Switching Off From The Home Office

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Switching Off From The Home Office

- How Remote Workers Self-promote Psychological Detachment From Work?

Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has forced millions of employees to work from home, changing the nature of remote working from a privilege to a mandatory form of work. Working remotely and from home has specific elements that may require extra effort by the employees in addition to those the work itself causes, increasing the need for recovery. Psychological detachment is the most important form of recovery, and helps the individual detach from work demands that load the individual's psycho-biological system, as suggested by Effort-Recovery model that was adopted as a theoretical framework for our study. Until now, there is limited research of psychological detachment in remote work, and none of it has focused on exploring mechanisms that promote detachment. COVID-19 pandemic outlines a new context for remote working, whereas the literature to date has considered remote working as a partial or voluntary work arrangement. Using a qualitative study design, we examined remote workers' experiences from home-based working and the ways they deliberately promote psychological detachment. Our analysis, that was based on 87 thematic interviews, with remote workers, reveals that the specific conditions in the home environment to cause a need for recovery are the increasing working hours and work intensity, decreased physical activity among remote employees, weakened or altered social network and slowness in practical support. Remote and alone, it seems largely to depend on the individual's own ability and preference to influence the achieved degree of detachment, and for recovery from work. We disclosed four ways that remote workers can self-promote psychological detachment: Cognitive activities (e.g., mind control), physical activities (e.g., physical transfer from workplace), time-bound activities (e.g., day ending routines) and nonwork activities (e.g., hobbies). This study extended the literature of recovery and psychological detachment in the context of remote working, added new content literature for remote working from the COVID-19 circumstances and provided a framework for remote workers and employers to enhance employee well-being and recovery from work.

Key words: Remote work, Psychological Detachment, Recovery, COVID-19

Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic forced a mass-relocation of work from offices to people's homes, affecting millions of employees and families worldwide. The extent remote work presently is being deployed, is a phenomenon unwitnessed before (Eurofound, 2020). While earlier research on remote working has studied voluntary and limited remote working from home, the pandemic, on the basis of a government policies (Finnish Government recommendations, n.d.), caused a mandatory relocation of activities to remote locations. The continued pandemic has further turned remote working into a new normal, and returning back to the situation before the pandemic is unlikely (Gartner, n.d.; Sven Smit et al., 2020). Therefore, novel knowledge about remote work is needed.

Today, the primary workplace of many remote workers is their own home (Eurofound, 2020). Working remotely and from home has specific elements that may require extra effort by the employees in addition to those caused by the work itself. This, in turn, is likely to relate to an increased need for recovery from work (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). However, when home and work are one and the same place, the boundary between them may become blurred and permit intrusions from one domain to another (Fonner & Stache, 2012). Constant reminders or interferences of work beyond working hours can prevent the mental switching off, i.e. psychological detachment from work (Kinnunen et al., 2016; Sanz-Vergel et al., 2011; Sonnentag et al., 2010).

Psychological detachment has been considered as the most important form of recovery (de Jonge et al., 2012; Shimazu et al., 2014; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015) and a prerequisite to effective recovery (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Recovery from work literature commonly refers to the Effort-Recovery model (Meijman & Mulder, 1998), that is also, in this study, adopted as a theoretical framework. The effort-recovery model proposes that people make daily efforts to meet various demands at work. This activates the individual's stress system, leading to energy consumption and need for recovery (Geurts & Sonnentag, 2006; Meijman & Mulder, 1998). Recovery from work refers to replenishment of personal resources, focus and physical energy consumed at work (Kaplan, 1995). Recovery can take place when the individual is no longer exposed to work demands, and in addition to psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control over leisure are experiences that have been found to prompt recovery from work (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Successful recovery, and especially psychological detachment from work is needed as repetitive failures to recover may eventually lead to impaired health and well-being (e.g., Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005; Siltaloppi et al., 2009; Siltaloppi & Kinnunen, 2007; Sonnentag et al., 2008). Impaired well-being has shown to be linked to lower performance and other negative organizational outcomes (Tanskanen et al., 2018). In order to ensure remote employees' well-being and ability to perform in their work, the knowledge of the process of recovery from work and especially how psychological detachment can be promoted is needed. Therefore, this is a new avenue in the literature, contributing knowledge on how the psychological detachment happens and what kinds of activities promote it (Luta et al., 2020; Sonnentag & Niessen, 2020) and our study is contributing to that field especially from the perspective of remote work from home.

Although it seems likely that remote work and working from home may cause specific challenges for psychological detachment (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Sonnentag et al., 2010), so far, we know very little about it. Only three studies were found that consider psychological detachment in the context of remote work (Dolce et al., 2020; Santuzzi & Barber, 2018; Sonnentag et al., 2010). However, none of these studies has focused on activities that promote psychological detachment from work when the work is done from home. There is also a lack of understanding of what the specific elements of remote work are that may increase the employees' need for recovery.

In light of the above, the contribution of this study is threefold. First, as far as we know, it is the first to focus on the recovery of remote employees, taking into account both 1) what the specific elements of remote working are that create the need for recovery, and 2) how recovery is achieved through activities promoting psychological detachment as an essential recovery strategy. Second, utilizing the effort-recovery model in the context of remote work is a novel approach for recovery studies, and expands the understanding of the different elements specific for recovery in that kind of work. Third, this study contributes to the literature on remote work in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recovery from work in the context of remote working from home

Effort-recovery model and recovery from work

The Effort-Recovery model (Meijman & Mulder, 1998) assumes that employees need to put effort into their work, which consumes energy and loads their psycho-biological systems. Like batteries of electronic devices that need to be reloaded after use, also the employees' consumed energy needs to be replenished - they need recovery from work. Recovery can take place when work-related demands cease and release the call for efforts. Subsequently, the individual's psycho-biological systems can reload to the original baseline. If the work demands continue to load the individual even beyond working hours, sufficient recovery might not happen, and energy deficits start to accumulate. Continued exposure to load effects and stress can result in negative physical and psychological health effects, like fatigue, sleeping problems and exhaustion (Siltaloppi et al., 2009; Siltaloppi & Kinnunen, 2007; Sonnentag et al., 2008).

Specific elements related to remote working from home

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the nature of remote working from being a voluntary benefit, usually aimed at improving the life quality of the employee, into a mandatory and long-term form of work (Gartner, n.d.; Sven Smit et al., 2020). Hence, remote working has become a norm for the majority of knowledge workers (EU Science Hub, 2020), unlocking its many advantages to a large population of employees, while also posing new and perhaps still unknown risks on the wellbeing of employees (Eurofound, 2017).

From earlier literature on remote working, some significant risks can be identified. Researchers have evidenced a connection from remote working to an increase in working hours(Glass & Noonan, 2016; Grant et al., 2013), where guilt, perhaps due to fear of being perceived lazy, results in over-working as a compensation (Eddleston & Mulki, 2015; Mann & Holdsworth, 2003; Moe & Shandy, 2010). The constant presence of work at home can yield longer workdays or increase the frequency for work related interruptions outside regular work hours (Martin & MacDonnell, 2012; Russell et al., 2009). The presence of technology at home can generate telepressure, i.e., urge to respond to work-related communication (Barber et al., 2019) and a compulsion to be available (Matusik & Mickel, 2011; Suh & Lee, 2017), and additional stress among employees (Chesley, 2014). Even if the equipment would be turned off, the home environment, once also utilized for working, may continue to carry physical and psychological associations to work (Eddleston & Mulki, 2015) and cause individuals unwillingly to think about work beyond the working hours (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009). Repetitive intrusions of work into one's leisure may have an adverse effect on the restoration when working from home (Hartig et al., 2007).

Moreover, remote working has been found to intensify the way people carry out their work (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Natural interruptions that typically happen in an office environment, such as sporadic discussions and coffee-breaks, may not similarly happen in the remote environment (Dimitrova, 2003). As suggested by Hartig et al. (2007) employees working remotely can undermine the restorative function when working from home and experience less effective restoration from work. Reduced interruptions might be experienced rewarding and improving efficiency (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Fonner & Roloff, 2010; Martin & MacDonnell, 2012), but omitting breaks can decrease the individual's recovery during the day and instead increase need for recovery in afterwork hours (Coffeng et al., 2015; Michel et al., 2014; Sianoja et al., 2016). Breaks are also important in terms of enhancement of physical activity during a workday, since e.g., standing, walking and stair climbing is likely to decrease need for recovery (Coffeng et al., 2015).

Another risk connected to extensive remote working is an increased social and professional isolation (Golden et al., 2008). Remote workers are more likely to experience exclusion from interactions (Grant et al., 2013) and misinterpretations (Kruger et al., 2005), as well as lack of support (Sardeshmukh et al., 2012) and social barometers as a reference for how to behave and react to work (Mann et al., 2000). Sufficient support has been connected to satisfaction and lack of it work related stress in a remote work context (Baker et al., 2006; Bentley et al., 2016). Mann & Holdsworth, (2003) found increased irritability, worry and negative emotions among remote workers, caused by loneliness and social isolation. Continuing exposure to negative experiences may have damaging effects on the individual's restoration (Radstaak et al., 2011), but in parallel, also increase need for recovery (Sluiter et al., 2003; Sonnentag et al., 2010).

Given the nature of the described risks associated with remote working (Ashforth et al., 2000; Dimitrova, 2003; Golden et al., 2008) individuals may not always have influence over them, but instead, it would be essential to find mechanisms to prevent the load effects from the work burden, by inducing recovery (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2009; Sonnentag & Zijlstra, 2006). In the following chapter we will review psychological detachment as a recovery experience and as a means of managing effects from workload.

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

The concept of psychological detachment was initially introduced by Etzion et al. (1998) as "an individual's sense of being away from the work situation". Psychological detachment has further been described as "switching off", i.e., temporarily leaving the workplace behind, not only physically but also mentally distancing oneself from work i.e., refraining from work-related cognitions, worries and activities (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Sonnentag & Niessen, 2020).

It has been suggested that people's ability to psychologically detach from work is influenced by their personal traits (Naseer et al., 2012; Potok & Littman-Ovadia, 2014; Reis & Prestele, 2020), social environment (Hahn & Dormann, 2013; Sonnentag & Schiffner, 2019) and preferences to detach from work during spare time (Jalonen et al., 2015; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015) It is not given that everyone needs or benefits a full detachment. If employees associate their work with positive thoughts, thinking about work during leisure may generate a positive affect even when not working (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015; Sonnentag & Grant, 2012; Sonnentag & Niessen, 2020).

Psychological detachment can occur *automatically* without a conscious attempt by the individual, and people may *deliberately* induce their own detachment through promotive activity (Luta et al., 2020; Sonnentag & Niessen, 2020). The detachment literature introduces cognitive paths to prevent and surmount work-related cognitions and emotion intruding one's mind during leisure, such as mindfulness (Michel et al., 2014) and planning techniques (Smit, 2016). Another path to detachment is preoccupying oneself with activities unrelated to work, for instance a hobby or social interaction, which enforce a shift of focus and enhance the detachment from work (Hahn et al., 2012; Luta et al., 2020; Mojza et al., 2011).

The detachment literature emphasises the individual's ability and preference to set boundaries for working as an important denominator for psychological detachment (Ashforth et al., 2000; Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015). Border theories describe boundaries or "mental fences" as mechanisms that individuals use to control the integration or segmentation of work and other domains of life (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000). Researchers have proposed that a high work-home segmentation predicts a higher level of psychological detachment (e.g., Kinnunen et al., 2017; Mellner et al., 2014; Park et al., 2011) and thus establishment of sufficient temporal, physical and technological boundaries around work enhances the individual's detachment from work during off-job time (Dettmers et al., 2016; Hartig et al., 2007; Kreiner et al., 2009; Sonnentag et al., 2010). For example, boundary creation around work-related technology (turning off devices, keeping separate devices for work and home purpose) reduces intrusive thoughts of work during non-work time, and allows more efficient psychological detachment (Barber & Jenkins, 2014; Derks et al., 2014; Mellner et al., 2016; Michel et al., 2014; Sandoval-Reyes et al., 2019).

The literature to date provides limited knowledge of detachment in the context of remote working (Dolce et al., 2020; Santuzzi & Barber, 2018; Sonnentag et al., 2010), although it seems likely that remote working introduces specific conditions that increase the individual's need for recovery and psychological detachment (Glass & Noonan, 2016; Grant et al., 2013; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic, with conditions previously unexplored, motivates the explorative approach used in the current study. This to thoroughly uncover the specific elements that cause need for detachment and activities that enhance detachment.

Methodology

The qualitative research design was based on thematic, semi-structured interviews (King, 1994) of 87 Finnish employees that at the time of the study delivered their work from home. The sample was collected from six large-size companies, with personnel of over 1000 employees, representing multiple industries: Technology Industry, Information Technology, Business Services, Telecommunications, Finance and Insurances. The interviews were conducted during October - December 2020 through computer mediated technology (Zoom or Teams). The duration of an interview was on average 60 minutes.

We developed the interview guide based on broad, open-ended questions giving the interviewees room to lift unanticipated, spontaneous topics and for the researches to address follow-up questions in order to collect more details (Mason, 2002). The interviewees were first asked to describe their remote work environment and the support available in remote work, especially when facing obstacles. They were then asked to go through a typical day of remote working from start to end, and how they manage to switch off thoughts from work at the end of the working day. To better understand the employees' priorities in life and their working style, we added generic questions about work-life balance and self-leadership.

The interviews were transcribed word-by-word in verbatim, and quotations translated into English by the authors. Based on the transcriptions we conducted a thematic analysis with a logic for replications and inconsistencies (Seale et al., 2004). The data was then coded based on the repetitive findings of the aspects causing need for recovery at home and the ways to promote detachment.

Findings

Our findings indicate that introduction of home as a working environment poses distinct needs for recovery because of five factors that add work demands in remote work; Increasing working hours and work intensity, decreased physical activeness, weakened social connections and slowness in practical support at work. Furthermore, we analysed how remote workers responded to these changes and we found four ways through which remote workers promoted their psychological detachment from work; cognitive, physical, time-bound and nonwork activities, thus enhancing sufficient recovery from work.

Home as a working environment poses distinct needs for recovery

Initially many remote workers had been concerned about transferring work to home, worrying that the home "*would also become sort of like a workplace*" (1) and it would be impossible to stop working and thinking about work at the end of the work shift. Some were uncertain whether they would adapt to working in the home environment, if constantly being reminded about house chores or at the presence of other house-hold members. Employees who had previous experience in remote working had less concerns about the suitability of home as a workplace, but they were more concerned about the increase in working hours when the workplace would constantly be present.

Those worries changed as the remote working continued, but home as a work environment in the long run has revealed distinct characteristics that make the workdays effortful in ways that differ from a day spent at the office.

Increasing working hours

Many remote workers save time due to reduced commuting between home and office. Even when the distance is short, the time consumed in getting organized for, and travelling to work is experienced as significant. Initially, remote workers used the time saved from commuting for work and this led to workday starting earlier and ending later. In several cases, however, new routines were later adapted by employees to manage and limit the active working hours to what would have been the case in an office-based context.

The workdays could be started earlier. When the remote workers were asked how they started off their days and how it was different compared to the conventional setting, they replied:

"*In the morning when I wake up [...] as a first thing I check messages [...] if there are text messages. Then I take a look from my mobile phone how many e-mails I have received, and I check if there are any urgent matters.* "(14)

"*The beginning is usually a little bit like that when one just about gets her eyes opened, usually the workday begins very much right away*" (19)

Being continuously connected to work from home caused some employees to experience an increased urge to be available for calls after normal working hours. Also, a change in behaviour of the organization towards stretching the working times was observed by employees. For instance, meetings could be booked after normal office hours, with the expectation that employees would be available during the time otherwise consumed by commuting. This caused an increase of time invested in actual work, although the total time consumed including the time spent working and commuting between home and work remained unchanged. Some remote workers described that working from home increased the frequency of getting engaged in work activities during leisure time, i.e., early mornings, evenings and weekends. They explained that with the connected technology available at home, it became more likely to open the laptop and quickly respond to an e-mail or handle an issue if needed. As explained by a remote worker:

"Principally I have the PC on all the time. Well, sometimes I check from my mobile phone, if there's urgent messages… then I go and respond. Sometimes I work a little in the evenings… earlier I never kept my PC on readiness state, and I kind of thought that I'll handle that in the morning. But now that the PC is there and available all the time, it is easy to go and type the response there[...] Getting it out of way." (3)

One employee described the common issue that such occasion could consume more time and effort than originally planned:

"It easily happens that you think I'll just do this one thing and another, and just quickly send that, and all of a sudden you realize it's been an hour if not one and half, on top of the normal working day." (4)

The tendency to flex in working time, and to work and be accessible also after work hours was more frequently mentioned by employees working in a managerial position. The same persons often mentioned, however, that this flexibility also had been expected in the earlier office-based work environment, and that this flexibility was expected in that role.

Increasing work intensity

Remotely working employees commonly experienced that working from home reduced interruptions that typically happen in an office environment. This lack of interruptions allowed them to work more effectively. They consistently described that more work could be done in the same working hours, since they were able to better control and limit incoming questions and contacts from internal stakeholders.

Also noted was that in the office, not only disruptive interruptions, but also regenerative breaks were more likely to occur. Common office practice and e.g., canteen opening hours may have shaped established schedules for coffee breaks and lunches that interrupted the work with regular intervals. In addition, spontaneous conversations caused natural breaks to work, occasionally also creating an opportunity for the employee to get up and briefly move from the workstation. An employee described that *"the interruptions by people and the spontaneous discussions would refresh your mind"* (5), and that the efficient work from home had created additional strains.

In the remote working context, these breaks disappeared, and while remote workers felt that they could work more effectively, they also experienced that the intensity of work had increased. They described that they often omitted breaks that they would otherwise have taken at the office:

"*I take less breaks compared to when I'm at office. The kind of voluntary or compulsory breaks when someone wants to interrupt your work with an important matter, doesn't happen so much here, and I am more efficient. [...] I have marked 11-12 in my calendar as a private appointment and in Finnish it means that I most times eat in front my PC.*" (5).

Simultaneously lunch breaks had become shorter or completely absent, as described by one of our participants:

"From time to time I have not eaten anything during the day, not one bit, from nine in the morning until six in the evening. I have drunk a cup of coffee [...] and I ate and drank the coffee [...] I have not eaten anything during the day. It is a horrible feeling." (6)

The nature of remote work had increased the number of meetings in a working day. As described by a remote employee: *"The number of meetings completely exploded [...] We had horrible days in the spring [...] Eleven a day."* (7)

What usually at the office would require a short conversation, in remote work required a whole meeting. The increasing meetings left less time to focus on actual work. One employee claimed that: *"Now in virtual times [...] everybody books every minute of your time."* (6)

Decreased physical activeness

Due to the fact that in the home environment distances are shorter, the remotely working employees felt that their physical activeness had suffered, which had negative effects on their general energy level. An employee explained that *"the number of steps I take has dramatically dropped"* (5) whereas another said: *"At office [...] you would easily get 5000-6000 steps only during the working day, but now it's all gone"* (8). Having lunch at home instead of going into a restaurant reduced the need for movement, and those who would otherwise commute to work by public transport or bicycle, stated that the possibilities for physical activeness did not naturally happen in the remote working context. Instead, remote workers had to resolve to find alternative ways to increase their physical activeness.

Some remote workers consciously had introduced walks, runs and other activities into their working days since they started working remotely. Employees, who had natural reasons to leave their workstation during the working day, such as a pet at home, reported that their physical activeness during workdays had increased.

Another factor that was considered to influence physical activeness and thus the employees' energy level was work ergonomics. This especially in case the remote worker had no designated workspace at home. If the work was conducted with equipment that did not take the individual needs into account (work chair, desk with adjustable height etc.), the work ergonomics was commonly seen as inferior when compared to office-based work. Often the workspaces needed to be shared as also other family members were working or studying remotely, as described by a remote worker:

"We only have one workstation, so that one of us must get out of the way to a less suitable place. We don't have a work nest for two". (6)

Another employee found the space simply too small for sufficient arrangements that she would need in her work:

"I have my daughter's school desk, and its area is too small and too low. [...] In the springtime I even had two screens, but I took one of them back to work [...] as the desk area was too small." (9)

Thus, bad ergonomics were mentioned as a factor decreasing healthy physical activeness, for example standing time, although it also could be the trigger for getting up and taking short walks in the room. In order to correct the situation, some employees had made changes largely at their own expenses. Some employees had invested on worktables and some had found creative solutions:

"I have an ironing board set up in the living room [...] and also a small card-board box underneath where I can get my laptop to a height so that I can stand." (10)

The matter of work ergonomics was further considered effortful and burdensome, and where they had not received sufficient support from the employer.

Weakened or altered social network

Working remotely and alone the employees felt working more effortful and demanding. Most of the interviewees reported changes in their social network. They described that the "over the shoulder" source of advice and "piece of shoulder" at the office environment was helpful in coping with work demands, but in the remote work context the role and effectiveness of this social network was reduced. An employee even felt that "the *social contacts have decreased, and as a result my own mental care is not on solid ground."* (5) Not having the ability to have sufficient contact with colleagues also seemed to create new kinds of negative emotions:

"A few weeks ago, it was a bit quiet, so I got a sort of feeling that what the heck… this is almost wasting a life… I didn't dare to constantly call colleagues [...] not to disturb them." (3)

Being remote and alone, some employees also felt that they risked missing important discussions if they did not happen to be in the right place at a right time, and that the inconsistency in transfer of information also tended to cause rumours.

On the other hand, working at home allows for discussing challenging questions with one's partner. This support could, however, not completely compensate for the role of the professional social network in the office and discussing work related issues with one's partner was also seen as adding additional strains to the relationship. One employee admitted:

"I now, more than during office times, go through work stuff with my spouse. [...] It's one way of dissolving the work stuff that bothers your mind. I haven't even asked her if that's ok." (11)

Interviewees mentioned that not being able to discuss and process work related questions at a sufficient level with the professional network, caused an increased perceived workload. Not being able to deal with these questions during work time was mentioned to cause undealt questions influencing leisure time: *"If you have too much work and stuff that bother your mind, they will follow you during the weekends.*" (4)

Slowness in practical support

Another burden frequently mentioned by the remote workers was the long response time for support when working from home. Unlike in an office environment where colleagues, supervisors and e.g., IT specialist may be on duty to help, in the remote working context, the employee is relying on digital channels to resolve e.g., IT problems, which takes time, requires more personal involvement and causes frustration, additional workload and dissatisfaction. As expressed by a remote manager:

"At office, where we have the open landscape, we ask help from colleagues, hints. Now we look for the information from the Intranet." (12)

When facing obstacles people seemed to prefer handling them in person or having someone physically present to solve them with as it was considered quicker. The team manager continued:

"The [software] updates were not successful for everyone. My team members [...] probably feel it is a bigger challenge when there is no one present to help." Especially the remoteness of a supervisor was seen as problematic in cases of issues: *"Sometimes we have those situations*

that it would be easier to go through certain things if we were person [...] If you have problems, it would be easier if the supervisor would be there in person" (12)

Remote workers actively promote psychological detachment to enhance recovery from work

The previous chapter outlined the challenges which made employees feel that remote working strained their energy and increased the needed effort. In order to recover from effort remote employees' have put on their work, psychological detachment from work was needed. Next, we represent our findings about four ways how remote workers actively promoted their psychological detachment from work.

Cognitive activities

Switching off was often described by the remote workers as a cognitive process, a conscious choice or decision, and management of their own mind. As self-advised by a manager: "*Close the computer, and do not look at your phone after work [...] You just have to make a decision not to look even if you would feel urged to*" (12), it involved being determined about not allowing oneself to engage in work-related thoughts and activity during off-job hours. One employee described it as a deliberate choice:

"*I am fully at work or else fully on leisure. It is an easy mode; I just start it. In my thoughts I just decide that now I turn these off and I switch off all machines.*" (13)

This would also mean actively letting go of work-related thoughts, if they would come into one's mind outside of work. A remote worker explained that initially seeing work-related devices etc. at home reminded about work but with time it had become a non-issue claiming that "*You can learn and get used to it*" (7). In fact, some had found ways of managing these intrusions, for example by writing down the thoughts, in order to allow oneself to forget about them and to come back to them during working hours. As described by a manager about how she controlled intrusive thoughts about work during leisure with writing them down: *"In my thoughts I decide to switch off [...] and I don't get back to it. I have the notebook in which I can write if I come to think of something [...] if all of a sudden a thought comes up in my mind [...] I actually have it in my handbag [...] I can throw my work thoughts there."* (13)

More importantly, it was the permitting that made the detachment effective. If the employees felt that " *I feel that I have done what I had planned for the day, I can close my computer with good conscience*" (14). The good conscience would better allow detachment to happen. One employee explained it as "*I try to prioritize the things that are important and complete them, so that they wouldn't continue to bother me*" (15). It was the skills to organize and prioritize work and getting enough work done during working hours that would increase the ability to allow the detachment.

Physical activities

The remote workers had introduced similar physical activities and cues for detaching themselves from work as those they would be benefiting from at office. Similarly, to a physical transfer from office to home, remote workers actively simulated the transfer in the home environment. An employee explained it as:

"*I go out as soon as I finish work [...] I go for a walk or go to take care of something, just get out of home, almost like leaving work. If I stay around, I easier continue to think about work*" (1).

The employee consistently reported leaving home as effective detachment. Some of the frequently mentioned means were taking a walk, going to a store or picking up the post. The remote workers who had a separate room for working, reported it beneficial to leave the room and some even found it effective to close the door to the room.

When the employees were asked how they managed to shift their thoughts away from work the most frequent response was turning off their laptop. Closing work related devices and programs, such as laptops, mobile phones, e-mails also enforced physical detachment from work by creating technological boundaries and preventing intrusions of work into nonwork. A remote manager described the ending of her workday:

"*I turn off my computer and [...] the work phone stays here at the workstation, and my workday totally stops. I earlier made the mistake of having a combined personal and work phone and I could hardly get rid of work at all*" (16).

Several employees claimed that switching off thoughts from work happened automatically when they simply switched off their laptop at the end of the workday.

Time-bound activities

The remote workers had voluntarily introduced personal schedules and work routines which were helping them to finish the day on time and switch off from work as a time-bound routine. As expressed by an interviewee:

"*In a way, you create yourself the kind of routines that help you get out of this work, rid of working from time to time, and I'll tell you that creating routines and a schedule has helped*". (5)

The remote workers also found other time-bound activities to be supporting their detachment from work:

"*[Shifting thoughts] away from work? Well, the family makes sure of it. I have two children with hobbies, and [...] I must drive them there or prepare a meal.*", "*It does a lot when my daughter comes home around 3 pm and I know exactly that peace for working ends then. She does not disturb me but [...] dinner time is approaching.*" (12)

In addition, determining a certain point of time for ending a workday had promoted detachment: "*It's now so and so o'clock and it's simply time for leisure*" (18). Although a schedule as such did not mean automated detachment, it was used as a way of creating a temporal boundary or permission, which allowed the employee to detach if in situations when work processes had not been completed. One employee described scheduling as a way of deliberately allowing oneself time away from work:

"*If I am planning to work more, I have marked it in the calendar, so that I try to switch off until I switch on again.*" (2)

Many of the workers initially had experienced an increase of working hours, since they would start to work earlier due to the time saved from commuting, and similarly finish work later in the evening, at the time they normally would arrive home from the office. With time, they had started keeping a better control of their working hours. As an employee explained:

"*You have to keep yourself strict about it, that the workday ends at 4 pm" and another: "This can't go so that I just sit on my PC all night [...], now I must schedule and [...] setting a boundary to it*." (1)

Nonwork activities

The remote workers described that psychological detachment sometimes happened automatically, without further cognitive attempts, when they engaged themselves in various nonwork activities. An employee felt that it was an effective way of switching off from work at the end of the workday:

"*I shut down the work computer and go and build my motorcycle. It must happen in the very same moment. [...] When a 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 would go lie down on the coach, work stuff would certainly go around in my mind.*" (17)

The most frequently reported nonwork activity was outdoor exercise. For example, walking and running were described as effective means for recovery, since they allowed the individual to leave work-related thoughts behind. An employee explained that he had found new means for recovery after work:

"*In normal times I try and [...] ride a bicycle to work. At least when coming back and keeping up the speed, your thoughts…[...] you have time to recover from work a bit. Now that there is no ride to work, then I go out with my dog. For a walk in the forest.*" (3)

Remote workers discussed the benefits of activities that require focus, such as reading and playing a computer game. These activities were described as enough immersive to flush away work out of one's mind. Similar effect would be experienced by home-related obligations. Many of the remote workers had household chores to take care of, for example cooking a meal would shift thoughts from work to nonwork, or laundry:

"*I detach from the computer and the work situation and do the laundry. [...] It works for me and takes my thoughts somewhere else.*" (4)

Engaging in social relationships also helped remote workers to disengage with work. Focusing on children and other family members, as well as house pets, was experienced as enforcement to detach from work. Hobbies and interests helped remote workers not to think about work during leisure. These activities were tied to personal interests and represented a large variety of activities, where most frequently mentioned were construction work, gardening and hobby clubs.

Discussion

The present study extended the so far limited literature of recovery and psychological detachment in the context of remote working. Utilizing the Effort-Recovery model (Mejman & Mulder, 1998) we took into account both the factors that cause need for recovery and those that promote recovery in the home environment. By exploring remote work in the context of COVID-19 this paper also constituted new content to literature for remote working. Our study is based on the qualitative data of 87 interviews of remotely working employees, where circumstances forced them to work from home. Our study provides essential novel knowledge for the academic audience as well as for practitioners of remote working, given that remote working will continue to be one of the major working models in the future.

Firstly, we found that remote workers face distinct demands in the home environment that increase need of recovery in comparison with traditional work settings, i.e., office-based work, and that of five reasons.

1) In line with existing literature (e.g., Glass & Noonan, 2016; Grant et al., 2013) we found that remote workers faced a risk for *increasing working hours* when hours were easily stretched at the beginning and the end of the day, and there was a higher tendency of work interruptions during off-job hours, for example at evenings and weekends. However, our findings did not support earlier studies reporting that the increase in working hours was a result of perceived external pressure or a sense of guilt (Eddleston & Mulki, 2015; Matusik & Mickel, 2011; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Suh & Lee, 2017), but we found it merely a choice of the employees.

2) As recognized in earlier literature, we also found that working from home was *high-intensive* and effortful (Dimitrova, 2003; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010), as less time was spent on breaks.

3) The remote workers reported *reduced physical activeness* during workdays, which in turn was experienced to reduce the energy levels. The COVID-19 context as such, could have been a catalyst for the reduction of physical activeness, as people in general have stayed home, being less physically active than usual (Chen et al., 2020; López-Bueno et al., 2020). We did not find research directly connecting remote working with reduced physical activeness, although we did find evidence for physical activity during a workday being an important mechanism for recovery (Coffeng et al., 2015). We also noted that in some cases the employees had voluntarily introduced activities such as outdoor walks into their workdays, as remote working provided the flexibility for it.

4) *Weakened of altered social network*, already recognized in the earlier research as a risk for an increased negative load in remote working (Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Golden et al., 2008; Grant et al., 2013), were frequently present in our data, although isolation was not perceived as a feeling of exclusion (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003), but rather explained as distress deriving from the reduced ability to share concerns with peers.

5) Another load factor was the perceived *slowness in support*. The remoteness of support seemed to increase the perception of added workload and caused negative affect, which finds support in literature that acknowledges insufficient support as a significant predictor for work related stress (Baker et al., 2006; Bentley et al., 2016).

Secondly, there are differences in how individuals manage the demands in the home environment. Our findings highlight the significance of the individual's own willingness and conscious action in managing the negative effects of the home environment in remote work and achieving recovery. This is especially important as in an office-based environment, common practices, habits and both temporal and spatial limitations imposed by the environment govern and delimit the workday (Greer & Payne, 2014; Mustafa & Gold, 2013;

Sardeshmukh et al., 2012), but in a home environment, such controls are absent, which challenges the psychological detachment (Mellner et al., 2016; Park et al., 2011). In the remote work context, toleration of work demands and ensuring own recovery are all the more left to the individual's own ability.

Thirdly, we found the remote workers desire and actively self-promote their psychological detachment from work. So far only three studies (Dolce et al., 2020; Santuzzi & Barber, 2018; Sonnentag et al., 2010) have focused on the actions and ways remote workers could psychologically detach themselves from work. Hence, the present study focuses on largely unexplored field of knowledge and discloses four ways that remote workers deploy in order to achieve desired detachment and recovery from work; cognitive activities, physical activities, time-bound activities and nonwork activities.

The *cognitive activities* found in our studies included techniques such as conscious decision-making and self-permission to shut down work related cognitions and mind controls for managing intrusive work-related thoughts. Existing literature still provides limited empirical research of these techniques, although proof of effectiveness of cognitive exercise can be drawn from recent intervention studies and controlled examinations in the context of more traditional work settings (Ebert et al., 2015; Michel et al., 2014; Sonnentag & Niessen, 2020).

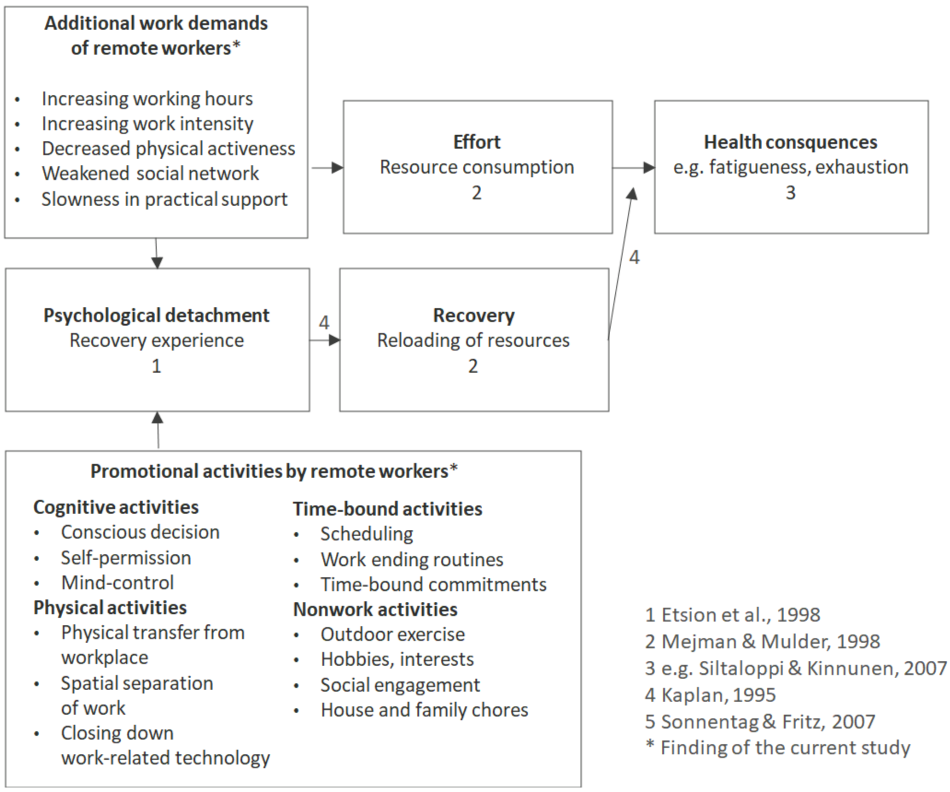
The *physical activities* through which remote workers were promoting detachment reminded of those that enhance physical separation of home and office in the traditional work setting. The remote workers had assembled similar controls as in an office environment; addressing a designated place for working and separating it from the non-work, physically leaving the workstation at the end of the work shift as well as switching off work related technology. These were much in consistency with the detachment literature related to boundary theories, which suggest that spatial and technological boundaries predict higher psychological detachment (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2000; Hartig et al., 2007; Mellner et al., 2016; Sonnentag et al., 2010).

The remote workers had found introduction of repetitive *time-bound activities* supporting and allowing detachment in accordance with their working hours. Such activities included creation of schedules, routines for work ending and utilization of time-bound commitment as references for detachment. Similarly, the detachment literature demonstrates association of temporal boundaries with increased detachment (Dettmers et al., 2016; Kreiner et al., 2009). However, instead of merely using time controls as boundaries (for e.g. overworking), remote workers consistently emphasized the routine itself to improve detachment.

Similarly, to existing literature, we found that employees regularly utilized *nonwork activities* as deliberate means for promoting detachment (Hahn et al., 2012; Luta et al., 2020; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). But unlike the findings that Luta et al., (2020) demonstrate, i.e., different activities being more or less effective promoters, we observed that it was the personal preferences and interests that were likely to determine their efficiency. It seemed that as long as the activity engaged the interest and thoughts of the person, detachment was likely to happen, and activities that were less engaging left more room for work related thoughts.

Although remote workers generally valued and desired detachment from work, we noted significant individual differences in the degree to which the employees desired or felt a need to detach. Some felt a great need to actively promote detachment whereas others, more often those with higher role salience and those in supervisor positions, preferred to stay attached to work during nonwork time, calling it a lifestyle.

Figure 1. Elements of remote working which creates the need for recovery and promotive activities for psychological detachment in home-based remote working.



Practical implications

The present study demonstrates and builds awareness of the significance of psychological detachment in home-based work and introduces alternative paths that can serve as guidance to enhance detachment. Remote workers could benefit from introduction of routines, e.g., scheduling, short-term goal setting and planning (Smit, 2016) and permit detachment within certain timeframes. Employees could utilize spatial arrangements to physical detachment, by designating a separate place for working and leaving the workplace at the end of the work shift. Spare time hobbies could force a shift of focus away from work, whereas mindfulness and meditation could help one with managing the intrusive thoughts (Michel et al., 2014). The role of the work organization can play a role as a catalyst (or a hindrance) for employees' psychological detachment (Sonnentag, 2018; Sonnentag & Schiffner, 2019). Based on our findings, we suggest employers to consider introduction of policies, company benefits and interventions that encourage recovery and psychological detachment. Members of an organization could benefit from agreeing common principles for availability and contact making in afterwork hours. Employers may consider providing instruction or training in enhancing the employees' detachment skills and awareness.

Limitations and further research

The findings of this study must be interpreted in the light of its limitations. Firstly, the demographics of the respondents was limited to Finnish office workers representing the corporate sector. A comparison with the public sector, or considerations for national differences could have given more generic insight. Secondly, the COVID-19 context is highly extraordinary, as limitations on e.g., possibilities to engage socially and in spare time activities may have influenced the results. A longitudinal view would eliminate the effects of such temporary conditions. Thirdly, the study discussed detachment from work to home. Detachment from home to work (Sanz-Vergel et al., 2011) could also be highly relevant to consider in the context of home-based remote working.

Furthermore, individual preferences to detach or not to detach from work were found significant, where managers especially seemed to have taken a more integrative strategy creating a positive affect. Thus, future research could add further exploration of the connection between role salience (Sanz-Vergel et al., 2011), boundary management and detachment approaches, specifically in the context of remote working.

Conclusion

Home as a working environment poses new challenges in relation to traditional work settings, thereby causing specific need for recovery and an active promotion of detachment. Remote workers reported increasing work hours, intense work, decreased physical activeness, weakened or altered social network and slowness in support as additional work demands calling for effort and adding workload. At the same time, specifically in the remote context, it much depends on the individual's own ability and preferences to detach that strongly influence the achieved degree of recovery. This study identified promotive activities which individuals may practice in order to deliberately induce detachment; cognitive activities (e.g., conscious decision, self-permission, mind-control), physical activities (e.g., physical transfer from workplace, spatial separation of work), time-bound activities (e.g., schedules, routines) and nonwork activities (e.g., exercise, hobbies, house chores). This study provided new insight into risks associated with remote working, in relation to the employees' work demands and workload, providing a framework for employees and organizations to enhance well-being and recovery from work given the circumstances the home environment delimits.

Citations

The below table provides background information of the interviewees that have been cited in this paper.

#	**Gender** (Female/Male)	**Personnel responsibility** (Yes/No)	**Age Group** A= 1960-1969, B= 1970-1979, C= 1980-1989, D= 1990-1999	**Number of people in the household**	**Amount of remote work before/during pandemic** Never, Occasionally, Party, Mostly
1	F	N	D	2	N/M
2	M	Y	A	2	O/M
3	M	N	B	2	N/M
4	F	Y	A	2	P/M
5	F	Y	A	3	O/M
6	M	Y	A	2	P/M
7	F	Y	A	3	M/M
8	M	N	B	2	N/M
9	F	N	B	3	P/M
10	F	N	A	1	N/M
11	M	N	C	3	N/M
12	F	Y	B	4	P/M
13	F	Y	B	3	O/M
14	F	N	B	3	O/M
15	M	N	B	4	P/M
16	F	Y	B	3	P/M
17	M	N	C	1	P/M
18	F	N	B	2	O/M

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