

Post-pandemic work-life balance

A qualitative study on the post-pandemic development of the managerial view on increased digitalization, working from home, and work-life balance

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Abstract

The increased digitalization and remote work following the pandemic has caused both positive and negative shifts in the perception of work-life balance. On one hand, it has allowed for more flexibility in working hours, but on the other hand, it is at the expense of increased job intensity and technostress. Addressing these issues on how to improve work-life balance will provide guidance and support for managers who are dealing with rapid changes in the workplace. This, in combination with a lack of previous literature on this topic because of the recency of these shifts, makes this report highly relevant for the management field. The study answers the following research questions: *‘How do managers view work-life balance in a post-pandemic office setting?’*, *‘How does the increased digitalization in combination with remote work connect to issues with work-life balance, and how is technostress discussed?’*, and *‘How have these recent changes in the workplace affected the role of the manager?’*. The research questions were answered by combining previous literature with a qualitative study exploring the views of 10 individuals occupying managerial roles in Swedish office workplaces. Their opinions and beliefs were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The findings state that working hours have become more flexible, that job intensity has increased, and that there are fewer opportunities for social interactions and relationship building. Building on this, the recommendations presented concern communication guidelines, one-on-one meetings, team meetings and to continue to offer hybrid solutions. This paper contributes to the academic research through the finding on how flexibility in working hours and location can maintain the perception of a high work-life balance despite increases in job intensity, longer working hours, and high technostress.

Keywords: Work-life balance, remote work, digitalization, technostress, pandemic, flexibility, working hours, managerial perspective

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact on the modern workplace. One of the more notable changes has been the widespread adoption of remote work solutions, which meant that a large portion of the workforce performed their duties from home. This transition has produced new considerations for managers. For example, what working hours should the team adhere to and what level of social interactions do the team members need? Further complicating matters is the recent increased dependence on digital tools. The increased digitalization in combination with remote work has uprooted the traditional work structures, and significantly altered the perception of work-life balance. On one hand, the increased flexibility afforded by remote working has positively impacted work-life balance, but on the other, increasingly blurred lines between work and leisure and constant accessibility has had negative consequences. It has resulted in an increase in technostress, when constant notifications at times previously not considered part of working hours creates issues with mental health (Tarafdar et al. 2007). At the center of dealing with this profound shift in workplace culture are the managers who lead teams. As workplaces shifted towards remote work, managers needed a way to maintain employee mental health, team morale, productivity and deliverables. This qualitative study aims to measure the views and opinions of managers who have experienced this profound shift in modern office workplaces, to obtain a deeper understanding of how managers have dealt with this change.

1.1 Background

The concept of work-life balance has been subject of increasing interest and research in recent years, and the COVID-19 pandemic brought it to the forefront of discussion. Work-life balance is defined as achieving harmony between work and non-work activities (Bataineh, 2019). Traditionally, there was a clear division between these two areas of life, as one could leave work tasks at the office and focus fully on private life commitments. Before the pandemic, the majority of workplaces worked solely from the office or had restricted options for remote work (Stankevičiūtė and Kunsakaja, 2022). As such, the expectations for working hours and work-life balance could be seen as more stable. However, the rapid changes brought on by the pandemic has shifted the understanding of work-life balance due to increased digitalization (Bolli and Pusterla 2022), widespread remote work, and blurring lines between professional and private spaces (Stankevičiūtė and Kunsakaja, 2022). These three

form the basis of understanding in this exploratory study into the dynamics of the modern workplace.

1.2 Research gap and delimitations

The recency of the adaptations and new managerial challenges within the office work setting means previous literature on this subject is lacking. The individual subjects, such as work-life balance, remote work and digitalization have all been discussed, but literature combining them is insufficient. Literature from the pandemic discussing the rapid change to working solely remotely can be found. However, the current situation in which most employers have decided to adopt a hybrid working strategy has become a “new standard” that is yet to be discussed further. Additionally, most literature on the topic discusses the employee view of the issue and how they adapt. The literature on how managers handle these changes is unsatisfactory, and we identify that managers need guidance and best practices on how to lead their teams in these changing conditions. This study aims to capture the hybrid working format from a managerial point of view, and to discuss the future implications and challenges managers are facing.

This study is partly based on interviews conducted with managers operating in an office setting in Sweden. The office workplace is one that has seen incredible changes and needs of quick problem-solving and adaptation, as opposed to for example the retail sector or medical areas, where physical presence was still required throughout the pandemic. The managers in this study experienced the shift from working fully in the office to working remotely during the duration of the pandemic, and they all also share the fact that they currently have adapted a combination of the two in the form of hybrid work. The similarities in actions taken among the different companies studied creates a picture of the office work sector and their handling of the changing conditions. However, the office sector is broad and the companies selected differ in size, sector, and values, resulting in different approaches in adapting to the new ways of working.

1.3 Research questions and Purpose

- ➔ How do managers view work-life balance in a post-pandemic office setting?
- ➔ How does the increased digitalization in combination with remote work connect to issues with work-life balance, and how is technostress discussed?

→ How have these recent changes in the workplace affected the role of the manager?

The study takes a managerial viewpoint by all interviewees holding managing positions, but also values the employee angle and implications for the company or team as a whole. The research questions cover both remote work and digitalization as important aspects to consider to understand the changed conditions, and aim to cover both opportunities and threats by the new way of working. The aim of this paper is to contribute to studies on the current issue of work-life balance in combination with remote work and digitalization, since working in a hybrid setting is still in the beginning phase. A gap in the current literature is identified on the topic where these factors in combination have not been widely discussed. The current conditions of adapting to an involuntary acceleration in the trend of remote work inflicted by the pandemic is a unique opportunity to observe how managers deal with substantial changes to workplace practices.

1.4 Structural overview

The main themes to summarize the previous research on the topic are *work-life balance*, *remote work*, *digitalization and technostress*, *job satisfaction* and the *pandemic*. These will be presented in the *theoretical framework*, to provide an initial understanding of the underlying concepts and conditions. The *method* describes the way of data collection in this interview-based qualitative study, how the analysis of the findings was conducted and the reliability of the study. Further, the *findings* show the results of the interviews, presented in main themes: *working hours*, *job intensity*, and *social interactions and relationship building*. These themes showed that remote work puts more pressure on the individual to create boundaries, and that there are positive consequences of sometimes also working from the office. Following the findings, the *discussion* showed that the flexibility associated with the new way of working in a hybrid setting increases perceived work-life balance despite longer working hours, increased job intensity and technostress. Lastly, the *conclusion* provides a summary of the report and presents recommendations for managers going forward, followed by a section on future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

To answer the research questions, the study has been divided into main literature themes. The themes identified as most relevant are *work-life balance*, *remote work*, *digitalization and technostress*, *job satisfaction* and the *pandemic*. The concept of *work-life balance* is a necessary starting point to understand the current changes and implications for managers. It is the base concept for the report and will be continuously discussed throughout the report. The shift toward *remote work* following the pandemic has been the main driver in the changing expectations concerning work-life balance, and will be thoroughly discussed throughout the report. *Digitalization and technostress* was a trend even before the pandemic, but was accelerated by the introduction of remote work. It has considerable impact on employee well-being as well as employee performance, and is hence an important topic of discussion in the report. *Job satisfaction* connects to both work-life balance and digitalization and has a strong impact on the performance and well-being of the employee, and is therefore an important aspect for managers to consider. Lastly, the *pandemic* has been the driving force of all discussed changes and hence plays an important part in the understanding of the other topics.

The literature covering previous knowledge in the field was found exclusively using the *Scopus* website. This ensures the reliability of the sources since everything published on the website has been approved by field experts. Since the topic of the study is a relatively new trend, the majority of the literature used is published during the last few years, to ensure their relevance. The literature was divided into five main themes presented in the theoretical framework, that together can help explain the current situation of post-pandemic work-life balance. The main findings from the literature are summarized under the “Tools for analysis” title and are used as the basis for the discussion of the results from the interviews.

2.1 Work-life balance

Formally, work-life balance is defined as the capability of individuals to meet the commitments of work and non-work activities, including family, friends, health, and personal growth (Wong et al. 2020). The commitments associated with work encompass a range of formal tasks completed by an individual while occupying a particular employment position. On the other hand, life comprises a group of activities and roles that are not associated with work, such as but not limited to housework, self-fulfillment, free-time, care of family, and

management of non-work relationships (Bataineh, 2019). In the academic literature, balance is used to refer to a state of harmony between these domains, in which an individual is able to complete commitments and achieve satisfaction in both (Ibid.). The boundary between work and life is not rigid, and each domain has significant spillover effects on the other. An individual inhabits several interconnected roles for different areas of their life, that are all affected by the activities undertaken by the other roles. Positive experiences in the work domain could therefore result in fulfillment and satisfaction in the family domain, and vice versa (Khateeb, 2021). Poor work-life balance is linked to several issues, including positive correlations with stress, morale, motivation, job satisfaction, and performance (Bataineh, 2019). Conversely, employee performance can be increased by support from the company and a culture which encourages a healthy work-life balance (Anwar, 2013). It has therefore become increasingly important for managers and employees to manage work-life balance properly, especially in completely new working conditions present in the current post-pandemic state. There are several methods available for managers to improve work-life balance. Giving employees the freedom to autonomously manage their time and work allows them to balance time spent in different domains (Mas-Machuca et al., 2016). This could refer to flexibility in both working hours, and location, which is especially relevant in combination with remote work, as examined in this report.

2.2 Remote work

The introduction of remote work has come as a consequence of the pandemic in many offices, and has affected the employees' well-being. Remote work can add extra stress in the form of fewer social interactions, less exercise and simultaneously having to take care of children (Tump et al., 2022). This may negatively affect work-life balance if the job tasks overstep into personal time and space (Stankevičiūtė and Kunsakaja, 2022). Working remotely however also shows positive advantages such as more flexible working hours and less time spent commuting (Ibid.). When working solely remotely, it is hard to maintain a healthy work-life balance because of the constantly blurred lines between freetime and work. Additionally, meeting in person allows for considerable tacit knowledge transmission that is lost if solely working remotely (Sutton et al., 2023). Work-from-home has further proved to lead to longer working hours, but also more autonomy concerning both the hours worked and when to take breaks. This requires considerable individual discipline to ensure continued well-being and contentment with the job position (dos Santos de Oliveira et al., 2021).

According to Baruch (2001), a possible managerial challenge with remote work is additionally to ensure employee health and well-being with no or less face-to-face contact, and also a potential loss in team feeling within the company if not meeting daily at the office. Despite this, the majority of employees (75%) would in the future prefer a hybrid working model, where work is done both remotely and from the office, whereas only 12% wanted to work entirely from the office (Juchnowicz and Kinowska, 2021). There has therefore been a substantial shift of the work-setting compared to pre-pandemic, which will be further discussed throughout the report.

2.3 Digitalization and technostress

The increasing digitalization of the modern workplace has created both challenges and opportunities regarding employees' well-being. Partly, digitalization has smoothened the boundary between work and leisure time, worsening work-life balance (Bolli and Pusterla, 2022) and increasing role stress (Tarafdar et al. 2007). Digital stress is found to strain employees' psychological well-being, increase emotional exhaustion, and mental fatigue (Fischer et al., 2021). Employees being constantly connected through an increased accessibility to information and communication technologies also prevents individuals from recovering from work related efforts (Cijan et al., 2019). This is mainly through the mechanism techno-invasion, defined as the invasive effect of technology blurring the line between work-related and personal contexts, by making the user reachable at all times (Tarafdar et al. 2007). However, the increased digitalization poses both an opportunity and a risk, depending on how it is dealt with (Cijan et al., 2019). For example, receiving work-related content to one's personal phone allows for greater flexibility since the work can be done whenever and wherever, and allows for individual autonomy and prioritization of personal matters (Ibid.) However, the constant accessibility also contributes toward increased stress, longer working hours and a greater pressure on the individual employee to set boundaries and actually end the work day (Ibid.). The literature suggests that digitalization and technostress creates stresses that affect work-life balance. However, the combination of digitalization and remote work and its effects on work-life balance has not been thoroughly explored, and hence the consequences are unknown.

2.4 Job satisfaction

The pandemic has resulted in a decrease in both employee well-being and job satisfaction, and this has since become a priority to improve for employers (Juchnowicz and Kinowska, 2021). This is due to a proven positive relationship between job satisfaction and work-life balance (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2019). The increased digitalization has also decreased the work-life balance by blurring the line between work and leisure, which has also proven to decrease job satisfaction (Bolli and Pusterla, 2022). A content employee has shown to be important for the firm performance. A satisfied employee has shown to increase the financial performance of the firm, and is motivated to perform if they have a favorable relationship with the employer (Melián-González et al., 2015). Additionally, employers that embrace family importance have a generally higher employee satisfaction, and employees with a satisfactory work-life balance feel proud of their employment company. This pride then acts as a mediator between the work-life balance and the job satisfaction (Mas-Machuca et al., 2016). The importance of job satisfaction is clear, however, when working remotely, ensuring employee well-being can pose a managerial challenge (Baruch, 2001).

2.5 Pandemic

The unplanned COVID-19 pandemic acted as a moderator on the already existing trend towards remote work and digitalization, and resulted in faster changes than anticipated (Amankwah et al., 2021). Since this pace of change was involuntary due to the pandemic, it increased the employee stress, both due to the remote work and the uncertainty of the crisis (Tump et al., 2022). The quick changes caused by the pandemic have resulted in challenges regarding employee motivation and work-life balance (Juchnowicz and Kinowska, 2021) in a way that previously has not been discussed (Stankevičiūtė and Kunsakaja, 2022). These changes are relevant to understand because they underpin the managerial challenges discussed in this paper.

2.6 Tools for analysis

The theoretical concepts that are critical for answering the research questions are thus:

2.6.1 How do managers view work-life balance in a post-pandemic office setting?

The personal pressure to schedule the work day could result both in increased stress, which negatively influences work-life balance (dos Santos de Oliveira et al., 2021). However, increased flexibility positively influences work-life balance (Stankevičiūtė and Kunska, 2022). Employee well-being and job satisfaction showed to positively correlate to increased work-life balance (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2019) as well as increased performance (Melián-González et al., 2015). The post-pandemic way of working with digital remote work appeared to have increased productivity but also increased stress (Cijan et al., 2019). Part of the reason why is that the lines between work- and leisure time have become blurred, which could indicate a worsening of work-life balance (Bolli and Pusterla, 2022). However, Juchnowicz and Kinowska (2021) stated that employees would prefer a hybrid way of working in the future, which combines remote work with working from the office.

2.6.2 How does the increased digitalization in combination with remote work connect to issues with work-life balance, and how is technostress discussed?

Working remotely can have both positive and negative consequences on well-being and work-life balance, depending on the individual ability to set boundaries (dos Santos de Oliveira et al., 2021). Part of the reason explaining this trend is that employees find it difficult to switch off laptops and phones at home, and therefore receive work-related content outside of working hours (Cijan et al., 2019). This poses a risk in the future if the development continues in the same trend (Ibid.).

2.6.3 How have these recent changes in the workplace affected the role of the manager?

Measuring well-being proved to be a challenge for managers in a remote work-setting, and the same applied for upholding team morale (Baruch, 2001). However, to answer this question, the manager interviews are vital to understand the managerial view of post-pandemic work-life balance and how this has affected the manager-employee relationships. The theoretical findings will thus be combined and compared with the findings of the interview-based study to create a deeper understanding of the managerial implications.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research setting

The study was conducted in a qualitative manner with the aim of understanding the underlying reasons for the effects of the pandemic and increased digitalization. The information was gathered through ten interviews, where managers described the implications of the pandemic, remote work, how new priorities had affected their companies and teams, and how they had adapted to it. The qualitative aspect allowed for personal opinions, analyses and a deeper understanding of the topic, which we believe is beneficial for this specific subject (Kvale, 1997, p. 70). The research questions regard highly individual and abstract aspects such as work-life balance, mental health and job satisfaction that can differ between different employees in the same team. We therefore value this way of study since it allows for broader as well as deeper answers that allows for more extensive analysis than simply “yes or no” (Kvale, 1997, p. 71). The interviews were conducted during a period of one and a half months, which allowed for analysis of the responses in between each interview as well as development of the questions for future interviews (Bell et al., 2019, p. 392). This was important since it increased the ability to build the interviews on each other and reach a more profound understanding of the subject for each interview (Ibid.). All interviews were completed almost a month before the report deadline which also allowed for substantial time for interpretation and connection to the research questions (Ibid.).

3.2 Sample selection

Our sample base consisted of ten managers or team leaders within office settings, from different industries and with different sizes. In this study, we aimed at capturing a diversity in age, industry and occupation, on the assumption that such an approach would increase the probability of variety of opinion, and make the core of experiences more visible. (Bell et al. 2019, p. 395). Furthermore, the interviewees were selected using a theoretical purposive sampling approach (strategic choice of participants based on their relevance to the research questions, in which the emerging theory from one interview guides the selection of new participants and data collection), in order to get the perspective of managers operating in different industries with a variety of responsibilities (Bell et al. 2019, p. 390). The unifying factor was that all interviewees held positions in leadership, the majority as middle managers. This means they work closer to the employees than for example the HR directors for big

companies, which makes the answers and analyses of the employees' thoughts and opinions more credible. We however believe our broad sample increased the reliability of similar answers explaining an industry-wide perception.

3.3 Collection of material

The material for the study was collected through interviews with managers in office settings, see *table 1*. Nine out of ten interviews were conducted in a video call format, either using Zoom or Teams, and one interview was conducted in person. Kvale (1997, p. 118) highlights the extra dimension added to a qualitative interview from being able to see the interviewee and observe their body language and tone of voice. This was a reason all interviews were conducted with cameras on or in person, to allow for deeper analysis. The interviews lasted approximately 20-45 minutes and consisted of broad questions to encourage the interviewees to discuss the topics related to the subject they found the most relevant, hence it was a semi-structured interview (using an interview guide with concepts and broad questions but allowing for the interviewee to steer their answers in the direction they are most interested in, as well as follow-up questions) (Bell et al., 2019, p. 436). According to Kvale (1997, p. 121), broader questions give room for unanticipated and spontaneous answers, which was beneficial for this study since the aim was to find managers' spontaneous perceptions of the topic. This method proved to be beneficial since it provided deeper understanding of the most considerable challenges for the different companies and also shone light on the differences between the observed sectors. The interviewees agreed to be recorded on the condition of being held anonymous. The recordings allowed for transcription afterwards, to make sure all information was remembered correctly and allowed the interviewers to focus on the interview and not take notes. Both interviewers were present and active during all interviews, which allowed for more reliable interpretation and active listening of the answers, which according to Kvale (1997, p. 126) is of utter importance in an interview setting. The presence of both interviewers further allowed for more nuanced follow-up questions that deepened the understanding of the subject.

The potential interviewees were contacted digitally. A number of interviewees were contacted through a search for "team leader", "team manager" and "project leader" on LinkedIn, and evaluated based on their ability to speak to the research questions. A few interviewees were also contacted through e-mail because of previous knowledge and contacts through our

education, and some were contacted via e-mail through previous contacts. The interviewees did not receive the interview questions beforehand, but a short description of the subject. This was due to the broad questions and the wish to keep the interviews open to discuss what they found the most interesting or relevant for their specific company or team, and to not limit them to any initial hypotheses which would have been the case with questions sent out beforehand. This is an explorative study (more open questions and more flexibility for the interviewee) rather than hypothesis testing (more structured), and hence spontaneity is valued (Kvale, 1997, p. 94). The interviewees were ensured to be kept anonymous for the report, and are presented in *table 1* without names of the person or the company, but rather descriptions of the role and sector. This was decided to ensure the interviewees felt comfortable and to promote them sharing their actual thoughts and eventual concerns of the company's work (Kvale, 1997, p. 109).

| Interviewee | Title | Industry | Date | Interview execution |
|--------------------|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Interviewee 1 | Manager | Public sector | 2nd of March 2023 | Video call |
| Interviewee 2 | Team Leader | Retail sector | 3rd of March 2023 | Video call |
| Interviewee 3 | Team Manager | Financial sector | 31st of March 2023 | Video call |
| Interviewee 4 | Senior Manager | Retail sector | 5th of April 2023 | In person |
| Interviewee 5 | Strategy Manager | Retail sector | 6th of April 2023 | Video call |
| Interviewee 6 | Engineering Manager | Financial sector | 12th of April 2023 | Video call |
| Interviewee 7 | IT Manager | Health services | 12th of April 2023 | Video call |
| Interviewee 8 | HR Director | Interest group | 13th of April 2023 | Video call |
| Interviewee 9 | Manager | Financial sector | 14th of April 2023 | Video call |
| Interviewee 10 | Works at CFO office | Financial sector | 19th of April 2023 | Video call |

Table 1

Table showing the interviewees with their position title, company industry, the date and method of execution

3.4 Analysis procedure

The literature used as basis for this study had, as previously mentioned, to be combined since this scope of events have not been researched before. This was realized through a diagram, connecting all relevant articles to the main themes used in the study (*figure 1, Appendix*).

This gave a clear picture of what articles covered what aspects of the question, and eased the process of fitting together all pieces of information to gain an understanding of what was previously known on the subject. The themes and articles were later revised to solely include the most relevant themes for the interview findings, and the themes of generational shift, quiet quitting, managerial perspective, and mental health were decided to be either excluded or integrated into another theme. Additionally, articles were both added and excluded during the writing process, and the diagram was mainly used to gain initial understanding of the topic.

The interviews were transcribed to include quotes from the interviewees but excluding filling words and excessive repetitions. Both interviewers partook in the transcribing process, but followed the same structure and included the same amount of information to allow for valid comparisons between the different interviews (Kvale, 1997, p. 155-156).

Based on initial understanding from the interviews, three main themes of *working hours*, *job intensity* and *social interactions and relationship building* were decided, and interviews were later analyzed through color coding to match said themes. Each main theme was assigned a specific color and the transcriptions were hence color coded to match what theme the answers linked to. This eased the process of relating and comparing the different interviewees' answers, and was used to find relevant findings that matched the research questions and the main themes (Bell et al., 2019, p. 531). After finalizing the coding, the themes were divided into subcategories (presented as subtitles in the *findings* section) and coded into different nuances of the original color of the theme, to maintain traceability while adding detail.

3.5 Reliability, validity, and generalizability

Since the topic of discussion in this study is dependent on the individual, the differing views described in the report are clearly shown. Any assumptions made where the interviewees were not unanimous in their answers are portrayed and discussed to ensure the transparency and credibility of the study. All interviews except for one were conducted in Swedish and

also transcribed in the same language, to be translated when implemented into the text. This creates potential for misinterpretations. However, the quotes presented in the report have been carefully translated to keep the original meaning of the statements and hence not solely direct translations, to minimize the risk of wrongly presented information. (Bell et al. 2019. p. 450)

Even though the fairly small sample size of ten interviews, it reached relative theoretical saturation. The diversity of the interviewees shows many similarities in future plans and priorities in many different companies and industries (Kvale, 1997, p. 210). However, it can not be said to be generalizable because of it not presenting any qualitative data, or statistical significance, but the results can still be seen as reliable because of the saturation reached (Bell et al. 2019. p. 377).

4. Findings

The interviewees' opinions on the topic of post-pandemic work-life balance reveal a pattern of beliefs that is relatively consistent across the various industries. In the majority of interviews, the manager stated that work-life balance had improved as compared to pre-pandemic levels. The primary reason for this belief was that the sudden shift to remote working has given employees more autonomy, and the ability to choose when and how they work (Stankevičiūtė and Kunsaja, 2022). However, the interviews also revealed certain workplace changes that stand in opposition to work-life balance. For instance, noticeably higher work intensity (Cijan et al., 2019), blurred lines between work and non-work spaces (Stankevičiūtė, Ž., and Kunsaja, S., 2022), and fewer opportunities for social interactions (Tump et al., 2022) all decrease the perception of work-life balance. The interviewees' views and perceptions regarding these issues are presented in the following section, organized by theme.

4.1 Working hours

4.1.1 Increased flexibility

Several of the interviewees expressed that working hours have become more fluid since the start of the pandemic. Increased accessibility, and the option to work remotely has made it possible for workplaces to be more flexible and accommodating regarding how and when work is performed. Several interviewees stressed that they are more concerned with measuring deliverables than time spent at work. The ethos is that as long as the employee delivers what is expected of them, they are granted more autonomy over when that work is performed. Interviewee 3 stated that:

Working hours have become a little bit more fluid, and we do not require employees to be logged in from 9 to 5. As long as the employee delivers on what they are supposed to do, they can do it whenever during the day.

Employees are able to shut down their work computers to complete commitments made in other areas of life, and work from home later in the evenings. The example expressed most frequently was that of employees leaving the workplace to pick up kids at school or kindergarten. Interviewees expressed the opinion that employees with children appreciate the ability to interrupt work to perform activities related to their family life, and that it decreases

stress. Interviewee 2 used themselves as an example of this, stating that without the increased flexibility in their workplace, they would only see their child for one hour every evening. Being able to leave work to spend time with their family had therefore improved their work-life balance, and they believed their own experience was applicable to other employees at the company. The interviewees believe that the flexibility afforded to employees as a result of the shift towards remote solutions have been positive for work-life balance.

4.1.2 Thinking about work

Several interviewees reported that they think more about work outside of working hours. Elaborating on this theme, the tendency to think more about work was most strongly associated with an inability to adhere to boundaries between work and home life, knowing when to stop working, and work-related communications being able to reach the individual outside of working hours. According to interviewee 5:

Not everyone is equally good at turning off the cellphone, and many have work and private e-mail on the same device. When [work related] e-mails roll in during the evenings, [feeling obliged to read and respond] adds to work-related stress. I start to think about work and experience difficulty falling asleep.

As interviewee 5's experience demonstrates, a combination of uncertainty regarding working hours, blurred lines between work and non-work, and constant accessibility result in work taking up more mental space, and leads to increased feelings of stress. Interviewee 9 adds the opinion that being constantly logged in has become a requirement for managers, as they need to keep an eye on work processes. According to interviewee 9, this means keeping work in mind at all times, in case something comes up that they will have to address. Many interviewees shared the observation that work is beginning to take up more mental space outside of working hours, and affect well-being during leisure time.

4.1.3 External factors

The change in working hours has not been universal. Of the managers interviewed, one worked in the public sector, and expressed that the working hours in their organization are strictly defined, and no change had been implemented since the pandemic. Interviewee 1 said "I work in a government agency, where we are very particular about our hours. The majority of us are expected to be accessible between 8am and 4:30pm". In that organization, working hours had not changed. On the other hand, some managers working in financial industries

noted that their working hours are governed by the opening hours of the Swedish stock exchange, rather than any internal decision making. Interviewee 9 stated that “We follow the opening hours of the stock exchange, and when clients contact us”. As the opening hours of the stock exchange have not changed, nor have the working hours in these offices. The interviewees argued that external factors and guidelines governing working hours is a moderating factor on the flexibility trend observed in other workplaces.

4.2 Job intensity

4.2.1 Productivity increase

Several of the interviewees highlighted the shift towards a more strict work focus. When working from home, the everyday distractions such as chatting about the weekend and grabbing a cup of coffee with a colleague are exchanged into more time spent on the actual work task. Interviewee 8 discussed the consequences of continuously being interrupted by questions at work. “You talk to someone, and then you have to go back to ‘What was I doing now?’ It’s mentally taxing.”. Some interviewees stated that their hours worked have increased, and that working from home has led to starting work earlier and working until later in the evening. Interviewee 7 reasoned that the hours they usually spent on commuting to and from work could now be spent on actual work tasks. The interviewees were further in agreement that the reduction in commuting time has had a positive effect on their work-life balance, and had reduced stress. Some interviewees suggested that the saved commuting time could now be used for starting work earlier, while others suggested it could be used for family or self-improvement activities. Interviewee 10 stated that the increase in productivity was clearly shown in their performance, since their 10 week performance plans had seen an increase in expected and also realized output. The increased productivity was described by interviewee 2 as: “At home I feel like I am working 150%. [...] Digital meetings make us do much, much more work. I feel it. [...] I think it is much more work we put in, maybe subconsciously.”. The increased demands of work-related efforts has in the interviewees’ opinion increased productivity, but few recognize that it has negative effects on work-life balance.

4.2.2 Technostress

The flexible working hours when working from home and the availability of the computer always being close were topics of discussion in the interviews. Interviewees mentioned the blurred lines between when to work and when to close the computer for the day. They said it is easy to scroll through work e-mails even during their free time and that taking breaks might not be as common as when working in an office. Interviewee 4 stated that they had “traded flexibility for accessibility and more work”. Interviewee 7 said that “Some people have said that [...] you had the computer on the kitchen table and you just kept on working. It was hard to say no; to end the work day.”. Several of the interviews also highlighted that different individuals respond to this differently and some have a harder time closing the computer for the day than others. Interviewee sentiment can be summarized as one being able to adjust more to their own schedule and for example daycare pickup, but this individual-based change also puts more pressure on the individual to not work too much. The different companies in this study also proved to handle this situation differently. Interviewee 5 talked about their more centralized approach where they had clear guidelines where they did not send e-mails at night, to prevent stress for the employees. They mentioned that some employees can have a hard time closing down the computer and they hence try to help the whole team maintain a healthy work-life balance by not communicating about work after working hours. Interviewee 4, however, stated that high tempo and stress levels are common at the company and in the whole industry, and that the employees at the company were used to it. They meant that it is up to the individual to set their own limits regarding when and how they are willing to be contacted outside of working hours. These differences in approach are thus based on the corporate culture of the company as well as individual preferences. The interviewees were in some disagreement over how to reconcile the differences in tolerance for constant connectivity. Some proposed letting employees reach informal agreements amongst each other, whilst others believed that it would be preferable with team-wide codes of conduct.

4.2.3 Differing opinions

Many of the interviewees agreed that they had seen an increase in productivity, but the degree to which it had been visible differed. As previously stated, interviewee 10 had seen clear improved performance in their 10-week plans. Interviewee 5 agreed and stated that they got “enormously much done very effectively” when working remotely. However, interviewee 7 had not seen any clear differences and said that the performance was the same or slightly

higher. Concerning the stress levels after introducing remote work, it was also inconsistent between the different companies. Interviewee 7 said that there was “Absolutely not more stress from remote work. It is rather the opposite because of the increased flexibility with leaving and picking up children and such.” Interviewee 4 however argued that all change leads to increased stress, and that the introduction of remote work was no different: “The increased pressure of measuring and reacting to changes in consumer behavior carried with it an increased workload, and higher stress levels.”. The differences in opinion expressed in this section show that a unanimous consensus is not reached regarding work-life balance in the hybrid context, and that managers think and act differently to one another.

4.2.4 Decreased sick leave

Some interviewees expressed a belief that absences due to sickness have decreased. Interviewee 6 said that “a positive effect of [offering hybrid solutions] has been that the instances of sick leave have decreased a lot”. The reason offered was that sickness is judged on a finer scale, and that employees who display minor symptoms can now participate remotely. Interviewee 1 meant that

Before the pandemic, employees were either healthy or sick and did not work. Now there are three states, healthy, ‘half-sick’ and sick. Employees who have caught a cold but do not have a fever may decide to participate remotely, but if symptoms are too severe they can take a sick leave. The middle stage means employees can participate in meetings and answer questions.

According to the interviewees, this has also contributed to a higher productivity and more hours worked.

4.3 Social interactions and relationship building

4.3.1 New managerial challenge

Remote work, and also the new hybrid way of working, poses a new challenge for managers in office settings. Several of the managers interviewed in this study highlighted that without the whole team being present at the office, gaining knowledge of the employees’ well-being becomes more difficult. Interviewee 7 stated the pandemic and its consequences

“[...] required me to rethink my leadership. I have always been one to walk around and make small talk and have an understanding of my employees and their well-being and all of a sudden I did not have that natural insight anymore. It is a whole different thing to get a feeling when talking by the coffee machine or when eating lunch than to actually ask a question in a Teams-meeting. [...] I think in a way it has made it harder to keep track of the well-being of the employees.”

The interviewees handled this problem by either scheduled one-on-one meetings, as mentioned by interviewee 3, or informal calls to the employees (interviewee 9). Interviewee 8 further expressed that “the role of the manager will have to change in that way. That you have to ask questions differently, listen differently.” In addition to keeping track of the individual employees’ well-being, the managers are also responsible for creating a team spirit within the whole team or department, which also proved to be a challenge with increased remote work. Several of the interviewees mentioned an increased focus on team activities, such as after-works or trips, to maintain a sense of belonging in the team even outside the office. Interviewee 5 also mentioned digital activities such as quizzes, to increase the team feeling. This was backed up by interviewee 6, who had one channel on Teams specifically dedicated to non-work related topics, such as weekend plans and cute dogs.

4.3.2 Interaction and communication with other departments

Interviewees also express that remote work has resulted in less communication with other departments within the company. Before the pandemic, employees met workers from different departments in the hallways or by the coffee machine and could have informal discussions about their different projects. The current new hybrid format of working puts more pressure on the individual to reach out to other people if they have questions or thoughts to discuss, as mentioned by several of the interviewees. Interviewee 4 stated:

We realized quite fast how dependent we were on informal contact with people to get things we could use in our work. [...] When you did not meet people, you realized that some things did not get to you as they did before because people were more caught up in the ‘bubbles’ of their small teams.

Interviewee 3 was of the same opinion and expressed the current need for actively reaching out to colleagues when the natural opportunity to talk in the hallway has decreased. Even though all interviewed companies have a hybrid format as of today, they expressed that the partial remote work still had the same effects but to a not as extreme effect as when it was strictly remote during the pandemic. Even though a few days a week were spent at the office,

the majority of the interviewees expressed that the office is never full and that people come in on different days, which also decreases the potential interactions that could be held in the corridors. Looking into the future, the majority of interviewees stated that they believed that attendance in the offices would be required for a few days a week as well as for certain meetings, as it facilitates good working relationships with clients and coworkers and creativity in meetings and workshops. The interviewees went on to express the belief that hybrid workplaces provide a sustainable balance regarding the social requirements of employees, and thus improve work-life balance.

4.3.3 Mental health implications

The decreased social interactions also have consequences for the employees' well-being. Interviewee 2 said: "I still feel that we need to have these light interactions. We are still human, so we need this. We like to be in the group, and we need to have the interaction." Interviewee 1 mentioned the differences between extroverts, who found ways to meet up regardless, such as at coffee shops, and introverts, who did not and hence had a higher risk for worse mental health. They said that "if you have a small tendency it can get worse [when working from home]. If you are in a downwards spiral it is harder to get out. A lot of companies are very watchful of this." Several of the interviewees mentioned the importance of team spirit and social interactions as a way to find purpose and motivation in one's work. Interviewee 8 also mentioned that even though the interactions might decrease the productivity short term, it is important for the long term well-being. Interviewee 10 also stated that performance is dependent on being satisfied with one's job as well as personal situation, and that well-being at the workplace thus is an important aspect for managers to consider. In summary, the managers were in agreement that mental health has become a more critical aspect to evaluate and manage to improve workplace well-being.

4.4 Outcome - Hybrid work is likely to continue

When asked about how they expected the workplace to function going forward, interviewees claimed that neither working 100% in the office, or 100% from home would be viable long term solutions. Rather, most managers expressed the belief that a hybrid between the office and remote work would be the most likely solution for the future. This system was introduced as a natural evolution of the workplace, as restrictions and government health guidelines concerning office attendance were lifted incrementally. As that experience showed, the hybrid

solution appeared to create a sustainable balance between the benefits offered by remote and office work. As presented in previous findings, working remotely led to increases in efficiency, improvements in work flexibility, and an enhancement in work-life balance. Meanwhile, working at a physical office provided better means of communication and spread of tacit information, stronger team morale by facilitating building relationships, and a better sense of when the workday ended. Combining these systems were suggested to be beneficial to both the manager and the employees. The general consensus among the interviewees indicated that having employees attend the office at a minimum of 2 days per week would maximize the benefits sought. Furthermore, offering some version of remote work was said to be important in determining the attractiveness of the workplace when it comes to hiring new employees. Interviewee 7 said that

We think it is important that we have this flexibility, to be able to work from home, and that is also from a recruiting point of view now. Now we always get questions about our take on workplace flexibility in the recruitment process. You almost never got that before the pandemic, so it is important that we have an attractive workplace [and adapt].

For the reasons outlined above, the interviewees were in consensus that hybrid working would be the more sustainable solution to maximize work-life balance in the future.

5. Discussion

5.1 The managerial view on work-life balance in a post-pandemic office setting

5.1.1 Why hybrid is the winner

As reported in the findings, the interviewees were confident that their workplaces would continue to offer hybrid solutions. The rationale inspiring this belief was a trade-off between the benefits of full office attendance and working fully from home. Additionally, literature presented on the topic revealed that 75% of employees would prefer to continue with a hybrid way of working going forward (Juchnowicz and Kinowska, 2021).

The benefits observed by the interviewees having worked from home were increased focus, higher output, greater flexibility, and improved work-life balance. This is to say that employees who work from home enjoy fewer distractions, have more autonomy over managing their time, get more work done, have a higher sense of independence, eliminate time wasted commuting, and have a greater ability to balance work and non-work activities. Stankevičiūtė and Kunska (2022) are in agreement as they highlight the saved time on commuting and flexible working hours that come from remote work. The drawbacks of working from home have been increased job intensity, higher work-related stress, ambiguity about working hours, fewer opportunities for social interaction at work, increased isolation, decreased creativity, increased technostress through techno-invasion and accessibility, increased difficulty in measuring mental health or emotional state, and loss of team morale.

For comparison, the interviewees suggested that the advantages associated with working at the office are improved team morale, improved flow of meetings, more opportunities for social interaction, increased dissemination of tacit information throughout the organization, increased cooperation and creativity, and getting a sense of the emotional state of the team. The drawbacks presented were non-work related social interactions, time wasted commuting, frequent disruptions to focus, more rigidity in working hours, and increased role-stress.

| | Time management | Social interactions | Tacit communication spread | Work-life balance |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| Fully at office | More rigid | High | High | Low |
| Full remote | Very fluid | Low | Low | Medium |
| Hybrid | Flexible | Medium | Medium | High |

Table 2

Table showing advantages and disadvantages with different ways of working

Table 2 summarizes interviewee perceptions of different ways of working, for the categories for which there was a clear consensus among the interviewees. For the purpose of this study, the importance of work-life balance is, based on the interviews, assumed to be higher than for example tacit communication spread. Based on a hybrid work setting showing satisfactory results on all factors, it is perceived to be the winner going forward. The hybrid solution proposed by many of the interviewees offers many of the benefits of both full physical presence and working fully from home. The managers interviewed stress that hybrid work solutions are appealing because it allows for a sustainable balance between different requirements for workplace performance, and improvements in work-life balance. Employees that are happy and satisfied perform better (Melián-González et al., 2015). Based on this understanding, methods and policies in the workplace which offer time management autonomy, improved work-life balance, opportunities for personal and professional development, and maximizes the utility of meetings and workshops are very attractive to both managers and employees. The solution proposed by the interviewees was a system in which employees are expected to physically attend the office 2-3 days per week, as this would promote an appropriate amount of social interaction and team morale in the office, and a sustainable work-life balance outside of the office. Since the way of working in a hybrid setting is a new phenomenon, previous literature does not cover these exact aspects of maximizing contentment in a combination of remote work and work from the office. However, both the literature and the interview findings highlight both positive and negative aspects with both ways of working, which supports the belief that hybrid working is the golden middle between the two extreme solutions.

5.1.2 Improvements in time management

The findings from the interviews reveal significant changes related to work-life balance. Although job intensity has increased, working hours have become longer, and the

opportunities for social interactions have decreased, the majority of interviewees stated that work-life balance has improved. This is a surprising finding, as social isolation, increased work effort, and blurred lines between work and other domains is considered the recipe for stress and decreased morale. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, the longer hours are in part a result of increased autonomy and the individuals setting their own boundaries (Cijan et al., 2019). This could be seen as negative and indicative of the difficulty in logging off for the day, however, this increased flexibility was also the aspect that the interviewees pointed to as the key to improved work-life balance. Flexibility in working hours allowed employees to complete commitments outside of work, such as leaving or picking up children at school, without having to stress to and from the office. This is also in line with the theoretical framework stating that more flexible and autonomous working conditions are positively correlated with work-life balance. According to the interviewees, a stop-and-start dynamic has emerged after the pandemic, the flexibility of which facilitates time management and completing tasks both at work and at home. Additionally, the widespread adoption of hybrid or remote solutions have reduced the need for commutes. The time otherwise spent traveling to and from work has now been unlocked for other activities. The ability to work from home and not have to travel to a physical office had carried positive effects on the well-being of both managers and employees. According to the literature presented in the theoretical framework, this positively relates to an increased feeling of work-life balance (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2019). From a work-life balance perspective, the adverse effects of increased workload and longer hours are said to be at least partly compensated by the increased flexibility offered in both time and location.

5.1.3 Increasingly blurred lines

However, as mentioned by several interviewees, the increased flexibility has come at the cost of increased accessibility. This is to say that while employees have greater autonomy over managing their time for commitments in different domains, the work follows them outside the office to a greater extent than before. This signifies that work is increasingly infiltrating other domains. As the trade-off is not formalized, employees cannot know for certain to what extent they will be required to participate or answer questions from co-workers in their free-time. It is possible that this uncertainty is mentally taxing for employees, as work-related issues constantly need to be available in their minds. This infiltration of work into non-work spaces is likely to have adverse effects on the focus and commitment individuals can dedicate to activities outside of the work. This connects to the theoretical framework and the statement

that there are negative psychological consequences of work constantly interfering with everyday life, such as stress and emotional exhaustion (Fischer et al., 2021). The fact that multiple interviewees reported thinking more about work after working hours may further be an indicator of worsening work-life balance. This is a challenge that will have to be solved for improvements to be made to work-life balance.

5.1.4 Future expectations

The changes discussed in this paper are snapshots of workplaces in the early stages of widespread adoption of hybrid and remote work solutions; it is therefore possible that the new levels of working hours and job intensity have not yet settled into a steady state. If the demands of the workplace continue to increase, in terms of job intensity and productivity, it is possible that workplace stress will increase drastically. Since this phenomenon has never before occurred at this pace or extent (Stankevičiūtė and Kunsakaja, 2022), it is not discussed in previous literature. However, articles such as Cijan et al. (2019), which discusses the increased productivity due to the digitalization and its negative impact on stress levels, and Tarafdar et al. (2007) discussing increased technostress, speak of a potential risk of future high stress levels. Currently, the increased flexibility and autonomy acts as a buffer to stresses caused by the demands of work. Going forward, the exact workplace demands will begin to settle, at which point a new equilibrium of typical work-life balance is expected to form. Because the interviewees were so keenly aware of the importance of work-life balance, and that happy and satisfied employees perform better at work, it is likely that work-life balance will continue an important factor for managers to consider for the future of work. As such, with the increased emphasis already placed on work-life balance we believe that managers will continue to facilitate a healthy and sustainable work-life balance for their employees.

5.2 How the increased digitalization in combination with remote work connects to issues with work-life balance, and how technostress is discussed

5.2.1 Flexibility outweighs technostress

The increasingly digital workplaces create problems previously not discussed. The findings of this study are aligned with previous literature on the subject in the sense that ‘techno-invasion’ and always being connected prevents employees from ever feeling fully free from work (Cijan et al., 2019). This is shown in interviewees stating that they think more about work than they previously did, and that it is difficult to close the computer and end the work day if it is easily accessible at the kitchen table. According to the literature, the increased digitalization has led to a decrease in work-life balance, since the lines between work and leisure time are blurred (Bolli and Pusterla, 2022). However, the majority of the interviewees in this study had positive views on the post-pandemic work-life balance and argued that it is currently better than before. This could be seen as a question of priority. As stated in an interview, employees have “traded flexibility for accessibility and more work” and hence seem to think the increased flexibility and ability to plan one’s time as one wants is worth more than completely free nights and weekends. However, the interviews also made it clear that the different observed companies have different takes on this, and some put more emphasis on ensuring total leisure-time than others.

5.2.2 Guidelines regarding contact after-hours

While some of the interviewees talked about clear policies and guidelines on when to allow for e-mails to be sent, some argued that it is up to the individual to set such boundaries themselves. The companies using guidelines highlighted the individual differences in how employees react to stress and how easily they can switch off and decide to take a break. A recurring theme in both the interviews and the literature was the focus on the individual and the different needs and personalities. Cijan et al. (2019) discuss the increased individual pressure to set boundaries, and how it can be a challenge in this new way of working. Most employees seemed to enjoy the hybrid work and the ability to be more flexible, but it also proved to pose a mental health challenge for some people. In addition to this, managers raised the new challenge of how to ensure employee well-being, when not getting the natural point of contact everyday at the office. Based on all employees having different needs, and also the

increased difficulty in ensuring the mental health for employees when working partly remotely, it gives reason to believe that having clear guidelines and regulations on when not to send e-mails should be more widespread in office workplaces. Even though some interviewees articulated that the majority of employees are able to set individual boundaries and close the computer after the workday is done, these regulations would not negatively impact them. However, it could be a way to ensure and help all employees feel like they can relax and recover from the workday, and in that way make the work-life balance even stronger. Additionally, the interviews showed that even though several managers argued that they had no problem with technostress and techno-invasion, they still had a hard time closing the computer and actually relaxing, and admitted to thinking more about work than before. A quote from an interview also stated that workers might not be conscious about the increased amount of work and hours they put in, which could be an explanation of why managers do not see it as a problem even though they are also part of it.

5.2.3 Same phone for personal and work-related use

An additional point raised in the interviews is that several of the studied companies had employees with the same phone for work and private use. By this, received e-mails cannot be missed, and even if one does not read them immediately, it constantly draws the mind to work and prevents one from fully relaxing, which was also brought up in interviews. This is further discussed in the literature presented in the theoretical framework. Having one phone for all matters, personal as well as work related, increases the flexibility which benefits prioritizing personal matters and in that way increasing work-life balance (Cijan et al., 2019). However, it requires strong individual boundaries by employees to actually turn off notifications. Without adherence to boundaries, this poses a risk for incentivizing longer working hours - increasing both performance and stress (Ibid.). Based on the interviews, managers generally did not consider the same phone used for several purposes to be a particularly important factor in employee well-being. However, we argue that this has the same explanations as to why managers do not believe they are subject to technostress when admitting to thinking more about work. It is an unconscious process, and we believe having the same phone facilitates this underlying stress.

5.3 How these recent changes in the workplace has affected the role of the manager

5.3.1 New ways of ensuring employees' well-being

The many changes in the workplace stemming from the pandemic has also affected the role of the manager. From being able to make small talk with the colleagues at the coffee machine and to being able to observe the body language and actions to determine the well-being of the employees, the new hybrid way of working has posed a challenge for managers. This is in line with the literature presented in the theoretical framework, stating the difficulty of ensuring employee well-being without frequent face-to-face contact (Baruch, 2001). Even though all observed companies had the employees come into the office once in a while, the majority of managers still discussed it being harder to keep track on how the employees were actually feeling, and if they were content. The solution to this problem that the interviewed managers brought up was to schedule meetings in a more planned way, since the natural informal conversations had become restricted. This would ensure time with all individual employees to make sure everything was alright. Previous literature on the topic presented in the theoretical framework emphasizes the relationship between job satisfaction and employee well-being and firm performance, which makes it an important topic for managers to pay attention and adapt to (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2019), (Melián-González et al., 2015). Additionally, job satisfaction is positively linked to a perceived better work-life balance, which further highlights the importance of ensuring employees' happiness (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2019).

5.3.2 New ways to create a team morale

Having a working environment where one feels safe and in a good mood not only relates to the relationship between the manager and employee, but also for the whole team and the company. It is easier to feel satisfied when getting along well with colleagues, and the job satisfaction once again has a positive relationship to both work-life balance and employee well-being (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2019). Literature on the topic, presented in the theoretical framework, suggests that environments that are employee-friendly also decrease risk and increase financial performance (Melián-González et al., 2015). The importance of this was also shown in the interviews conducted in the study. The majority of all interviewees discussed the importance of creating a team feeling also remotely, and exemplified this by

describing Teams-channels dedicated to leisure talk, or quizzes and hangouts happening also digitally. Some of the interviewees also discussed that they had started with in-person hangouts as well following the new hybrid way of working, when not having the natural everyday contact at the office, and now went to museums or had after work to increase team morale. This paper's theoretical framework also describes the potential loss in team feeling by working remotely or hybrid, which further highlights the importance of spending time and efforts on this matter in a hybrid setting (Baruch, 2001). A problem that will always be present in social interactions is that not all people will participate in activities to the same extent. However, if the majority of time is spent remotely, this problem will be even more prominent and the individual differences regarding the need for social interactions will show more clearly. The most important for managers here will be to ensure employee well-being, as previously mentioned. No one can be forced to participate, but managers need to be aware of the well-being of those that do not attend events, since the interviews and literature were unanimous that lack of social interactions can result in mental health implications.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Summary

This study has discussed the consequences of the pandemic-inflicted remote work. In combination with increased digitalization, this has blurred the lines between work and leisure, thus putting pressure on work-life balance. The main findings provided by the study states that *working hours have become more flexible*, that *job intensity has increased*, and that there are *fewer opportunities for social interactions and relationship building*. The majority of interviewees proved to prioritize the increased flexibility over the longer and more intense hours, and work-life balance in general was therefore found to be perceived as better than before the pandemic. This stands in contrast to previous literature, which highlighted the negative effects of remote work and digitalization on work-life balance. We therefore add to the field of research concerning work-life balance by the finding that flexibility in working hours in certain circumstances outweighs these negative effects. As this is a novel finding that has not previously been discussed, it constitutes a significant contribution to the literature.

Furthermore, the importance of flexibility in working hours offered by hybrid solutions implies that the possibility to work remotely is expected to be a requirement in future workplaces. Some degree of social interactions were shown to be of high importance for job satisfaction, tacit knowledge spread, ensuring employee well-being, employee mental health, and team spirit. The social aspects of the office present a strong argument as to why workplaces should not be fully digitalized. All interviewees currently use a hybrid way of working, which is expected to become a “new normal” going forward. It allows for the flexibility of working remotely but also adds the ever-needed social interactions. In the future, it will be vital to discuss the implications of technostress following the digitalization that is inherent in remote working. If taking action to minimize the stress, it will show positively on employee well-being as well as employee performance, which is valuable for managers.

6.2 Recommendations

There are 4 main recommendations that will be useful for managers.

1. Implement clear guidelines on when post-working-hours communication between members of the team is appropriate, and have an open discussion on what the expectations are. Ensure that each team member is included in setting these guidelines, to make this process as transparent and democratic as possible. Be mindful that different people may tolerate different levels of communication outside of working hours. The goal of this action is to decrease job intensity, thinking about work after hours, and technostress.
2. Schedule regular one-on-one, face-to-face meetings between manager and employee, to continually monitor the employee's emotional and mental state. Physical meetings are preferable in this context, as it is much easier to judge body language when sitting across from someone. Make the goal of these meetings to improve employee well-being over time. The desired outcome is to increase well-being and job security, as they are positively correlated with employee performance.
3. Schedule meetings to set expectations for work-life balance. Get an understanding of the particular circumstances that the employee is trying to balance, and make an effort to help the employee get closer to harmony between different contexts. As discussed in detail, employees who experience good work-life balance are less stressed and perform better at work. Make these meetings both vis-a-vis manager and employee, and as a team. Having such discussions will increase empathy and facilitate effective collaboration within the team.
4. Continue offering hybrid solutions. Based on the shortcomings of either extreme alternative, hybrid offers an attractive middle ground between office and remote work. In particular, the flexibility that this solution brings increases perceived work-life balance and outweighs many of the negative consequences otherwise associated with remote work. Provide guidelines on how many days per week employees are expected to attend physically. To ensure employee perception of flexibility, it is recommended that employees may choose themselves which days they attend the office, to the largest possible extent.

6.3 Limitations and Future research

A limitation to the study is that only the managers have been interviewed and not the employees of their teams, which might create a skewed picture of the actual situation. By interviewing managers that have close relationships to the employees, this problem has partially been avoided. However, the risk is still present that the managers exaggerate the success of their teams and the satisfaction of their employees, either because they want to be portrayed to be benevolent and competent, or simply because they are unaware of the actual thoughts of the employees. This study however aims at examining the managerial perspective which means the managers are the relevant interviewees, but also connects the interviews to the literature to create a more objective discussion and analysis of their responses.

Additionally, the ensured anonymity of the respondents was also thought to decrease the risk of the managers posing as more successful than in actuality. The risks nonetheless need to be kept in mind in the analysis of the findings.

To further expand this field of research it would be valuable to investigate the employee view and the manager-employee relationships on the topics of remote work and work-life balance. This would allow for further understanding and exploration of managerial awareness of the employees' well-being when working remotely. The relationship of flexibility on work-life balance in remote or hybrid workplaces should be studied at greater detail using a quantitative study, to formalize the correlation between the two. To further develop the understanding of post-pandemic work-life balance, future research on tangential areas could also be explored. The recency of hybrid work being considered the "new normal" gives room for future research studying the development of hybrid work as it becomes more established and reaches a more steady state. The employee view of the topic could also be explored, where interviews with employees could be compared and combined with the findings in this study to explore the same issue from a different angle. This could also be used to develop the recommendations and future implications found in this study. Lastly, the increased option to work remotely represents an opportunity for more employees to become digital nomads and work entirely remotely. How to effectively manage remote employees and ensure work-life balance for nomadic employees could further develop the findings in this study.

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Appendix

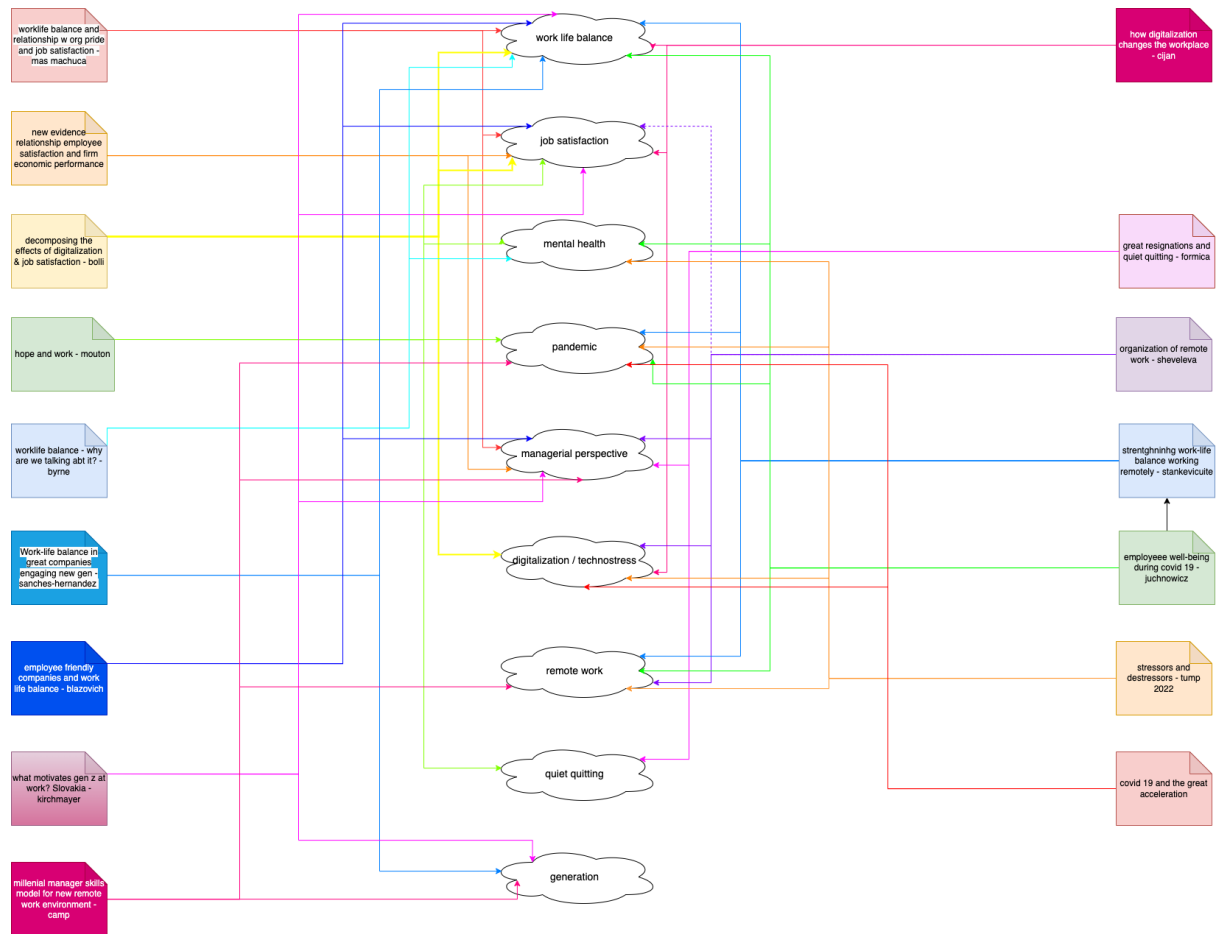


Figure 1

Diagram showing relevant literature connected to the main themes used in this study