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**“We are not working at home, but are at home, during a pandemic, attempting to work”:
Exploring experiences of homeworking and work-life balance during the Covid-19 crisis.**

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Introduction

The global Covid-19 outbreak means that many people are having to work from home, and this is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Homeworking can improve wellbeing, work-life balance and productivity, providing people have control and choice over their working arrangements and receive guidance to help them balance their multiple role demands (Kossek & Lautsch, 2008; McDowall & Kinman, 2017). Nonetheless, current restrictions have posed new challenges even for longstanding homeworkers (e.g. home-schooling children and partners also working at home) and posed new demands (e.g. getting to grips with new and varied information technologies). Leaders and managers may also have little experience of managing remote workers which can impact on wellbeing and performance.

Creating home workspaces is likely to lead to blurred work-life boundaries as people will often need to accommodate conflicting demands, for example, domestic and caring responsibilities, obtaining provisions and remaining healthy. People’s living circumstances also vary; some have dedicated study/workspaces, whereas others may share a cramped environment that is not conducive to maintaining ‘business as usual’. The ways in which workers set up their working environment and attempt to satisfy the competing demands of work and personal life will inevitably impact on their work-life balance, their experience of work and their wellbeing.

As users of social media, we noticed that people started to post their experiences, worries and concerns about homeworking immediately after the Covid-19 lockdown. Research studies also started to appear, aiming to explore people’s responses to homeworking. These typically use traditional data collection methods, such as questionnaires or interviews, but some utilise diaries. Observing people spontaneously and openly sharing their reactions to the sudden onset of homeworking on Facebook, we decided that a ‘netnographic’ method (Kozinets, 2015). would help us gain insight into people’s varied experiences of homeworking.

Following BPS ethical guidelines for conducting Internet-mediated research (BPS, 2017) and using Facebook rules for group conduct, we created a closed Facebook group and invited participants initially using our networks and subsequently using snowballing techniques. From the start, we adopted a participant-observer approach (Kozinets, 2015) by sharing our own experiences and stimulating discussions. We were especially interested in the following issues:

- the demands and resources people encounter while working from home;
- the strategies/skills/personal resources people use to manage competing role demands;
- how people navigate the physical work/home environment;
- the dilemmas people face as they craft a new way of working at home;
- how people spend, allocate and plan their work and domestic time;
- how homeworking can impact on well-being, job performance and relationships with family and co-workers.

The aim of the research was three-fold: to gain insight into the demands of homeworking during the pandemic; to inform the development of guidance to help people manage homeworking more effectively post Covid-19 and to explore the use of netnography as a novel method for understanding remote-working. We invited people to make one-off or regular contributions as they saw fit, in the form of written blogs, video posts, photos, snapshots, memes, verbal accounts or reflections. Private messaging was also welcomed if people were reluctant to share their experiences publicly. As well as helping us gain insight into people's experiences of homeworking during the pandemic, we hoped that group members would find written disclosure to be therapeutic during this challenging time (e.g. Travers, 2011; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014).

There are currently 211 group members, mainly from the UK, who vary in terms of demographic and employment backgrounds. Although we occasionally provide prompts to encourage contributions, the group tends to be self-managing. The project is ongoing, as we aim to capture people's unfolding experiences during times of change and uncertainty, but this article provides a summary of some prominent themes emerging so far.

A time of contradictions and transitions

Working from home during lockdown has led to varying and sometimes contradictory experiences and feelings. New and often excessive demands have resulted in increased pressure, worry and stress while factors, such as the lack of a commute, spending more time with family, enjoying the home environment and more opportunity to exercise, have been a bonus for many group members. Many people seem to be enjoying a slower pace of life and engaging in activities that have previously been shelved. These contradictions are summed up well by this group member:

"..I find it hard when school insist on calls, Zoom or work submitted by a certain time, or just call you in bed at 9 am and expect you up answer. I normally pay for a team of folk to look after my kids so find the expectation that I work directed hours a bit sexist and not family friendly. My line manager clearly does not parent his own kids much! 😞 ... on a positive note I only got a 6 week mat(ernity) leave as it was a new job so the extra paid time with my new baby has been delightful, getting my garden, loft, clothes cupboards cleared out is a joy for someone who loves a clear out... family walks in forests I want to keep doing after lock down is lifted as it has been tonic for the soul.."

Not going into the office each day enables some members the freedom to engage in activities that can counteract feelings of stress from the current situation, such as a re-engagement with domestic activities:

"..all very reminiscent of the 70s when I was growing up. Meals from scratch, baking, hobbies, plant growing and all the things I usually do not have time for. My defences against anxiety are going quite well."

But others miss the social element of work and appreciate staying connected, even if the mode of communication is somewhat different:

"Had my first online meeting today. Six colleagues looking very awkwardly out from my screen and me looking even more awkward in return. However, it was very comforting to see them, we're quite a close-knit bunch I suppose, and the fact that these familiar faces are still out there, has lifted the spirits a little."

The widespread use of the term 'the new normal' suggests that we have reached a new, permanent destination. For many of our participants, however, this time is a transition (Bridges, 1995) where

old habits must be replaced by new ways of being and working. Some people appear keen to return to their usual work mode, while others who are enjoying the flexibility and an enhanced quality of life wish to continue working from home after lockdown is eased.

Coping with homeworking: implications for wellbeing and performance

A prominent theme is the negative impact of homeworking during the pandemic on cognitive functioning. Group members commonly report experiencing a 'mental fuzziness', 'brain fog' or 'muddy headedness' during lockdown. Feelings of fatigue are also frequently reported that seem to be worsening over time. Reflecting on their lack of cognitive 'sharpness', one group member considered the possible reasons:

"I started out with brain fog. But looking back I'm wondering if that was extreme anxiety about delivering teaching online and feeling deskilled with minimal tech resources - with no practical or constructive responses to any expression of anxiety from boss. I felt paralysed with fear to be honest."

Other people posted about the lack of routine in their eating, exercise and sleeping patterns and the effects on their wellbeing, e.g. *"Sometimes, I just wake up crazy early and am unable to get back to sleep. This results in me feeling rubbish, tired and at the end of the working day, in no mood for exercise."*

Some group members are crafting their own ways of coping with a lack of focus and motivation, but recognise they are not sustainable over the longer-term, e.g.

"Now, I'm thinking more clearly than usual. I enjoy the focus, but that's only when combined with a daily 2 hr run/walk at 6pm and 20 minutes cardio activity at 12.00. So, although I'm working effectively, I'm having to use unsustainable compensatory behaviour to maintain that. "

Having people posting about their experiences of lockdown so far gives us insight into how changes can lead to fluctuating wellbeing and job performance and how people develop strategies to accommodate the challenges: e.g.

"The first week of lockdown I was really productive and thought I was going to get a lot done. But then I hit a wall and had five weeks when I just managed to keep on top of things. The simplest of tasks took hours. But last week I moved my working to another room, set specific targets for each day (smaller targets than I would otherwise set) and I seem to have become more productive again. Hopefully the fog has lifted."

Group members report experiencing a range of negative emotions, such as frustration and disappointment, and many are clearly feeling the 'corona-coaster' of emotional ups and downs. Conversely, however, the lockdown also provides an opportunity for people to reflect on their values and enjoy a new-found sense of calmness.

The homeworking environment

Many people were forced to set up an office at home with little preparation. In contrast, seasoned homeworkers have been able to organise and refine their workspace over time that enable them to compartmentalise work and domestic life e.g. *"I feel that we're both very privileged because we can go off to our separate workplaces and, when we're done for the day, we can close the doors on them"*. Other, however, are struggling for suitable spaces (e.g. one member reports working on the landing, another is blocking the fridge door). Photographs of workplaces provided by participants

show desks in cramped or improvised spaces shared with clothes or boxes) and many seem to be using equipment that would not comply with health and safety regulations. This contrasts with an aspiration for an efficient workplace that is clear of debris (Rich et al 2006). The risks to health of unsuitable workspaces was highlighted in a discussion of seating arrangements: *“One thing I wish I had was a better chair, didn't really plan it very well. Any chiropractors out there?”*

Many people are competing for the same study/workspace with others in their family. This is highlighted in photographs showing family members' debris and children and pets interacting with people while they are trying to work. Comments sometimes express conflicted priorities and frustration, but also convey warmth for their family and pets. An ironic post alongside a photograph of a messy family dining-room complemented by many toys was, *“Anyone else managed to create a nice relaxing workspace?”*.

Effective communication is particularly important when people are homeworking; although technology allows close and continued contact, it can pose challenges. e.g.:

“Our use of Microsoft Teams has been largely successful, only one colleague in rural Holland seems to be accessing the internet with a potato, such is the poor video quality of his feed! Either that or he smeared the camera with Vaseline – which I think is probably the case!”

A common theme when discussing the homeworking environment is impression management. Postings initially reflected concerns about what others could see in the background during online calls, as well as concerns about being judged by others by increasingly greying hair and clothing choice. More recently, however, many seem to be enjoying a new informality, warmth and authenticity that working from home via a computer screen interrupted by domestic life has created.

Sharing the working environment with others

Working productively alongside children and other family members is a challenge for many: *“I've worked from home for 20 years now. These last 5 weeks the landscape of that has changed drastically ... The house during the day is no longer my own! It feels cramped. My "space" has been invaded.”*

The differences in routines required to accommodate the needs of others can also be time-consuming and distracting: e.g.

“I take my lunch breaks at 12 (because I'm starving by then!!). My youngest follows her school schedule and has hers at 1:10. I can't take all that time out of my day and make 2 lunches at different times. It's all very hit and miss!!”

Also, family members' responses to the lockdown can be incompatible and this can impact on mood. As the lockdown continues, we have gained insight into the dynamics of shared living and working environments and the effects that environmental factors, such as the weather, and workload can have e.g.:

“30 April at 11:59 (5 weeks in)

Anyone finding their housemates are struggling this week?

I think it's the change of weather, but I've got a bit more work than I've had in recent weeks, whereas my housemates are struggling to find things to do during the rain when they can't

get outside, and are constantly interrupting me/whinging/being needy/snapping at each other and me/ranting about things that can't currently be changed.

It's making me feel very tired, and unable to concentrate on work fully. I've sent both of them off to do some tasks separately, while I try to get on with work. It's like having two kids again - they are 20 & 51!!! 🤔🤔

What next

The study highlights the value of the netnographic method as a data-gathering tool. It has allowed us to determine patterns in postings; an initial deluge subsequently settled into a rhythm, where the weekend is quiet, but Mondays are quite active. Key government announcements also appear to be triggers for activity, as new guidance is provided. We are continuing to determine themes and analyse the rich visual images that are being posted. Unexpectedly, the group appears to have evolved into a source of support and a way for people to make sense of their experiences, with members frequently offering validation and tips to others.

We plan to continue the study after lockdown has eased to gain insight into the experiences of people who are transitioning back to an office environment, remaining working at home or 'blending' the two working modes. The newly developed skills, expectations and values we have observed during lockdown suggests that some people may be reluctant to abandon the flexibility offered by homeworking. They may therefore welcome the opportunity to craft their working lives to incorporate some of the best aspects of homeworking and expect organisations to support them in doing so. We can safely say that work may never be the same again.

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