

“It needs to be the right blend”: a qualitative exploration of remote e-workers’ experience and well-being at work.”

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“It needs to be the right blend”: A qualitative exploration of remote e-workers’ experience and well-being at work.

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“It needs to be the right blend”: A qualitative exploration of remote e-workers’ experience and well-being at work

Abstract

Purpose - This present qualitative study explores the impact of the remote e-working experience on employees’ well-being.

Design/methodology/approach – Forty (23 male) remote e-workers working for a British IT company were interviewed about their work-related well-being. Semi-structured interviews were framed within the theoretical model of work-related well-being developed by Van Horn, et al. (2004), hence questions targeted its five distinct dimensions of affective, professional, social, cognitive, and psychosomatic well-being. However, data collection was not constrained by this model, allowing the exploration of other aspects interviewees considered relevant to their work-related well-being. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, where key themes emerged.

Findings - Findings support the relevance of a multidimensional approach to understanding remote e-workers’ well-being as it provides an in-depth understanding of the interconnectedness between relevant dimensions. Further insight into the overlooked issues of detachment from work, and health-related behaviours when e-working remotely is also provided.

Practical implications – This study proposes practical implications related to the organisational, managerial, and individual level; providing individuals tailored guidance on how to remote e-work effectively, and raising the importance of cultural change to support remote e-workers to be open about their working preferences.

Originality/value –An original contribution to the field of remote e-working is provided, by adopting a holistic approach to explore well-being, disentangling the interconnections between different well-being dimensions, and discussing pivotal contributing factors that seemed to be understudied within extant remote e-working literature.

Keywords: remote work; e-work; telework; well-being; agile work; health.

1. Introduction

Living in an era of increasing technological change has revolutionised the way people work (Eurofound, 2018). Remote e-working refers to work conducted at anyplace and anytime by using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to stay connected with colleagues and supervisors (e.g. Grant et al., 2013). A report by Eurofound and the ILO (2017) highlighted that remote e-working is rapidly increasing across Europe. Also, according to a Gallup report, there was a four percent increase (from 39% to 43%) in the number of employees who worked remotely, for at least some of their working time, between 2012 and 2016 (Corbin, 2017). At the time of writing this paper, the world faces the global coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) which brought a massive increase in homeworking, with organisations worldwide forced to move their offices in the cyberspace (Prasad et al., 2020). The complex impact of remote e-workers' well-being needs to be fully considered, especially because different spheres of individuals' lives can potentially be affected (Allen et al., 2015). To examine the relationship between remote e-working and well-being at work, a multidimensional approach has been recommended since it allows for a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the interconnectedness between relevant dimensions (Charalampous et al., 2019). Such a multidimensional approach takes seriously the conceptual complexity, variability, and epistemic uncertainty of well-being (Mitchell & Alexandrova, 2020). Hence, the present qualitative study aims to explore in-depth employees' experience of remote e-working practices and the potential repercussions on their work-related well-being. This research is framed within Van Horn et al.'s (2004) domain-specific multidimensional well-being model, including the affective, cognitive, social, professional, and psychosomatic dimensions. However, it is not constrained by this model as it explores widely and fully the issues related to remote e-workers' well-being.

1.1. The phenomenon of remote e-working and the future of work.

Remote e-working enables employees to work from multiple locations including work conducted from home (e.g., Richardson & McKenna 2014; Vander Elst et al., 2017) and work conducted from a variety of locations (e.g., cafes, trains, hotels, and customer sites; Maitland & Thomson, 2014). The fluctuating nature of the working environment has not only changed how organisations operate but also shifted individuals' expectations of their jobs. Corbin (2017) suggested that gaining control over when and how working becomes essential for many individuals. Particularly, 51% of employees said that they would leave their organisation, if a new job could offer them flexitime, and 37% said that they would go for a new job if they would be able to have flexibility in their work location. Preliminary data suggested that these statistics are most likely to increase because of COVID-19, as employers consider what jobs can now be done remotely and office space requirements (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). According to Office for National Statistics data in April 2020, 46.6% of adults in employment did some of their work from home, with 86.0% of those stating that this was because of COVID-19 pandemic (Office for National Statistics, 2020). In addition, a large-scale online survey launched by Eurofound including more than 85,000 people across the European Union and beyond, suggested that almost 4 in 10 employees started e-working remotely (Eurofound, 2020). With remote e-working becoming the 'new normal' for many organisations, it is important to identify and specify the means through which work-related tasks can be entirely and effectively performed remotely (Prasad et al., 2020). Thus, the workplace's transformational change proposes that CEOs and organisations who have previously been resistant to e-working practices (Boell, et al., 2016; Simons, 2017) will now have to reconsider and embrace them.

1.3. Gaps in our knowledge.

The present qualitative study extends and contributes to our current knowledge on the topic of remote e-working, filling some gaps in the extant literature and making unique contributions. Particularly, the study addresses the current tendency to conceptualise well-being within remote e-workers as a one-dimensional phenomenon. Counter-intuitively, psychological literature has supported that multidimensional approaches can offer us a wider understanding of individuals' well-being (Daniels, 2000; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Van Horn et al.'s (2004) multidimensional model of well-being at work, including affective, psychosomatic, cognitive, social, and professional components, has been effectively used as a meaningful framework to interpret remote e-working literature (Charalampous et al., 2019). Therefore, by using a multidimensional approach to well-being allows to adopt a pluralist stance, going beyond the exploration of well-being as a one-dimensional phenomenon (such as life satisfaction), something that has been claimed to be important when capturing well-being's conceptual complexity (Mitchell & Alexandrova, 2020).

Furthermore, there is a gap in our knowledge about the extent to which remote e-working is impacting upon specific well-being dimensions. Literature has overlooked risks imposed by remote e-working to psychosomatic well-being (Ellison, 2012; Eurofound and the ILO, 2017). Studies within general working populations suggested that prolonged sedentary behaviour, a common aspect of remote e-working (Thompson, 2020), was found to be associated with many health risks. These included, but were not limited to, coronary heart disease and myocardial infarction (Petersen et al., 2014), with bone health in youth (Chastin et al., 2014), with mortality, weight gain, and obesity (Thorp et al., 2011). Previous research has suggested that the combination of sitting for long periods, not adequately exercising, and an unhealthy diet might have a detrimental impact to individuals' health (Thompson, 2020). This study, thus, attempts to answer: Do individuals benefit from the flexibility linked to remote e-

working, using this time to sit less, exercise more, and eat better? Or, do individuals end up neglecting themselves and engage in more sedentary behaviours because of limited opportunities to socialise and move around in their work environment?

Furthermore, past research does not provide a clear answer as to whether remote e-workers become cognitively weary by concentrating less, finding it harder to take new information in, especially due to overworking and using technology (Charalampous et al., 2019). Working away from the office, and precisely working from home, was suggested to help individuals to concentrate more and get demanding tasks done (Boell et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the evidence is scarce. Contrasting empirical evidence suggests that the ICTs use when e-working remotely (e.g., the large volume of emails and instant messages) may induce many interruptions (Leonardi et al., 2010), which can consequently affect levels of cognitive weariness and concentration. Detaching from work could also play a fundamental role to the extent that individuals may feel weary. It has been found that remote e-workers may be more susceptible to blurred boundaries between work and home life (Basile, & Beauregard, 2020), which can then lead to work mentally predominating during time spent for leisure, reducing time for unwinding from work (Cropley & Millward, 2009). This study allows greater exploration into the impact that remote e-working may have on cognitive weariness levels, investigating possible contributing factors such as unwinding and detachment from work.

1.4. Analytical approach

Sparrow's (2000) suggests that qualitative research can be more sensitive than quantitative designs when capturing changes in individuals' perceptions and cognitions. Existing qualitative data allowed scholars to detect significant changes to work outcomes caused by the primary work location (Morganson et al., 2010), even if individuals get accustomed to the changing nature of their jobs (Sparrow, 2000). Moreover, with a qualitative research approach, and in this case thematic analysis, the context of data becomes apparent

(Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Therefore, the analysis of meaning can be combined within the context of e-working and provide a more in-depth interpretation of our findings. For instance, in a previous qualitative research it was suggested that escaping a 'hostile', 'hateful' environment which was 'causing immense stress and frustration' was what made individuals happy when e-worked remotely (Tietze & Nadin, 2011, p. 321); whereas supportive organisational cultures improved remote e-workers' outcomes (Gálvez et al., 2011). Hence, the context for this research is accounted and outlined below.

In sum, the present study is seeking to provide a more holistic and in-depth interpretation of how remote e-working may have an impact on individuals' well-being at work. It precisely poses the following overarching research questions: *How does remote e-working affect an individual's work related affective, psychosomatic, cognitive, social, and professional well-being? Are there any further well-being components or elements that are essential to holistically capture the remote e-worker's experience?*

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

The current study was conducted in an IT organisation, which that for anonymity purposes is given the pseudonym Novus. There was an established collaboration between the research team and Novus, therefore, data collection was supported and facilitated by the Human Resources (HR) Department. The HR Department advertised the project through their intranet. A semi-structured interview format was used to collect the data. The semi-structured interview consisted of open-ended exploratory questions on remote e-workers' experiences. It is worth noting that the researchers worked independently of Novus. Therefore, regardless of the organisation being informed about the topics covered in the interviews, no restrictions were imposed to the questions. Interviewees answered three types of questions: demographic, work-related, and remote e-working related. The demographic and work-related questions aimed at

establishing rapport between the researcher and the interviewee by discussing their current job responsibilities and what did their e-working practice looked like. The subsequent questions elicited information about each one of the five well-being dimensions declared by Van Horn et al.'s (2004) model of well-being at work. For example, individuals were asked to expand on the extent to which e-working remotely had an impact on their emotions, and their satisfaction levels. Prompt questions were used throughout though, encouraging participants to expand more on any interesting claims made and encouraged open answers to ensure that all aspects of the remote e-worker experience related to well-being were collated, going beyond the five theoretically posited dimensions. Also, the interviews were conducted by the independent research team, with no one from the organization been present, guaranteeing full confidentiality. Participants were also ensured that data would only be reported after been anonymised and in an aggregated form. Interview duration ranged from 60 to 90 minutes.

2.2. Participants

For this study 40 individuals were interviewed, all from Novus, including 38 across the U.K., and 2 from an Australian site. This was an all-volunteer sample, where participants came forward, instead of being selected by the researcher. As per Braun and Clarke (2016, 2021) thematic analysis should be approached in an organic and flexible way, with sample sizes varying depending on the respective project and its main research aims. The research team, thus, decided to stop the data collection once 40 interviews were completed, because a very rich amount of information was collated, allowing an in-depth exploration of the research question. There was a good representation of male ($N = 23$) and female participants ($N = 17$) with a mean age of 46.86 ($SD = 8.43$). On average they have been working in Novus for 8.61 years ($SD = 5.46$; ranging from 2 months to 30 years), having an overall e-working experience of 10.6 years ($SD = 3.45$). Individuals claimed that they worked extra hours, which was on average 9.18 hours a week (ranging from 0 hours to 25 hours extra; $SD = 3.52$). They covered

a range of roles within the organisation, belonging to different function departments with 42.5% of them having managerial responsibility. They covered a range of roles within the organisation, belonging to different function departments with 42.5% of them having managerial responsibility. Therefore, although the sample size was relatively small when considering the whole size of Novus, it was still perceived to be representative of the organisation's overall remote e-working population, including individuals from a variety of job roles.

3.1. The research context

Novus is a market leading software development organisation which supports customers in software applications, business process outsourcing, and technology solutions. The company employs more than 4,500 individuals, serving more than 1,000 customers. The organisation has substantially grown in the last 30 years, becoming an international business. With their supply chains being predominantly based across the U.K., they are an international organisation with clients across the world. Novus serves a variety of sectors including, but not limited to, the U.K. government and national security, local and regional government and public safety. Due to a growth in demand for flexible working and the need to retain talented employees, Novus have embraced and encouraged a 'Remote e-working' policy which proposes that employees have flexibility over the location and timing of their work.

2.4. Data analysis

The qualitative data gained by the semi-structured in-depth interviews was analysed conducting thematic analysis, which is a widely used qualitative method within psychology, known for its flexibility (King, 2004). According to thematic analysis, patterns/themes within the data are acknowledged, analysed, and described (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six phases of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were: (a) *familiarising with the data*, which is achieved by transcribing and reading the data; (b) *coding* which refers to creating

labels for the main semantic and conceptual content of individuals' narratives; (c) *search for themes*, where codes are grouped together to provide meaningful patterns of the data; (d) *reviewing the themes*, where the themes are checked to ensure that themes fully capture and tell a convincing story about the data; (e) *name the themes*, and (f) *writing up*. Rich information was gathered from the interviews and data saturation was reached.

Both theory-driven and data-driven themes were created. Since interview questions had a declared intention to search for specific impact in each one of work-related well-being dimensions, thematic analysis was used predominantly in a deductive and theoretical (top-down) way and predetermined themes were explored (Coolican, 2014). For example, information was elicited about each individual well-being dimension proposed in Van Horn et al.'s (2004) model (i.e., affective, psychosomatic, cognitive, social, and professional), as well as for health-related behaviours (such as eating and exercise habits). Nevertheless, since responses were wide and in-depth, capturing all aspects of remote e-workers' well-being, novel and data-driven themes were also raised through exploring the breadth and depth of the remote e-worker experience. Thus, an inductive approach was also employed, where findings were strongly linked to the transcripts (Boyatzis, 1998). The data-driven themes were not necessarily new dimensions to well-being at work, but they outlined contributing factors to the experience of well-being (e.g., individuals' personality).

3. Results

The sample offered a good variability of working patterns, with interviewees working full time from home and only occasionally visiting the office or customers sites ($N = 13$); some others equally working from home and office locations ($N = 10$); some splitting their time between office, home and customer locations ($N = 8$). Also, there were no gender patterns identified within the sample, with both female and male participants sharing similar experiences when e-working remotely. Also, it is worth considering that Novus was suggested

to have a ‘*real supportive culture*’ (P14) and individuals seemed to be very satisfied, engaged, and committed to their organisation. Very positive feedback was given regarding their job, colleagues, and managers and the overall organisational support. Novus’ willingness to be involved in this project and their great interest to discuss the final findings, could also be an illustration of their proactive and positive approach to remote e-working practices. Notwithstanding the overall results portraying a healthy positive organisational environment, there were elements of criticalities in participants responses.

The resulting themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 1 below. Concordance in the themes and their relevance were discussed and confirmed between the lead researcher and an external researcher. Interviewees’ direct quotes are also presented throughout the analysis, to illustrate suggested themes and demonstrate that findings have directly arisen and are deeply embedded in participants’ words and narratives.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes of the analysis

Theme 1:	Affective well-being.
<i>Sub-theme</i>	Improving affective well-being.
<i>Sub-theme</i>	Deteriorating affective well-being.
Theme 2:	Psychosomatic symptoms.
<i>Sub-theme</i>	Risk factors to psychosomatic health.
Theme 3:	Developing healthy habits.
<i>Sub-theme</i>	Preventative factors in developing healthy habits.
Theme 4:	Impact on cognitive weariness.
Theme 5:	Experiencing detachment from work.
<i>Sub-theme</i>	Enablers to detachment from work.
	Obstacles to detachment from work.
Theme 6:	Social isolation and maintaining relationships.
<i>Sub-theme</i>	Personality and relationship building.
Theme 7:	Impact on professional well-being.
<i>Sub-theme</i>	Career development/progression.

Sub-theme Autonomy.

Sub-theme A competent and effective remote e-worker.

3.1. Theme 1: Affective well-being.

Participants' narratives holistically captured their affective experience and the twofold impact that remote e-working had on it.

3.1.1. Sub-theme: Improving affective well-being.

Work-related emotions were found to be both positive and negative, depending on the nature of the job, the present conditions (e.g., upcoming deadlines), and the complexity of the tasks. However, overall remote e-working seemed to have a positive effect on emotions. Individuals advised that compared to working in an office, they were more satisfied with their jobs and felt happier with getting a better balance between their working and non-working lives. They felt more at ease and relaxed in their personal and familiar surroundings. Commuting less appeared to be much appreciated, as it *'can be a stressful experience sometimes'* (P8). Several remote e-workers who split their time between different locations expressed their excitement to be able to have a variation in the way they worked. Being trusted to work in this flexible way and having control over ones' environment made individuals feeling proud, and grateful and content.

When feelings of emotional exhaustion were explicitly explored, individuals again suggested that the nature of their job, such as excessive demands and upcoming deadlines, played a pivotal role to these feelings. However, in their majority participants recommended that remote e-working could ameliorate feelings of emotional exhaustion. The thinking space created away from the office distractions, and the greater control increased individuals' ability to complete more work. Both dealing with personal life commitments easily, and the discussed flexibility around individuals' work released tension, and decreased emotional exhaustion. This, in turn, allowed recovery and recuperation from work.

3.1.2. Sub-theme: Deteriorating affective well-being.

Nevertheless, individuals expanded upon negative emotions they experienced whilst e-working remotely. Numerous remote e-workers said that it was easy to feel lonely, bored and sad when the social interaction was reduced or eliminated. Also, feelings of anger, frustration, and stress were mainly linked to issues with technology, or not being able to get hold of colleagues when needed. Interestingly, a couple of individuals referred to guilt that comes with remote e-working. Interviewees suggested that they did not want people to think that they were not actually working, but they are ‘slacking’(P6) instead:

“... when I work from home I have my own inbuilt guilt-meter [laughs] so I've always worried that people are thinking that I am watching telly, em so I would say, when I work from home I do more hours as I don't want anybody to think that I am doing anything but working” (P6)

Potential feelings of guilt were also associated with trust that specific managers showed as: *“managers who are maybe themselves not used to...enabling trust people because they can't see them physically be working, that's one of the biggest challenges.” (P12)*

Aside the discussed positive impact of remote e-working on emotional exhaustion, there were some pitfalls. Remote e-workers who travelled long hours suggested getting physically tired, which was then reflected in their emotional exhaustion levels. Additionally, constant accessibility to work was a double-edged sword. While most individuals claimed that being able to get more work done could relieve stress, reducing emotional exhaustion, for some interviewees putting work away for the day was becoming harder, and the expectation of being contactable was increased. Ineffective email use also increased emotional exhaustion, especially when issues took longer to be resolved.

“...one aspect of e-working that is irritating, and can probably get people down...it's email [...]it's poor for things like debates and people will tend to respond back to emails and start to debate by email and you could, you have another phone call and you find that you've got 17 emails in your inbox and that are accumulated in the last fifteen minutes.” (P4)

Also, isolation and not being able to get in person emotional support from colleagues increased emotional exhaustion as individuals struggled with distressing matters and could not offload. This worsened when individuals did not have an extended social network outside work.

3.2. Theme 2: Psychosomatic symptoms.

Regarding individuals' psychosomatic health, it appeared that none of the employees reported serious and exasperated health conditions resulting from remote e-working. However, a few individuals reported musculoskeletal complaints, such as their body becoming very stiff, pains in their shoulder, in the upper body (e.g., forearms and elbows), and in their neck and back. These symptoms worsen when individuals worked for many hours in front of the computer screen. Interview data focused more on the threats of this way of working to individuals' psychosomatic health conditions, than actual symptoms experienced.

3.2.1. Sub-theme: Risk factors to psychosomatic health.

The increased sedentary behaviours combined with the absence of breaks was a prominent risk factors for psychosomatic health. The impact of sedentary lifestyle, which is an integral aspect of remote e-working, could get worse with the absence of breaks, exasperating individuals' conditions (e.g., increased fatigue, back-shoulder pain). Sedentary behaviours worryingly increased for remote e-workers because individuals lost social cues from colleagues. These cues would have encouraged them to take a break, walk, and spend time away from the screen. Interviewees suggested becoming very focused and absorbed with work, ending up skipping breaks or lunch, or having a working lunch at the desk.

“Because you're at home, you could be working all weekends and things like that. So you've got to be quite self-controlled I think, and know when to stop.” (P14)

Irrespective of the “conducive” with “fewer distractions environment” (P6) when working from home, which benefited employees' concentration, individuals appreciated the importance of reducing sedentary behaviours. Therefore, they consciously tried to increase breaks throughout their day (e.g., pet walks, setting reminders to leave their screen). Sedentary

behaviours mostly affected individuals who translated flexibility and connectivity into longer hours of work.

Moreover, the ergonomics of the workstation has been raised as a critical element to remote e-workers' psychosomatic health. Having an appropriate desk and chair appeared to reduce musculoskeletal irritations, such as back and neck ache. However, there was mixed experience as to whether individuals' remote workspace is assessed by the organisation. Uncomfortable postures were also identified (e.g., '*slumping*' P27).

Extensive driving and travelling could also take its toll on the body as "*you can feel stiffed in a car*" (P16). Individuals, thus, appreciated the days they worked from home as they could physically rest. Driving was proposed to '*affect posture*' and '*hurting the back*' as individuals were confined to the seat (P34).

3.3. Theme 3: Developing healthy habits.

In relation to health and lifestyle, two opposite effects are reported. Regardless of the risk of not taking enough breaks, and not having appropriate ergonomics, interviewees suggested that a healthier lifestyle was available to them. For example, fitting more exercise in becomes easier, as individuals could flex their hours and take breaks during their working day (going for a walk or to the gym). Excluding the participants who travelled extensively, the reduced time spent commuting was suggested to also enable physical activity.

"I've definitely become more active, definitely because when I was working in the office, you know, by the time you've got to work, got home again, especially in the winter and it's dark you don't want to do anything but actually since I started working from home I started to run, so I started going for a run on my lunch break or after work because I could finish and already be at home and just go" (P11)

It was also evident that most remote e-workers were able to have a healthier diet when working remotely from home, where they had more control and access to better quality food.

3.3.2. Sub-theme: Preventative factors in developing healthy habits.

Conversely, although being the minority, a small group of remote e-workers adopted unhealthy behaviours. This referred to either eating habits with individuals snacking more or moving less as the walking involved in commuting to an office was not there anymore. Also, an unhealthy lifestyle was a common phenomenon among remote e-workers who travelled a lot and those working from different client sites. This was due to both their fast-paced schedule restricting the time they exercised and the unhealthy food on offer.

There were two main contributing factors to health-related behaviours adopted, with the first one being individual differences. Remote e-workers acknowledged that eating and exercise habits were improved when individuals made a conscious effort and had a self-drive to be healthier, fitter, and more active. Specifically, whilst most remote e-workers suggested that overnights at hotels led to an adverse impact on healthy habits, one specific remote e-worker suggested purposely booking hotels that had gym and pool facilities. A second contributing factor observed was the type of remote e-working. Those who travelled the most and stayed overnight for work struggled the greatest to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

3.4. Theme 4: Impact on cognitive weariness.

Reflecting on their cognitive weariness levels (struggling to concentrate or take in new information), the majority of employees suggested that working from home could increase concentration levels. It was suggested that a possibility was offered to do the “*right work, at the right time and place*” (P35). The office was considered to be where people socialise, have their face-to-face meetings, and work on creative tasks involving groupwork. Working from home was ‘*conducive because you are able, by enlarge, to create your own environment*’ (P6), which increased concentration. For a few interviewees changing scenery and for example working in other locations, such as cafes, helped increasing concentration and getting more work done. In addition, individuals could avoid distractions such as office noises, colleagues

approaching them with work-related matters, or engaging in 'social banter'. The higher position individuals held in the organisation, the more they got colleagues coming over to them and wanting a chat for work-related matters.

Although individuals could reduce 'social distractions' when e-working remotely, they were more exposed to what it can be classified as 'e-distractions'. These included emails, phone calls, and instant messages. Ruling out noise, chatting, and colleagues' interruption had the potential to improve concentration and weariness, but some interviewees talked about the importance of also properly logging off, to eliminate 'e-noise'. Disconnecting was proposed to eliminate distractions and, consequently, allowed individuals to absorb more information.

Notwithstanding the benefits of remote e-working on concentration and taking new information in, participants suggested that individuals should stay disciplined and not get distracted by tasks around the house or other personal matters, as remote e-working makes it very tempting to be receptive to those. Furthermore, remote e-workers who were travelling a lot for their jobs made the most frequent reference to being tired and cognitively weary from their jobs. The combination of missing information which limited individuals' understanding, and the absence of colleagues sitting next to you, were suggested to increase cognitive weariness levels.

3.5. Theme 5: Experiencing detachment from work.

All interviewees acknowledged the importance of detaching and unwinding from work, which fundamentally contributed to their recovery. Many individuals suggested that taking breaks from their work allowed them to think of solutions to ongoing issues. In contrast, not detaching seemed to make individuals cognitively weary. As described below, the reality around detaching and unwinding from work was more complex than initially contended.

3.5.1. Sub-theme: Enablers to detachment from work.

A group of participants suggested switching-off much quicker when being away from the office environment, as they could finish work and start dealing with personal life matters straight away. Time saved from travelling was dedicated to other activities outside work, such as spending time to do their hobbies. Two individuals mentioned that feeling productive and satisfied with the day gave a greater sense of being able to detach from work more easily.

3.5.2. Sub-theme: Obstacles to detachment from work.

Nevertheless, some aspects of remote e-working made the detachment process harder. The most cited reason to that was technology use, and the expected availability of individuals. Having constant access to work, and all the electronic devices to hand made it greatly tempting to spend more hours working, or logging in late hours to check emails and do extra work. It was also highlighted that emailing people outside hours should be treated with caution as it could interfere with individuals' ability to detach from work. Poor working practices from role models seemed to also be detrimental, as they drive individuals' behaviours.

"...you see some teams in business units emailing Sunday night, things like that. [...] I think that's creating the inability to switch off from work so I'm responsible for my teams well-being in that respect and my behaviour will probably dictate their behaviour." (P27)

A few remote e-workers referred to their personality characteristics. It was claimed that *"...it's our fault, not the technology's fault"* and that *"there is a dreadful habit, that you get into...carrying on working for very long hours"* (P10). Also, detaching from work was harder when people were new to working away from the office with individuals needing some time to adjust. This was reflected in the narrations of the newest remote e-worker of the sample (e.g., e-working remotely for two months), who found it extremely difficult to stop thinking about work after normal working hours (P29). Interviewees set their own coping strategies to better detach from work such as having dedicated offices at home and separate phones, setting strict

rules with their email (e.g., avoid copying people in if not needed). Also avoid checking emails when on leave, as time off seemed to be pivotal to recovery from work.

3.6. Theme 6: Social isolation and maintaining relationships.

A trusting organisational culture appeared to play a fundamental role in the development and flourishing of relationships and in their majority, interviewees were pleased with their existing relationships with both colleagues and supervisors. However, the threat of isolation was indeed looming large, especially because *“you are not bumping into people in the office”* (P38). Isolated individuals felt forgotten and excluded from social activity with colleagues, feeling as though they were not counted as valuable team members. These feelings were heightened in the beginning of individuals’ remote e-working experience and when social connectedness outside work (e.g., close family or friends) was limited. Although interviewees accepted that face-to-face communication was reduced, or eliminated, they really enjoyed meeting their colleagues.

“I do think you know almost for the mental health, if you like, someone who works a lot at home, or does a lot of e-working that can have, communication with their colleagues which is actually quite important, in a way that's not electronic?” (P12)

The use of technology could bring individuals together, but it was claimed that *“I don’t think anything can quite replace proper, face to face human contact”* (P26). Communication in person was proposed to be richer in visual cues, involving body language, and sparking new discussions about career opportunities, something that technology could not offer.

3.6.1. Sub-theme: Personality and relationship building.

Personality types could affect how individuals experienced their social relationships, managing them effectively. Individuals suggested that *“it suits some people and it doesn’t suit others.”*(P14). There was the consensus that individuals who are very introverted, or ‘relatively anti-social’ remote e-working can actually work well, as these people do not necessarily seek frequent face-to-face interaction.

“...so you’d find that if you’re an introvert or quiet, quiet by nature you would have the personality to be a good home worker. [...] My personality is... I’m an introvert and quiet so I can...I don’t depend on other people to on a day to day basis.” (P15)

Nevertheless, more extroverted individuals seem to seek in-person social interaction and enjoyed less full time working remotely. A counterbalance to that was some individuals’ conscious effort to create bonds with colleagues, stay in touch and be as proactive as possible in their relationship building. This linked to the argument made that the way that individuals used electronic means to reach colleagues and supervisors, and their attitude when building and maintaining relationships mattered. More precisely, being proactive, getting hold of important people in the organisation, and doing a conscious effort to be in touch with colleagues was essential to avoid isolation.

3.7. Theme 7: Impact on professional well-being

This theme explored remote e-workers’ professional well-being, seeking information on perceptions of career development, autonomy, and competencies.

3.7.1. Sub-theme: Career development/progression.

Interviewees suggested that being part of an organisation that embraces and supports remote e-working was fundamentally important for their career progression and development. This was because results ultimately drove their progression. Some dangers of not being physically present about career opportunities and relevant training were outlined though, especially when individuals first started e-working remotely.

Regardless of opportunities been available to remote e-workers, several individuals claimed that they had to approach their career development in a different manner, compared to full-time office-based colleagues. Likewise the social dimension, interviewees discussed the importance of building relationships with key people within the organisation and *‘making yourself very visible to them’* (P27). This could take both the form of face-to-face and online.

A sub-group of remote e-workers explained the necessity of getting across what they achieved, communicating any issues they were facing.

3.7.2. Sub-theme: Autonomy.

Remote e-workers had autonomy in deciding the location of their work, the best way to get a task done, prioritising tasks, and flexing their hours. There was a sample of individuals who deliberately chose to adhere to a strict routine (e.g., working 9-5) either because they preferred, or because they had to be visible at certain/fixed hours. It is worth mentioning though, that the higher the position individuals possess within the organisation, the more comfortable they were to flex their time and change the scheduling of their work. There were some interviewees suggesting that it can actually be the other way round as individuals need to be autonomous so they could work in a more agile way. The organisational culture can be a major contributor to this increased autonomy. The management style was suggested to be very important as “*you know getting the feeling that you can make decisions and you won't be, you know, criticized if you make a wrong decision and you know so yeah I think that's really important*” (P12).

3.7.3. Sub-theme: A competent and effective remote e-worker.

When asked to profile a competent and effective remote e-worker, interviewees suggested that there were specific competencies (i.e., knowledge, skills, and abilities) which were crucial for a successful remote e-worker. Self-discipline and focus on getting things done was suggested to become even more pivotal than in an office environment. This was based on the proposition that home surroundings could distract individuals while getting work done. It was suggested that individuals had to “*stick within the confines of their flexibility*” (P22). This could be harder when individuals first started working in this way. Being self-motivated was also suggested to be very important as the office pressure is absent and what is expected to be achieved becomes blurred. Good communication skills were also important, especially

through electronic means, as “*you need to have that sanity check to reread something and think, can this be interpreted differently?*” (P6). Additionally, confidence in resolving work-related issues that may arise by using ICTs (e.g., emails and instant messages) was emphasised. Individuals referred to the importance of choosing the most efficient and appropriate means of communication, depending on the issue needed to be resolved. For instance, when email exchange was overwhelming, alternative communication media such as telephone could be more appropriate to resolve an issue quickly. Individuals’ also talked about the importance of having good knowledge of themselves and their own capabilities, as these are indicators of an effective and competent remote e-worker.

4. Discussion

Findings of the present study overall supported the complex and multidimensional impact that remote e-working experience has on individuals’ well-being. The originality of this research is twofold: 1) it considers pivotal contributing factors to well-being (such as health-related behaviours, and detachment from work, and cognitive weariness) that seemed to be understudied within remote e-working literature (Charalampous et al., 2019); 2) it adopts a holistic approach to explore well-being, to investigate more in depth and disentangled the interconnections between all its components. In particular, this study used Van Horn’s (2004) multidimensional well-being at work model as a theoretical framework to analyse data and the themes. In addition to the theoretically guided themes, data-driven themes were also revealed, such as risks imposed by remote e-working to psychosomatic health and individual differences. These additional, but still relevant, aspects to the Van Horn et al.’s (2004) model are integrated to the presentation of each dimension (i.e., affective, psychosomatic, cognitive, social, and professional). Finally, it is worth noting that the findings discussed below may have been influenced by a potentially positive and supportive organisational culture, which was previously supported to improve individuals’ well-being (Grant et al., 2019).

4.1. Affective well-being dimension

Overall, there were mainly positive responses to remote e-working, supporting that individuals tend to experience a greater range of positive, over negative emotions when they are e-working remotely (Anderson et al., 2015). The prevalence of positive emotions may be strongly influenced by the organisation, particularly when it treats workers fairly, trusts them, and is very flexible. Notwithstanding this, negative emotions still emerged, mostly in terms of frustration with technological issues, and loneliness when being away from the office. A further negative emotion of relevance is guilt, potentially resulting in working longer hours. Guilt was associated with the worry that colleagues or the management might suspect that one is not as productive as they are e-working remotely. Novus' positive organisational context did not rule out guilty feeling. It is, then, plausible to expect that this might be an even greater issue for organisations that are less trustful. In addition, the majority of individuals' narratives were in line with previous research suggesting that levels of job satisfaction and organisational commitment can greatly link to remote e-working (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). Findings also supported that remote e-workers experience less emotional exhaustion as autonomy might. However, similarly to Vander Elst et al. (2017), it was suggested that individuals who had less social support experienced greater levels of emotional exhaustion, as they could not share their problems and gain emotional support from colleagues. This finding highlights the increased importance of social support in a remote workforce (Charalampous et al., 2019).

4.2. Psychosomatic well-being dimension

Although psychosomatic reported symptoms did not appear to be particularly worrying, individuals still expanded on changes they noticed in some of their behaviours, which could potentially worsen physical health conditions. For example, a problematic behaviour for some individuals was skipping breaks and leaving their desk less regularly. This was due to office cues not being present and getting very absorbed with work. Taking into consideration the

detrimental impact that sedentary behaviours have on individuals' health (Tremblay et al., 2010), and the fact that not having breaks can further increase the time that individuals sit, there is an imperative need to tackle such behaviours. Also, remote e-workers who travelled excessively adopted more unhealthy behaviours (e.g., bad diet, less exercise), had worse psychosomatic conditions (e.g., stiffness in the body) and were more exhausted. This finding is supported by Ding et al.'s (2014) study conducted on a 37,570 Australian sample which suggested that driving can be linked to lack of physical activity, changes in sleep, increased levels of obesity, and a negative impact on physical and mental health. This is also in line with studies suggesting that commuting can be stressful and can have causal effect on psychosomatic health (Evans & Wener, 2006). This shows the importance of monitoring how much time individuals spend travelling for work to ensure that this does not put strain on individuals. Furthermore, long hours were reported. Although this enabled individuals to get the work done and release stress, when this is constant it can harm individuals' health (Bannai, & Tamakoshi, 2014). Having health and safety checked to avoid any musculoskeletal pains was also discussed. Findings supported Ellison's (2012) proposition that the remote office should be treated in the exact same way as the office workstation and that the ergonomic risk may increase when the same guidance and equipment is not provided.

Regardless of the aforementioned risks, the findings of this study suggested that remote e-working provides individuals with a great deal of flexibility which may be dedicated to adopt a healthier lifestyle; where individuals fit in more exercise and have more control over their diet. Individual differences were found to link to health-related behaviours, such as eating habits, exercise habits, and taking breaks. Self-driven and self-disciplined individuals, who expressed an innate desire to be healthy, made conscious efforts to exercise more, to eat healthier, and to take breaks frequently. Thus, even though individual differences were

proposed to play a pivotal role to what kind of behaviours individuals adopt, remote e-working can enable a healthier lifestyle.

4.3. Cognitive well-being dimension

The findings of this study provide light on remote e-workers' cognitive well-being dimension, which received the least empirical attention (Charalampous et al., 2019). Findings, overall, suggested that cognitive weariness might depend on the context and circumstances. The findings supported that individuals can indeed take more information in and concentrate when working away from an office environment. Aligned with previous literature (Boell et al., 2016) it was proposed that working away from an office environment can decrease interruptions leading to higher concentration. Interviewees reported some contributing factors to cognitive weariness levels, which are worth acknowledging though. For example, remote e-working benefited specific such as reports or any other written work which demands individuals' full attention. In contrast, individuals found being on the phone exhausting, recommending that face-to-face contact would be more beneficial for interactive tasks. Likewise, working physically together seemed to be more appropriate for creative or collaborative tasks, as individuals could share ideas (Boell et al., 2016). Overall, findings suggested that a combination of isolated work at home or writing reports in other locations (such as cafes), and then visits to the main office location was ideal and preferred. These findings enhance previous researchers' prepositions that suggest remote e-working being more beneficial and as a part-time arrangement (e.g., Golden & Veiga, 2005; Virick et al., 2010). There are individual differences in preferences of where and when to work and remote e-working proved the flexibility.

Interviewees also mentioned that their daily routine involved high ICT use, (e.g., sending emails and instant messages). In line with Leonardi et al. (2010), individuals claimed that ICT interactions distracted them from conducting their work, something that can lead to

impaired concentration (Braukmann et al., 2018). Thus, many remote e-workers purposely disconnected to focus more on their work. This finding raises a red flag for cases where the organisation does not support remote e-working, at the level that the examined organisation did, something that may lead employees to be constantly switched on; and consequently suffer from impaired concentration.

Moreover, interviewees who opted for having a quick break away from their workstation experienced the lowest cognitive weariness levels, as they returned to work refreshed. This, consequently, suggests that there are some actions to decrease cognitive weariness. Organisations and managers need to encourage individuals to leave their screens, especially when individuals feel guilty to do so, or when they are new starters. As supported by the findings, individuals who were not detaching from work, tend to feel more cognitively weary, which has been suggested to be one of the main determinants to an individual's recovery (Crompton & Zijlstra, 2011).

Also, being more self-disciplined was supported to benefit individuals' concentration levels, as individuals can solely focus on work, without getting distracted from personal life. Findings can be better understood when considering Allen et al.'s (2003) key theoretical framework of remote work, which explicitly explains the mechanisms by which remote e-working may affect employee outcomes and hypothetically well-being. Allen et al. (2003) suggested that work-family conflict, autonomy, and personal control perceptions can act as mediators of the relationship between remote work and employee outcomes. Thus, as indicated by the present study's findings, remote e-working enables individuals to keep themselves away from office hassles (e.g., interruptions, meetings) which can, in turn, allow for greater concentration. However, remote e-workers may experience greater work family conflict due to the close proximity of family members or significant others, and the blurring of boundaries between work space and time along with family space and time. This can consequently reduce

concentration. Allen et al. (2003) drawing upon the spillover theory (Zedeck, 1992), suggested that individuals' with high personal control perceptions on work and family boundaries, tend to experience a positive spillover. Subsequently, the researchers suggest that the increased flexibility and control provided by some remote e-working arrangements may result in positive spillover, which can then lead to greater concentration.

4.4. Social well-being dimension

Regarding relationships, individuals confirmed that isolation is one of the greatest pitfalls and dangers for remote e-workers (Tietze & Musson, 2010) as individuals felt occasionally being 'out of sight, out of mind' (Sewell & Taskin, 2015). However, a conscious effort to stay in touch with colleagues, and being more proactive in relationship building was proposed to help. This finding supports research suggesting that making effective use of ICTs can counterbalance the negative consequences of social isolation (Lal & Dwivedi, 2009). This study highlighted that nothing can truly replace the human interaction and face-to-face communication. Notwithstanding technology enabling individuals to stay in touch with work colleagues and help them to form good quality relationships (Handy, 1995), individuals emphasised how much they missed and valued face-to-face interaction. Findings remind us that face-to-face interaction will always be essential to build trusting relationships. Thus, even if individuals build strong connections with their colleagues when separated by large distances (O'Leary et al., 2014) face-to-face interaction should not be underestimated. Another important finding to consider is the crucial role of social connectedness outside work played (e.g., close family and friends). When social connectedness was absent feelings of isolation appeared to increase. Especially in situations like COVID-19 where individuals do not have an option of meeting their colleagues face-to-face, having limited interpersonal relationships (Casali et al., 2020), increases the need for social support. Overall, the findings are in agreement with Gajendran and Harrison's (2007) proposed theoretical framework about remote e-working,

which suggested that relationships quality can serve as an intervening mechanism of the impact that remote e-working has on individual outcomes.

Findings suggested that individual differences, and specifically personality traits were pivotal to the degree to which individuals enjoyed working from home and the way they build their relationships. Those who described themselves as more 'introverted', 'relatively anti-social', or 'odd characters' who did 'enjoy not talking to people at work', seemed to be in better terms with the isolation that comes with remote e-working. In contrast, individuals who classified themselves as 'extroverts' or 'sociable' made a conscious effort to stay in touch with colleagues, to ensure that distance did not deteriorate their relationships. As Baruch (2000) suggested, individuals with a high need for socialisation might find it harder to e-work remotely. Notably, individuals who described themselves as more social, appreciated having both the flexibility and the variety that comes with working from differing locations. This could provide a potential answer to Anderson et al.'s (2015) question about why 'open to experience' individuals may enjoy remote e-working more. However, individual differences remain vastly unexplored in the remote e-working literature (see Anderson et al., 2015 & Luse et al., 2013 for exceptions).

4.5. Professional well-being dimension

Considering the professional well-being dimension, individuals' perceptions of autonomy, career progression, and competencies were explored. Initially, interviewees proposed that remote e-workers were granted great levels of autonomy, as it has often been proposed by past research (Gajendran et al., 2014). As the aforementioned, Allen et al.'s (2003) theoretical framework was again supported as that higher autonomy and increased personal control perceptions when e-working remotely enhanced performance and job satisfaction. As per the social cognitive theory (Greenberger & Strasser, 1986), this could be a result of an increased feeling to control factors that affect their work outcomes, which can increase self-

efficacy judgments and allow setting higher personal goals (Bandura & Wood, 1989). In addition, interviewees suggested that an efficient and a competent remote e-worker, needs to be self-disciplined, using their autonomy wisely.

In relation to career development, remote e-workers appeared to be overall happy with the opportunities they received from their organisation, agreeing with previous meta-analytical findings (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Although professional isolation concerned individuals, as in previous studies (Golden et al., 2008), it was still not a major issue. By including a good variety of both male and female participants, these findings allows us to reject Gajendran and Harrison's (2007) hypothesis that absence of changes in career opportunities perceptions is due to samples comprising mostly women. Instead, career advancement opportunities within remote e-workers seem to be free from gender bias. It could also be claimed that supportive organisations can be more inclusive, safeguarding career development perceptions. In line with the social well-being findings, individuals who classified themselves as 'extroverts' or 'sociable' were proactive in their career development, actively chasing opportunities.

Individuals' narrations proposed that the competent and effective remote e-worker had to be self-motivated, as the face-to-face push from colleagues was absent. Improved communication skills, especially when using electronic means, were also suggested to be warranted (Richardson & McKenna, 2014). The beginning of the remote e-working experience was found to be the most challenging time, as individuals had to adapt to new working practices and structures. Trommsdorff's (2000) work on social change (i.e., "gradual unfolding of different ways of life", p. 58) suggested that during the change in one's environment both stressors and opportunities for development will be induced. In turn, how the individual will experience this change will inextricably depend on their contextual factors (e.g., wider social networks) and personal resources (e.g., emotional dispositions). Thus, acknowledging both

opportunities and risks, as well as looking into individuals' context and needs, can allow preparing and supporting individuals in their adaptation to remote e-working practices.

Summing up, the present findings conclude that remote e-working affects individuals' affective, cognitive, social, professional, and psychosomatic well-being. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the answer to our paradoxical findings is complex, with one size not fitting all. Instead, interviewees' narratives proposed that "*it needs to be the right blend*" for remote e-working to succeed. For example, individuals may be happier with the amount of solitude and the amount of collaborative work they do, when they split their working time in different locations. What can also be important is the amount of emails they receive, how much their job allows them to disconnect and finish tasks in hand, whether flexibility is used to meet personal demands or whether it has a distractive character.

4.6. Practical implications

This research informs best practice by proposing key practical implications that can improve the remote e-working experience. For example, individuals who are new to remote e-working would benefit from essential guidance, familiarising with its possible pitfalls. This guidance can be offered through videos (e.g., experienced remote e-workers sharing tips), information in organisations' internal website, and during company events. Training about important key competencies (e.g., self-discipline and self-motivation) relating to remote e-working can promote a more effective and competent workforce. Moreover, it is crucial to educate individuals on how to use emails, managing individuals' expectations when responding to them. Preferred working patterns should also be discussed and shared between colleagues (e.g., working during evenings vs sticking to typical working hours). Organisations and managers should lead by example and create and maintain a safe environment where individuals can share their preferences.

This piece of research also adds insight into strategies that employees and organizations can use to overcome potential work family conflict occurring from working from home, and consequently improve remote e-workers' well-being. If their space allows, remote e-workers could consider defining boundaries even at home, creating clear separation between the domains which should allow them to concentrate on tasks associated with one domain at a time. This would also allow them to conserve resources, which they could in turn deploy in the other domain, leading to improved overall well-being (Hobfoll, Shirom, & Golembiewski, 2000). Organizations looking to resume "business as normal" following by the increased number of vaccinated individuals and restrictions been lifted by the government should try to accommodate the significant population of employees who are reluctant to fully return to the office, after more than a year spent working remotely. With findings suggesting that a good balance between working from home and being in the office, organisations could encourage individuals to return back for a part of their time, so they could regain some of the positive aspects of working in the office, such as further strengthening their social bonds and facilitating creative and collaborative tasks. Of course, individuals need to trust that their organisation safeguards their well-being at all times and that they can work safely. However, organisations also need to avoid setting blanket policies, acknowledging both individuals' different circumstances and the fact that one size does not fit all, as this is fundamental when ensuring the effectiveness of remote e-working practices.

4.7. Limitations and future work

Notwithstanding its value and contribution, the current study has several limitations that are worth outlining. The study was conducted within a specific organisation restricting the generalisation of the findings to a wider population. To counterbalance this, a very good number of employees were interviewed (i.e., $N = 40$), and individuals had different remote e-working patterns. Also, the examined organisation appeared to be very trusting and supportive,

something that may have led to more positive findings overall. However, this can promote good practice, highlighting the beneficial role of an enabling organisational environment to individuals' well-being. Some of the reported themes reflected the pre-determined questions asked, and particularly the five postulated well-being dimensions. This has been critiqued by research to depict a lack of analytic work (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Yet, analytic work can be illustrated in the over-arching themes across the entire dataset, with nuanced interpretations of the examined relationship between remote e-working and well-being at work. In future, scholars can investigate individual differences further (and personality traits) which were suggested to be pivotal when interpreting the impact of remote e-working on individuals' well-being. The present study explored five distinct well-being dimensions, and relating concepts (e.g., switching-off from work) something that one might claim that can sacrifice depth over breadth. Thus, future research can focus on specific well-being dimensions, to get an even deeper understanding on the topic.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on a large number of interviews, within a well-reputed organisation. The qualitative information analysed and presented expands our theoretical knowledge about the impact that remote e-working has on well-being at work. The seven themes identified allow to gain a greater insight into the well-being dimensions of affective cognitive, social, professional, and psychosomatic. Contributing factors to remote e-workers' well-being were also discussed, including but not being limited to the organisational context and culture, individual differences, and the way that technology is used in building and maintaining relationships. Effectively detaching from work and health-related behaviours were also explored, as these have been understudied by existing research, and on a positive note, remote e-working was suggested to provide individuals with an overall healthier lifestyle. For an organisation to succeed in the adoption and implementation of this work practice, it is pivotal

to identify the right blend and balance between working from office locations and working remotely using ICTs to stay connected. Individuals' narratives revealed that understanding remote e-workers' well-being might be more multidimensional, proposing that future research should consider more complex models and include underlying mechanisms. Remote e-working seems to be an attractive work arrangement for employees, but there is still an imperative need that organisations acknowledge in which ways remote e-working can affect well-being at work.

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