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Invited Review

Work, life and COVID-19: a rapid review and practical recommendations for the post-pandemic workplace

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Remote working because of the COVID-19 pandemic has eroded boundaries between work and home, necessitating the need to evaluate the long-term impacts of these changes and mitigate any negative effects on workers' work-life experiences. To do so, we reviewed and examined work-life research published since the start of the pandemic. The review yielded a sample of 303 work-life scholarly articles, with three common themes: 1) work-life boundaries have become more permeable, with behavior-based and time-based work-life conflict emerging as the more salient forms of work-life conflict; 2) technical work demands have increased, as employees grapple with techno-invasion, techno-overload and techno-complexity; and 3) psychological and emotional work demands have intensified. Based on these key findings, we call for multi-level and multi-agency responses to deal with the complex, diverse nature of work-life demands. Specifically, we offer recommendations at the individual-, team/organizational- and societal/governmental-levels to enhance employees' work and non-work lives after the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, remote working, techno-stress, work demands, work-life boundaries

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Key points

1 We reviewed scholarly research that examined the associations between the COVID-19 pandemic and office-based employees' work-life experiences.
2 Behavior-based and time-based work-life conflict increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3 Employees had to grapple with increased techno-invasion, techno-overload and techno-complexity.
4 Psychological and emotional work demands intensified during the pandemic.
5 The pandemic presents an opportunity for governments to reform existing legislation relating to flexible working and the right to disconnect.

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has prompted a sweeping transition to remote working (Caringal-Go et al. 2022), which is unlikely to be reversed post-pandemic (Carroll and Conboy 2020). With the threat of subsequent COVID-19 waves and other pandemic outbreaks (Wise 2020), social distancing and lockdown measures are likely to be an ongoing feature in our lives for the foreseeable future. As the pandemic continued to unfold, organizations acknowledged that a large proportion of onsite jobs could be performed remotely, for at least some of the time (Sytch and Greer 2020). Consequently, the 'flexibility stigma', which refers to 'negative sanctions towards employees who ask for or are assumed to need workplace arrangements to attend to family and personal obligations' (Cech and Blair-Loy 2014, 89), has diminished, and the use of flexible work arrangements (FWAs) such as remote or hybrid working is now less likely to be viewed as deviant behavior. Some organizational leaders are also incorporating remote working options to a greater degree, even as employees return to the workplace with the easing of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions (Gartner 2020).

Against this backdrop, we primarily discuss the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work and home lives of office-based workers,[1] since they face ongoing uncertainty as to *when* and *if* they will return to the office permanently. At the time of writing this article, new COVID-19 variants have emerged leading to a sharp increase in cases, and organizations around the world are grappling with high turnover and a disengaged workforce (Jiskrova 2022). Therefore, the time is ripe for a rapid review of the emerging evidence from work-life research conducted since the pandemic began, and to update prior knowledge about the work-life interface for human resources (HR) policy development, implementation and assessment (Tricco et al. 2015; Tricco, Langlois and Straus 2017).

While there are some upsides to flexible work–home boundaries such as increased autonomy and ability to attend to work and non-work responsibilities promptly (Adekoya, Adisa and Aiyenitaju 2022), the blurred work–home boundaries caused by full-time remote working have also led to the intensive use and reliance on information and communication technology (ICT; DeFilippis et al. 2020), contributing toward workers' emotional, psychological and physical strains (Garfin 2020). The eroded work–home

boundaries have also increased pressure for many workers, especially in regard to the effective management of their work and non-work commitments (Garfin 2020; Thomason and Williams 2020). Therefore, to evaluate the impacts of these changes, we conducted a rapid review of studies that have examined work and non-work demands and outcomes in light of the pandemic. Given the evolving COVID-19 situation, decision-makers urgently need a synthesis of evidence to produce guidance for the wider population. In circumstances such as these, rapid reviews are apposite as they can provide timely information (Tricco et al. 2015; Tricco, Langlois and Straus 2017). Rapid reviews are an accelerated and simplified form of systematic review, which involve the following stages: 1) development of a research question, 2) definition of inclusion and exclusion criteria, 3) database search for relevant articles, 4) data extraction from the studies, 5) analysis and synthesis of the studies' findings and 6) results write-up, although some stages may be reduced or streamlined to ensure the timeliness of the review (Tricco, Langlois and Straus 2017). In our rapid review, we performed all six stages but limited our database search to two databases to accelerate the pace of our review. Based on the major work and non-work themes identified during the analysis and synthesis phase, we offer HR recommendations at the individual, team/organizational and societal/governmental levels.

Work and non-work demands during the COVID-19 pandemic

Work-family scholars have, for several decades, assessed how workers manage work–family conflict, a form of inter-role conflict that occurs when time-based (e.g. working overtime), strain-based (e.g. work pressures) or behavior-based (e.g. aggressive leadership style) demands of the work (family) role conflict with those of the family (work) role (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). Specifically, the demands in the work (family) domain drain personal resources (e.g. physical energy, focus, time), leaving insufficient personal resources to function optimally in the family (work) domain (Brough et al. 2020). Work–family conflict was extended to include the broader work-*life* conflict in recognition of other non-work roles (e.g. volunteering, community and sports) that individuals may also manage beyond their immediate familial responsibilities (Kalliath and Brough 2008). Individuals experience varying levels of work-life conflict over time, and where possible, adapt their lifestyles to access the resources available to them to fulfill their work and non-work responsibilities (Chan and Tay 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has abruptly disrupted many workers' work–life balance (Thomason and Williams 2020), thus necessitating their adjustment and re-orientation to new routines that prioritize and address the demands of the pandemic (Caringal-Go et al. 2022). To provide relevant insights to facilitate such adjustments, we re-examine these salient work and life demands and show how they have changed in the course of the pandemic.

Method

The rapid review was informed by Tricco and colleagues' (2015, 2017) best practice recommendations. Literature for the scholarly search was sourced using Scopus and Google

Scholar. The search was conducted using key terms 'COVID', 'work home' (or 'work life', 'work family', 'work nonwork', 'professional personal') and 'office' (or 'professional', 'white collar', 'skilled', 'employee'), not limited to any academic disciplines or geographical regions. However, these searches were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published from January 2020 to March 2022, specifically since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Book chapters and doctoral dissertations were not included in the search, since they may not have been peer reviewed. To capture as many relevant articles as possible, the research team undertook a backward and forward citation search of the articles already identified. The initial search process yielded 378 articles. Two researchers independently read the articles to determine whether they focused on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work and non-work lives of office-based workers and whether they should be included in this literature search and review. They then consulted with the team to determine whether to exclude certain articles. This process initially yielded a sample of 318 scholarly articles included in the review.

A research assistant was then engaged to go through each of the 318 articles to 1) ascertain that the data, content or research conducted in each article was indeed based on the COVID-19 pandemic and 2) perform preliminary coding of the research design (e.g. quantitative, qualitative, review etc.) for each article. A further 15 articles were excluded in this process as they merely mentioned 'COVID-19' without performing research in relation to the intended topic and context. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 303 articles. Most of the articles ($n = 270$) were empirical studies, of which 184 were quantitative studies, 75 were qualitative studies and 11 were mixed method studies. The remaining 44 articles were review articles such as systematic reviews, meta-analyses or commentaries. Based on the 303 scholarly articles, the research team met over the course of a few weeks to go through each article and identify common work-life topics and themes that have emerged during the pandemic.

Results

Figure 1 presents a bibliometric map of the key topics of the 303 scholarly articles. The size of each word represents the frequency at which the word was mentioned. The distance between two words indicates their correlation: shorter distances represent stronger correlations. The major topics that emerged in relation to the key topic, COVID-19 pandemic (blue cluster), were work–life balance and mental health (red cluster), burnout and well-being (green cluster) and telework (yellow cluster). Within the blue cluster, the sub-topics were pandemic, work-from-home, gender, work–family conflict and lockdown. Within the red cluster, the sub-topics were stress/occupational stress, remote working, work engagement and social support/support. Within the green cluster, the sub-topics were job performance, resilience, coronavirus, life satisfaction and emotional exhaustion. Within the yellow cluster, the sub-topics were remote work, telecommuting, HR management and job satisfaction. The independent sub-topic of anxiety also emerged and was related to the key topics of COVID-19 pandemic (blue cluster), work–life balance and mental health (red cluster) and burnout and well-being (green cluster). In the next section, we
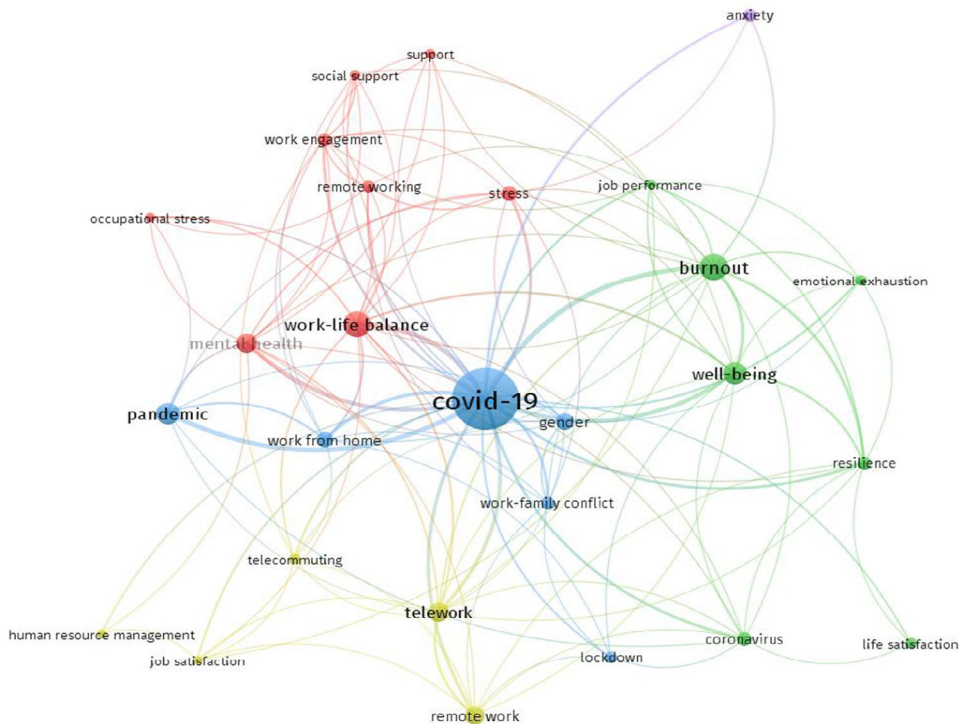
Figure 1 Bibliometric map of the research articles' keywords using VOSviewer

discuss in detail the links between these key and sub-topics, which we analyzed, synthesized and categorized under three recurrent themes.

Theme 1: More permeable work-life boundaries
Many organizations have enacted FWAs to give their employees more control over their work and non-work demands, especially in terms of *when*, *where* and *how* work is done (Brough et al. 2020). Thus, most governments around the world have legislated to provide employees with options for FWAs. For many workers, the implementation of FWAs has led to increased permeability of work-life boundaries and more overlap between work and non-work domains (Wood et al. 2020). In parallel, there has also been growing interest in work-life boundary management, which refers to how an individual demarcates boundaries between their work and non-work domains, to actively manage their work and non-work roles and responsibilities (Kossek and Lautsch 2012). Boundaries can be physical ('*where*'), temporal ('*when*') or behavioral ('*how*') (Timms, Brough and Chan 2020). By establishing appropriate boundaries with the assistance of employers, employees can, where possible, define the expected behaviors for each role, improve the transitions between multiple roles and reduce their work-life conflict (Biron, Casper and Raghuram 2022).

Although physical work-life boundaries were becoming increasingly permeable before the COVID-19 pandemic (Wood et al. 2020), most employees still worked according to strict physical, temporal and behavioral boundaries to manage their role demands. For example, many working parents physically attended their workplaces after sending their children to school, enforcing the physical boundary between their family and employment domains. However, the occurrence of remote working and school closures during the pandemic resulted in the erosion of this physical boundary (Beno 2021; Brough et al. 2021). Instead, employees have had to rely on temporal and spatial boundaries at home to manage their work-life conflict (Waismel-Manor, Wasserman and Shamir-Balderman 2021). Studies (e.g. Kossek et al. 2021) have shown that the temporal boundary between work and non-work has increased in permeability, as employees spread their working hours throughout the day, interspersed with household chores or caregiving.

These changes in work-life boundaries have also compounded time-based work-life conflict for workers (i.e. time pressures of one role making it difficult to fulfill expectations and demands of another role). Many work-life studies conducted during the pandemic found that while working fathers took up more childrearing, working mothers spent more time home-schooling than working fathers (Beno 2021; Waismel-Manor, Wasserman and Shamir-Balderman 2021). Generally, women also experienced more work and non-work interruptions and had to multi-task more than their male spouses (Leroy, Schmidt and Madjar 2021). Remote working has further reinforced the traditional gendered division of labor between men and women and locked women more firmly into their traditional domestic roles (Risi and Pronzato 2021). Hence, women's work-life conflict was both widespread and persistent throughout the pandemic (Miller and Riley 2022), and their work performance suffered consequently (Brough et al. 2021; Kossek et al. 2021), further exacerbating gender inequalities.

Similarly, the behavioral boundary between work and life domains has also become more permeable. While working from home, some employees were required to adjust their work patterns to simultaneously attend to their children or other dependents (Hoffman 2021; Waismel-Manor, Wasserman and Shamir-Balderman 2021). Many working parents were faced with the abrupt situation of having to care for their dependent children while also participating in professional video meetings with their managers, co-workers or clients (Giannotti et al. 2021). Both roles require different types of behavior, and the frequent transitions between these distinct behaviors can intensify behavior-based work-life conflict (i.e. behaviors demanded in one role interfere with the performance of another role). In the remote work setting, employees had to adjust the way they connect with their colleagues and spent time figuring out the most optimal use of technology to enhance the quality of communication, speed and reach of communication, convenience of communication and purpose of communication (Warrier, Shankar and Belal 2021). In sum, the studies revealed that for many employees, behavior-based and time-based work-life conflict emerged as the more salient forms of work-life interference during the pandemic.

Theme 2: Work demands are more technical

ICT can facilitate employees' task performance and productivity (Gupta et al. 2021) and improve their work effectiveness and well-being (Wang, Liu and Parker 2020). However, evidence also indicates the occurrence of 'techno-stress' (i.e. intense job demands caused by technology use), where workplace ICT use significantly contributes to employees experiencing stress and burnout and decreased work–life balance (Garfin 2020; Ma, Ollier-Malaterre and Lu 2021; Wang, Liu and Parker 2020). COVID-19 has caused an increased reliance on ICT for job and organizational performance, in particular for those for whom teleworking was a novel experience. Research has also suggested that individual differences have a significant impact on attitudes toward ICT. For example, older employees are generally less comfortable with ICT changes and have lower levels of self-efficacy when working with new ICT (Gupta et al. 2021). How employees perceive ICT, as a demand or resource, also impacts their work–life balance and burnout (Ninaus, Diehl and Terlutter 2021). Below, we summarize how work demands have become more technical due to the pandemic.

First, remote working has resulted in a daily home routine of ICT use for these employees, and for some, there is also an added expectation to be online and responsive during office hours (Wang, Liu and Parker 2020). This phenomenon is also known as techno-invasion, which refers to the feeling of being constantly connected, reachable and attuned to work issues through technology use (Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008). Molino et al. (2020) found that, during COVID-19, techno-invasion directly increased work-to-life conflict, subsequently leading to behavioral stress (e.g. difficulties in interacting with people). A second cause of techno-invasion is organizational surveillance, where an organization uses technology to monitor employees' performance and productivity, or requires employees to be 'active' on work performance monitoring software (Parker, Knight and Keller 2020). Although the use of work-related surveillance technology is not new, it has significantly increased due to the mass transition to remote working (Risi and Pronzato 2021). Consequently, more employees have felt the need to be available during and beyond formal work hours (Molino et al. 2020), resulting in lower job satisfaction, trust and organizational commitment during the pandemic (Gupta et al. 2021).

Second, employees who previously relied on ICT staff to solve technical issues have had to troubleshoot ICT problems on their own (Carroll and Conboy 2020). This has contributed to techno-complexity (i.e. where ICT's features and complexity make users feel inadequate with respect to their skills; Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008), as employees have exerted time, energy and cognitive resources to learn and master new ICT systems in their home environments (Garfin 2020; Molino et al. 2020). A third consequence is increased ICT usage (i.e. techno-overload, or ICT's potential to compel users to work faster and longer or change their work habits; Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008), caused by full-time remote working via an increased volume of e-mails, telecommunication and notifications from workflow planning applications. Techno-overload has also been found to have increased employees' daily stress levels at the start of the pandemic, during the initial transition period from offices to remote working. For example, when supervisors engaged in virtual staff

management through electronic HR management systems, techno-overload increased exhaustion and burnout for both supervisors and their employees (Gupta et al. 2021; Wang, Liu and Parker 2020).

Therefore, while remote working facilitated through ICTs might offer benefits to employees via increased work flexibility, the mandatory and prolonged use of ICTs has depleted employees' cognitive and emotional resources and imposed significant challenges in how they manage their daily work and non-work demands (Gupta et al. 2021; Wang, Liu and Parker 2020).

Theme 3: Work and non-work demands are more psychological and emotional
The strongest impacts on individuals during times of pandemic are caused by psychological and emotional demands (Pfefferbaum and North 2020). Psychological demands arise when individuals perceive themselves as being incapable of meeting environmental changes and challenges (Biggs, Brough and Drummond 2017). Emotional demands manifest in various forms such as the expectation to manage one's feelings and expressions to fulfill the requirements of a job (i.e. emotional labor; Hochschild 1983), or the need to manage one's emotional reactions to difficult, challenging, monotonous, interpersonally demanding or unpleasant work circumstances (i.e. emotion regulation; Diefendorff, Greguras and Fleenor 2016). If left unaddressed, psychological and emotional demands will deplete an individual's personal resources (i.e. time and energy; Hobfoll et al. 2018), leaving insufficient resources to fulfill their core work and life demands. During the pandemic, an individual may have to manage their reactions to widespread collective trauma (Garfin 2020), increased risks of job insecurity and unemployment (Blustein et al. 2020) and increased ICT usage (Vaziri et al. 2020), all of which engender psychological strain and emotional exhaustion (Ma, Ollier-Malaterre and Lu 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened psychological and emotional demands for the global populace both directly (e.g. fear of infection, death and loss of loved ones) and indirectly (e.g. constant media exposure and subsequent outbreaks; Wise 2020). At work, organizational changes (e.g. downsizing, restructuring and redundancy) led to loss of job control and security, which in turn exacerbated employees' psychological strain and emotional exhaustion (del Rio-Chanona et al. 2020) and increased their work-life conflict (Begum, Shafaghi and Adeel 2022). In April 2020, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated global unemployment to be 190 million, primarily driven by job losses in the food and accommodation, retail and wholesale and business services and administration sectors (Clarke 2020). The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimated that in the Asia Pacific region, 8 per cent of working hours were lost due to mobility restrictions and business disruptions, which then led to higher unemployment and underemployment, deeply affecting poorer households (ADB 2021).

Given the adverse impacts of job losses and job insecurity on psychological and financial well-being, one would expect that workers would be motivated to return to their jobs as soon as COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed. But contrary to expectations, many workers started to reassess their job and career options (Jiskrova 2022). In 2021, the 'Great

Resignation' gained momentum as an unprecedented number of workers left their jobs in the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union. By early 2022, the 'Great Resignation' was being felt across the Asia Pacific region, particular among small and medium-sized enterprises. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that more than 24 million American employees left their jobs between April and September 2021. Many of these workers had experienced increased psychological distress, virtual micromanagement and the struggle of combining work demands with childcare or other caregiving responsibilities (Jiskrova 2022; Sull, Sull and Zweig 2022). Coupled with the collective trauma of COVID-19 deaths and illnesses, some are more motivated than others to leave their jobs or exit the workforce, especially for those who were already experiencing high levels of work-life conflict and burnout before the pandemic (Fuller and Kerr 2022).

Accommodating work and life needs during and after the pandemic

In light of the work-life issues that have emerged since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is becoming apparent that structural (or formal) work-life policies and practices, such as FWAs, need to be further updated because they are now widely implemented. However, cultural (or informal) work-life policies and practices, including work-family culture, family-supportive supervisor behaviors (FSSBs) and employee empowerment are becoming more prominent in determining employee well-being and resilience (Brough et al. 2021; Vaziri et al. 2020). Coupled with the ongoing uncertainties associated with the pandemic and disruption in basic life activities, there is an urgent need for HR policies and practices to evolve and incorporate greater understanding, flexibility, targeted work-life support and compassion toward employees (Chan and Tay 2022).

Figure 2 presents a summary of our HR recommendations at the employee, team/organizational and societal/governmental levels. Our employee-level HR recommendations are centered on fostering individual resilience, facilitated by daily recovery experiences and multi-modal self-compassion and emotional regulation interventions. Our organizational-level HR recommendations are centered on fostering a supportive work-life culture, facilitated by effective formal and informal voice mechanisms, as well as FSSB training for managers. Finally, our societal-level HR recommendations are centered on developing a multi-agency response, underpinned by a robust remote working ICT infrastructure and strong 'right to disconnect' and labor laws and facilitated by broad-based up-knowledge and up-skilling of the workforce. We elaborate on each of these recommendations below.

Individual-level HR recommendations

Many of the individual-level strategies for managing occupational stress emphasize the development of resilience, which is defined as the ability to resist disruption of normal functioning in the face of a distressing event, usually through anticipation and preparation (Maunder et al. 2008). Resilience is an important factor in distinguishing between individuals who suffer burnout and falter in the face of stress, compared with those who do

Societal-/governmental-level HR recommendations
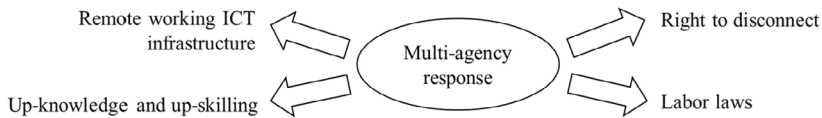
Team-/organizational-level HR recommendations
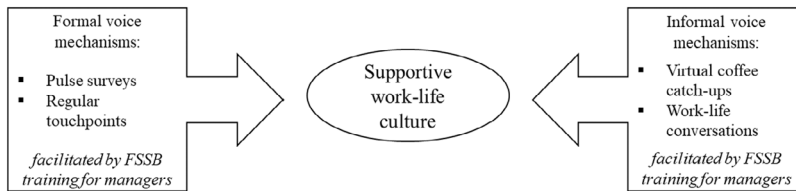
Individual-/employee-level HR recommendations

Figure 2 Overview of individual-level, team-/organizational-level and societal-/governmental-level HR recommendations. Note. FSSB stands for family-supportive supervisor behaviors

not (Seligman 2011). Employees with high levels of resilience are most likely to successfully balance their work and life (Brough et al. 2020). Resilience can be cultivated through multi-modal interventions focused on enhancing an individual's personal resources (Grant and Kinman 2014) as well as daily recovery experiences (Demerouti et al. 2012). Multi-modal interventions can be delivered through a series of modules (e.g. workshops) or micro-interventions (e.g. app-based activities) focused on developing self-compassion (e.g. a self-compassion journal) and emotion regulation (e.g. mindfulness meditation), which help to enhance participants' resilience and psychological well-being (Kotera and Van Gordon 2021). Vanhove et al. (2016) found that a one-on-one delivery format (e.g. coaching sessions) was most effective for resilience-building in the workplace, followed by the group-based delivery format (e.g. workshops).

Resilience can also be cultivated through recovery breaks. Recovery is the process that repairs the negative effects of strain or the process during which an individual's functioning returns to its pre-stressor level (Sonnentag and Natter 2004). Recovery at work can be facilitated through breaks, which may include rest, exercise, playing musical instruments or going for a walk (Demerouti et al. 2012). For workers who may not have the luxury of having frequent breaks (e.g. in call centers), short breaks (e.g. deep breathing exercise for 2 min) can reduce perceived stress and improve emotional and psychological well-being

(Allexandre et al. 2016). The daily commute between work and home provided many employees with an opportunity to psychologically detach from their work and non-work domains (van Hooff 2015). Since remote working has eroded the physical boundary between work and home, employees are encouraged to purposefully engage in recovery experiences each day. The four common types of recovery experiences are psychological detachment (i.e. not thinking about work), relaxation (i.e. taking time for leisure), mastery (i.e. learning new things) and control (i.e. having control over one's leisure time; Sonnentag and Fritz 2007). It is thus recommended that employees consciously allocate time each day to engage in recovery experiences. Evidence consistently shows that such recovery experiences enhance well-being, proactivity and job performance the next day (Chawla et al. 2020).

For employees who have experienced severe resource depletion due to the pandemic (e.g. bereavement, job loss or burnout), it is imperative that they access instrumental and emotional support from their formal and informal social networks to prevent further resource loss and to alleviate strain (Hobfoll et al. 2018). Accessing adequate social support is, of course, one of the key moderators of the stress-strain process (Brough, Drummond and Biggs 2018). Work-family specific support is directly accessible via both work (e.g. paid sick and carer's leave) and life domains (e.g. family and community support; Chan et al. 2020). Seeking instrumental support may directly involve asking employers, line managers, HR managers or family and community services agencies for additional resources to cope with the crisis threatening employees and their families' livelihood. Seeking emotional support may involve reaching out to extended family members to connect and share one's stress and anxiety. Tull et al. (2020) reported that individuals who were highly motivated to seek social support and connectedness were better able to adjust to and cope with the abrupt changes caused by the pandemic.

Team/organizational-level HR recommendations

At the team/organizational level, it is recommended that senior management cultivate a compassionate workplace culture that values employee health and well-being while recognizing employee performance (Sull, Sull and Zweig 2022). At the same time, senior management should also act to minimize toxic work culture, which typically manifests in the form of 'masculinity contest culture' (characterized by zero-sum competition played according to rules defined by masculine norms; Berdahl et al. 2018; Brough et al. 2021). Any implementation of new family-friendly initiatives within organizations high in masculinity contest culture will not bring about meaningful change (Brough et al. 2021). For organizations with a masculinity contest culture, it is essential that this culture first be refined to produce any meaningful uptake of work-life policies and initiatives.

To cultivate a compassionate and supportive workplace culture, senior management needs to ensure that their formal (e.g. employee pulse surveys) and informal (e.g. virtual coffee catch-ups between managers and employees) voice mechanisms are well-functioning. Voice mechanisms enable employees to have a say and potentially influence organizational issues that affect their work and lives (Wilkinson, Barry and

Morrison 2020). Having effective formal and informal voice mechanisms at the team and organizational levels will ensure that employees have multiple platforms to raise their concerns and provide feedback on pertinent issues (Cumberland et al. 2018). Further, employees will perceive a supportive work environment, since they are allowed to voice concerns (e.g. feeling stressed and burned out) and feedback without repercussions (Bergeron and Thompson 2020). With effective voice mechanisms in place, leaders and managers will also benefit from understanding factors that are contributing toward higher stress, burnout and turnover as well as issues around talent attraction and retention, upon which they can develop specific responses to deal with subsequent COVID-19 waves (Fuller and Kerr 2022).

Such voice mechanisms should be implemented with FSSB training, which is designed to teach leaders about the benefits of providing support to help employees with their work and life demands, and the different types of supportive behaviors that leaders should exhibit to their employees (Hammer et al. 2013). Leaders who have received FSSB training are generally more confident in initiating informal conversations with employees, supporting their employees as they recover from adverse life events, and responding to their employees' work and life needs (Pal, Galinsky and Kim 2022). Together, the opportunities for employees to talk to their supervisors and colleagues, develop personal relationships and work skills, and voice opinions also lead to increased work engagement and well-being (Knight, Patterson and Dawson 2017) and foster team compassion behavior (Wee and Fehr 2021). Therefore, organizations and leaders who carry out regular check-ins with their employees and facilitate various platforms for social interactions also tend to garner increased loyalty and contributions from their employees (Guest 2017).

Undertaking work-life conversations with employees also assists managers in determining whether their employees prefer to integrate or segment their work and life domains, allowing both parties to negotiate and communicate expectations on availability outside office hours and to set reasonable boundaries for technological use at home, which minimizes techno-invasion and techno-stress (Vaziri et al. 2020). As part of these work-life conversations, we encourage managers to lead by example and share their own preferred work-life arrangements with their employees, as managers also need to balance their work and life demands. Doing so also enhances psychological safety and trust between managers and employees and encourages open two-way communication, leading employees to be more forthcoming about their preferred working styles and work-life arrangements (Liu et al. 2018).

Finally, rather than subjecting employees to surveillance through ICT monitoring software, managers should instead have touchpoints throughout the day or week to discuss employee progress and issues. Employee surveillance is generally symptomatic of a low-trust approach that increases anxiety and stress among employees, ultimately disrupting their work–life balance (Parker, Knight and Keller 2020). Managers' mistrust of their employees also encourages a micromanagement approach, which diminishes employees' motivation, impairing their productivity and performance (Parker, Knight and Keller 2020). Rather, organizations and managers should focus on providing appropriate

support to assist employees in accomplishing their job tasks while they work remotely (Vaziri et al. 2020).

Societal/governmental-level HR recommendations

At the societal/governmental level, we encourage governments and policymakers to work with relevant stakeholders, such as employer groups, unions and organizations, to reform existing legislation so that work-life policies and practices (e.g. remote or hybrid working arrangements) are normalized (Timms, Brough and Chan 2020). The pandemic has stimulated the development of hybrid working models, in which, for example, employees are physically in their workplaces some days and working remotely on other days. However, health-vulnerable employees are likely to continue working from home until the threat of COVID-19 is minimal. This is a valuable opportunity for policymakers and organizational leaders to consider a range of solutions to support diverse needs. For example, could additional investment be made available for organizations to build a remote working ICT infrastructure that is effective, reliable and secure when employees work from their homes? In addition, many workers who have either lost their jobs or resigned from their roles during the pandemic may struggle to connect with other career pathways when the pandemic is over. Digital acceleration and digitalization will characterize the post-pandemic environment, and the remote and distributed nature of the workforce further underscores the need for a more robust ICT infrastructure and constant up-knowledge and up-skilling. A multi-agency response is thus warranted to deal with the complex, diverse nature of the demands and needs of office-based workers and to prevent inequalities from being further exacerbated.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic also brings an opportunity for governments to reform existing legislation relating to flexible working. For example, in the United Kingdom, workers do not yet have a statutory right to flexible working, only a right to request it after 26 weeks of working for the same employer (Dobbins 2021). Therefore, it is worthwhile for governments across the world to consider legalizing flexible working for all employees given the ongoing uncertainties relating to COVID-19 and other pandemics in the future. In addition, governments should require organizations to implement the right to disconnect from work for employees. For example, employees should have the right not to be penalized for refusing to attend to work matters outside of normal working hours (Dobbins 2021). A good example is Portugal, which introduced a new labor law in November 2021 intended to protect the boundaries required for an adequate work–life balance for remote workers.[2] Employers in Portugal will now face possible fines if they attempt to contact remote workers outside working hours. Employers are also prohibited from monitoring employees while they work at home. Before the pandemic, only some countries in Europe (e.g. France, Italy, Luxembourg, Germany etc.) and the Philippines had some form of 'right to disconnect' included in their labor laws. Since then, more countries, such as Canada, Australia and Portugal, have passed bills and introduced clauses that require some employers to define expectations around disconnecting from work. If rolled out carefully, the right to disconnect can be the catalyst for employers

around the world to review and adjust their archaic workplace policies for a thriving post-pandemic work environment.

Limitations

Our rapid review is not without its limitations. Although rapid and systematic reviews often yield the same conclusions, the accelerated nature of our rapid review may result in a less comprehensive search as some studies in other databases may not have been captured. This may result in limitations in the interpretation of findings. Nevertheless, to enhance the quality of our rapid review, we had two researchers engaging in the database search process and the entire team involved in the selection of articles, as well as the analysis and synthesis of the studies' findings.

Conclusion

The pandemic outbreak has led to an increased focus on and recognition of work-life boundaries, work-life culture, FSSBs and employee well-being. Work-life studies conducted during the pandemic consistently highlight the blurring of work-life boundaries for white-collar employees, leading to increased time- and behavior-based work-life conflict and resulting in psychological stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout and turnover. Therefore, we call for concerted efforts by businesses to work with policymakers, governments, unions and other relevant stakeholders to lay the foundations and build momentum for a well-being-oriented HR management strategy (Guest 2017) amid the unfolding socio-technological changes produced by the pandemic. Central to this well-being-oriented HRM approach is the link between HRM and positive short- and long-term economic, social, human and environmental outcomes (Kramar 2022). Lansbury (2021) suggested it is time for a new social contract, arguing that the pandemic has clarified the nature of our unequal societies and provided us with an opportunity to reset this balance. The time is thus ripe for organizations and governments to invest in their employees and citizens and assist them in overcoming work-life challenges produced by the pandemic.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

[1] We acknowledge that not all workers have the 'privileged' option of a remote working arrangement. Frontline emergency workers, cleaners, supermarket workers and platform workers (most notably, on-demand rideshare and delivery drivers) have largely continued working as usual throughout the pandemic. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this review, we are focusing on office-based workers and have kept our discussions and recommendations specific to them.

[2] For a summary of this new law in Portugal, please refer to Leitão, S. (2021, December 1). Portugal: new law on remote work includes ban on employers contacting employees outside of working hours. *DLA Piper – Lexology – Global Employment News, Insights and Events*. https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=29c48e70-e5a7-48a1-890e-d02ea5b5c28e

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