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Remote work and employee well-being: The blurred work-life boundaries

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Abstract

Remote work is significantly changing the way people work and perceive their environment in the recent past. The wake of the pandemic has tremendously accelerated an approach that has previously struggled to gain traction. The research aims to evaluate the relationship between remote work and its implications on the well-being of employees in light of the blurred lines of professional and personal spaces through an analysis of the literature that connects distance working and mental health. The paper is an exploratory qualitative review of remote working and its implications on the psychological well-being of employees within the context of the blurred line between work and personal life. The research probes into the link of remote work and well-being literature with the work-family conflict, work-life balance, and work-family boundary theories to explain the dimensions of e-working that interact with the mental health of employees, addressing a gap in literature relating to emerging workplace dynamics. Remote work is discussed in the light of a blurred work-life boundary as work and life are brought too closer in the arrangement. The findings suggest that on the positive side, remote work can be enriching and contribute to increased well-being owing to increased autonomy, job control and decreased conflict. On the downside, it makes work inseparable from life, allowing lower respite periods, social isolation, increased stress and exhaustion causing reduced well-being. Proper managerial support, communication, and well-designed work hours should be established to manage stress and exhaustion levels.

Keywords: Remote Work, Employee Well-being, Mental Health, work-life balance, e-HRM

Introduction

As businesses progressively integrate information and communication technology (ICT) systems into their operations, remote working has emerged as the "new normal." The rise of unprecedented occurrences like the pandemic has further pushed such an approach in recent years. Remote work is significantly changing the way people work and perceive their environment in the recent past. The wake of the pandemic has tremendously accelerated an approach that has previously struggled to gain traction. The constraints and benefits of working remote are becoming evident as the pandemic progresses. As people return to their workplaces whilst organizations return to normalcy and economies improve, a significant number of people would be back in their offices. At the same time, experts are of the opinion that hybrid models of remote work are still going to be around for some people. An accelerated digitalization and automation are transforming job processes, and information and communication technologies (ICT) are hastening an approach towards digital labour. It has been observed that around 20% of people could work 3-5 days a week from home, and if e-work becomes commonplace at such a rate, it is inferred that 3 to 4 times people would be going remote compared to what's before the pandemic. It can significantly affect economies, markets, spending behaviour, commutation etc. (Lund, Susan *et al.*, 2021) ^[43].

Remote work assisted by technological information and communication systems has helped business organizations to contribute flexibility and work-life balance to employees while considering their well-being, reducing costs, and increasing productivity altogether (Lewis and Cooper, 2005) ^[41]. Studies show that workload has escalated during the pandemic, which is related to higher demands on cognitive, performance, emotional and temporal grounds. Environments, lack of sleep, adverse job expectations, and uncertainty have contributed to such an increased workload on employees (Rodríguez-López, Ana María *et al.* 2021) ^[55]. Microsoft's research based on the keyboard activity of employees says that knowledge workers have a third peak of made the work and life boundaries permeable (Microsoft, 2022) ^[65]. People engaged in remote working or e-working is described through different names,

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Like “e-worker”, “tele-work” or “tele-worker” and “telecommuting” (mostly in the US). They are used to refer to an arrangement of flexible working through technical assistance to communicate with the workplace from a remote or distant location. Agile working is another term that refers to the capacity of an organization to make room for flexibility in accordance with the evolving demands in the market and work practices, has recently found a place in the language (Gillies, 2011) [25]. Remote working operations would become a continued practice for some people as restrictions and containments are still in place, whilst others would be going through a temporary arrangement (Huston *et al.*, 2020) [32]. Studies have associated positive work outcomes with remote work such as improved productivity, participation, and retention, and it is perceived to be acclaimed for improving the work-life balance as well as reduced energy consumption and traffic issues (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007) [23]. Such benefits are mainly caused by the decreased need for commutation that provides a space for employees to manage work and personal lives (Baruch, 2000; Grant *et al.*, 2013) [4, 26]. E-working has helped employees assort their work hours and family time, reducing the daily travel requirement that increases the chance of work-family conflicts (Lautsch *et al.*, 2009) [38].

There have been studies that probes into the negative effects of remote working which discuss the undesirable outcomes, that includes employees working past the required hours as well as a perceived need to push beyond the limits owing to an obligation to recompense the flexibility they avail, which in turn results in an increased burden that conversely affects the psychological wellbeing (Chesley, 2010; Derks *et al.*, 2015; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010) [11, 17, 36]. It is observed that though remote working contributes desirable outcomes to organizations in the short-run, it can conversely affect the employee mental health as there is an intensified work load, heightened reliance on technology and information systems, obscure or blurred work-life border, always-on culture, lack of communication with colleagues resulting in social isolation and trust issues from digital supervision which can deteriorate employee well-being in the long-run. Several studies have discussed that e-working weakens or diminishes the recovery or respite period that people receive from their homes, as it creates an ‘always on’ culture, which causes an inability to differentiate work and life domains that could possibly affect the mental wellbeing (Kossek *et al.*, 2009) [38]. The purpose of the current study is to evaluate the relationship between remote work and its implications on the well-being of employees in the light of the blurred lines of professional and personal spaces through an analysis of the literature that links e-working to workers’ mental health and psychological wellbeing.

Conceptualizing Remote Work

Remote work is a flexible working arrangement that allows employees to perform their job duties from a distant location or from their homes through the assistance of information and communication technology. E-working arrangements facilitate a working practice that weakens the concept of a central work setting; it helps for a better work life balance, and provides scope to work beyond the bounds of a specific location (Prasad *et al.*, 2020) [49]. Previous research suggests that remote work could be both beneficial and detrimental from different angles, it allows for better work life balance, improved flexibility, increased productivity and engagement

(Grant *et al.*, 2013) [26], along with improved engagement and reduced stress, it could be beneficial for cutting the cost of maintaining a centralized workplace, such as electricity, rental, supplies, and infrastructural expenses, along with commutation cost to employees during their travel, and the time lost during the process (Molino *et al.*, 2020) [47]. Studies shows that work life balance, mental wellbeing and learning are crucial for improved satisfaction, commitment and employee retention (Deery, 2008; Radda *et al.*, 2015) [16, 50]. Therefore, remote work or the resultant flexibility and work life balance allows for better retention of employees. Regardless of the aforesaid favourable effect of remote or e-working, it can negatively affect individuals and organization. Several studies discuss such consequences of remote work that can adversely affect employees as opposed to working from an office space. (Song and Gao, 2019) [63] Suggests based on a study of 3962 full time employees that telework causes increased stress levels whilst decreasing happiness. Remote working may cause deteriorated wellbeing, increased pressure and overload of work (Charalampous *et al.*, 2019; Barber and Santuzzi, 2015) [27, 3]. Working beyond normal working hours and blurred boundaries of work and life, causes heightened stress, and affected performance and effectiveness (Chesley, 2014; Grant *et al.*, 2019) [12, 10]. Social isolation is another factor that affected the mental health of e-workers whereas, lack of communication or grapevine with colleagues have caused a negative impact on the wellbeing as suggested by studies. Remote workers were more isolated, detached, and anonymous during e-work, whilst autonomy and determination helped them (Sewell and Taskin, 2015) [62]. There are possibilities of trust issues associated with digital supervision as suggested by several studies. Remote workers had to put on an extra effort to make themselves appear trustworthy, and managers had to go a bit further than usual to establish trust. Workers had to rearrange the boundaries of work and life, and had to work on time managing skills, socializing with colleagues, and active display of achievements (Richardson and McKenna, 2014) [53].

Well Being

Employee wellbeing is an essential part of the overall mental, physical and emotional health of individuals in an organization. It relates to enhancing the health of employees from several dimensions which is not limited to physical health, but to the way people engage in work, their presumptions, that affects the overall health and happiness. It is defined from several perspectives among scholars, a definition states that well-being consists of six factors; a workload that’s attainable, positive workplace connections, sufficient control in the work, managerial and co-worker support, role clarity and participation in the organizational changes (Guest and Conway, 2004) [31]. Studies states that quality of life highly correlates with the perceived wellbeing of individuals (Warr, 2002) [70], whereas few studies states wellbeing is related to the environmental factors where people work, that encourages a sense of safety and respite; workplaces that exude a feeling of joy and stimulation (Bakke, 2006; Currie, 2001) [2, 15]. Van Horn *et al.* (2004) [68] described employee wellbeing as a multidimensional construct that consists of five dimensions which are illustrated as follows.

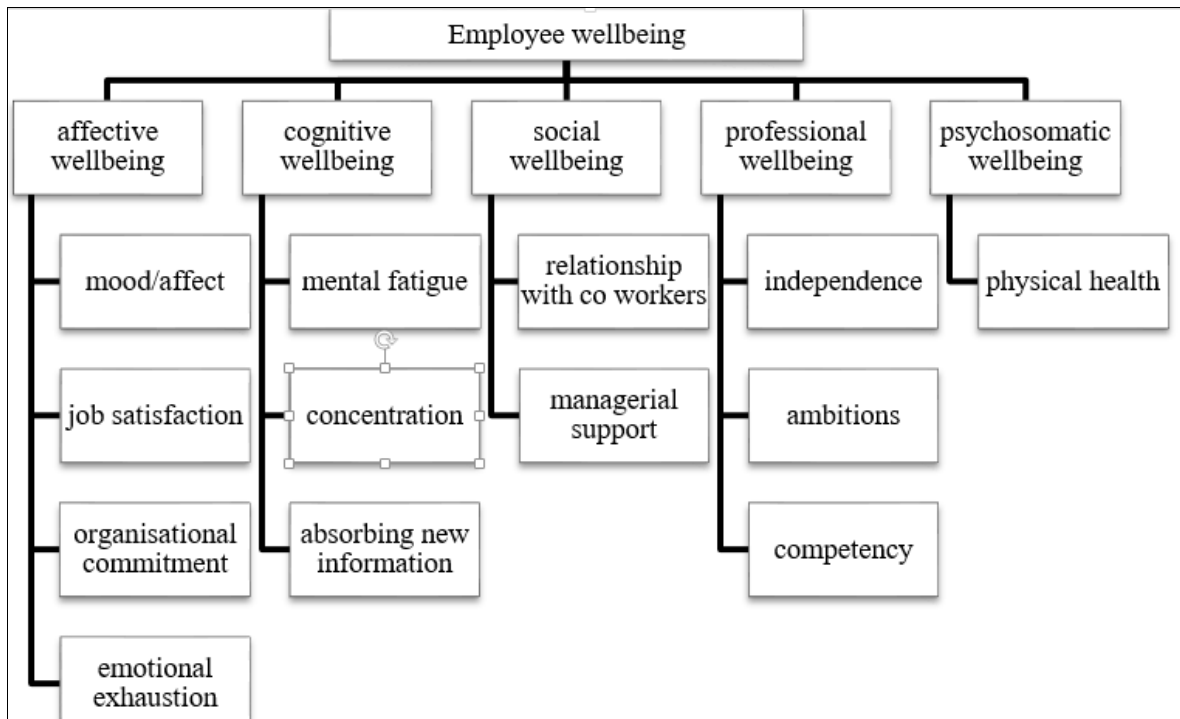


Fig 1: Five dimensions of well-being demonstrated according to Van Horn *et al.* (2004) ^[68].

Relied on the studies conducted by (Ryff, 1989) ^[57] and (Warr, 1987) ^[68] to propose a model that encompasses both the studies into a holistic structure. Among his dimensions affective, professional and social wellbeing took its roots from the aforesaid studies, whereas psychosomatic and cognitive wellbeing was based on earlier research. Another study made by (Steel *et al.*, 2008) ^[64] states that there are six dimensions to employee wellbeing; self-acceptance, positive workplace relationships, independence and autonomy of job, purpose, mastery of environment, and growth. In the discussion of well-being theory, there is diversity in the perspectives among scholars. As there is complexity in defining the concept; several doctrines exist in literature (Carter, 2016) ^[8].

To roughly classify, it falls into two streams of thought; namely, hedonic and eudemonic. The hedonic perspective states that human happiness relies on the collection of experiences of pleasure or enjoyment. In the hedonic approach to well-being, it describes well-being with regard to gaining pleasure and aversion of pain (Kahneman *et al.*, 1999) ^[33]. In the eudemonic view, well-being is based on the development of a person in terms of a purpose in life and its attainment, honesty towards the subconscious self, mastery of environment, that in turn resulting in positive mental health (Marrero *et al.*, 2021) ^[22]. The eudemonic view relies on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 1970) ^[46] where it states that attaining self-actualization results in positive well-being, where achieving one's full potential is a fulfilling experience. How people perceive things, their thought process, and how they feel about things around them, directly influences their life and the living condition of people who are connected to them (Michalos, 2007) ^[40]. An approach by (Diener, 1984) ^[18] discusses wellbeing in the light of both the aforesaid streams of thought; namely, hedonic and eudemonic. It focuses on how people assess their quality of life, based on both affective experiences as

well as cognitive perspectives (Diener *et al.*, 1997) ^[19]. Thus, it is called the subjective wellbeing theory (SWB). It is defined in terms of how people evaluate their life in the light of both cognitive and affective spheres. The cognitive part of subjective wellbeing consists of satisfaction with the life in its entirety, and the affective part discusses the positive affect (happiness, excitement, pleasure, love) and negative affect (anxiety, sadness, ill temper) (Cohn *et al.*, 2009) ^[14]. Another theory of wellbeing is the six factor model of psychological wellbeing proposed by (Ryff, 1995) ^[58]. Carol D. Ryff proposed PWB as a six factor model to explain the components of wellbeing. The six factors in PWB rely on the eudemonic perspective of well-being. They are namely; personal growth, autonomy, positive relationships, self-acceptance, meaning and purpose, environmental mastery (Ryff, 1995) ^[58].

Another prominent theory in defining wellbeing is attempted by Martin Seligman, renowned as Seligman's PERMA theory of wellbeing. In which he integrates the hedonic and eudemonic approaches of wellbeing. In his model, he states that there are five core components to wellbeing or a flourishing life; namely, Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning & Purpose and Achievement (PERMA) (Seligman, 2011) ^[61]. The positive emotion is a part of hedonic view that discuss pleasure and happiness. Engagement relates to the mental attachment with the job or organization (absorption, vigour, and dedication as stated by (Schaufeli, 2009) ^[60]. Positive relationships relates to the social connections people maintain at the workplace, such as co-worker and managerial support and attachment. Meaning is about the perception about how life in general, the value people sees in it, and a feeling of being part of something bigger. Achievement relates to capabilities and sense of accomplishment. The prominent theories in well-being are illustrated as follows for a better review.

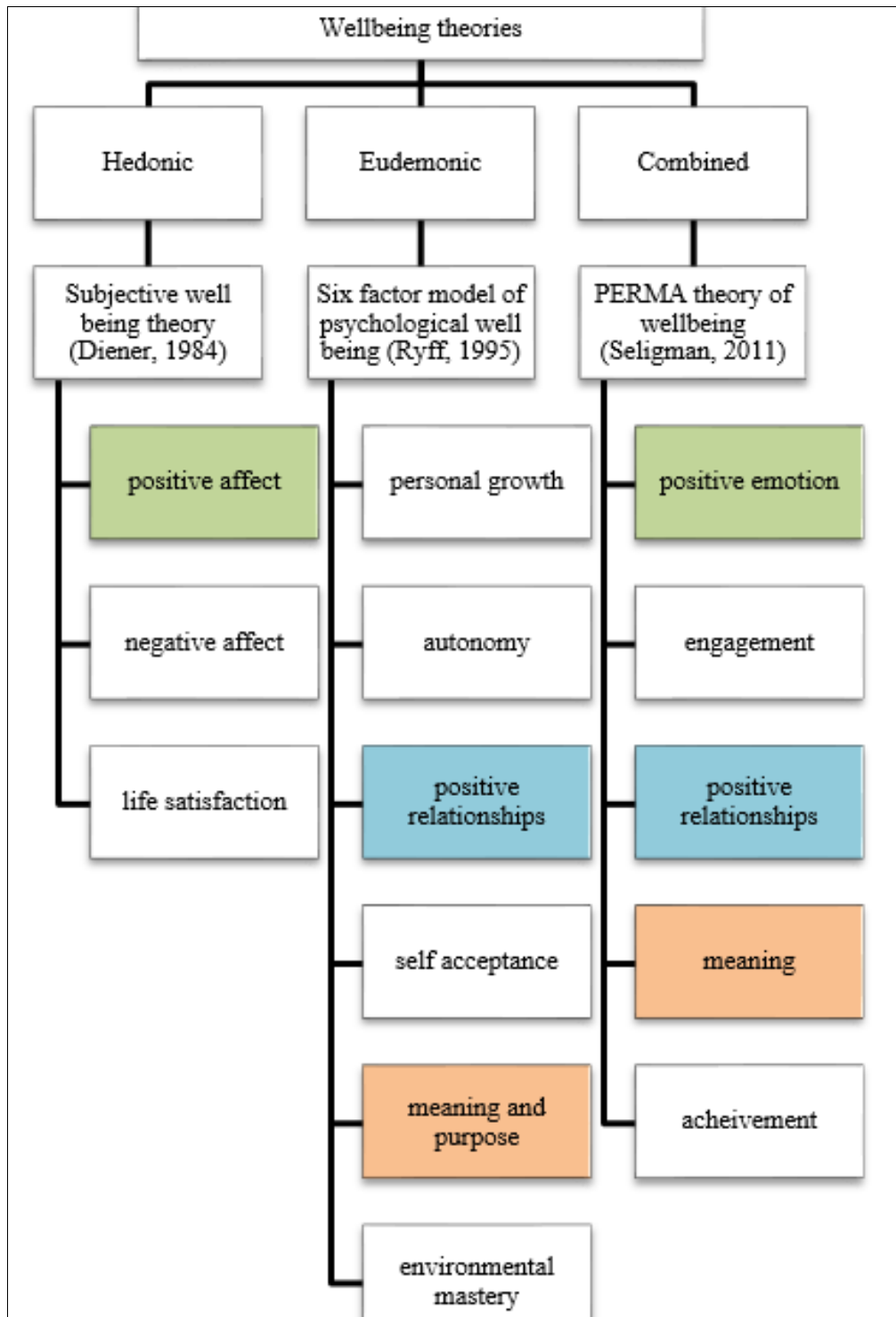


Fig 2: Illustration of well-being theory

Conceptualizing work and life domain and the interaction

People exist in several spheres and play a variety of roles throughout their lives. They are employees, partners, parents, children etc, and each role comes with its own duties and responsibilities. As the same person goes through all the roles, and both the domains of personal life and work, there exists a chance of role and work-life conflict. Work life balance is about reducing such conflicts and attaining what is required for different roles. The concept of work life balance took its roots early in 1970s (Lockwood, 2003) [42]. During the initial period, work life balance was discussed due to women entering the workplaces, as the family

responsibility became shared; a need for managing the conflict in both domains emerged, and as a result, work life balance came into discussion (Fleetwood, 2007) [21]. Work life balance is a state when there is attainment of satisfaction in both work and life domains, and such an achievement is a result of division of resources such as time, responsibility and energy to both work and life domains (Kirchmeyer, 2000) [37].

Work-life interface: Work-life interface is the border or boundary that interconnects work and personal life of an individual. The interface has two kind of association depending on the direction, the work affecting the personal life and the personal life affecting the work. The influence

can be positive, that experiences in one domain positively influence the other; termed as work-life enrichment. On the other hand, it can be negative, that both domains come into a disagreement; termed as work-life conflict (Greenhaus *et*

al., 2011) [28]. Several theories exist that describes the relationship between work and life domains. The prominent approaches to define the work life interface are illustrated as follows;

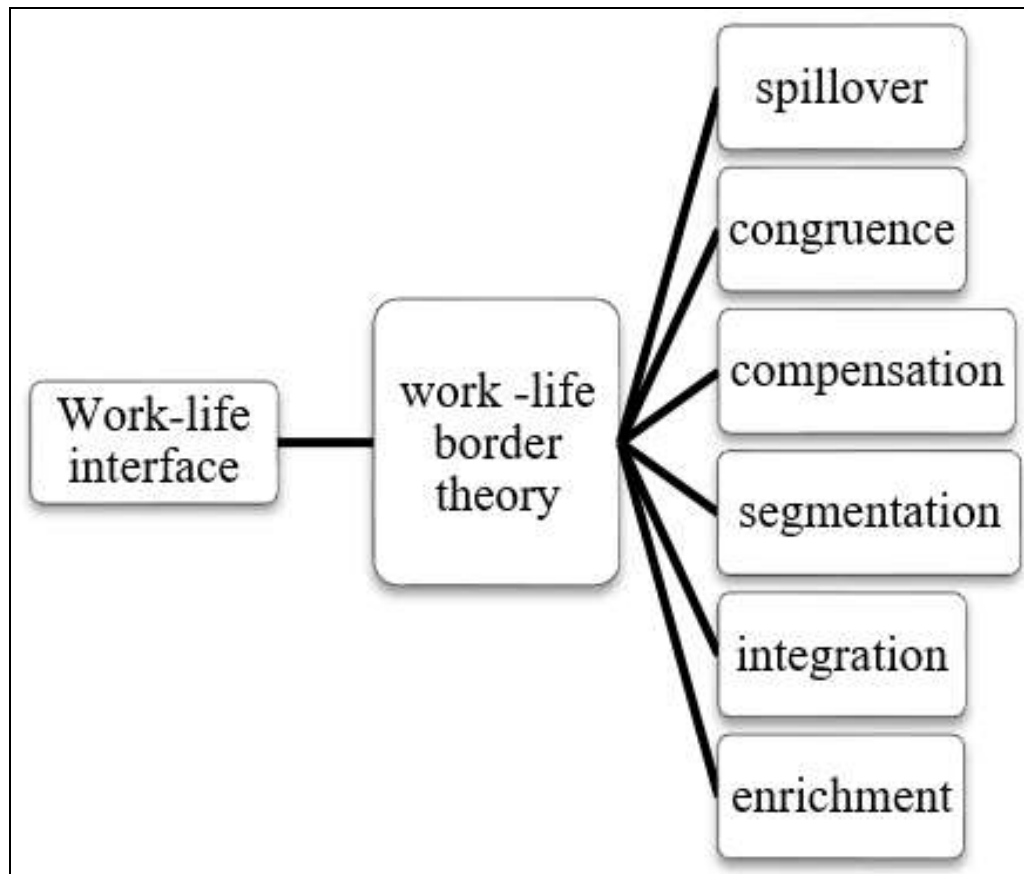


Fig 3: Approaches to define work-life interface.

Work-life border and boundary theory-work family or work life border theory is a fundamental theory that recognizes the presence of the border or boundary between work and personal life. The theory states that the border is permeable and individual cross the boundary and move in and out through the divide between both the domains. It is opposed to the segmentation theory that states that the boundary is impermeable and both domains exist independent of each other (Clark, 2000 and Guest, 2002) [13].

Spill-over theory: The spill-over approach states that experiences in one domain spill over to the other domain. A positive and fulfilling experience in one domain, say work may positively influence the personal life, and vice versa. The conduct, skills, and frame of mind in a particular role affect the other role (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000) [20]. It occurs due to transference of skills, values from one domain to another (Repetti, 1987) [52].

Congruence: Congruence approach discuss the presence of additional or a third factor that can influence the work-life relationship. The third variable can be related to the personality or individual traits such as intelligence, skills, and qualifications or organizational and socio cultural that can affect the work-life interface (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000) [20].

Compensation: Compensation refers to overcoming the negative experiences or problems faced in one domain through a more active involvement in the other domain (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000) [20]. It can be reactive and

supplemental, in reactive approach, negative experiences are countered with positive experiences in the other domain, and in supplemental approach, shortcomings or insufficiency of positive experiences are balanced in the other domain (Zedeck and Mosier, 1990) [72].

Segmentation: Segmentation is an approach that sees both work and life are totally distinct and separate domains that does not allow permeability or crossing (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000) [20]. Earlier, there existed a natural distinction between both the domains of work and life, and as technological interventions came, and research developed, it is observed that it no longer holds true (Kanter, 1977; Zedeck, 1992) [34, 72]. Now, segmentation is seen as an active process that is intended to manage both work and life domains and to form a proper boundary (Philip and Dumas, 2005; Kossek *et al.*, 2009) [56, 39].

Integration: Integration theory states that work and life domains are closely attached or integrated that they cannot be separated or seen as two independent spheres as observed by segmentation approach. It relies on blending the roles and responsibilities of both work and life together (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000) [20].

Enrichment: enrichment is referred to as how experiences in a domain enhances the quality of life in another domain, that positive and fulfilling experiences in one domain enriches the life in the other domain (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006) [29]. Affective sources (frame of mind, happiness) and instrumental sources (skills, capabilities) in a particular

domain enriches the QOL of the other domain (Morris *et al.*, 2007) ^[48].

Rationale and Method

Working remotely has helped organizations to effectively manage a workforce at difficult times, such as pandemic and lockdowns where employees cannot access to a physical location away from home. Technological interventions have contributed to the advent of modern e-working where employees can work flexibly at any place or location apart from a central workplace setup (Richardson & Benbunan-Fich, 2011) ^[54]. Literature states that though remote working has a beneficial side, it comes with a potentially detrimental image as well. Integrating the remote work and work life balance theories, it is observed that boundary management between work and life becomes challenging when it comes to remote work. As technological interventions facilitate a

constant connection with the workplace, people find it difficult to detach them from work, resulting in an ‘always on’ culture. The boundary of work-life becomes increasingly blurred during e-work, which in turn leads to exhaustion and depleted wellbeing (Wepfer, A.G. *et al.*, 2017) ^[71]. The aims of the research are as follows;

1. To assess the relationship between remote work and employee wellbeing based on the existing literature.
2. To review the dimensions of employee well being affected by remote work.
3. To elicit the role of a blurred work-life boundary based on the work life border theory in the association between remote work and employee wellbeing.

The conceptual framework of the research is illustrated as follows;

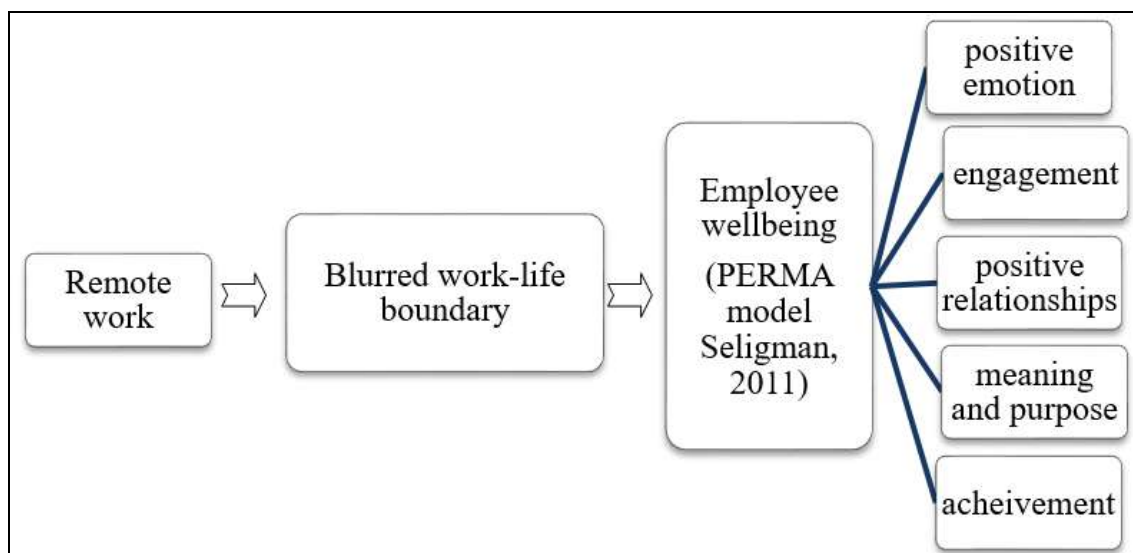


Fig 4: Conceptual framework of the research.

Remote work and employee well being

There is an increasing attention recently on the discussion of relationship between remote work and employee wellbeing owing to the emergence of remote working and flexible working arrangements as the ‘new normal’ in the workplace, as organizations increasingly integrate distance working into the culture, advancement in the information and communication technology accelerates such a transformation. Digital technology is the foundation upon which remote working is established, enabling seamless connectivity to the workplace whilst being physically away from it; at the downside, remote work can make work a process that’s inseparable from life, blurring the boundaries between work and personal life (Park *et al.*, 2011) ^[9]. Seligman (2011) ^[61] states that employee wellbeing has five core components which are illustrated above, literature that probes into the relationship between remote work and wellbeing components are discussed as follows.

The study of Song & Gao (2019) ^[63] observes that remote work causes elevated levels of stress whilst decreasing the happiness of employees. They conducted the survey on 3962 full time workers in the United States. Happiness relates to ‘positive emotion’ component in the wellbeing scale. Kazekami (2020) ^[35] observes that though there is an increase in the stress level, an increase in the happiness is also observed on male employees, whereas no changes are

there on females. Anderson *et al.* (2015) ^[1] states that positive and negative affect were influenced greatly with the individual differences, for people who are more socially connected felt more positive effect compared to people who are not. Vander Est *et al.* (2017) observes that there is an increased emotional exhaustion (affective component) and stress with decreased social support (positive relationships component), as remote work relates negatively with social support.

Redman *et al.* (2009) ^[51] state that remote working arrangements improves the positive affect or emotion positively, whereas it is negatively related to emotional exhaustion and it shows an increased job satisfaction. Mann and Holdsworth (2003) ^[44] observe that remote work induces negative emotions on employees, such loneliness and moodiness. Mann *et al.* (2000) ^[45] states that there is a small positive improvement in the affective wellbeing of employees through remote work as the commutation to office spaces and related stress can be avoided, whereas there is an increased negative emotion relating to loneliness and frustration. Tietze and Nadin (2011) ^[66] found that there is a decreased level of colleague or co-worker support as a result of resentment from office workers to remote workers, and lessened managerial trust on remote employees. Caillier (2012) ^[7] states that people who are not permitted to perform remote work has decreased work motivation compared to

people who are allowed. Gajendran and Harrison (2013)^[23] observe that remote work improves job satisfaction and managerial relationship along with autonomy. Sardeshmukh *et al.* (2012)^[59] have found that remote working decreases exhaustion and social support whilst improving job autonomy. They have used JDR model to explain the phenomena, as job demands such as pressure of time, role stress are reduced, and an improvement in job resources through autonomy, support etc are observed. Sewell and Taskin (2015)^[62] have observed that social isolation has increased during remote work as employees felt invisible during work, and autonomy showed an improvement and relationships were strained. Richardson and McKenna (2014)^[53] observe that remote workers had to put in an extra effort to make they appear trustworthy to managers. Grant *et al.* (2013)^[26] observes that co-worker support and communication helped remote working arrangements to go smoother, building relationships and permeable boundaries helped the system. Bentley *et al.* (2016)^[6] have found that increased support from the organization and managers helped reducing the negative effects of remote working such as employee stress and strain. Becker *et al.* (2022)^[5] have found that increased job control associated with remote work has decreased exhaustion and work life balance, whilst it increased loneliness. Gillet *et al.* (2022)^[24] observes that remote work has duality of impact as it can reduce the negative side of work centrality on family relationships and satisfaction and at the same time decreasing the positive aspect of work centrality on engagement.

Discussion

Inferring from the literature we can observe that there is a mixed opinion among scholars relating to remote work and associated stress, happiness, and exhaustion. Majority of the studies observes that though remote work is associated with decreased exhaustion and increased happiness and stress, the relationship is often controlled by the level of social and organizational support, as with increased support remote work is found to be beneficial to employees and organization. At the same time, remote work is found to be associated with high autonomy and job control which can positively affect engagement and satisfaction. Lack of supervisory support and communication along with its negative effects such as social isolation, loneliness and frustration can lead to decreased happiness and increased exhaustion and stress which in turn results in lower wellbeing.

The role of blurred work-life boundary in the relationship between remote work and wellbeing is inevitable in the light of hastened changes in the working arrangements and modern work practices. As remote work arrangements bring work and life domains closer, theories relating to work family conflict and balance proves to be insufficient to fully understand the phenomena, as the segmentation or duality concept of work and life is redundant and insufficient to cover the dynamics of modern workplace. Thus, we have to consider approaches that inculcate a broader plain that discuss not only the conflict, but enrichment as well (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006)^[29]. The work family border theory by (Clarke, 2000)^[13] recognizes the presence of a boundary or a border between work and life of an employee, and it observes that the boundaries can be blurred, or become permeable that individuals can traverse through

roles across the border.

Remote work can be explained through the blurred work life boundary as individuals could not differentiate work and life as they are brought too closer in the arrangement. On the positive side, it can be enriching and contributing to an increased wellbeing owing to increased autonomy, job control and decreased conflict. At the downside, it makes work inseparable from life, allowing lower respite period, social isolation increased stress and exhaustion causing decreased wellbeing. To control the detrimental effect of the blurred work life border through remote work, employers has to establish proper managerial support, communication and well-designed work hours to manage the stress and exhaustion levels.

Conclusion

As workplaces increasingly adapt to digital communication technology, working from home arrangements are becoming a commonplace. As remote work becomes a parlance for people at work, it is shaping how people and organizations approach and perceive the working arrangements. At the same time, remote work is seen as a system that has duality of consequences, as it can affect an organization in both ways. A well planned and tailored arrangement can benefit an organization and its employees improving the overall productivity and wellbeing. An unplanned and defective system would further complicate the workplace dynamics and employee wellbeing.

Thus addressing how remote work is associated with employee wellbeing in the light of a blurred work life boundary as its result is the major discussion of this paper. It is observed that remote work greatly helps in improving the job autonomy, control, improved work life balance, flexibility, productivity and engagement provided under the right circumstances. On the contrary, absence of ample supervisory support and communication, social isolation, lack of respite period, unclear working hours, always on culture, lack of trust can escalate employee stress, exhaustion and decreased wellbeing. The working arrangement needs to be tailored keeping in view of the employee wellbeing and organizational requirements. The future research should address interventions that can effectively control the negative impact of the blurred work life boundary as a result of remote work, and how people can better manage their roles in work and life in a system which makes work and life inseparable.

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