

An Exploration of Work-Life Wellness and Remote Work During and Beyond COVID-19

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Abstract

Understanding work-life wellness contributes to improving the physical health, mental health, and productivity of remote workers. Due to physical distancing guidelines associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees have been working from home, often without adequate training and resources. How has the work-life wellness of remote workers been impacted by this rapid transition to remote work, and how can work-life wellness be improved during and beyond these unprecedented times? Scholarly analyses about COVID-19 and remote work were reviewed, along with publications about remote work and work-life wellness. The literature indicates that the work-life wellness of remote workers could be influenced by lack of organizational supports during the transition to remote work, combined with COVID-19 related stress. Beyond the pandemic, organizations and employees will need support to find suitable remote work plans. Career development practitioners can assist clients by being aware of how the transition to remote work may be further complicated by home dynamics, COVID stress, overworking, and challenges collaborating. More research is needed

to better support the new remote workforce, including choosing the most relevant construct to describe the relationship between work and life, understanding how COVID stress influences work-life wellness in the long term, and testing related training programs.

Keywords: work-life wellness, work-life balance, COVID-19, coronavirus, remote work, new workplace, distributed work, flexible work, flexwork.

Between 2005 and 2015 the number of workers in the United States who worked remotely at least 50% of the time grew by 115% (Reynolds, 2017). Currently, around 56% of employees in the United States have a job which could be done from home at least part of the time due to it being information-based and involving a lack of physical work requirements (Global Workplace Analytics, 2020), while 37% of jobs in the United States can be done solely at home (Dingel & Neiman, 2020). Although there is less current information about the situation in Canada, in 2012, approximately 70% of Canadian employees worked from home at least some of the time (Jedras, 2013). In addition, 38% of Canadian jobs can be fully carried out at home, with most be-

ing in finance and insurance (Deng, Morissette, & Messacar, 2020).

Before COVID-19, teleworkers tended to be around 45 years old and held a bachelor's degree (Reynolds, 2017). Employers who offered formalized programs for employees to engage in remote work tended to do so to reduce land/building expenses, retain talent, recruit millennials, and bolster mental health (Anderson, Kaplan, & Vega, 2015; Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016; Weikle, 2018). Employees appreciated these programs due to lower travel and clothing costs, flexibility of living location, increased autonomy, and a myriad of other benefits (Anderson, Kaplan, & Vega, 2015; Smith, Patmos, & Pitts, 2018). For some firms, the limited progression of remote work adaptation prior to COVID-19 may have been due to issues around trust, desire for in-person contact, and threat to traditional ways of working (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016).

When COVID-19 became an imminent threat, non-essential businesses that were able to do so moved to a remote workplace model (Dawson, 2020; Franklin, 2020). In contrast, industries unable to make this shift, such as manufacturing, hospitality, and tourism, had to lay off staff (Arora & Suri, 2020), and essential ser-

vices such as health services, food manufacturing, and grocery stores continued to operate, often at a heightened risk to employees. The focus of this review, however, is the experiences of workers who are working remotely from their homes.

According to a recent Conference Board of Canada survey, 55% of Canadian employers plan to keep their workforce remote until the risk of contracting COVID-19 significantly lowers. This is in line with the 60% of employees in the United States who want to keep working remotely as much as possible (Brenan, 2020). Working from home can mean more isolation and less collaboration (Siqueira, Dias, & Medeiros, 2019). Alternatively, working from home helps people avoid long commute times and lowers personal expenses such as parking and fuel (Weikle, 2018). Organizations implementing a remote workforce can also benefit from lower office space costs when leases expire, and less space is needed. In addition, 40% of Canadian businesses are reimbursing at least partial home office costs during this challenging time (Conference Board of Canada, 2020). Although the concrete costs and financial benefits of shifting to remote work are being identified, it is also important to understand how this change affects workers in terms of their wellness.

Work-life wellness, which we operationally define as the ability to be well in different aspects of life and feel well about the connection between work and non-work lives, is essentially con-

nected to mental health. According to Lunau, Bambra, Eikemo, Van der Wel, and Dragano (2014), poor work-life balance was associated with lower self-rated health and mental well-being in a sample of European workers from various professions. Haar, Russo, Suñe, and Ollier-Malaterre (2014) found work-life balance to be negatively related to depression/anxiety, for participants from seven different countries who worked full-time. Rudolph et al. (2020) identified work-family issues and telework as two of ten relevant areas of industrial/organizational psychology research to help support society during the pandemic.

There is a gap in the literature around location of work and its impacts on work-life wellness, including the impacts of organizational support and the collective trauma of COVID-19. Exploring the existing literature is an essential step for career development researchers and practitioners across settings to understand and increase the work-life wellness of remote workers during and beyond COVID-19. Next, we explore COVID-19, work-life wellness, and remote work on their own and in relation to each other. In addition to the nascent Canadian research in this area, we include findings from the international research community. We will then provide relevant implications for practice and ideas for future research.

COVID-19 and COVID Stress

COVID-19 is a virus that first broke out in Wuhan, China in December 2019, and causes serious respiratory issues in 20% of infected people (World Health Organization, 2020b). The emerging research indicates that the virus spreads primarily through moisture droplets expelled from the nose/mouth, which are inhaled by surrounding people or transferred onto objects that are later touched by others before they touch their face and contract the virus. Due to global travel, COVID-19 rapidly spread outside of China and has led to more than 61 million confirmed cases and 1.4 million global deaths by the end of November 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020a).

Considering the possibility of becoming sick, dying, losing a job, and being isolated or quarantined, people around the world are experiencing increased levels of anxiety and depression (World Health Organization, 2020b). In a study by Montano and Acebes (2020), COVID stress predicted depression, anxiety, and stress. The term “COVID stress” is part of what has been called COVID stress syndrome, which involves contamination and socioeconomic concerns, along with xenophobia, trauma symptoms, and compulsive checking (Montano & Acebes, 2020; Taylor et al., 2020). Given the reality of COVID stress for many, it is important for workers to find ways to avoid or manage this experience (Chong, Huang, & Chang, 2020). Therefore, achiev-

ing wellness across one's work and life, is more important now than ever.

Work-Life Wellness

The literature uses a variety of concepts to describe the intersection of being well in work and life, such as work-family conflict, work-life balance, and work-life integration. We describe and review these concepts prior to explaining why we have used the term “work-life wellness.” Since work-family conflict has been explored quite extensively in the literature (Duxbury & Higgins, 2012, Grandey, Cordeiro, & Crouter, 2005; Rudolph et al., 2020), we think it is more beneficial to society to focus on the positives. The following paragraphs outline some of the past research on work-family conflict, work-life balance, and work-life integration to justify our choice of work-life wellness as the construct for this paper.

Work-family conflict is a bidirectional construct containing family interference with work and work interference with family (Grandey, Cordeiro, & Crouter, 2005). Since we are addressing the interplay of work and home commitments for those who may not have a family at home (to be more inclusive), we decided against using this term as our main construct, despite its prevalence in past research. It is important to note that time, energy, strain, and cognitive conflict all play a role in an individual's life during the pandemic regardless of whether

they have a family (Rudolph et al., 2020).

Work-life balance is a common term used to describe finding balance between work and personal commitments. According to Soni and Bakrhu (2019), work-life balance is “not division of equal number of hours” to personal and work life, as the term suggests. Rather, it is a subjective application of time to work and personal life, as desired. We chose not to use this term because to suggest “balance” implies perfection, when the reality is work versus life focus and priorities are constantly in flux (Brower, 2014). The achievement of a theoretical state of balance appears to be an unachievable ideal (Carpenter, 2017; Ezzedeen & Zikic, 2017).

Work-life integration is defined as blending work and personal life (Brower, 2012). The notion of blending work and personal life can be problematic for some, since highly integrated lifestyles are often related to greater exhaustion (Wepfer, Allen, Brauchli, Jenny, & Bauer, 2018). People who integrate their work with their personal life may have trouble setting boundaries and making time for what is important. However, Gadeyne, Verbruggen, Delanoëje, and De Cooman, (2018) found that for people who prefer work-life integration, bringing work home does not interfere with, and may even promote, work-home compatibility by facilitating flexibility to manage work and life. Since work-life integration seems to have both negative and positive impacts on the lives of workers,

we decided against using the term since we wanted to focus solely on positive life impacts (Ezzedeen & Zikic, 2017).

Although the term “work-life wellness” is used by some in industry, work-life wellness is a newer term in the research literature. Nonetheless, we believe this is a more suitable term for representing the desired outcome of being well in both work and life: the term focuses on how an individual can cultivate wellness through a variety of means, rather than only focusing on conflict factors or suggesting balance or integration as the ideal. It is also equally suitable for individuals with and without families. We have further defined it as the ability to be well in different aspects of life and feel well about the connection between work and non-work lives. People can reach their desired level of wellness using balance, integration, segmentation, or other approaches. Work-life wellness describes this phenomenon in a way that accurately depicts what is happening in employment settings, and in the widespread remote workplace COVID-19 has brought about.¹

COVID-19 and Research on Telework and Remote Work

Telework is typically defined in the literature as work-

1. When describing findings of studies, we will name the construct that the original researchers used instead of using “work-life wellness” (i.e. work-life balance, work-family conflict).

ing from home (Giovanis, 2018; Waters, Stoothoff, Gibraltar, & Thompson, 2016). Remote work is a broader term that includes any situation where an individual works away from the traditional office, such as working from client sites or coffee shops (Blount & Gloet, 2017). Several studies have been conducted on work-life balance and well-being of remote workers, which may be relevant to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A qualitative study by Grant, Wallace, and Spurgeon (2013) on 11 remote workers from the UK found remote workers struggled with overworking, which had a negative impact on their well-being. However, the same study found that remote workers enjoyed the flexibility of working whenever they wanted, especially when communicating with those from other time zones or making time for household chores. The remote workers also enjoyed being around family, even when they were engaging in work. However, during COVID-19, it must be recognized that being full-time with family, who are also likely to be home more than previously, may lead to a lack of personal time to recharge or an increase in caregiving responsibilities that would not have been present in the research of Grant et al. (2013).

Another study by Grant, Wallace, Spurgeon, Tramontano, and Charalampous, (2019) on 469 employees, most of whom were working full-time and having two years of remote working experience, found that work-life inter-

ference had a negative correlation with mental health and general health. The authors proposed that this could be due to the tendency of remote workers to overwork. Supporting this possibility, Fellestead and Henseke (2017) found that remote workers in the UK experienced work intensification, an inability to switch off, and greater work-home spillover than traditional employees. Nonetheless, the researchers also found that remote workers were more enthusiastic about their job, more loyal to their organization, and had greater job satisfaction. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many remote workers are still experiencing the inability to switch-off from work (Gambhir, 2020).

A 2016 dissertation by Martinez-Amador found that work-location enjoyment mediated productivity, especially for remote workers who worked more than three days per week remotely. Working from home was associated with greater work-life balance, possibly due to decreased commute time and more time to deal with personal life (Hill, Ferris, & Mårtinson, 2003). The same study showed that when controlling for hours worked, teleworkers were as productive as traditional workers. The possible mediating effect of work-location enjoyment may be particularly salient during COVID-19, where working from home has been mandated for many individuals, regardless of their preference or enjoyment.

A factor that may be particularly relevant to the sudden and unplanned shift to remote

work that has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic is whether the worker has a dedicated room for working at home. Fedakova and Istonova's (2017) focus group study on 23 Slovakian teleworkers from IT companies revealed that the lack of a dedicated room when working from home decreased participants' work-family boundaries. Whether or not the participant had family at home during work hours also influenced work-family tension due to more frequent switching between family and work roles. At the same time, participants in this study enjoyed flexibility for family needs and tasks, and more autonomy when working from home; findings which may also generalize to remote work precipitated by COVID-19. However, parents may feel that children disrupt their work duties, which may increase family pressure and stress (Fedakova & Istonova, 2017). During COVID-19, when schools have been closed, trying to manage childcare and online education while working from home may be a major source of stress for parents.

According Johri and Teo (2018), a qualitative study of 65 participants from technology companies who worked on multi-national teams suggests that employees enjoyed working at home due to comfort, location, and lack of interruption from colleagues. The firms in this study also experienced a lower turnover after implementing work from home options. Di Domenico, Daniel, and Nunan (2014) surveyed home-based businesses in a qual-

itative study of 23 entrepreneurs. The researchers discovered that the entrepreneurs in their sample often felt virtually connected while being physically disconnected. These entrepreneurs took advantage of third locations (such as coffee shops) for client meetings or for a change of pace from being at home. These third places have been less available during the pandemic; however, more are opening as restrictions lessen in places with fewer COVID-19 cases. Nonetheless, issues related to commuting, family responsibilities, sense of connection, and the ability to go to “third places,” may all be relevant influences on the experience of remote work during COVID-19.

Overall, before COVID-19, lack of commuting and increased flexibility were clear benefits for remote workers. Compared to traditional workers, remote workers tended to have slightly higher job satisfaction and lower role stress (Rudolph et al., 2020). However, work-life wellness for remote workers tends to depend on several factors, such as overworking and work interference with personal life. A dedicated working space in the home helped with boundary setting, particularly one with a closed door to reduce disruption. Remote workers are likely to have fewer disruptions from coworkers than they would experience in the office. However, depending on the remote worker’s family responsibilities, childcare availability, and whether schools have been disrupted by COVID-19 outbreaks, office-based disruptions may be replaced by disruptions

from children/family members. As the pandemic continues, mandated remote work will continue as a method to decrease the risk of spreading COVID-19. It is essential to manage the challenges of remote working during this time, such as overworking, spillover, and family stress. How can we cultivate work-life wellness while working from home in an anxiety riddled time?

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Research from the United States has identified numerous workplace-related problems following the need to engage in remote work due to COVID-19, including inadequate technology, lack of equipment, and increased distractions (CPA Practice Adviser, 2020). Companies without digital infrastructure in place were slower to transition to a work from home model (Arora & Suri, 2020). Managers who prioritize office presence over results especially struggled with the move to remote work (Rudolph et al., 2020). This evidence also suggests a need for employers and career development practitioners to focus on wellness and mental health: COVID-19-related work-life wellness and stress started stabilizing in June 2020 but continues to be above pre-pandemic levels (CPA Practice Adviser, 2020). There is also no guarantee that this stability will maintain itself in the long-term, especially as severe additional waves of the disease are occurring.

Recommendations for the workplace. To mitigate the difficulties with transitioning to remote work in a COVID-19 context, some companies have appointed dedicated human resources professionals that check-in regularly with employees to ask about their mental health, which has led to higher motivation and productivity (Arora & Suri, 2020). The practice of checking-in with team members and making necessary adjustments can help employees to feel included and more in control of their work (Cuthbertson & Ashton, 2020). Leading with empathy (i.e., a people-first approach emphasizing compassion) is also recommended, as employees may be experiencing more role spillover during COVID-19 (Cuthbertson & Ashton, 2020). Focusing on outcomes rather than inputs may help leaders to manage more effectively and make room for employee flexibility (Cuthbertson & Ashton, 2020).

Changing expectations also have an impact on employees, with the sudden wide availability of free webinar content, employees feel the pressure to build skills while also working from home and possibly caring for a family (Arora & Suri, 2020). To counteract this pressure, it may be beneficial to encourage employees to focus their skill-development efforts on ways to promote their mental health and improve their self-care practices. Prior to COVID-19, training to promote wellness was found to have significant positive impacts on self-reported work-life balance (Cave, 2019). In addition,

providing training about remote work and managing remotely could be particularly beneficial for those with little to no remote work experience before they were mandated to work from home due to COVID-19. It is likely that these individuals experienced greater challenges shifting their work location and style due to the transition (Yang et al., 2020). Those with collaborative roles may also benefit substantially from remote work training, to develop their virtual teamwork and collaboration skills (Yang et al., 2020). Finally, supervisor support and flexibility, of the kind found in family-friendly organizations, can mitigate employee stress around juggling work, family, and learning (Rudolph et al., 2020).

Recommendations for Career Development Practitioners.

Career development practitioners are likely to encounter workers who are struggling with an abrupt, potentially unwanted transition to remote work due to COVID-19. For these clients, it may be important to assess and differentiate between anxiety, depression, and other symptoms related to COVID-19 itself (Montano & Acebes, 2020; Taylor et al., 2020) and the distress resulting from the sudden changes in their work environment and job demands created by the abrupt move to remote work. Frameworks, such as Redekopp and Huston's (2020) recommendations for promoting mental health through career development or the action-based

integration of career development and counselling (Young, Domene, & Valach, 2015), may be beneficial for working with clients experiencing symptoms related to general COVID stress, as well as for promoting work-life wellness more generally. However, if the severity of a client's symptoms places them outside of the career practitioner's ethical scope of practice, referral to mental health treatment may be required (Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners, 2004).

For presenting problems that are specific to clients' transition to remote work, career development practitioners could advocate for or otherwise support their clients to pursue with their employers some of the suggestions in the "recommendations for the workplace" section. In addition, there are several topics that practitioners could raise with their clients to identify contributors and solutions to their distress. Exploring and addressing whether and how the transition to remote work has blurred the boundaries between work and home life may be important (Ezzedeen & Zikic, 2017; Fedakova & Istonova, 2017; Wepfer, Allen, Brauchli, Jenny, & Bauer., 2018). Discussing practical issues related to equipment, space, and technology (CPA Practice Adviser, 2020), including the potential ergonomic and physical consequences of prolonged use of space and furniture not designed for office work, may identify specific issues that need to be addressed. Practical ways to maintain phys-

ical health in any office setting may be applicable in this situation, along with identifying ways to share space and resources with other members of the household or identifying third places, where the client could work at least some of the time (Di Domenico, Daniel, & Nunan, 2014).

When providing career counselling for COVID-19 related transitions to remote work, there may also be some family issues to address (Arora & Suri, 2020; Fedakova & Istonova, 2017). Some clients may benefit from problem-solving related to childcare responsibilities while working at home; this may need to include developing contingency plans in case of sudden school cancellations due to COVID-19, or the client's children themselves becoming ill. In addition, there is growing evidence that domestic violence rates have increased globally during the COVID-19 pandemic (Campbell, 2020; Usher, Bhullar, Durkin, Gyamfi, & Jackson, 2020). Although a client's stated problem may be from difficulties with working from home, career development practitioners should remain aware of the possibility that an underlying contributor to these difficulties may include threatened or actual conflict with other household members. Even without considering the COVID-19 pandemic, it may be beneficial for career development practitioners to become familiar with local supports for domestic violence and to engage in professional development on how to support clients who disclose experiencing violence.

Future Research

Fedakova and Istonova (2017) have called for more quantitative research on remote working since there is a lack of agreement in the literature on whether remote work leads to higher work-life wellness. To better understand work-life wellness of remote workers, further research using a variety of methodologies is required to explore the phenomenon in relation to gender, parenting/caregiver status, and relationship status. The potential influence of colleague support, opportunities for social interactions, and other environmental factors could also be investigated (Overla, 2017). Unique considerations for remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic should also be studied, such as the phenomenon of being mandated to work from home as opposed to choosing remote work, and the effect of COVID stress on work-life wellness. For example, longitudinal studies of remote workers and their work-life wellness through the pandemic could shine some light on how trauma impacts work-life wellness and how work-life wellness changes through the pandemic.

Remote work is likely going to continue to exist to a greater degree than it did before, due to fears around social interaction, the newfound benefits of remote work, and the creation of infrastructure and policies to support longer-term remote work. Video conferencing may replace in-person client visits for reasons related to cost and because being around others may

be viewed as an unnecessary risk (Kelly, 2020). How will work-life wellness shift after COVID-19? Again, longitudinal research could help us to better understand the longer-term mental and economic impact of the pandemic on employees.

Work-life wellness is a term used in industry that could be adopted by researchers to describe positive work-life interaction without implying balance or integration as the ideal. Asking employees whether the term work-life wellness best describes the interaction between their home and work lives may help researchers determine what construct should be used (i.e. work-life balance, work-life wellness, work-family conflict). Ideally, the term used in the research should be an accurate reflection of the reality employees experience. This term may change over the years as more knowledge is developed and the workplace morphs.

Regardless of term used, it is important to continue expanding understanding of remote workers' wellness and broader intersections of their career development and mental health (Redekop & Huston, 2020), both during and after COVID-19. More research is also needed to explore best practices for creating a team atmosphere and facilitating communication and trust between co-workers working remotely during the pandemic, when people are less able to encounter each other at the office (Saghafian & O'Neill, 2018; Yang et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Due to physical distancing guidelines associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, workers in many fields of employment have moved to working from home, often without adequate training and resources. This review of the literature about COVID-19, remote work, and work-life wellness reveals that organizations and employees will need continued support to find the best suited remote work scenarios during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Career development practitioners can contribute to this support by becoming informed about the nature and consequences of remote work, including the intersections between remote work and COVID stress and distractions from children, and other problematic home dynamics. Career development practitioners may also want to pay attention to the implications of remote work on work collaborations and amount of time spent working. As more research emerges on this phenomenon, it is likely to uncover additional strategies for supporting the career development and mental health of Canadians continuing to work from home during and after the pandemic.

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