it affected their subjective well-being and that of their partners. Fathers' transitions to teleworking were found to increase their likelihood of reporting higher levels of satisfaction with their amount of leisure time, and flexitime fostered their female partners' satisfaction with leisure time. Mothers' transitions to flexitime and flexiplace positively impacted their own satisfaction with leisure time but not that of their partners.

In "Workplace Flexibility, Work–Family Guilt, and Working Mothers' Parenting Behavior" Melissa Rector LaGraff and Heidi E. Stolz looked at a sample of US working mothers to show that flexible working was positively associated with positive parenting, positive reinforcement, and warmth behaviors. Work–family guilt did not mediate these relationships but was negatively associated with workplace flexibility. The authors concluded that policies that promote flexible work arrangements could also promote positive family outcomes as well as reduce feelings of guilt related to employees' work and family life.

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NOTE

1. In this context, the term “family” refers to individuals who live together in the same household with their own or adoptive children, partners, or relatives.

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SECTION 1

FLEXIBLE WORK AND THE FAMILY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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CHAPTER 1

WHEN HOME BECOMES THE WORKPLACE: WORK–LIFE BALANCE EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Samantha Metselaar, Laura den Dulk and
Brenda Vermeeren

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the relevance of the intersections between work and personal life. Measures introduced to slow the spread of COVID-19 have included an increase of working from home and the temporary closure of schools and child-care facilities, leading to a lighter workload for some and a heavier workload for others. These consequences are likely to affect employees' work–life balance (WLB), although the impact may differ across groups of employees depending on the nature of their work, family and personal demands and resources. This mixed-method study examined how Dutch government employees perceive their WLB during the pandemic and how differences in what employees are experiencing can be explained. In May/June 2020, an online survey ($N = 827$) and an interview study ($N = 17$) were conducted at a government organization whose employees were obliged to work from home partly or exclusively. Results indicate that demands changed when working entirely from home and resources became more important to maintain WLB satisfaction. Being able to manage boundaries across life domains and find a new routine also appeared to be crucial for WLB satisfaction.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly changed the way people work. Efforts to slow the spread of the virus included national lockdowns that required any employee who could reasonably do so to work from home. Schools and child-care facilities also closed temporarily, and measures were introduced to foster social distancing. As a result, families across the globe saw their homes become their place of work, their children's schoolroom, and their social sanctuary (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021). Working parents had to juggle care responsibilities and homeschooling with their jobs, posing additional challenges to their WLB (TNO, 2021).

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing number of employees had the option of working from home (Allen et al., 2015). In the Netherlands, for example, more than a third of the labor force worked from home. In most cases, however, this was incidental, on average one day a week (CBS, 2021). For several decades, working from home has been viewed as a means to achieve a better WLB or to reduce work–family conflict (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Hill et al., 2008), even though findings have been inconclusive so far (Allen et al., 2015; Kelliher & De Menezes, 2019). On the one hand, working from home reduces commuting time and may give employees more control over their work schedules, allowing them to better align responsibilities from different life domains and increase their WLB satisfaction (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). On the other hand, working from home leads to blurred boundaries, making it more likely that work will creep into the personal domain or vice versa. This can lead to a situation in which *“there is too much overlap between jobs and personal lives”* (Kossek, 2016, p. 259). Boundary blurring may also increase work pressure (Demerouti et al., 2014) or work intensification (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010), as it may be harder for people to disconnect from work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, employees who were forced to work entirely from home struggled with boundary blurring to a greater extent, whether they were working parents or employees without child-care responsibilities. Their predicament makes clear that more research is needed to shed light on the conditions under which working from home increases or diminishes WLB satisfaction (Allen et al., 2015; Kelliher & De Menezes, 2019).

In this explorative chapter, we examine how government employees working entirely from home during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced their WLB. By exploring a unique set of circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and based on both survey and interview data, we aim to improve our knowledge of the relationship between working from home and WLB satisfaction. The data for this chapter were collected shortly after the beginning of the first lockdown in the Netherlands, allowing respondents to reflect on their pre-COVID-19 situation and compare their WLB experiences before and while working entirely

from home. These comparisons help us to better understand how the context of working entirely from home shapes WLB experiences and why employees have differing experiences.

The consequences of working entirely from home for WLB satisfaction may depend on exposure to demands and access to resources across life domains (Glavin & Schieman, 2012). When working from home is involuntary and schools and child-care facilities close at the same time, the demands may increase and working parents with children in particular may find it difficult to maintain a satisfactory WLB. Employees who have sufficient resources may be better able to adjust to working entirely from home and maintain a satisfactory balance between their work and their personal/family life. Boundary management may allow employees to mitigate the negative consequences of boundary blurring (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012), especially for those who were unused to working from home before the pandemic. However, when employees lack resources, working from home can negatively affect their WLB. Using Bakker and Demerouti (2007) job demands-resources (JD-R) model and boundary theory (Allen et al., 2014), we explore whether differences in WLB experiences are contingent on exposure to demands and access to resources in the work, family and personal domain. We thereby address the following research question: how do employees working at a government organization in the Netherlands experience their WLB satisfaction during working from home entirely, as opposed to the pre-COVID-19 situation, and how can we explain the diversity in experiences?

The contribution of this chapter is fourfold. First, research findings on the relation between working from home and WLB are inconclusive so far and little is known about the conditions that shape WLB experiences when working from home. Theoretically, we aim to increase our knowledge on how to explain differences in WLB experiences by looking at different conditions across life domains, not only in relation to the work context but also the home situation, family demands and resources, personal resources, and boundary management. Second, the transition to working entirely from home during the COVID-19 pandemic offers us a unique and extreme set of circumstances for examining WLB experiences. While private organizations may deviate from policy by allowing their employees to come to the office, working from home was strictly enforced in government organizations. As a result, employees working in various types of jobs and with different home lives were forced to work from home (Fukumura et al., 2021), including those who had not been allowed to work from home before or who did not wish to work from home because their home situation was unsuitable, or they preferred to work at the office. Most research on the impact of teleworking and working from home is based on high-educated knowledge workers who choose to work from home (Beauregard et al., 2019). The diverse group of employees in this study allows us to examine such factors as the nature of the job and the home situation, potentially increasing our knowledge of the conditions that explain differences in their WLB experiences. Third, scholars have so far argued that after a certain threshold, working from home or teleworking is no longer beneficial (Beauregard et al., 2019; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). In particular, when working extensively from home is combined with heavy care

responsibilities in the family domain, employees are more likely to experience work–life conflict (Golden & Veiga, 2005). The unique data collection of this chapter makes it possible to explore the consequences of working extensively from home. Fourth, as far as we are aware, there have been few mixed-method studies in this field. Nonetheless, a mixed-method approach can better capture WLB experiences of employees who work entirely from home. It allows us to identify the mechanisms behind the quantitative findings by using qualitative data derived from the same sample of employees.

In the next section, we present a theoretical framework for the relationship between working entirely from home and WLB satisfaction. We then explain our approach to data collection and the methods that we used. Next, we present our quantitative findings and follow this with a qualitative analysis to identify the mechanisms behind these findings. We end our chapter with a discussion and our conclusions, as well as a review of our chapter's limitations and practical implications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

WLB Satisfaction

A term widely used in both the academic literature and real-world practice, WLB has attracted growing interest over the years as people have increasingly attempted to combine their work and personal lives. Overall, when employees are able to achieve a satisfactory WLB, they are more likely to experience positive work-related outcomes (e.g., performance, job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions) as well as family-related outcomes (e.g., family performance and family satisfaction). Evidence suggests that WLB satisfaction can have a direct effect on these outcomes, but balance satisfaction can also facilitate the accumulation of additional resources such as self-belief and affective commitment (Kim, 2014). These additional resources may then result in enhanced performance and higher levels of employee well-being. Having a satisfactory WLB is therefore an important spill in fostering beneficial outcomes for both employees and organizations (Brough et al., 2020).

However, there has been some debate about the concept WLB and different views have emerged. Some definitions of WLB start by acknowledging that individuals fulfil multiple roles across different life domains (Kalliath & Brough, 2008): employee, mother, father, caregiver, friend and so on. The individuals concerned, or others, imbue these roles with different expectations and responsibilities (Fuegen et al., 2004; Graham et al., 2004; Jang & Zippay, 2011). Several scholars have defined WLB as the absence of conflict between these different life roles (e.g., Clark, 2000; Duxbury & Higgins, 2001; Frone, 2003). Conflict occurs when time and energy spent in one domain make it difficult to meet expectations and demands in other domains (Chen et al., 2009), meaning that different life roles are incompatible to some degree (Byron, 2005; Reynolds, 2005). Role conflict can therefore be regarded as a negative spillover. Scholars also argue that different life domains can facilitate one another. These

processes are often referred to as work–life enrichment (i.e., positive spillover). Resources gained in one domain can facilitate role fulfilment in other domains (Carlson et al., 2006).

Other early conceptualizations of WLB mention an equal distribution of resources (e.g., time and energy) across work, family and other life roles (see for example Greenhaus et al., 2003; Kirchmeyer, 2000). The equality approach has, however, received criticism as it fails to account for individual preferences regarding the importance of different life domains (Brough et al., 2020).

More recently, scholars have argued that WLB is a global construct that concerns an overall perception of the work–life interface. These approaches differ from spill over approaches (such as conflict and enrichment) in that they do not refer to cross-domain processes or specific directions (Wayne et al., 2017). From a global perspective, WLB can be understood as an individual's ability to fulfil roles and meet commitments in different domains (Hill et al., 2001). Balance satisfaction refers to contentment with the combination of roles in different domains, rather than how these domains conflict or facilitate one another (Grawitch et al., 2013). In this chapter, we are interested in WLB satisfaction as it offers a more integrative approach of the work–life interface (Brough et al., 2020; Wayne et al., 2017), including individual preferences and priorities. Hence, using Valcour's conceptualization, WLB satisfaction is defined as "*an overall level of contentment resulting from an assessment of one's degree of success at meeting work and family role demands*" (2007, p. 1512). Valcour's (2007) definition implies that there is no optimal division between work and personal life that suits all employees, as an overall level of contentment proceeds from an individual's subjective evaluation (Annink, 2017). This evaluation is based on their expectations, experiences, or wishes and can be shaped by the social context (Wayne et al., 2017). In this chapter, we explore conditions, i.e., demands and resources, that either contribute to or hinder the ability to acquire a satisfactory balance between work and personal life.

Working from Home and WLB Satisfaction

Many authors have focused on the relationship between working from home and WLB satisfaction. Some have argued that working from home can be beneficial for WLB satisfaction because employees swap commuting time for more time spent on their personal lives (Tremblay & Thomsin, 2012). Moreover, working from home allows them to better align work and personal life, as it is likely to enhance temporal flexibility (Palumbo, 2020).

When home becomes the workplace, however, the beneficial effect on WLB satisfaction may be diminished. Scholars argue, for example, that working from home may foster work intensification, not only by increasing the number of work hours but also because of boundary blurring (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010), making it more difficult to disconnect from work. Working from home may also induce an involuntary overlap between activities in different life domains, such as work tasks and child-care responsibilities, potentially threatening the employee's ability to successfully balance work and personal life (Palumbo, 2020).

Working from home can therefore give rise to both positive and negative processes. Some researchers have found a positive relationship between working from home and WLB satisfaction, while others have found a negative relationship between the two constructs (Kelliher & De Menezes, 2019). The literature to date has therefore been inconclusive. More research is needed to examine why working from home unfolds positively for some and negatively for others. To increase our knowledge of this issue, it is important to explore the conditions that may play a role (Allen et al., 2015; Kelliher & De Menezes, 2019).

The Job-Demands Resources Model

The JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) can help us to identify conditions that may be important in the relationship between working from home and changes in WLB satisfaction. According to the JD-R model, conditions can be divided into demands and resources. We look first at *demands*: “*Demands refer to those physical, psychosocial, or organizational aspects that require sustained physical and/or mental effort and are, therefore, associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs*” (Bakker & Geurts, 2004, p. 348). Examples of job demands are work pressure and task interdependency. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees saw an increase in their work demands (Craig & Churchill, 2021). They may have been assigned additional tasks or have had to adopt other, more time-consuming ways of doing their job to ensure the continuity of task accomplishment while working from home, possibly resulting in changes in WLB satisfaction. The latter may also apply to employees with a higher task interdependency. Task interdependency requires a higher degree of information exchange and interaction between employees. When working entirely from home, however, employees are physically far away from one another, possibly hampering the accomplishment of tasks that require multiple employees to work together simultaneously. Task interdependency can therefore become a more pronounced demand, whereas working entirely from home may be less problematic for less interdependent tasks (Beauregard et al., 2019). Task interdependency may therefore also affect WLB satisfaction during working from home entirely as opposed to the pre-COVID-19 situation.

Although the JD-R model focuses on the work domain (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), demands and resources in the family domain can also play an important role with respect to WLB satisfaction. The temporary closure of schools and child-care facilities to slow the spread of COVID-19 may, for example, have increased child-care responsibilities for working parents, resulting in higher demands in the family domain (Del Boca et al., 2020). The increasing demands in the family domain may hinder the ability to successfully combine work and personal life, causing a shift in WLB satisfaction.

However, demands in both the work and family domain are not necessarily negative, but they can have a diminishing effect on outcomes when employees do not have sufficient *resources* to deal with them (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007): “*Resources refer to those physical, psychological, or organizational aspects that may be functional in meeting task requirements (i.e., demands)*” (Bakker & Geurts,