

# Roads to recovery in remote working. Exploration of the perceptions of energy-consuming elements of remote work and self-promoted strategies toward psychological detachment

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper examines an employee's recovery process in the remote-working context. It explores which elements of remote work are energy-consuming for employees and what action they can take to instigate the essential recovery strategy of psychological detachment.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study adopts a qualitative research approach based on 89 semi-structured interviews with employees working from home with six large corporations from multiple industries. The data were interpreted using thematic analysis.

**Findings** – The study identifies a main theme – the energy-consuming elements of remote work – and three sub-themes: extended working hours, intensive working and reduced social support. Each theme incorporates elements controlled by individuals (internal) and those beyond their control (external). Second, the authors identified strategies that helped individuals to detach from work, and devised four sub-themes, the authors labeled cognitive controlling, physical disconnection from work, time-bound routines and non-work activities.

**Originality/value** – This is the first study to focus on recovery as a process in the context of remote working, and it contributes to the knowledge of psychological detachment and strategies for recovery and to the literature on contemporary remote working.

**Keywords** Remote work, Psychological detachment, Recovery strategies, COVID-19

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic made remote working the new normal, and a complete return to pre-pandemic working life is unlikely (ILO, 2022; Teevan *et al.*, 2022). Accordingly, there is a demand to understand remote working and how employees experience it. Many remote workers' primary workplace is now their home (Eurofound, 2022), but combining home and work locations blurs the boundary between the two environments (Haun *et al.*, 2022). As a result, the home environment can become permeated by work outside working hours, hindering psychological detachment from work (Charalampous *et al.*, 2022; Kinnunen *et al.*, 2016; Sonnentag *et al.*, 2010). Psychological detachment is a process that restores employees' energetic and mental resources consumed by demands imposed by work (Zijlstra *et al.*, 2014) and is an essential prerequisite of effective recovery (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007). It is. While relaxation,



mastery and control over leisure can also aid recovery (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007), prior studies have identified psychological detachment as the most significant recovery experience (de Jonge *et al.*, 2012; Sonnentag and Fritz, 2015). The essential role of psychological detachment in recovery and the threat to it posed by working from home (Charalampous *et al.*, 2022) motivated the current study.

Recent research reveals how employee actions can affect psychological detachment (Luta *et al.*, 2021; Sonnentag *et al.*, 2022; Sonnentag and Niessen, 2020), and the current study complements that research by focusing on strategies promoting psychological detachment to aid recovery in a remote-working context.

Psychological detachment from work and the subsequent recovery process is necessary because failure to recover can impair health and well-being (Fritz and Sonnentag, 2005; Sonnentag *et al.*, 2008). Ongoing exposure to workload and strain without appropriate recovery can result in negative physical and psychological health effects; fatigue, sleeping problems and exhaustion (Sianoja *et al.*, 2018; Siltaloppi *et al.*, 2009; Sonnentag *et al.*, 2008). Impaired well-being is linked to negative organizational outcomes such as reduced performance levels (Bakker and Bal, 2010; Tanskanen *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, it is important to understand the process of recovery from work and how psychological detachment can be promoted to support well-being among employees working remotely (Charalampous *et al.*, 2022). The current study aims to fill a research gap arising from strategies for psychological detachment in the context of remote work being understudied (Gillet *et al.*, 2022; Haun *et al.*, 2022; Kubicek *et al.*, 2022; Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė *et al.*, 2022; Smith *et al.*, 2021; Sonnentag *et al.*, 2010; Tedone, 2022; Trógolo *et al.*, 2022).

Past recovery studies utilized the effort-recovery (E-R) theory devised by Meijman and Mulder (1998) (e.g. Minkkinen *et al.*, 2021; Pereira and Elfering, 2014). The theory proposes that people routinely strive to meet work-related demands and, in doing so, activate their stress system, leading to energy consumption and an elevated need for recovery (Geurts and Sonnentag, 2006; Meijman and Mulder, 1998). Here, we follow the logic of E-R theory by focusing on energy-consuming elements of remote work that can increase the need for recovery among remote-working employees. We acknowledge that by focusing only on the demands imposed by remote work, we are not covering the full spectrum of employee experiences, and the positive aspects of remote working are beyond the purview of this study.

Furthermore, E-R theory suggests that recovery occurs when the individual is no longer exposed to work demands. However, that suggestion has been criticized for being too simplistic and ignoring the processual nature of recovery (Zijlstra *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, acknowledging conservation of resources theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 2001), we assume that employees working remotely aim to replenish the resources consumed by their work (i.e. energy) and, moreover, that their personal resources (e.g. self-regulation skills) play an important role in the dynamic process of recovery via strategies fostering psychological detachment (Zijlstra *et al.*, 2014).

Most empirical recovery studies are based on a quantitative research design (e.g. Gillet *et al.*, 2022; for a review, see Sonnentag *et al.*, 2022). We found only two studies focusing on self-promoted strategies to improve psychological detachment. One relied on a qualitative approach to elicit students' experiences via group interviews (Luta *et al.*, 2021), while the other was conducted in a laboratory setting and utilized quantitative research methods (Sonnentag and Niessen, 2020).

The current research adopts a qualitative approach to expose this little-researched phenomenon. It explores (1) what elements of remote work employees perceive are energy-consuming and (2) what self-promoted strategies foster the essential recovery strategy of psychological detachment. This study contributes to knowledge of remote working and recovery from work.

## 2. Recovery from work in the context of remote working at home

### 2.1 Remote working at home demands effort

Remote working was once considered a privilege and a voluntary arrangement to introduce flexibility and enhance work-life balance (Kossek and Lautsch, 2018). The response to the COVID-19 pandemic transformed remote working from a voluntary arrangement to an enforced form of work, leading to the extensive adoption of remote working in almost all major economies (Eurofound, 2020, 2022). Now a mixture of office and home working is far more established than previously, one reason for that being that employees have come to value the flexibility and enhanced work-life balance remote working offers (Adekoya *et al.*, 2022; Gajendran *et al.*, 2015; Golden and Gajendran, 2019). However, unrestrained remote work can be burdensome for employees and jeopardize their well-being and working ability (Charalampous *et al.*, 2022).

Some research indicates employees working remotely believe their workload increased during the pandemic (Carillo *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2021). Recent studies also suggest that the growth of remote working has spurred a new *overwork* culture in which employees devote more time to work, regardless of whether they chose to work remotely from home or if doing so was mandated by their employer (Charalampous *et al.*, 2022; Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė *et al.*, 2022). Working more diligently when at home might reflect gratitude for being permitted to work flexibly or a heightened sense of responsibility (Eddleston and Mulki, 2017). The burgeoning of work-related technology available in the home might also trigger an urge to work (Barber *et al.*, 2019; Suh and Lee, 2017).

Lapierre *et al.* (2016) conducted a longitudinal study following the implementation of a new cost-saving policy in a global financial services organization in the Netherlands. They found staff worked more hours each week when the proportion of remote working increased, even when remote working was not entirely voluntary. In addition, those employees who involuntarily worked remotely were likely to experience heightened strain-based work-family conflict and report negative consequences of remote working. Greater work demands and longer working days will likely tally with a greater need for recovery (Sonnentag and Zijlstra, 2006).

Another explanation for the increased need for recovery connected to remote working might relate to how work is delivered. In general, remote workers report they are more focused on work and more efficient owing to fewer interruptions than in their office environment (Maruyama and Tietze, 2012). As a result, employees can invest greater effort in their work (Felstead and Henseke, 2017; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Shirmohammadi *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, the absence of interruptions and willingness to invest extra effort into work leaves less room for recovery during working hours and increases the need for recovery after work (Bosch *et al.*, 2018; Coffeng *et al.*, 2015; Demerouti *et al.*, 2012).

Moreover, remote working cannot be separated from an increased sense of professional and social isolation (Charalampous *et al.*, 2022; Kossen and Berg, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021) and the consequential lack of social support (Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012). Social isolation is likely to extend over time as remote working continues while social networks and related support reduce (Collins *et al.*, 2016). Subsequently, prolonged exposure to negative experiences, such as worry and lack of sufficient support, can eventually hinder restoration and increase the need for recovery after work (Radstaak *et al.*, 2011; Sonnentag and Zijlstra, 2006).

Researchers have committed to developing strategies to manage the challenges of remote working (Charalampous *et al.*, 2022; Grant *et al.*, 2019; Kubicek *et al.*, 2022). However, we have identified only one study exploring detachment from work as a well-being challenge stemming from remote work and related coping strategies (Charalampous *et al.*, 2022). That study found that time saved commuting enhanced detachment, although access to work through technology, an expectation of availability, and limited remote-working experience presented barriers to detachment. However, Charalampous *et al.* (2022) only covered

detachment briefly, among other important themes related to well-being, whereas our study investigates it comprehensively.

Identifying the mechanisms encouraging recovery and forestalling the harmful effects of remote working is important because it is likely to be a key aspect of working life in the future (Moreno-Jiménez *et al.*, 2012; Sonnentag and Zijlstra, 2006). Therefore, the following section reviews existing knowledge on psychological detachment as a recovery experience and the mechanisms that can help individuals balance the need for recovery attributable to remote working.

## 2.2 Psychological detachment from work in the context of remote working from home

The concept of psychological detachment was initially introduced by Etzion and associates (Etzion *et al.*, 1998) and described as “an individual’s sense of being away from the work situation.” Psychological detachment, also termed *switching off*, refers to both a physical and mental distancing from work and involves not doing work or entertaining work-related thoughts (Sonnentag *et al.*, 2022; Sonnentag and Bayer, 2005; Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007; Sonnentag and Niessen, 2020).

People’s ability to psychologically detach from work is determined by personality traits (Potok and Littman-Ovadia, 2014; Reis and Prestele, 2020), their preference for detachment (Jalonen *et al.*, 2015; Sonnentag and Fritz, 2015) and their social environment (Hahn *et al.*, 2014; Hahn and Dormann, 2013; Sonnentag and Schiffner, 2019). At the same time, a high cognitive load and stressors at work can prevent detachment from it (Kubicek *et al.*, 2022; Sonnentag and Fritz, 2015). Kubicek and colleagues (*ibid.*) found that in the case of remote working, the daily demand to coordinate work with others increases daily cognitive load and therefore hinders sufficient detachment from work at home. Interestingly, the same study did not establish that the daily demands of structuring work enhanced cognitive load jeopardized detachment among individuals; instead, those demands encouraged routine learning and cognitive flexibility.

Psychological detachment sometimes occurs automatically, but might also be deliberately induced through activity (Luta *et al.*, 2021; Sonnentag and Niessen, 2020). Detachment literature introduces interventions linked to cognitive paths that prevent work-related cognition and emotions from intruding into leisure time (Althammer *et al.*, 2021; Karabinski *et al.*, 2021; Smit, 2016). Pursuing hobbies or socializing to spur a shift of focus offers another way to detach (Hahn and Dormann, 2013; Luta *et al.*, 2021; Sonnentag and Lischetzke, 2018).

Detachment literature shows people’s ability to set boundaries for their work is an important determinant of psychological detachment (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Haun *et al.*, 2022). A high degree of work-home segmentation predicts more efficient psychological detachment. Establishing sufficient temporal, physical and technological boundaries enhances a person’s detachment from work (Haun *et al.*, 2022; Kinnunen *et al.*, 2017; Sonnentag *et al.*, 2010). Boundary creation around work-related technology (e.g. keeping devices for work and personal use separate) can reduce intrusive work thoughts during non-working time and foster efficient psychological detachment (Barber and Jenkins, 2014; Michel *et al.*, 2014; Sandoval-Reyes *et al.*, 2019).

The existing literature on recovery indicates a need to understand what makes breaks from work effective and how awareness of the importance of recovery can help address future work challenges (Sonnentag *et al.*, 2022). That would involve understanding what employees can do to foster recovery processes when facing high levels of work-related load factors (Sonnentag, 2018), like those experienced during remote working (Grant *et al.*, 2013; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Kubicek *et al.*, 2022).

Luta *et al.* (2021) produced the only qualitative study exploring detachment strategies among university students. Students are similar to remote workers in that they integrate studying and home life. Although the sample was limited ( $n = 25$  female students) and the

group interview method selected might have restricted how candid the participants were in the interviews (Luta *et al.*, 2021), the study established that students apply strategies and engage in various leisure activities to safeguard their well-being and implement a mental separation from their study responsibility. The research suggests some activities, including physical activity and listening to music, are more effective than others, such as socializing or napping. However, the authors acknowledged further exploration of more diverse samples and using other methods would be worthwhile (e.g. individual interviews).

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that a study conducted by Charalampous *et al.* (2022) touched upon this topic and noted that employees working remotely mentioned coping strategies that aided detachment from work. Those coping strategies included dedicated offices at home, separate phones for work and private use and setting rules around e-mail use. The current study continues that discussion and explores the phenomenon further.

In light of the above, our study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What elements of remote work do employees perceive to be energy-consuming? And (2) what strategies promote the essential recovery strategy of psychological detachment? We next outline the dataset and methods of this study before presenting our findings.

### 3. Method

This section describes the methodology of our qualitative study and the data collection procedure and also offers a step-by-step view of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

#### 3.1 Study participants

In October and December 2020, we interviewed 89 employees from six large-sized private corporations operating in telecommunications, the technology industry, information technology, insurance and services. At the time of the interviews, all the companies had directives in place for remote working in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Managers of remote teams were invited to join the study in each company. Team managers who accepted the request were invited to interview and to forward the invitation to between three and five team members. All but four participants were working fully from home at the time of the study and had done so for at least six months; the other four were partly working from home. The respondents would normally work mainly at their employer's premises. The majority of the participants lived in Finland at the time of the interviews, but two lived elsewhere in Europe. The participants were aged between 23 and 60, with a mean age of 41.64 (six participants did not report their age). More than half were women (62.9%), and nearly half of all participants (48.3%) had children under the age of 18 living at home. The background information on the participants is summarized in Table A1.

#### 3.2 Data collection

We followed a thematic interview guide to ensure that the interviews covered the themes the research team was interested in. The interview guide was loosely structured and allowed room for the participants to raise spontaneous issues and for the researchers to ask follow-up questions (Mason, 2002; Weller *et al.*, 2018). The interviews included three themes: work-life balance, leadership and well-being. For instance, as a part of the work-life balance theme, the participants were asked to describe their working environment at home, a typical remote working day and to elaborate on how they managed the two life spheres.

The interviews were conducted by a six-person research team via an audio or video conference link and then recorded. The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 min and were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. The interview excerpts used here were translated into English by the authors.

### 3.3 Data analysis

The team conducted a thematic analysis assisted by NVivo 11 software. We aimed to identify and interpret key features of the data, guided by the research questions that evolved throughout the coding and theme development process (Braun and Clarke, 2016). The data analysis was conducted in different stages (Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, one of the authors reviewed the complete data to understand how participants spoke about their work well-being and how they linked mandatory remote working to their experiences. The interviewees' accounts of how they managed to psychologically detach from work became a central theme in the analysis of the narratives on well-being. We subsequently focused on the elements of remote work employees found energy-consuming (representing perceptions of an increased need for recovery) and how our participants described what they did to facilitate a psychological detachment from work.

In the next phase, the first author conducted open coding of the whole data, and all the transcripts were analyzed to the point where it was impossible to identify new codes. Six codes were identified in the experiences related to elements of remote work that reinforced the need for recovery or induced recovery and 11 for strategies to cope with them, representing the activities or actions related to psychological detachment from work.

The research team compared codes and discussed their interpretations several times, going back and forth between the original data and the literature. The authors carefully reviewed and interpreted the content of each theme.

The team next applied logic for inclusion and exclusion (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Three main themes were identified as energy-consuming elements of remote work (*extended working hours, intensive working style and decreased social support*). Within each theme, we recognized narrative patterns representing internal and external elements and four themes promoting recovery (*cognitive controlling, physical disconnection, time-bound routines and engaging in non-work activities*). The codes and themes are summarized in Figure 1.

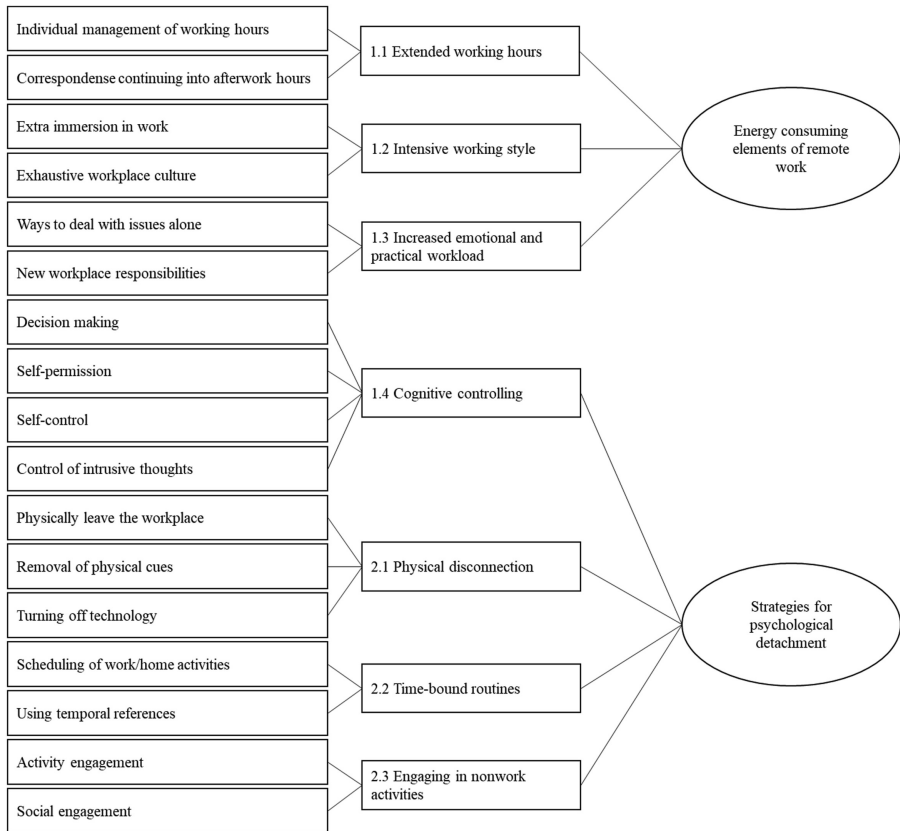
## 4. Findings

Our findings indicate that employees feel the intensive nature of remote work and their homes being transformed into a working environment had changed their experience of working life. First, they discussed elements that consumed their energy and fostered a distinct need for recovery. We identified Theme 1, *Energy-consuming elements of remote work* and three explanatory sub-themes: Theme 1.1: extended working hours, Theme 1.2: intensive working style and Theme 1.3: reduced social support. Two narrative elements were evident in each theme (1) those relating to the participants' own choices and behavior (internal elements) and (2) those relating to perceptions of changes to the context, such as to organizational practices at work (external elements). Second, employees reported the methods they had developed to promote detachment, which aided their recovery from the energy-consuming aspects of remote work. Accordingly, Theme 2 was labeled *Strategies to help individuals detach from remote work*, within which we set four sub-themes: Theme 2.1: *cognitive controlling*, Theme 2.2: *physical disconnection*, Theme 2.3: *time-bound routines* and Theme 2.4: *engaging in non-work activities*.

### 4.1 Theme 1: energy-consuming elements of remote work

The participants described various aspects of remote work that spurred them to increase the effort they put into their work and thus consumed their energy. We found both *internal* and *external* reasons within each of the three themes.

*Theme 1.1 Extended working hours:* Our participants felt the transition to home-working had extended their working hours. While some of our participants managed to align their work with standard office hours, a majority reported that those hours changed, and



**Figure 1.**  
Codes and themes  
derived from the  
analysis

**Source(s):** Author's own creation

numerous participants reported that managing them was a challenge. Although avoiding the daily commute was often reported as a positive and time-saving change, the interviewees also brought up energy-consuming elements. The technology available at home was also said to encourage long working hours. Our interviewees reported they started their working day earlier than usual or finished it later, typically without additional compensation.

Internal reasons for extended working hours related to participants feeling tempted to start working as soon as they awoke, for instance, checking e-mails and addressing urgent issues. Moreover, the participants commonly talked about the struggle to detach themselves from work at the end of the working day, preferring to finish tasks even if that meant doing so after standard working hours. As the next interview excerpt shows, extended working hours were perceived as a new habit and changed behavior followed by the new working circumstances:

The difference [with working at home] is that you leave the office to go home at four pm and leave your work behind. Even if I used to take my (work) phone home, I rarely had to take care of work stuff in my spare time. But now that work is here [at home], I'll take care of just one more thing and another thing, and then I realize that I sit there for much longer. You experience a sort of burnout because of your [increased] productivity. (Male, 45 years, Trainer)

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Beyond personal choices, external reasons for extended working hours were identified. Some employees reported feeling pressured by collective behavior and new norms that arose owing to everyone working remotely. For example, meetings could be scheduled for periods previously spent commuting (mornings and evenings) with an expectation that employees would attend.

It is noticeable that the working days are getting longer. Previously, in the afternoon, people would be asked whether it would be possible to have a call or a meeting at four; now, you automatically get invitations to start at five. We assume people are more available in the evenings when they don't have to drive home from the office. (Female, 43, Finance Director)

*Theme 1.2 Intensive working style:* The home-working regimen also introduced a new and intensive working style resulting in perceptions among staff that they were obliged to increase effort and energy consumption. That intensified working style typically comprised uninterrupted working periods without breaks (or with only very short ones) and increased demand for the coordination and organization of work.

The participants mentioned that their home workplace was conducive to working without interruption, which was an internal element contributing more effort to them than when they worked at an employer's premises. That extra effort could develop into immersion in work. Because the extra focus contributed to increased efficiency, some employees deliberately chose to work in the most productive manner and skipped restorative breaks. Our participants were also concerned about a significant reduction in physical activity during the day, leading to them becoming too sedentary.

At home, I work much more intensively, am more focused, and do more work, which is also a bad thing . . . Coffee breaks are a totally ridiculous notion. I actually don't even want to have them. And for lunches, I quickly eat in front of my computer; if I eat, that is . . . I practically work all day. (Female, 23, Office worker)

Moreover, virtual working seemed to foster a working culture underpinned by a far more exhausting working style, which we interpreted as a sign of external factors spurring increased effort. Our interviewees reported remote working curtailed spontaneous conversation that could obviate the need to write e-mails to colleagues to address issues. Consequently, the respondents faced a mass of daily correspondence quantified by the number of meetings, e-mails and the content of information channels. This trend forced employees to constantly remain alert and led to multitasking, which works against taking restorative breaks. They described their remote-working regimen as wearying.

Now [during remote working], everyone's on their PC all the time, which means there are a lot of contacts arising from many different channels and meetings, and there are a lot of interruptions. I remember we used to brag about having six meetings a day; then, you were tough. Now it's all history. Now it is 12 or more. And some calls between them. The work pace has accelerated and is getting out of hand. People's demand for response speed has increased and causes frustration. (Female 49, Accounting Manager)

*Theme 1.3 Reduced social support:* Most participants felt working in isolation from other employees diminished the social support available (both instrumental and emotional) and hindered their social activity. That change was perceived as energy-consuming. Our interviewees' narratives on this theme included essential elements relating to the lack of naturally occurring social interaction. That reduced availability of emotional support made staff hesitant to ask for it and to feel they should address work issues without calling on others.

Some of our participants thought internal reasons for the reduced social support included being reluctant to contact colleagues, as doing so required writing a note instead



of just shouting for help. They also described how they had developed a barrier to social contact for fear of interrupting a colleague's work. As a result, they referred to less available help with practical work issues and emotional support, for example, when facing hardship at work. Our participants reported that over time the lack of a sufficient social network of colleagues had affected their mental state and created an emotional burden.

Overall, virtually mediated communication was described as *cold* and *impersonal*, which here represents the external context of interactions. Virtual communication creates a platform for misunderstandings between colleagues while providing few opportunities to resolve them. Participants often mentioned that handling conflicts and interpersonal issues was challenging in the remote-working context and many underlying issues remained unresolved. In the following excerpt, a manager explains that the remote-working context complicates the social atmosphere:

Resolving tensions [between people] is easier at coffee tables next to one another, as you can express your feelings. Now [in remote working], the atmosphere intensifies when we rely on e-mail or Teams conversations . . . people overinterpret. (Female, 41, Service Manager)

Some participants explained that unresolved issues hindered recovery after work or even disturbed their sleep. Many admitted that the lack of productive contact with colleagues meant they had begun to offload their work-related mental burden on their partners, which would extend the emotional loading caused by work into leisure time.

Participants also felt practical support at work had decreased and mentioned the expectation that individuals would more often resolve issues by themselves. Whereas at the office, they would have worked with other people or functions to resolve information technology (IT) and connectivity issues or referred matters onward, people working from home tried to manage the situation for as long as possible:

At the office, you would have better support for your work. Now you are responsible for this work, and you spend a lot more time trying to solve the issue on your own before you start calling for help. (Female, 26, Sales Manager)

We now move on to outline the strategies our participants described as fostering their psychological detachment and recovery from work.

#### 4.2 Theme 2: strategies that helped individuals detach from remote work

We recognized four themes relating to deliberately formulated ways to counter the energy-sapping elements of remote work through detachment. The following interview excerpt describes how the respondent had to train themselves to develop self-control:

In the beginning, it was difficult to cut off from work . . . Since I trained myself how to do it, it has been going well. (Male, 32, Customer Service Specialist)

*Theme 2.1 Cognitive controlling:* We identified detachment strategies that involved conscious thought management, which we labeled *cognitive controlling*. This theme includes thought processes, including assessment, decision-making and reasoning, intended to prevent work-related thoughts from intruding into leisure time. Our participants said they would prevent themselves from thinking about work during leisure periods by resolutely avoiding work-related behaviors. In addition, they talked about managing thoughts that arose about work during non-working hours. The most frequent scenario was consciously avoiding addressing work messages to detach from work, as the following excerpt shows:

Now the computer is here at home all the time, and it somehow invites me to work . . . I'm a bit of a workaholic, so first, I had to work on myself because this remote working is tougher and more

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intense. I have myself to blame for working at weekends—no one forced me to do it. Honestly, I had to control myself and decide not to work at weekends anymore so I get time to recover (Female, 40, Customer Service Manager).

Some participants talked about self-permission, allowing themselves to detach when they had “done what was planned for the day” (Female, 49, Line Manager), which meant they could also close down for the day “with a clear conscience” (Female, 49, Line Manager). This theme incorporated participants’ accounts of allowing themselves to delay addressing certain issues. The tactic enabled them not to have to think about work continuously:

I try to prioritize the important tasks, so they don’t continue to bother me in my downtime (Male, 50, Product Manager).

When controlling intrusive thoughts, the participants deliberately tried to “reset” their brains when work-related thoughts intruded. To do so, one participant wrote down the intrusive thoughts:

I have a notebook to write in if I think of something . . . if a thought suddenly comes to mind . . . I can throw my work thoughts in there. (Female, 47, Group Manager)

*Theme 2.2 Physical disconnection from work:* The participants also talked about strategies similar to those available to employees working in an office, which we termed physical disconnection from work. The participants described leaving their workstation or workroom was helpful when they needed to mentally detach from work. Aside from changing rooms, some would go outside to collect the post or visit the local store: anything that facilitated disconnecting from work. A participant explained,

I go out as soon as I finish work, just to get out of the house, almost like leaving work. If I stay around, it’s easier to continue to think about work. (Female, 30, Order Handling Specialist)

In addition, our participants reported that removing physical work cues and turning off work-related technology helped them forget work. They would close the door to the home office or move the computer out of sight to block any intrusive correspondence and signal their brain that it was time to leave work. This process is exemplified in the following excerpt:

I end the day by closing the computer and placing it out of sight. Sometimes I leave home just to get out of the environment; it’s healthy to go somewhere else to refresh your mind. (Female, 43, Finance Director)

*Theme 2.3: Time-bound routines* emerged when the participants discussed induced detachment as a habit or routine. Interviewees described deciding when they ended work or scheduling their working day to allow some time away from work. Temporal signals were felt to trigger detachment. One of our respondents explained the only strategy required was to remind herself:

It’s now such-and-such o’clock, and it’s simply time for leisure. (Female, 47, Design Engineer)

*Theme 2.4: Engaging in non-work activities:* The remote workers gave examples of psychological detachment sometimes happening automatically without additional cognitive efforts when they engaged in certain non-work activities. The participants frequently discussed the benefits of activities requiring focus, like exercise, reading, housework and computer gaming. Focusing on the activity could flush work from the mind.

Similarly, social activity can encourage disengaging from work. In the next excerpt, an employee explains that an immediate transition to activities unrelated to work helps them switch off:

When my workday ends, I go through the door straight away and do stuff outside of work. I must have activity directly after work because if I went and laid down on the couch, work stuff would certainly go around in my mind. (Male, 32, Customer Service Specialist)

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

This qualitative study helps us understand recovery as an actively produced process (Zijlstra *et al.*, 2014) and not only as something naturally occurring when necessary work efforts cease (Meijman and Mulder, 1998). This study offers new information on the remote work context, a working arrangement that has become common. We focused first on the specific elements that consume remote employees' energy and second, explored the strategies individuals apply to promote recovery by engineering a psychological detachment from work, which is the most important recovery experience (e.g. Sonnentag and Fritz, 2015).

### 5.1 Theoretical implications

Remote work has been studied for decades. However, the large-scale movement toward remote work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated updating the knowledge. Some studies have focused on the novel job demands imposed by remote work during the pandemic (Carillo *et al.*, 2021; Charalampous *et al.*, 2022; Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021). Our findings support others indicating that remote employees perceived their workload increased during the pandemic (Carillo *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2021). Our findings contribute to that knowledge by highlighting the importance of employees being aware of their increased workload and its potentially harmful effects. That awareness should encourage people to apply novel responses to their new situations. Therefore, future research should more often focus on the role of the employee's own agency when facing new challenging situations at work.

Prior research on the specific demands of remote working and the time spent on it has established that both increased during the pandemic (Charalampous *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021). A high-paced way of working has become quite typical (Felstead and Henseke, 2017; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Maruyama and Tietze, 2012; Shirmohammadi *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, physical distance from the work community impedes access to social support in the work context (Charalampous *et al.*, 2022; Kossen and Berg, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021; Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012). We found similar elements associated with remote working, which seemed to consume the energy of remote employees, thus increasing their need for recovery. We categorized those elements under three themes: *extended working hours*, *an intensive working style* and *decreased social support*. The current research contributes to previous knowledge by identifying the internal and external elements of each theme. External elements involve the norms and work habits of the organization (e.g. scheduling meetings and changes in working culture), over which staff members have little control. In contrast, internal factors involve behaviors individuals display in the remote-working context (e.g. working extended hours, missing breaks and a reluctance to seek help), which individuals do control. Accordingly, this finding contributes to the knowledge of remote work (Charalampous *et al.*, 2022) by highlighting the need to consider both internal and external aspects.

We also contribute to the understanding of E-R theory (Meijman and Mulder, 1998) by highlighting that the need for the effort to meet work demands is not static and is subject to changes in working conditions. The pandemic dramatically changed the way of working, affecting those aspects of work that consume energy.

We found another study touching upon the theme of detachment from work in the context of the novel demands of remote work that stressed the importance of coping strategies to address them (Charalampous *et al.*, 2022). Previous literature on psychological detachment has recognized the existence and effectiveness of detachment strategies (Luta *et al.*, 2021; Sonnentag and Niessen, 2020), nevertheless, it is a nascent stream of research to which this study contributes in several ways.

The first strategy identified was cognitive control—comprising people's thoughts applied to control their activity (e.g. thought patterns and decision-making). Previous studies have

shown the power of thought to affect detachment in laboratory settings (Sonnentag and Niessen, 2020). In addition, prior intervention studies have acknowledged the connection between cognitive techniques and detachment (Althammer *et al.*, 2021; Karabinski *et al.*, 2021; Smit, 2016). Our study enhances knowledge of cognitive paths to the detachment that remote-working employees find useful and learn to utilize. The finding highlights the importance of viewing such employees as agents promoting the recovery process. We suggest the first step to successful recovery is cognitive; employees must recognize the increased need for recovery and the risks of disregarding it. We suggest that recognition enables employees to commence resource replenishment (cf. energy resources in COR theory; Hobfoll, 2001; Zijlstra *et al.*, 2014) and apply suitable detachment strategies. In addition, suitable personal resources, such as skills and attitudes (Hobfoll, 2001), can help people manage new and demanding situations and protect the individual from the strain caused by heavy job demands (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009). We suggest that personal resources (Hobfoll, 2001) play an important role in choosing strategies to cope with the energy-consuming elements of remote work. For instance, someone with strong mindfulness skills (Urrila, 2022) may be more likely to recognize the early signs of those energy-consuming elements of their work and decide which strategies could address the situation.

The next two strategies are physical disconnection (disconnection from the physical workstation, for instance, a desk, workroom, devices, or even leaving the home) and time-bound routines (regular procedures and habits performed at specific times, usually at the end of the working day). Both share some aspects of border theories. Physical and temporal boundary setting has been connected with psychological detachment (Haun *et al.*, 2022; Kinnunen *et al.*, 2017; Sonnentag *et al.*, 2010). The physical disconnection strategy is especially relevant when the home is the main place of work. However, the resources available can affect how well remote employees can physically disconnect from their work; for instance, the process would be impacted by the size of the home (Hobfoll, 2001) and whether it has a dedicated workroom or working space.

Regarding time-bound routines, the environment can affect an employee's commitment to maintaining routines. People who have to collect children from daycare or walk their dogs at a certain time are likely to have time-bound routines. Overall, future studies should consider different background issues that may play a role in the recovery process, for instance, family status, having children or other career responsibilities and previous experience with remote work.

The last of the strategies, engagement in non-work activities, is well-represented in previous studies indicating that leisure-time activities facilitate detachment from work (Hahn *et al.*, 2012; Sonnentag and Lischetzke, 2018). This study offers a new slant on previous knowledge by noting that the activity must be sufficiently engaging to capture the individual's attention and distract from work. Another essential observation was that some employees immediately did something unrelated to work at the end of the working day to effectively detach from work and maximize recovery time. Accordingly, the optimal combination of different strategies, for instance, activation of time-bound routines and engagement in leisure-time activities, might be the most beneficial way to promote recovery from work through psychological detachment. The field would benefit from a greater understanding of the effectiveness of different types and combinations of detachment strategies. Future research could also investigate different job contexts, one of which should be remote working.

### 5.2 Practical implications

The findings outlined above have several practical implications. First, we recommend that organizations review their practices and policies to manage the external causes of energy-

consuming elements of remote work. For instance, to avoid extended working hours, organizations should agree on common practices governing off-job work e-correspondence (Andrade and Matias, 2022). Those rules might encompass not sending e-mails or calling between certain hours of the day. In addition, strongly recommending breaks during the working day is advisable to avoid an excessively intensive working style. Digital nudges (Forberger *et al.*, 2022), such as setting a shorter default time for meetings on invitations (Ebert and Freibichler, 2017) and providing employees with applications supporting guided breaks with regular pop-up reminders to do some physical or mental exercise (Forberger *et al.*, 2022) can be used to punctuate back-to-back meetings or over-immersion in work. Organizations could increase social support and systematically increase spontaneous and informal dialog among colleagues by organizing peer-support groups and coaching on quality conversations at work (Grant, 2017). The human resources (HR) department should pursue having conflict resolution processes (Currie *et al.*, 2017) and support people available to all organization staff.

Moreover, issues arising during remote working should be considered as important as those occurring on site. In addition, organizations should support individuals' detachment strategies. Interventions focusing on cognitive skills, such as mindfulness (Querstret *et al.*, 2017), could be organized to support individuals' ability to actively enhance their detachment. Moreover, providing company support for off-job activities can be worthwhile.

Second, we recommend regularly evaluating the recovery status of remote employees and the internal causes of the energy-consuming elements of their work. The process should reveal the most appropriate detachment strategies. In practice, that could be done as an individual self-reflection, or with the help of other people, for instance, with regular one-to-one discussions with a supervisor or an occupational health care professional. Efficiently disseminating information on psychological detachment in remote work could support such reflection. Dissemination might involve using media channels and persuasion tactics (Marzouk *et al.*, 2022). Employees should also persist in applying newly learned detachment strategies and understand that they will only become habits if practiced repeatedly (Bouton, 2021).

### *5.3 Limitations and further research*

We acknowledge several limitations in the current study. First, the data were derived only from Finnish corporate office workers. Comparisons between public and private sectors or nations would offer more insight into remote home-based working. The extraordinary circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic likely affected how people perceived their work burden, and work practices were still reshaping when we were interviewing. A longitudinal view might reduce the effects of temporary conditions. Individuals' perceptions captured in the interviews represent their views at that point in time, while a diary study could provide a detailed description of their daily recovery.

We exclusively studied psychological detachment as a pathway to recovery, excluding other recovery experiences that might play an important role (Sonnetag and Fritz, 2007). Future research should also investigate relaxation and the control of leisure time as important recovery experiences. Scholars might also investigate the necessary conditions for recovery in the context of remote work (Dul, 2016). Intervention studies to test the effectiveness of promotional strategies on detachment and recovery identified could be enlightening. The results of the interventions and the impact of sufficient detachment from work could be measured against organizational outcomes, like job performance and productivity.

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**Appendix**

Remote  
workers'  
recovery  
strategies

ID	Role	Gender	Age
1	Service specialist	Female	30
2	Product manager	Male	48
3	Line manager	Female	49
4	Sales manager	Male	52
5	Service specialist	Female	43
6	Line manager	Male	53
7	Service manager	Male	53
8	Sales manager	Male	50
9	Design engineer	Male	48
10	Product developer	Male	34
11	Design engineer	Male	58
12	Design engineer	Female	47
13	Product manager	Male	50
14	Product manager	Male	46
15	Service director	Female	43
16	Line manager	Male	60
17	Line manager	Male	31
18	Line manager	Male	43
19	Line manager	Female	57
20	Accounting specialist	Female	40
21	Accounting specialist	Female	40
22	Service specialist	Female	37
23	Line manager	Male	39
24	Service manager	Female	40
25	Service director	Female	50
26	Team manager	Female	44
27	Service specialist	Male	32
28	Service specialist	Female	45
29	Service specialist	Female	36
30	Service specialist	Male	57
31	Service specialist	Female	29
32	Service specialist	Female	38
33	Service specialist	Male	55
34	Service specialist	Female	31
35	Service specialist	Male	38
36	Sales manager	Female	46
37	Sales manager	Male	33
38	Group manager	Male	31
39	Group manager	Female	45
40	Group manager	Female	53
41	Group manager	Female	47
42	Service specialist	Male	32
43	Service specialist	Female	45
44	Service specialist	Male	34
45	Development manager	Female	38
46	Service manager	Female	41
47	Service manager	Male	38
48	Service manager	Female	35
49	Not reported	Female	Not reported
50	Risk manager	Female	37
51	Service specialist	Male	36
52	Service specialist	Female	49

(continued)

**Table A1.**  
Background  
information of  
participants

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45,7

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ID	Role	Gender	Age
53	Sales manager	Female	48
54	Team manager	Male	25
55	Sales manager	Female	26
56	Service specialist	Female	Not reported
57	Service specialist	Female	28
58	Service specialist	Female	Not reported
59	Development manager	Male	31
60	Service specialist	Female	37
61	Office assistant	Female	28
62	Service specialist	Female	Not reported
63	Service specialist	Female	36
64	Team manager	Female	41
65	Process specialist	Female	53
66	Team manager	Female	54
67	Service director	Female	58
68	Service director	Female	49
69	Process specialist	Female	31
70	Process specialist	Female	33
71	Service manager	Female	40
72	Accountant	Male	51
73	Accountant	Female	60
74	Service manager	Female	36
75	Office assistant	Female	23
76	Group manager	Male	41
77	Development manager	Female	Not reported
78	Service manager	Female	Not reported
79	Group manager	Female	35
80	Line manager	Male	Not reported
81	Operational director	Male	55
82	Project manager	Male	49
83	Service specialist	Male	45
84	Not reported	Female	55
85	Team manager	Female	38
86	Design engineer	Male	35
87	Line manager	Female	32
88	Service specialist	Male	26
89	Accounting specialist	Female	50

**Table A1.** Source(s): Authors' own creation

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Heini Pensar is University teacher (Human Resource Management) at the University of Vaasa, Department of Management, Finland. Her research relates to work well-being, work-life balance and recovery from work, and how those are constructed in remote and hybrid work. She has presented her research at international conferences and in various publications. Heini Pensar is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [heini.pensar@uwasa.fi](mailto:heini.pensar@uwasa.fi)

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