How is the Relationship between Working from Home during the Covid-19 Pandemic related to Strain-Based Work-to-Home Interference and is this Relationship Moderated by Neuroticism?

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Abstract

In this study, we investigated the direct relationship between working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic and work-to-home interference. Further, we also investigated the moderating effect of neuroticism on the relationship between working from home and work-to-home interference. It was predicted that working from home would have a positive effect on work-to-home interference. It was also predicted that neuroticism would strengthen the relationship between working from home and work-to-home interference. There were 33 participants included in the main analysis, who were either assigned to the working from home scenario or working from the office scenario. A questionnaire was used to measure work-to-home interference, neuroticism and demographic variables. Results showed that working from home does not predict work-to-home interference. The results also indicated that there is no moderating effect of neuroticism on the relationship between working from home and work-to-home interference. Several methodological limitations of the study were discussed.

Povzetek

V tej študiji smo raziskali neposredno povezavo med delom od doma med pandemijo Covid-19 in motnjami med delom od doma. Raziskali smo tudi moderatorski učinek nevroticizma na razmerje med delom od doma in motnjami zaradi dela od doma. Predvideno je bilo, da bo delo od doma pozitivno vplivalo na motnje zaradi dela od doma. Predvideno je bilo tudi, da bo nevroticizem okrepil odnos med delom od doma in motnjami zaradi dela od doma. V glavni analizi je sodelovalo 33 udeležencev, ki so pripadali dvema skupinama: skupini, ki dela od doma in skupini, ki dela v pisarni. Za merjenje motenj pri delu od doma, nevroticizma in demografskih spremenljivk je bil uporabljen vprašalnik. Rezultati so pokazali, da delo od doma ne predvideva motenj zaradi dela od doma. Rezultati so pokazali tudi, da nevroticizem nima moderatorskega učinka na razmerje med delom od doma in motnjami zaradi dela od doma. V študiji je bilo obravnavanih več metodoloških omejitev.

Introduction

Nearly a year has passed since the World Health Organisation declared Covid-19 a pandemic, on March 2020. Millions of people have faced lockdown, lost their jobs, or have suddenly shifted to working from home. Working from home is essential as it allows employees to continue working and receive their wages during the pandemic. Workplace flexibility refers to employees' flexibility in terms of "where" or "when" work is completed (Rau & Hyland, 2002). In the current study, we aim to investigate working from home and strain-based work-to-home interference. Working from home (WFH) can be defined as working from one's home with the help of technology to facilitate communication among employees (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021).

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Work-to-home (WTH) interference can be defined as the degree to which the demands in the work domain interfere with demands in the home domain making participating in the home domain difficult. WFH reduces the costs for the organisation, increases human resource productivity and is used to attract, motivate and retain talent. WFH can have many benefits for employees as it improves flexibility and resilience and reduces commuting time and costs. The main disadvantage of WFH is that it could enhance the interference between work and family roles as well as decrease social contact between employees (Hill et al. 2005; Shin et al., 2000). In this study, we will investigate WTH interference since it has been shown that WTH interference not only occurs more often but also has greater negative health consequences compared to WTH conflict (Charkhabi et al., 2016). Strain-based conflict occurs when responsibility and pressure in one role impairs the performance in the other role. For example, when the fatigue that builds up during working hours spills over to the family domain and drains resources for family activities (Montgomerya et al., 2009). In this study, we will focus on strain-based WTH interference since it is associated with several negative health consequences such as anxiety, worry, fatigue and depression (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1980).

Previous research on the relationship between WFH and WTH interference is quite ambiguous (Nijp et al., 2016; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). While some studies found WFH through telecommunication increases strain-based WTH interference (Duxbury et al., 1998), other studies found that WFH allows employees to schedule their work in such a way that it minimises WTH interference (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). It has also been found that the blurred boundaries between work and family life lead to overwork and an inability to disengage from work (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017). According to Schieman & Young (2010), workplace flexibility does not reduce WTH interference since there is increased blurring of the work - family domains. This blurred boundary can cause other issues such as an "always-on culture" which is facilitated through technology. This not only leads to work intensification but can also act as a distraction from family roles and has the potential to increase conflict and negative emotions (Sonnentag et al., 2008). Given the current pandemic, WFH has become involuntary. Previous research, there is a positive relationship between involuntarily WFH and strain-based WTH interference (Lapierre et al., 2015). The negative consequences of the pandemic along with the possibility that WFH is not a short-term phenomenon makes this topic very relevant to study. Taking all these factors into consideration it is hypothesised that WFH has a positive impact on strain-based WTH interference (Waizenegger et al., 2020).

This paper will also investigate the moderating effect of neuroticism on the relationship between WFH and WTH interference. People who score high on neuroticism have a general tendency to experience negative emotional states such as anxiety, anger, guilt, depression more than the average person. Neuroticism is best described as a chronic level of emotional instability and proneness to psychological distress (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2020). Previous research shows that people who score high on the neuroticism have poor coping strategies which can have very negative effects on the individual's ability to work from home and cope with the work and family demands (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Surrounding the pandemic there is increased stress and fear, which calls for healthy coping strategies, making neuroticism a relevant moderator. Therefore, it is hypothesised that neuroticism moderates the relationship between WFH and WTH interference.

Method

Participants were recruited through various social media platforms. The general aim and duration of the study were mentioned (15 minutes). Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: a) ability to speak fluent English or Dutch, b) currently working in the Netherlands, Germany or Luxembourg, c) not working more than 16 hours a week from home before the outbreak of the pandemic, d) working at least 24 hours a week at home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants received no monetary rewards; however, they were informed that a report of the finding would be made available to them after the study was complete. A total of 200 participants were contacted to participate in the study from which the data of only 33 participants was used in the main analysis. The rest of the participants either did not complete the questionnaire or did not meet the inclusion criteria. **Working from home** was assessed through the questionnaire by conducting a vignette study. In the questionnaire, two scenarios are provided. In the first scenario, participants were told to imagine they worked from home full-time while in the second scenario participants were given the option to work from home or the office. Participants received either one of the scenarios at random. **Strain-based work-to-home interference** was measured through the Survey Work-home Interaction/NijmeGen (SWING) scale (Geurts et al., 2005) and **Neuroticism** was measured through the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999). The manipulation Check was conducted through the questionnaire, using the question "What instructions did you receive regarding working from home?" The possible answer categories included a) I am obliged to work from home, b) I can work from the office or from home. The level of English proficiency and the country of residence were controlled for during the study.

Results

The results showed there is no significant correlation between both WFH and WTH interference and between neuroticism and WTH interference. Age and gender were also not significant predictors of WTH interference. WFH was not a significant predictor of WTH interference. Therefore, the hypothesis "Working from home positively influences strain-based work-to-home interference" is not supported. No significant interaction was found between neuroticism and WFH. Furthermore, with neuroticism included in the model there was a non-significant 2% increase in explained variance between model 1 and model 2. Therefore, neuroticism is not a significant predictor of WTH interference. Therefore, neuroticism does not moderate the relationship between WFH and strain-based WTH interference.

Discussion
Findings

The current study found that WFH does not predict WTH interference. This was unexpected since Hartig et al. (2007) found that e-workers experience overlaps between work and home lives, reducing the restorative effects of home. Thus, with the current pandemic, it was expected that the positive relationship between WFH and WTH interference would be strengthened due to everybody having to work from home. However, it is also possible that with the current pandemic, isolation has caused a slower pace of life and reduced social obligations, thereby also reducing some of the workload and responsibilities of individuals in society. The current study found no support for the moderating role of neuroticism in the

relationship between WFH and WTH interference. This is unexpected since research shows that neurotic individuals tend to be anxious and intolerant to stress (Maltby et al., 2010). It was also found that low neuroticism moderates between job demands and work behaviours (Van Den Berg & Feij, 2003). Thus, it was expected that individuals high in neuroticism would therefore have difficulties in dealing with conflicting demands of work and family life and this would therefore increase their WTH interference. The current study also found that neuroticism does not predict WTH interference. This is unexpected since previous research states that neuroticism is positively related to WTH conflict (Bryant, 2010). While the result we obtained is unexpected, there might exist a possible explanation for these findings. Maybe those who score high on neuroticism are more likely to follow social distancing rules (Jonason & Sherman, 2020). WFH could reduce employees' social obligations and workplace-related stressors. It is also possible that physical boundaries at home between the two domains are effective, then WFH would not increase WTH interference.

Limitations

In this study, there are three main limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the sample in our study. Participants were recruited through social media, which may lead to a homogeneous sample that excludes a large portion of the population and causes an over-representation of the younger population. This decreases the external validity of the study. The second limitation in the study was the sample size of the study. Out of the 200 participants the data of only 33 participants was used in the main analysis reducing both the internal and external validity of the study, since the small sample is not representative of the working population. Lastly, the study lacked a good manipulation check since more than half the participants answered the manipulation check question incorrectly. This may have occurred due to the unclear wording of the question or because some participants did not take the time to read and understand what was expected of them. This has a negative effect on the effectiveness of the study.

Further Research

In future research, a pilot study is essential to identify possible issues in the research design before the research is conducted. In this case, it would be used to ensure the instructions in the questionnaire are clear to the participants and that the manipulation check is effective. It would also be advisable to add an attention-check question in our questionnaire, to eliminate participants who answered the questions in a random manner. Since previous research on this topic is inconsistent, it is important that further research should be is conducted to investigate the relationship between WFH and WTH interference, especially since this situation affects a large proportion of the global workforce. Future research should also be conducted on this topic in Slovenia, since before the pandemic a smaller portion of the workforce worked from home. Since the pandemic has seen such a large shift to WFH, conducting the study in this population is highly relevant.

Conclusion

This study focused on the effect of working from home on work-to-home interference, which is moderated by neuroticism. A recent Gartner survey states that 74% of CFOs are planning to shift previously on-site employees to remote work arrangements post-Covid-19 (Gartner CFO

Survey, 2021). Considering all this, it is even more essential that workspace and family life domains are preserved, and further research is conducted to optimise working from home.

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