Est. 1841 | YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Wheatley, Daniel, Broome, Matthew, Dobbins, Tony, Hopkins, Benjamin and Powell, Owen H. J. (2023) Navigating Choppy Water: Flexibility Ripple Effects in the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Remote and Hybrid Working. Work, Employment and Society, 38 (5). pp. 1379-1402.

Downloaded from: https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/8692/

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/09500170231195230

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. Institutional Repositories Policy Statement

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

Check for updates

*Article*

WES

Work, Employment and Society
1–24
© The Author(s) 2023

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/09500170231195230
journals.sagepub.com/home/wes

# Navigating Choppy Water: Flexibility Ripple Effects in the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Remote and Hybrid Working

**Daniel Wheatley**
University of Birmingham, UK

**Matthew R. Broome**
University of Birmingham, UK

**Tony Dobbins**
University of Birmingham, UK

**Benjamin Hopkins**
University of Birmingham, UK

**Owen Powell**
York St John University, UK

## Abstract

This article investigates the challenges of navigating the adoption of remote and hybrid working for large organizations with diverse functions. Focus groups with employees of the UK business of a multinational organization identify conceptual contributions to the sociology of work and employment and empirical findings in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that inform future policy and practice. Location-based flexible working has a potential unintended 'ripple' effect wherein application of individual-level flexibility has wider-reaching consequences throughout

**Corresponding author:**
Daniel Wheatley, Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B152TT, UK.
Email: d.wheatley@bham.ac.uk

the organization. Findings emphasize that organizations need to recognize and respond to new realities of location-based flexibility. Management must navigate potential 'ripples' in the development of flexible working policies and practice, shaped by various tensions, including an overarching autonomy–control paradox. This requires a coordinated approach centred on 'inclusive flexibility' and 'responsible autonomy' that involves moving away from one-size-fits-all strategies towards a tailored approach offering employees choice, agency and voice in decision-making, while accommodating different stakeholder needs.

**Keywords**
autonomy, flexible working, hybrid work, remote work, ripple effect, tensions, voice, well-being, work–life balance, workplace location

## Introduction

In March 2020, the magnitude of the Coronavirus pandemic was realized when countries across the globe enacted lockdowns and other measures targeting social distancing on grounds of public health (Kupferschmidt and Cohen, 2020). At the organizational level, this often resulted in temporary reductions or shutdown of economic activity and furloughing of employees (i.e. suspension of employment in response to economic conditions). There was also an extensive and unexpected shift in working routines driven by government guidance requiring working from home where possible (Felstead and Reuschke, 2020). At peak, around two-in-five workers reported remote working entirely from home across the UK, consistent with experiences in several other economies including the EU and the US (Milasi et al., 2020).

A substantial evidence base spanning several decades provides understanding of the sociological impacts of remote working from home for the employee and organization, including potential benefits to productivity, work–life balance and employee well-being, but challenges regarding managing relationships at work, suitability/lack of physical workspace, invasion of privacy and potential for overwork due to blurring of work–life boundaries (Wheatley, 2017). What makes the recent expansion of remote working distinct is the sudden and unexpected nature of the shift, that remote working from home became the primary/sole location of work rather than a previously occasional flexible option, that many employees asked to work from home were in roles where previously this option was unavailable and that many employees experienced this shift as one of multiple people in their household simultaneously working at home (Anderson and Kelliher, 2021).

The shift in working routines created practical challenges for organizational dynamics where a portion of employees continued to operate at employer workplace or client sites, while other employees have been required to, at least temporarily, work entirely from home. Given the high-profile narratives around remote working from home it is important to acknowledge that, across the UK, most work, accounting for more than three-in-five workers, has continued to be performed outside of the home in workplaces, client sites and on the move, even at the height of the pandemic (Wheatley, 2022b). The distribution of work by location has also been sociologically uneven/unequal, with much

larger proportions of lower socio-economic groups working outside of the home, while much office work has been relocated, at least partly, to the home. Many larger organizations, especially those with diverse functions, have therefore faced the challenge of blending fully onsite, at-home and hybrid employee working routines. The increase in remote working from home has also tested organizational capacity to adapt, including adopting new digital technologies such as video conferencing software (Bennett et al., 2021). These developments have also presented challenges at the organizational level in maintaining job quality and well-being as businesses and employees were not fully prepared to operate remotely.

More recently, as social distancing measures have been relaxed, hybrid working has come to the fore, involving combining time at the employer workplace with time spent working remotely from home (Halford, 2005). Data from the CIPD's (2023) UK Working Lives Survey, a representative survey of over 6000 workers, collected at the time of our study in early 2022, confirm these trends with just under half (46%) of surveyed workers reporting a hybrid model. Hybrid working involves a mix of routines with over one-third (35.9%) of hybrid workers reporting spending less than half of their working time at home, and 47.9% of hybrid workers spending most of their working time, 75% or more, at home (Wheatley, 2022a). These patterns may still reflect the impacts of the pandemic to a degree and the relative balance of time spent at work, home and other locations is still in flux. Debates have continued in contemporary sociology of work literature over the future of work, including the relative effectiveness of new flexible modes of work for different actors in the employment relationship (Felstead, 2022; Laß and Wooden, 2023; Reissner et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2023). In the UK context, this has prompted policy reviews by the UK government (e.g. Dobbins, 2021) and generated a need for research into the impacts, including for workplace well-being, of the adoption of location-based flexible working.

Consequently, the unique circumstance of the pandemic has presented an opportunity to reassess approaches to work and explore potential new directions for the future of work. In this article, we investigate the challenges of navigating the adoption of remote and hybrid working for large organizations with diverse functions, providing insight into a form of flexibility not previously applied at such scale in a functionally and occupationally diverse organizational context. The application of hybrid working is further novel in its fluidity relative to more traditional and often researched flexible working arrangements such as flexi-time and the more fixed application of remote work from home. As such, this article adds a novel contribution to existing literature through answering the following research questions:

1. What challenges and opportunities do employee-led flexibility policies and practices, and remote and hybrid flexible working create for employees and the organization?
2. To what extent are the intended impacts and outcomes of employee-led flexibility policies and practices, and remote and hybrid flexible working realized?
3. What contradictions and unintended impacts have remote and hybrid flexible working had on workers and the organization, and how can these inform future policy and practice?

Through focus groups with employees and managers at the UK business of a diversified multinational organization, the research identifies findings with relevance to future flexible working theory, policy and practice. The article provides a conceptual contribution to the sociology of work and employment literature by identifying a series of unintended 'ripple effects' arising from remote and hybrid working, and greater fluidity in location-based flexible working patterns generally. This is shaped by tensions in flexible working, notably an overarching autonomy–control paradox (Putnam et al., 2014). In considering potential 'ripple dampening' methods, the research also conceptually identifies the importance of 'inclusive flexibility' and 'responsible autonomy' (Friedman, 1977) and the role of management in addressing the unintended and more distal consequences of changes in working practice. The next section reviews relevant literature on location-based flexibility. The methodology is then outlined, followed by the findings, and a discussion and conclusion.

## Location-based flexibility

While the pandemic-induced rapid growth in remote and hybrid working since 2020 has constituted a considerable and unexpected change to places of work for many employees, some employment patterns have long been characterized by location-based flexibility involving work time spent outside of co-located employer/business premises. Debates relating to workplace location have featured in past and present sociology of work and employment research. Indeed, workplace location has been evolving gradually for the last three decades (Felstead, 2022; Felstead and Reuschke, 2020; Wheatley, 2022b). Locations of work have been reshaped owing to changes in industrial structure, the application of digital technologies and sustainability agendas (Green and Riley, 2021). Cost reduction and rationalization (flexibilization) has influenced some of this change, rather than culture-driven adoption of employee-focused flexibility (Walker, 2020). There has nevertheless been steady growth in work taking place outside of employer/business premises across multiple sectors of employment, including homeworking, home-based teleworking (involving use of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs)), location-independent working, mobile working, remote working and teleworking. In many service occupations, especially those that involve higher skills, 'the workplace' is constructed from a complex and evolving mix of employer premises, client sites, business incubators, co-working spaces, public spaces (coffee shops, hotels, airports, etc.) and the home (Wheatley, 2022b). Felstead (2022) summarizes several recent studies that have sought to categorize the relative suitability of different occupations to remote working based on the characteristics and content of the job, with major differences noted by broad occupation and industry groupings (e.g. production operatives have almost no chance of working from home, while working at home is possible in service occupations such as finance and law).

It is important to contextualize these changes and recognize that most paid work occurs in centralized workplaces located in urban centres and industrial parks (Zhu, 2013) and this remained the case throughout the pandemic (Milasi et al., 2020). Locating workers in a single co-located workplace has extensive historical roots under industrial

capitalism and is predicated on a series of purported benefits including managerial control, agglomeration derived from labour market pooling and knowledge sharing and through facilitating economies of scale and scope (Zhu, 2013). Employee benefits, meanwhile, include greater professional and social connectedness from face-to-face interaction, and the physical and mental separation that is created between home and work. While often cited as one of the least appreciated work-related activities (Wheatley and Bickerton, 2016), evidently, some workers value the transitional properties of the commute (LaJeunesse and Rodríguez, 2012).

More fluid and diverse locations of work are key features of paid work for an increasing proportion of workers who fulfil tasks of employment across multiple locations. In addition to reflecting an evolving relationship between worker and paid work, changes in where work takes place have led to debates around how workplaces can be best captured with contributions such as the probability space concept from Shearmur (2021), offering alternative measurement of where work takes place, in this case focusing on proportions of time spent in different locations. Debates also occur over the relative benefits of different models of workplace, including centralized, decentralized and hybrid models (Shearmur, 2021), with the latter moniker proposed by Halford (2005) in the context of a 'hybrid workspace' involving workers, facilitated by ICTs, combining time at co-located workplaces with other locations including the home.

## Benefits, challenges, contradictions and unintended consequences

Many of the benefits identified in the existing evidence base associated with remote work are also present in hybrid models. For the employer, the aforementioned cost reduction is a substantial potential benefit where workspace can be reorganized (e.g. hot-desking) or rationalized (Walker, 2020; Wheatley, 2022b). For society, environmental benefits could be realized from reductions in congestion at peak travel times. Potential benefits for workers include greater autonomy over how, when and where work takes place, time savings derived from not commuting when working from home, the ability to combine two or more part-time roles and associated enhancements in job satisfaction (Anderson and Kelliher, 2021; Moos and Skaburskis, 2008; Taylor et al, 2021; Wheatley, 2017). Several other benefits can be generated, including greater inclusivity as access to work becomes possible among those for whom a traditional workplace may present a barrier due to mental and/or physical health or other factors (Green, 2017) and reductions in employee absence arising from ill health and household pressures such as childcare. Evidence suggests outcomes differ between sub-groups of workers and by type of location-based flexibility. For example, homeworkers in highly skilled occupations more often report jobs with good characteristics and higher levels of job satisfaction, whereas part-time and self-employed homeworkers experience lower job quality (Wheatley, 2021).

In principle, a hybrid work model offers the opportunity to blend the benefits of both centralized and remote working; for example, supporting the key functions of enabling new members of staff to feel connected to their colleagues and employer via induction, role-modelling, acculturation to practices and sharing of values. It enables the employee to shape their working routines while retaining regular face-to-face

professional and social connection with their organization. Employers benefit from the ability to reduce costs while avoiding the loss of agglomeration benefits associated with centralizing workplaces (Wheatley, 2022b). It shifts the function of co-located organizational workplaces to multifunctional spaces and shared hubs that are designed as collaborative spaces that promote colleague interaction, support professional and social networks, consolidate organizational culture and can attract talent and host clients (Green and Riley, 2021). However, this will likely require investment to reshape workplaces for these purposes. The extent to which these blended benefits are manifest is therefore dependent on the level of buy-in to potential benefits and how hybrid work is practised. What makes hybrid working distinct is its fluidity relative to more traditional flexible working arrangements such as flexi-time, job share and fixed application of remote work from home. Application of hybrid models poses several challenges.

Common challenges in the application of remote and hybrid work that have been identified in the extant literature include limited face-to-face contact that has a series of knock-on effects, including creating co-ordination difficulties for collaborative and team-working tasks, potential slowing of career development/progression and reductions in managerial support due to lower organizational visibility and loss of professional and social networks, and associated employee well-being impacts from feelings of isolation (Bennett et al., 2021; Pederson and Lewis, 2012). Existing research has argued it is necessary to retain at least a basic level of face-to face contact within teams as this helps to moderate negative effects (Coenen and Kok, 2014). There is a well-being risk from overwork as employees report higher volumes of work and intensity of work routines (Taylor et al., 2021), difficulties are faced in dividing space and time, and work–non-work spillovers intensify work–life conflict (Laß and Wooden, 2023; Reissner et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2023). There is also the potential for workers to engage in virtual presenteeism behaviours (i.e. working while unwell or when undertaking caring responsibilities given the ease of connecting to work, including emails, meetings, etc., remotely). When primarily implemented with a cost reduction focus, it can effectively shift costs – including resources (e.g. ICTs) and workspace (e.g. office furniture) – onto workers (Moos and Skaburskis, 2008).

Alongside problems with awareness among employees and line managers, employer apprehension surrounding the loss of direct managerial control over employees and malfeasance has historically limited levels of flexibility and remote working (Felstead, 2022; Sweet et al., 2014). Putnam et al. (2014) refer to the presence of an autonomy–control paradox in which the provision of greater autonomy leaves employees subject to more managerial and peer control because control is applied in ‘unobtrusive’ forms (e.g. schedule flexibility leaving employees effectively on call and working longer hours). A lack of buy-in to the benefits of flexibility and absence of managerial trust in employees can also influence use of monitoring and micro-management systems, including application of technical control methods (i.e. software that captures productivity data (Dayaram and Burgess, 2021)). Remote working, especially that subject to monitoring systems and/or health and safety checks, also has implications for privacy. Putnam et al. (2014) identify several tensions/contradictions that often occur at the

organizational level, including supposed flexible policies being enacted through rigid criteria simultaneously encouraging and discouraging use, and policies that are only available to certain employees. In these instances, realized flexibility is often limited, resulting in 'fixed' or 'faux' flexibility.

Location-based flexibility has the potential to generate contradictions and unintended consequences. Existing evidence has identified impacts including contagious offsite working (Rockmann and Pratt, 2015), which refers to a domino effect of offsite working influencing other workers to also be offsite. Coenen and Kok (2014) report a similar effect arising from hot-desking, which can impede co-locating close to team members, rendering physical presence in the workplace less useful and thus encouraging remote working. Research has also pointed to unintended negative impacts to well-being arising from HR systems and practices, including those that in principle are designed to enhance work–life balance (Baluch, 2017). The notion of a 'ripple effect' associated with flexible working has also been posited. For example, McAlpine (2015) argued that schedule control could not only have an impact on employees' job attitudes but also have a potential ripple effect on the job attitudes of co-workers (e.g. lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment). Similarly, recent research has identified peer resentment towards employees using flexible work arrangements (FWAs), which can drive negative outcomes, including higher employee turnover levels (Calhoun and McCarthy, 2022). Navigating 'ripples' and identifying effective 'ripple dampeners' and methods of application is essential if benefits are to be realized from location-based flexibility.

## Organizational context

The research involved capturing the voices of employees across different functions and at different levels of the UK business of a multinational organization with diversified activities across energy, technology, transport and other sectors. The case organization was chosen predicated on the expectation that its diverse operations would present specific challenges, as well as opportunities, associated with the adoption of location-based flexible working. Owing to its size, employee types are highly diverse, covering a whole range of occupational groups, including those that existing evidence has shown do not easily lend themselves to remote and hybrid working, such as machine operators, service engineers and others (Felstead, 2022). In addition, its size provided further rationale for its selection, as large organizations are sometimes cited as those that are most progressive in their adoption of new working routines (Sweet et al., 2014). The choice of case organization enabled the exploration of the specific effects of implementing remote and hybrid working across a large highly diverse workforce, something that prior to 2020 had not been tested at such scale.

The case organization has a history of implementing policies targeting enhancements in flexibility. For over a decade it has had a policy for requesting formal flexible working arrangements (subject to approval) and leave policies, including holiday buying/selling, maternity, paternity and shared parental leave. However, despite availability, feedback on flexible working at the organization was mixed, indicating an inconsistency in application of policies and culture. In 2018, the senior leadership team made a commitment to focus on flexible working as an enabler for diversity and inclusion. This led to a flexibility

experiment, which at its core had an employee-led philosophy with the employee viewed as the driving force behind their own flexibility choices, rather than permission-based systems. This included the option for employees to take up to 50 days of unpaid leave. The experiment and follow-up inquiry received a highly positive response and expectations of future change. The inquiry report emphasized that 'doing nothing' was not an option and change was needed towards a culture of trust and ownership. This emphasis on employee-led choice and agency over location-based flexibility at the case organization also had implications for enhancing employee voice (Wilkinson et al., 2020).

The organization was impacted by the pandemic. In March 2020, short-term closure of operations and sites was accompanied by the widespread movement of employees to remote working. Workers in some parts of the business were also periodically furloughed. The organization responded to the emerging situation by producing guidance that covered working from home, including working environment, seating, desk and work surface, equipment, movement, IT connectivity and services support. In addition, the organization already had in place well-being support for employees, including an employee assistance programme (EAP).

Towards the end of 2021, the organization made a commitment to a 'new normal' work model founded on a flexible 'work wherever' philosophy enabling employees, following consultation, to work in any location where they can be most productive. The model accommodates employees' desire for more autonomy when it comes to choosing where they work, although owing to the breadth of functions choices to work flexibly are not available to all employees. The timing of the adoption of the new flexible working model prompted this research project, which aimed to evaluate the impacts, including for workplace well-being, of the adoption of remote and hybrid working.

## Methodology

Data were captured from the case organization through 12 focus groups conducted over a period of five months from October 2021 to February 2022, beginning with the senior leadership team (SLT) and ending with a final 'mop-up' mixed employee group to ensure data saturation had been reached (i.e. no further novel findings from additional data capture) (Hennink and Kaiser, 2019). Focus groups were identified as a suitable method as the research sought to uncover impacts of the adoption of remote and hybrid working, including unexpected consequences. We also sought to explore the dynamics within and across functions and teams, and focus groups enabled these to be captured in a 'live' format with a relatively naturalistic setting (Riach and Loretto, 2009). The approach echoed existing research adopting a single case method using focus groups, including: Monteith and Giesbert (2017), which drew on 14 focus groups and just over 100 participants; Mosseri et al. (2022), with 12 focus groups and 85 participants; and Riach and Loretto (2009) who used eight focus groups with 66 participants.

Focus groups generally comprised between three and six participants, with the SLT Group involving 10 participants. All participants volunteered to engage in the focus groups via response to an advertisement that was distributed through the organization's intranet and through local communications (e.g. email newsletters). Focus groups were each scheduled for one hour. In total, the focus groups captured data from 58 employees

**Table 1.** Focus group details.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Senior leadership team (SLT)** | A group of 10 senior leaders from across the case organization's UK business. |
| **Department heads** | Two groups of department heads of differing seniority, totalling seven employees, with tenures up to 20 plus years. |
| **Professional services** | Two groups totalling nine employees covering professional services employees in functions including HR, finance, legal, marketing and other roles, and including some line managers. Mix of tenures from under one year to 15 years. |
| **IT community** | Six employees comprised of three interns and three full-time permanent employees, covering services including back-office systems, clients and supporting staff. |
| **Project delivery** | Five employees with varying tenures; involved with delivering mix of onsite construction and maintenance projects, remote external customer support and in-office functions. |
| **External sales** | Six sales team employees covering roles including account manager and line manager, with tenures at the organization (and subsidiaries) up to 20 years. |
| **Service engineers** | Five service engineers in roles including applications engineer, support engineer and area field manager, with varied tenures. |
| **Factory** | Four employees based in the factory, including three shop floor employees and one office-based, with mixed tenures up to 17 years. |
| **Interns and apprentices** | Two interns and two apprentices, totalling four employees, in roles including engineer, data analyst and digital marketing. |
| **Mixed group** | Final 'mop-up' mixed employee group to ensure data saturation had been reached, comprising one employee from sales and one working within the IT function. |

at the case organization. A summary of each focus group is outlined in Table 1. The focus groups covered several areas of discussion comprising working routines (including change), working environments, benefits, challenges and unexpected impacts, well-being (mental and physical health, job satisfaction) and work–life balance. Specific lines of questioning were also included for recently onboarded employees, and for the SLT Group around strategic aspects of the implementation of new flexible modes of work. The focus groups were led by a member of the research team with a second member of the team present at each group to ensure smooth operation and to take notes of key discussion points. All members of the team 'sat in' on the first focus group to ensure co-ordination of approach. The team also mixed and matched pairings to further ensure consistency and minimize any potential researcher bias. An additional benefit of conducting focus groups virtually was that the team could co-ordinate our approach by watching recordings of other focus groups.

Focus group data were analysed using an abductive thematic approach. The discussions in the focus groups were transcribed into text form. The text data were then coded into thematic sub-groups and analysed using themes identified from existing evidence and understanding, such as work–life balance, relationships with colleagues and technical challenges, and additional 'reflexive' themes that emerged during the data collection and analysis (Terry et al., 2017). Analytical rigour was ensured through several steps enacted in the analysis, including the project lead having primary responsibility for the analysis, and the application of a thematic method that drew on good practice from several published pieces of research, including Kidd and Parshall (2000) and Riach and Loretto (2009). The method comprised a first stage involving coding individual focus groups and a second stage involving comparative analysis, which itself comprised initially extracting the larger narrative discourse and then the finer substantive content. This combination enabled the researchers to identify conflation of ideas, contradictions and tensions, and understand how and where responses could have been influenced by group dynamics. The approach facilitates an openness that enables specific contexts and experiences to be captured and individual voices to be heard, while the reflexive component helps to draw out emerging unexpected themes. It is a particularly effective research method to inform practice and policymaking (Braun and Clarke, 2014). The analysis generated four themes: (1) the practicalities of location-based flexibility; (2) ripple effects across teams and functions; (3) impacts for workplace performance and well-being; and (4) methods for navigating the identified ripple effects.

The research underwent ethical review and approval by the research project leader's university. All participants were provided with details in advance of the research, including how data would be processed and used. All data have been anonymized. Focus groups present different specific challenges (Sim and Waterfield, 2019) and these were carefully reflected upon by the team both prior and post data collection. For example, it is not possible to have anonymity within groups. As such, the structure of the focus groups was carefully considered to maximize the freedom for participants to share their experiences and perspectives.

## Findings

### *The practicalities of location-based flexibility*

While the organization already had flexible working in place and plans for expanding flexibility across its workforce, the pandemic acted as a catalyst for change that would have otherwise been difficult to realize:

> We'd got an employee group working on what flexible working looked like and you could sense that there was a lot of kickback from somebody – perhaps management, not sure . . . And then you were forced to have to do it and I'm not sure maybe everyone would have ever got over that . . . had it not been for the forcing bit. (SLT Group)

Many employees at the case organization across multiple functions, including engineers, IT, professional services and sales, experienced a substantial shift in working

routines to remote and hybrid working. However, it was widely acknowledged that the developments prior to the pandemic, including employee-led flexibility initiatives, had already increased levels of flexibility. It is important to further contextualize these changes as not all employees shifted to remote and hybrid routines. Practicalities around the nature of some jobs require employees to be physically present on site (e.g. factory-based employees) or at client sites (e.g. location-independent service engineers) (Felstead, 2022), creating a highly diverse workforce with respect to choices regarding locations of work:

> I think there's a massive difference just within our own departments, because you have an element of office-based staff that are having to work from home, which creates its own problems, that you're never away from it, but we also have a mobile workforce, and that mobile workforce didn't really have an option to work from home. (Service Engineers Group)

While the expansion of remote and hybrid working may not have directly affected the working routines of all employees, its reach was felt across the organization. It had a notable positive effect within the organization through changing perceptions around flexible working, including working from home, removing stigmas associated with concerns around employee behaviours and risks of malfeasance:

> People just had that stigma attached to [working from home] of 'are you going to get the washing done? Receive a delivery?' and all that stuff. I think that has shifted 100% the other way and people have realized that when you work from home, you probably end up doing longer hours because you take the commute time and then you can add that on to the day and get more done. (Department Heads Group 2)

Increases in location-based flexibility have raised the profile of flexible working within the organization. Nevertheless, not all employees were aware of their ability to request to work flexibly and the formal arrangements available at the organization, while some indicated they did not feel able to request flexible working for reasons including job pressures and local-level work cultures and line managers. Inconsistencies and lack of clarity in messaging around flexible working was also identified. Communications promoting 'work from anywhere' were reported to have led to differing interpretations at local level by both line managers and employees, resulting in concerns about the impact on customer experience where large numbers of employees continue to work mainly from home or other remote locations. Similarly, changes in messaging from 'employee-led flexibility' to 'flexible working' and a 'flexible culture' created some lack of clarity over the extent of employee autonomy and agency over flexibility.

Responding to the needs of employees across diverse functions is particularly challenging and one-size-fits-all approaches were noted as creating difficulties and not offering a suitable solution. For example, messaging around flexibility in standardized organization-wide communications did not apply to certain functions and employee groups, resulting in a lack of clarity and creating tensions and feelings of resentment towards the organization and colleagues:

> They were quite communicative with their emails, but they were very much an overview – a generalization. They weren't specific to particular groups of people, so it was basically a case of, right, that's it; you're all working from home, regardless of whether, like us, you're location-independent, or whether you're an outright office worker. (Project Delivery Group)

Levels of awareness, perceived availability and autonomy over decisions to work flexibly varied considerably at local level, reflecting a complex mix of differences in job properties, quality of communications, the influence of local line management and local workplace culture, along with individual preferences and personality traits:

> Before COVID, line managers had chats with people from HR who were talking about employee-led flexibility – this opportunity for you to go, 'Hey, I need to have a flexible working pattern', approach your line manager, talk about it, agree on a working pattern, but it's interesting that it didn't always trickle down to everybody. I think a lot of the things that came about with COVID, people had lots of different expectations, and I think that was solely due to their line management. (IT Community Group)

The physical workspace added further complexity. Multi-site changes to physical workspace require substantial investment and these decisions affect building utilization. At the time of the research, many spaces had not yet been adapted or optimized for new modes of working. This included a lack of collaborative spaces, teams being spread across different floors and/or buildings and rigid design of space less suited to flexible working. While it was clear that a level of change was necessary to facilitate new ways of working, at the same time strategic decisions about the future of work-design feed into these physical changes, creating a complex interdependency that has knock-on effects for the success of any working model adopted:

> I don't think our office is set up well for us to have really positive downtime areas where you can have your lunch and break and collaboration areas, because I've got lots of teams, I've got teams on different floors, it's an absolute nightmare, so I split myself when I go in . . . We could definitely improve on that. Often, you're there and half the building is empty or most of your floor is empty and half my team downstairs, half are upstairs, so we're not really set up well for it at the moment. (Professional Services Group 2)

## *Ripple effects across teams and functions*

The most significant finding is the 'ripple effect', which reflects the challenges of implementing flexible working in the presence of functional interdependency. It should be noted that ripple effects can be positive, as per the aforementioned changes in attitudes to, and awareness and acceptance of, flexibility. However, the evidence from the case organization highlighted the potential difficulties regarding co-ordinating flexibility in functionally diverse organizations. Certain roles and functions restrict levels of employee flexibility, including those driven by client demand, practicalities around the nature of the job, as well as certain external requirements (e.g. government guidelines requiring onsite presence among finance employees). In all cases, employees had a clear awareness of why their roles had more or lesser flexibility, but also conveyed that the provision

of flexibility and/or autonomy over their working patterns, where possible, is appreciated. This diversity of functions and roles at the case organization elucidated the challenges of implementing employee-led flexible working.

Hybrid working routines that have been adopted within the case organization have been applied in differing models. Some follow more closely the flexibility-without-constraints approach afforded by the 'work from anywhere' principle promoted by the organization, whereas others are arranged using a rota with specified onsite days. In the latter case, not all employees reported having used onsite days, as such reporting less frequent time spent on site. Decisions regarding whether to mandate presence on rota days represent a particular challenge for implementation of hybrid working. Use of hybrid routines based on mandated rota systems can suffer from the problems associated with 'one-size-fits-all' policies, creating contradictions as noted by Putnam et al. (2014) as 'fixed' or 'faux' flexibility, which is counter to the core purpose of flexibility. It presents practical difficulties at the individual level if onsite days do not fit, for example, with household responsibilities and/or partner work routines. When working routines combine mixes of rota patterns and individuals working to different flexibility models, it can have several undesirable impacts associated with asynchronous working, including expectations of availability, and lengthening of the working day where individuals work different times:

> People might take two hours off in the morning and work till 8:00 o'clock at night. There's some things they'll say in the foot of the email – 'I don't expect a response outside of office hours'. I think it does blur the lines, even though people are making it clear that they don't expect a response . . . Whereas, I think previously, if you do 8:00 till 5:00, you finish at 5:00, you pick emails up in the morning. I think by spreading the workday out for people who want to spread it out or have to spread it out on occasions, it spreads it out for everyone else as well. (Project Delivery Group)

Lack of regular onsite presence also presents challenges in the co-ordination of activities with those who work at a co-located employer workplace all the time. Several examples were given, including an employee who cited having to wait for IT services to have someone available on site, and employees in the factory focus group who reported delays when they had to wait for an engineer to be on site, sometimes for up to three working days:

> Sometimes, when you've got a problem, it's better to have someone face-to-face who could come down and talk you through a problem, rather than send an email and then you don't hear back for days, or sometimes you don't even hear back at all . . . It doesn't really work, [having other functions] working from home, because they're not with you to talk you through the problem, solution, and then they might say, 'Well, I'm not coming on site until Wednesday', and it might be a Monday morning. So, it can sometimes delay the jobs getting out or whatever, and sometimes it can make it quite difficult, quite frustrating that you're not getting the support that you need. (Factory Group)

> We had one [colleague] who immediately said, 'I'm getting so much more out of being pretty well a full-time mum and a home-schooler, and flexible working's ideal for me, because I do my work in the evenings'. It's like, 'Yeah, but the wake of your speedboat is catastrophic, you're never available when I need to speak with you'. (Mixed Group)

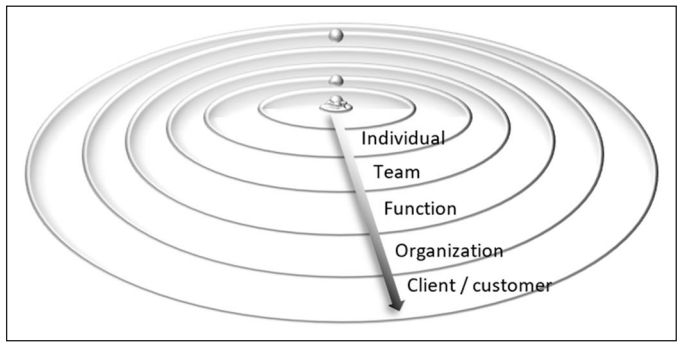


**Figure 1.** The flexibility ripple effect.

Flexibility has to be carefully managed against service delivery, as one Department Head noted:

> [The site] is high output, serial production, very digitalized . . . I had to staff the people on site and keep the on-call procedures in place to keep that going, because if IT went home the whole place would just stop. (Department Heads Group 1)

While the behaviours and routines of some individuals were often highlighted in the focus groups as creating delays or difficulties in operation, in the cases identified it was evident that the problems created by individual-level flexibility were not attributable to the individual, but rather occurred where there was a lack of co-ordination at team level resulting in gaps in practical availability. The result is a multi-layered 'ripple effect' (Figure 1) in which the wake of an individual is felt throughout teams and across functions with potentially significant reach throughout the organization and for its clients/customers.

## *Impacts for workplace performance and well-being*

While the challenges of navigating unintended ripple effects of flexibility is the core finding of the research, the focus groups did uncover a series of benefits for both employee and employer from remote and hybrid working, including enhanced levels of employee autonomy and associated benefits for work–life balance, improved employee performance and potential enhancements to workforce diversity. Performance enhancements of new modes of work reflect a somewhat unexpected benefit. However, the sustainability of these benefits is questionable given this may have been at least partly attributable to a reported growth in work intensity and virtual presenteeism. Employees reported the incidence of high workloads and long hours driven by work cultures that result in back-to-back meetings and little time for breaks, leading to burnout and work-related stress. The atomization and asynchrony of remote work can exacerbate these issues for some, causing well-being impacts. Fit between job design and motivation of employees and better workplace culture was emphasized in the focus groups as critical

to the success of new flexible modes of work. Part of the challenge lies in addressing splits and tensions in perspectives between some employees and managers who value more traditional rigid working routines that may entail faux flexibility, and those who have embraced new, more fluid, modes of work:

> I think there's going to be that challenge between traditional views and new world views, in that there's people who still want to have almost a regional identity or a branch identity of some description where they want to have people at desks where they can still see them so there is a degree of – whether it's not a lack of trust but it might be even the business is in a certain turnaround cycle or something like that where actually they need to address a cultural thing within their business that they feel the best way to do that is potentially have people working face-to-face, being able to bounce off each other. (Department Heads Group 2)

Problems arising from the co-ordination difficulties and flexibility ripple effects offset some of the benefits of remote and hybrid working. Employees reported having to adapt to new methods of communication using ICTs, and to fewer opportunities for physical interaction, which can have detrimental impacts on task progression, and social connectedness at work. Nurturing and maintaining high-quality relationships at work is a significant challenge to effective adaptation to hybrid work. Impacts may be especially felt among onboarding staff who reported reduced relationship building. While hybrid routines mean some time is spent physically on site, this time is not always spent face-to-face with others, but may be spent working solo or joining virtual meetings where activities are not co-ordinated effectively. Some line managers and leaders referred to onboarding, succession planning and developing junior staff as 'different rather than more difficult', although recently onboarded employees emphasized difficulties in building relationships and networks, gathering information and identifying key contacts, maintaining motivation and lack of exposure to leaders, with the latter having wider significance in limiting the identification and nurturing of talent.

These challenges have wider well-being implications that are especially pronounced for employees with more limited professional and social networks, including recent onboarded employees, migrant workers and individuals who live alone:

> I found it really difficult, personally, to onboard remotely, it was so hard. So, we definitely need to get better at that, I think we can do better at that, and that means having people also having proper time in the office and really meeting their colleagues. (Professional Services Group 2)

These findings emphasize the differing needs of individual employees, requiring careful navigation on the part of line managers and underscoring the need for flexibility and responsiveness:

> I got everybody together and said, 'Right, we're working from home', and it caused a panic in one guy because he lived at home alone; so a guy in his 30s, had no family, lives alone in his flat, and the worst thing in the world to him was me saying, 'You now work from the place where you also live and are isolated'. That was an unintended consequence, I had to go and sit with him and have a brew and put my arm around him and say, 'OK, you can still come to the office then'. (Mixed Group)

Linked to the management of relationships is that communication channels may not have been adapted adequately to keep all employees updated under new modes of work, raising implications for employee voice and information and consultation provisions. In part a product of these communication difficulties, as well as the management of expectations around levels of flexibility that can be realized across different functions and roles, some employees reported feelings of frustration and lack of equity where they continued to work in a more traditional onsite mode, or at client sites, while their line managers and/or colleagues in other teams and/or functions had greater autonomy over their working routines.

### *Navigating the choppy waters*

The impetus and support for employee flexibility among the SLT positioned the case organization well to navigate the ripple effects and associated tensions produced by remote and hybrid work. The SLT recognized that these new modes of work are here to stay:

> That's the thing we've learnt; you can't put the genie back in the bottle. Lots of people have found this new way of working really, really beneficial. (SLT Group)

The focus groups offered insight into several potential 'ripple dampeners' that could be employed to mediate negative ripple effects. Optimizing the suitability of occupations to flexible remote and hybrid work through job and task redesign was noted by a member of the SLT Group. This involved an important distinction between input-related (labour process) and output-related (productivity):

> Most of those indicators, by the way, are input-related as opposed to output-related. So, we talked about this move to ignore what a person's doing and just measure the output of their work. I think, for me, that's true trust and autonomy, where you give more freedom to the input, and the how, and actually we are more concerned with the what. (SLT Group)

Workplace culture change was also viewed as key to achieve buy-in among those holding old world perspectives on how work should be performed, as already noted in the Department Heads Group. This requires training and guidance around expectations and service delivery for employees and line managers, with the latter having a key co-ordinating role. It also requires trust in employees' autonomy and provision of choice, agency and voice in decision-making and policy and practice development, as noted by members of the SLT:

> We are trying to encourage managers to unlearn a lifetime of how they manage their people and in unlearning that, they are asking for guidance, a steer, confirmation, assurance, that they're doing the right thing . . . [Managers] are saying exactly the same thing, 'We want to do the right thing but we need more guidance, we need to be reassured that this is not going to backfire on us and that we can still run an effective business'. (SLT Group)

> We had to trust people and we now need to continue to trust them and not give up on that change of culture. (SLT Group)

> The way we used to create policies in the past was an elite group, maybe leaders, maybe HR, would go into a room and write down what we think the company needed, maybe linking it to a written strategy and we'd come out with a policy and consult on that. I think those days are becoming extinct. What will happen now is we'll have policies for the real world where they emerge. They emerge from the way people behave, from the things that we see happen and then what we will do is we'll codify the behaviours we're seeing into policies. (SLT Group)

Making flexible forms of work more effective also requires reshaping of workspaces to avoid pitfalls such as those already noted in the Professional Services Group 2 and evidenced in existing research (Green and Riley, 2021). This requires investment to adapt workplaces to be more suited to hybrid working, including collaborative spaces and grouping of workspaces into 'neighbourhoods' to enable co-location among teams and between those working interdependently. This can be extended to environments designed to promote employee well-being, while provision of appropriate resources, including ICTs, is essential to facilitate effective flexible modes of work:

> I think we're going to see offices not used for doing things that you could easily do on your own in your own home or in a coffee shop. They're going to be used for networking collaboration, working together, things that can better be done by people coming together . . . At the moment, we still use desks and we've shaped it still around the old way of working. (SLT Group)

Finally, the SLT noted that there is not a one-size-fits-all 'silver bullet' to the challenges faced in the application of flexible remote and hybrid work, but that it could be feasible to design policies and practices that offer flexibility and local-level autonomy while also being practical for the organization:

> The reality is that all of the business situations are so different . . . I think actually the answer is we're going to have to create five frameworks, yeah? Not 100, because 100s are not going to work and you're going to have no level of control, but it can't be one because there isn't one. (SLT Group)

## Discussion and conclusion

Contemporary sociology of work research has debated the implications of recent flexible modes of home, remote and hybrid working for different actors in the employment relationship, in the context of COVID-19. The pandemic and resultant lockdowns and social distancing measures abruptly compelled many organizations to implement remote and hybrid working (Felstead, 2022; Laß and Wooden, 2022; Reissner et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2023), and these organizations must now respond to the reality of location-based flexibility in the future of work.

Workplace location, specifically location-based flexibility, has been discussed in recent sociology of work and employment research (Felstead, 2022; Felstead and Reuschke, 2020; Wheatley, 2022b). This article has provided a new conceptual contribution by identifying a series of unintended multi-layered 'ripple effects' arising from remote and hybrid working in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and greater fluidity in location-based flexible working patterns generally. In considering potential 'ripple

dampening' methods, the research has identified the significance of the role of management in addressing the 'ripple effects' and related challenges and benefits. The findings add to the existing literature identifying the importance of employee agency regarding choice and voice over issues like flexible working (Wilkinson et al., 2020), facilitated by a managerial strategy of responsible autonomy instilling greater discretion and variety in work (Friedman, 1977 Abgeller et al., 2022). Employees with the greatest autonomy over their working arrangements are the most satisfied with their jobs (Wheatley, 2021).

The article illustrates these conceptual contributions by empirically exploring the impacts of the adoption of location-based – remote and hybrid – flexible working through a study of the UK business of a highly diverse multinational organization. The case organization rolled out what it called an 'employee-led flexibility' policy. The main contribution of the study is the identification of the presence of a multi-layered flexibility 'ripple effect' and an overarching autonomy–control paradox, created by agency and choices over flexibility at the individual level having wider-reaching consequences that can impact teams, co-workers in other functions, the wider organization and in turn clients/customers.

In the case organization, this 'ripple effect' resulted in a paradoxical mix of benefits and challenges arising from remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Cañibano, 2019 and Putnam et al., 2014 for analysis of tensions and paradoxes of workplace flexibility). For example, benefits such as greater autonomy and discretion over work patterns and ensuing job satisfaction coincided with work intensification, difficulties negotiating atomization and asynchrony in work and the potential blurring of work–life boundaries. These tensions, and the management of them, are tied to an overarching autonomy (employee)–control (organizational) paradox embedded in fluid location-based flexible working. The greater autonomy that employees possess, the harder they work, and the more that organizations control, and extend into, their lives (Putnam et al., 2014). The overarching autonomy–control paradox, which influences unintended ripple effects, is revealed even in an organizational context where senior management is very supportive of employee-led flexibility. The assumption is that such tensions would be more pronounced and difficult to manage in more traditional organizational/management contexts.

Through generating new understanding regarding the impacts of location-based remote and hybrid working, the findings have several practical implications. The findings highlight the importance of developing policy and strategy at the organization level, but also of the impact of local-level actions of line managers and co-workers in impacting the efficacy of location-based flexibility, both positively and negatively, and in creating and maintaining workplace well-being. The role of line managers is particularly crucial for organizational performance and employee well-being (Townsend and Hutchinson, 2017). Management must account for potential 'ripple' in the development of flexible working policies and practice. This requires an approach to flexible working that is centred on 'inclusive flexibility' and 'responsible autonomy' (Friedman, 1977; Wheatley, 2017, 2021), and involves moving away from one-size-fits-all strategies towards the tailoring of practice and offering employees choice, agency and voice in decision-making, while acknowledging the functional constraints and needs of all stakeholders. Employee choice and voice matters insofar as it determines the likely impact and sustainability of related

policy and practice (Donaghey et al., 2022). Relative to more traditional organizations, the case organization was well positioned to deal with these issues, providing the research with insights into several potential 'ripple dampeners' that can be deployed to maximize the benefits and minimize the negative impacts of remote and hybrid work.

Consideration needs to be given to the design of jobs and the role of employees and line managers in this process to ensure they fit new modes of operation. As such, it is important to integrate the wider context in which employees work into the development of flexible working policies to avoid negative 'ripple' effects. Workplaces and spaces need to support and enable flexibility in work requiring facilities investments and provision of relevant resources. For example, the co-ordination of physical presence to provide support to those who must be on site. When identifying solutions, the use of core hours or onsite days in hybrid working should be approached carefully. Mandated presence on fixed days delivers less flexibility to the individual and may not create efficiencies at team or function level (e.g. where employees work across teams all members of one team being allocated the same mandated onsite days will create gaps in availability). To be truly effective requires line managers to have a key co-ordinating role to ensure that the application of flexible working fulfils the needs of the individual, while enabling fit with the needs of the team and wider organization (Townsend and Hutchinson, 2017). The findings also emphasize the need for training and guidance around expectations and service delivery when working flexibly for both employees and line managers. This requires workplace culture to adapt to these new routines of work. Furthermore, employees and their representatives need to be consulted about flexible working patterns, which raises the importance of having robust collective employee voice processes and structures (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Above all, positioning employee-friendly flexibility as a fundamental right in the employment relationship, and a central element of the reciprocal employee–organization psychological contract, offers a channel to navigate the tensions and ripple effects that have been identified. For example, as in the case organization, tensions can be navigated by focusing on results, rather than the labour process of when, where and how work gets done (Cañibano, 2019; Putnam et al., 2014).

The analysis also connects to research and policy debates regarding whether flexibility at work is generally too one-sided in power relations in favour of employer-oriented flexibility (Rubery et al., 2016), and whether a policy push is required to a more employee-oriented trajectory. This will be influenced by the nature of any future regulation/proposals for reform of flexible working; notably whether employees should have a stronger 'right to have' flexible working rather than just a 'right to request' with various caveats (Dobbins, 2021).

This research is subject to certain limitations. As the study only considered the case of the UK business of one organization, some of the findings may be context specific. Further research is required to corroborate and elaborate the findings. In particular, research is needed that explores the extent of flexibility ripple effects in different organizational (and sector and country) contexts and provides understanding regarding the degree to which ripple effects can be both positive and negative, and the drivers and impacts of differing outcomes for employees and organizations. This will enable the flexibility ripple effects and tensions identified to be better understood and support the development of future policy and practice pertaining to location-based remote and hybrid flexible working.

In conclusion, this article has built on existing sociology of work and employment research on location-based flexibility by advancing a novel conceptual contribution, which reveals paradoxical 'ripple effects' and paradoxes emanating from remote and hybrid working, and greater fluidity in location-based flexible working patterns more broadly. As recognized by the SLT in the case organization, the Pandora's Box of hybrid working patterns was opened during the pandemic. The consequences for those who do not embrace new modes of work could be considerable, including recruitment and retention difficulties as people demand and increasingly expect location-based flexibility. Organizations need to recognize the new reality of flexible modes of work and the potential for 'ripple effects' and respond accordingly – not to oppose or eliminate hybrid models but to integrate them and adopt new modes of working that incorporate employee autonomy, choice, voice and welfare. Time will tell regarding the extent to which management in different contexts try to deal with the ripple effect challenges of remote/hybrid working or revert to what they see as the old normal of onsite presenteeism and direct managerial monitoring and control.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all individuals from the case study organization that participated in the research project that informed this article. The authors would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments on the earlier versions of the article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors would like to acknowledge the funding provided by the case study company for a research project which formed the basis for the findings presented in this article.

## ORCID iDs

Daniel Wheatley https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6753-2867

Matthew Broome https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6963-8884

Tony Dobbins https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4159-5218

Benjamin Hopkins https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7319-5249

Owen Powell https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6229-9912

## References

Abgeller N, Bachmann R, Dobbins T, et al. (2022) Responsible autonomy: the interplay of autonomy, control and trust for knowledge professionals working remotely during COVID-19. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 0(0). DOI: 10.1177/0143831X221140156.

Anderson D and Kelliher C (2021) Enforced remote working and the work-life interface during lockdown. *Gender in Management: An International Journal* 35(7/8): 677–683.

Baluch AM (2017) Employee perceptions of HRM and well-being in nonprofit organizations: unpacking the unintended. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 28(14): 1912–1937.

Bennett AA, Campion ED, Keeler KR, et al. (2021) Videoconference fatigue? Exploring changes in fatigue after videoconference meetings during COVID-19. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 106(3): 330–344.

Braun V and Clarke V (2014) What can 'thematic analysis' offer health and wellbeing researchers? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being* 9(1): 26152.

Calhoun M and McCarthy V (2022) An unintended consequence of flexible work arrangements (FWAs) – the role of peer resentment on turnover intentions in public accounting. *Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change* 19(3): 401–419.

Cañibano A (2019) Workplace flexibility as a paradoxical phenomenon: exploring employee experiences. *Human Relations* 72(2): 444–470.

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2023) CIPD Good Work Index [online]. Available at: https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/goodwork/ (accessed 25 March 2022).

Coenen M and Kok RAW (2014) Workplace flexibility and new product development performance: the role of telework and flexible work schedules. *European Management Journal* 32(4): 564–576.

Dayaram K and Burgess J (2021) Regulatory challenges facing remote working in Australia. In: Wheatley D, Hardill I and Buglass S (eds) *Handbook of Research on Remote Work and Worker Well-Being in the Post-COVID-19 Era*. Hersey, PA: IGI Global, 202–219.

Dobbins T (2021) *Flexible working: remote and hybrid work*. Research Briefing. UK Parliament, House of Commons Library. Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9391/ (accessed 25 March 2022).

Donaghey J, Cullinane N, Dundon T, et al. (2022) Employee choice of voice and non-union worker representation. *Industrial Relations Journal* 53(6): 503–522.

Felstead A (2022) *Remote Working: A Research Overview*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Felstead A and Reuschke D (2020) *Homeworking in the UK: before and during the 2020 lockdown*. WISERD Report, Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Cardiff. Available at: https://wiserd.ac.uk/publication/homeworking-in-the-uk-before-and-during-the-2020-lockdown/ (accessed 25 March 2022).

Friedman A (1977) Responsible autonomy versus direct control over the labour process. *Capital & Class* 1(1): 43–57.

Green A (2017) Implications of technological change and austerity for employability in urban labour markets. *Urban Studies* 54(7): 1638–1654.

Green A and Riley R (2021) Implications for places of remote working. In: Wheatley D, Hardill I and Buglass S (eds) *Handbook of Research on Remote Work and Worker Well-Being in the Post-COVID-19 Era*. Hersey, PA: IGI Global, 161–180.

Halford S (2005) Hybrid workspace: re-spatialisations of work, organisation and management. *New Technology, Work and Employment* 20(1): 19–33.

Hennink MM and Kaiser BN (2019) Saturation in qualitative research. In: Atkinson P, Delamont S, Cernat A, et al. (eds) *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Available at: https://methods-sagepub-com-christuniversity.knimbus.com/foundations/saturation-in-qualitative-research (accessed 25 March 2022).

Kidd PS and Parshall MB (2000) Getting the focus and the group: enhancing analytical rigor in focus group research. *Qualitative Health Research* 10(3): 293–308.

Kupferschmidt K and Cohen J (2020) Can China's COVID-19 strategy work elsewhere? *Science* 367(6482): 1061–1062.

LaJeunesse S and Rodríguez DA (2012) Mindfulness, time affluence, and journey-based affect: exploring relationships. *Transportation Research Part F: Traffic Psychology and Behaviour* 15(2): 196–205.

Laß I and Wooden M (2023) Working from home and work–family conflict. *Work, Employment and Society* 37(1): 176–195.

McAlpine KL (2015) The 'ripple effect' of schedule control: a social network approach. *Community, Work & Family* 18(4): 377–394.

Milasi S, González-Vázquez I and Fernández-Macías E (2020) *Telework in the EU before and after the COVID-19: where we were, where we head to*. European Commission, Science for Policy Briefs. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/jrcsh/files/jrc120945_policy_brief_-_covid_and_telework_final.pdf (accessed 25 March 2022).

Monteith W and Giesbert L (2017) 'When the stomach is full we look for respect': perceptions of 'good work' in the urban informal sectors of three developing countries. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(5): 816–833.

Moos M and Skaburskis A (2008) The probability of single-family dwelling occupancy: comparing home workers and commuters in Canadian cities. *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 27(3): 319–340.

Mosseri S, Vromen A, Cooper R, et al. (2022) Between frustration and invigoration: women talking about Digital Technology at Work. *Work, Employment and Society*. Epub ahead of print 9 June 2022. DOI: 10.1177/09500170221091680.

Pederson VB and Lewis S (2012) Flexible friends? flexible working time arrangements, blurred work-life boundaries and friendship. *Work, Employment and Society* 26(3): 464–480.

Putnam LL, Myers KK and Gailliard BM (2014) Examining the tensions in workplace flexibility and exploring options for new directions. *Human Relations* 67(4): 413–440.

Reissner SC, Izak M and Hislop D (2021) Configurations of boundary management practices among knowledge workers. *Work, Employment and Society* 35(2): 296–315.

Riach K and Loretto W (2009) Identity work and the 'unemployed' worker: age, disability and the lived experience of the older unemployed. *Work, Employment and Society* 23(1): 102–119.

Rockmann KW and Pratt MG (2015) Contagious offsite work and the lonely office: the unintended consequences of distributed work. *Academy of Management Discoveries* 1(2): 150–164.

Rubery J, Keizer A and Grimshaw D (2016) Flexibility bites back: the multiple and hidden costs of flexible employment policies. *Human Resource Management Journal* 26(3): 235–251.

Shearmur R (2021) Conceptualizing and measuring the location of work: work location as a probability space. *Urban Studies* 58(11): 2188–2206.

Sim J and Waterfield J (2019) Focus group methodology: some ethical challenges. *Quality and Quantity* 53(6): 3003–3022.

Sun L, Liu T and Wang W (2023) Working from home in urban China during the COVID-19 pandemic: assemblages of work-family interference. *Work, Employment and Society* 37(1): 157–175.

Sweet S, Pitt-Catsouphes M, Besen E, et al. (2014) Explaining organizational variation in flexible work arrangements: why the pattern and scale of availability matter. *Community, Work and Family* 17(2): 115–141.

Taylor P, Scholarios D and Howcroft D (2021) *Covid-19 and working from home survey: preliminary findings*. Available at: https://pure.strath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/119024009/Taylor_etal_2021_Covid_19_and_Working_from_Home_Survey.pdf (accessed 25 March 2022).

Terry G, Hayfield N, Clarke V, et al. (2017) Thematic analysis. In: Willig C and Stainton-Rogers W (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 17–37.

Townsend K and Hutchinson S (2017) Line managers in industrial relations: where are we now and where to next? *Journal of Industrial Relations* 59(2): 139–152.

Walker LD (2020) The Covid-19 office in transition: cost, efficiency and the social responsibility business case. *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal* 33(8): 1943–1967.

Wheatley D (2017) Employee satisfaction and use of flexible working arrangements. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(4): 567–585.

Wheatley D (2021) Workplace location and the quality of work: the case of urban-based workers in the UK. *Urban Studies* 58(11): 2233–2257.
Wheatley D (2022a) *Good Work Index 2022*. London: Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development.
Wheatley D (2022b) Work time, place and space in the 'new normal'. In: Holland P, Bartram T, Garavan T, et al. (eds) *The Emerald Handbook of Work, Workplaces and Disruptive Issues in HRM*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 459–478.
Wheatley D and Bickerton C (2016) Time-use and well-being impacts of travel-to-work and travel-for-work. *New Technology, Work and Employment* 31(3): 238–254.
Wilkinson A, Donaghey J, Dundon T, et al. (eds) (2020) *Handbook of Research on Employee Voice*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
Zhu P (2013) Telecommuting, household commute and location choice. *Urban Studies* 50(12): 2441–2459.

Daniel Wheatley is Reader in Business and Labour Economics at University of Birmingham, UK. He researches work and well-being including job quality, work–life balance and flexible working arrangements, spatial dimensions of work including work-related travel, and aspects of time-use including leisure time and the household division of labour. Dan is author of *Time Well Spent: Subjective Well-being and the Organization of Time* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017) and *Well-being and the Quality of Working Lives* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022) and editor of the *Handbook of Research on Remote Work and Worker Well-Being in the Post-COVID-19 Era* (IGI Global, 2021) and the *Handbook of Research Methods on the Quality of Working Lives* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

Matthew Broome is Chair in Psychiatry and Youth Mental Health, and Director of the Institute for Mental Health at the University of Birmingham, Distinguished Research Fellow, Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, University of Oxford, and Visiting Professor, Suor Orsola Benicasa University of Naples. Matthew is Honorary Consultant Psychiatrist to the Early Intervention in Psychosis Service, Birmingham Women's and Children's NHS Foundation Trust. Matthew studied Medicine at the University of Birmingham and trained in psychiatry at the Maudsley Hospital, Bethlem Royal Hospital, and the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery. Matthew has a PhD in Psychiatry from University of London and in Philosophy from University of Warwick.

Tony Dobbins is Professor of Work and Employment Relations at University of Birmingham, UK. He researches employee voice and democracy at work, good work, living wages, sociology of work, and labour markets. He is a former Parliamentary Academic Fellow in the UK Parliament, and former British Universities Industrial Relations Association president. Tony is visiting professor at the University of Malta and University of Limerick.

Benjamin Hopkins is Associate Professor in the Department of Management at the University of Birmingham. He read Economics and Management at the University of Oxford before gaining an ESRC-funded MA and PhD at the University of Warwick. His current research interests include migration in the context of Brexit, work in agriculture and the food manufacturing sector, and worker well-being. Benjamin's previous research has been published in journals including *Work, Employment and Society*, *Economic and Industrial Democracy* and *Human Resource Management Journal*.

Owen Powell is Lecturer in Human Resource Management at York St John University, UK. He is a former Research Fellow at Birmingham Business School and the Institute of Local Government Studies at University of Birmingham, UK. In 2021, he completed a PhD exploring the challenge of sustaining horizontal collectivist organizing across time and scale in worker co-operatives. Between 2019 and 2022 he worked as a freelancer with SMEs across the fields of social innovation, events, music, design, manufacturing and community-led housing. He continues to support grassroots organizations across the UK and is engaged in multiple action research projects.

**Date submitted** October 2022
**Date accepted** July 2023