



Individual and Organizational Impacts of Flexible Work: A Study of Women Workers in North America

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – In this research we investigated how North American women experienced flexible work along with the benefits and challenges associated with such modes of work.

Aim – The study aimed to understand the impacts of hybrid/remote work environments and determine why women working in North America perceived them to be important. It also aimed to investigate the impact of a forced return to the physical workplace.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employed a qualitative approach with data collected by interviewing 14 women selected from a social network. A constant comparison approach was used to analyze data thematically and to identify meta-themes.

Findings – Women participants regarded work-life balance, flexibility and a trusting work relationship as benefits associated with flexible work. However, they expressed feelings of alienation leading to an intention to leave, resulting mainly from a loss of control, if forced to return to a wholly in-workplace mode of work. For organizations the findings suggest negative outcomes, which include employees leaving prematurely, lack of trust, alienative commitment, and perceptions of presenteeism.

Limitations of the study – As with all qualitative research the findings are not generalizable. However, this does not detract from the value of the findings.

Originality/value – The study extended previous research about women's work/life balance, loss of control and turnover associated with flexible work modes. It also identified the presence of feelings of alienation associated with a perceived lack of control if women were forced to return to the physical workplace. Alienation can lead to alienative commitment, a powerful negative organizational force that often remains undetected and leads to dysfunctional outcomes.

KEY WORDS

Flexible work, women, loss of control, turnover, alienative commitment, work-life balance, trust

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1 INTRODUCTION

Following an often fully remote work experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been increased pressure on organizations to continue allowing time and location flexibility in the post-pandemic work environment (Fan & Moen, 2023; Lang, Dony, & Roberts, 2022). Flexible work entails both remote and hybrid work modes. Remote work enables employees to manage their time and family obligations more effectively on the basis of undertaking work wholly outside a fixed office location along with possible flexible hours (Olson, 1983; Shirmohammadi, Au, & Beigi, 2022). Hybrid work, as defined by Grzegorz (2021), is a work arrangement based on a split between work performed in the office and from a remote location. Before the covid pandemic full-time, in-person office attendance was the norm, allowing mainly for no location and minimal schedule flexibility (Boland, De Smet, Palter, & Sanghvi, 2020).

Employers offering flexible work are perceived as being supportive of employees' well-being, while strengthening the psychological contract between employees and the organization (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). Coupling autonomous work practices with flexible work modes has been shown to attract and retain talented individuals by improving work-life balance (Sung, Choi, & Ko, 2024). On the other hand, organizations not allowing flexible work opportunities risk losing top talent thus reducing access to a diverse talent pool with a consequent negative impact on innovation and engagement (Alexander, De Smet, Langstaff, & Ravid, 2021; De Smet, Dowling, Mugayar-Baldocchi, & Schaninger, 2021).

In the pre-pandemic work environment, flexible time and location opportunities often reinforced perceptions of traditional gender roles, negatively affecting career opportunities and progression for women (Gilbert, Amenabar, Zakharenko, & Bever, 2023; Glass & Noonan, 2016; Goldin, 2014; Semuels, 2023). Supporting these perceptions Williams, Blair-Loy and Berdahl (2013) found that pre-pandemic flexible work opportunities in the United States were underutilized despite the need for such flexibility. Some research suggests that a contributing factor was attributable to deeply rooted gender stereotypes, fear of the flexibility stigma and cultural values of work devotion, visibility and presenteeism (Williams et al., 2013).

The pandemic impacted the perception of time and location flexibility being exclusively tied to women's caregiving and family obligations (Goldberg, 2022). It changed the narrative from work accommodation for some to how the majority performed work. The change has provided an opportunity to define how best to support women in the new environment, improve engagement and make meaningful progress towards achieving organizational justice in career opportunities and compensation. However, even organizations embracing flexible work have found it challenging to boost engagement and morale in the long term (Grzegorzczuk, Mariniello, Nurski, & Schraepen, 2021; Harter, 2023; Wilkie, 2019). Low morale and perceptions of powerlessness can lead to feelings of alienation that negatively affect performance (Mehta, 2022; Vafeas, Little, & Vafeas, 2025). Despite being harmful to a range of organizational outcomes (e.g. commitment, satisfaction, engagement) alienation is an important area of management and organization that is under-researched (Vafeas et al., 2025).

So, the focus of this research is on women's perceptions of the key benefits of flexible work, how organizations can drive engagement of employees in flexible work and how likely are women to change employers if flexible work opportunities are unavailable or withdrawn? The decision to select an all-woman sample is driven by Coser's (1974) seminal work on 'greedy organizations' where loyalty and commitment are expected on a full-time basis. Women are faced with the competing demands of two greedy organizations, home and work. Understanding areas where women face challenges in the workplace is important in providing an equitable workplace and in understanding a range of behaviors such as commitment and engagement.

We draw on qualitative interview data from women in North American organizations engaged in flexible work modes to explore feelings about a forced return to the physical workplace. We provide an overview of the impacts of flexible work on women's work and life balance, then an outline of the research methods used. The findings of the study are presented through a thematic analysis supported by relevant quotes of participants to support their experiences. The study concludes with a discussion of the findings from individual and organizational perspectives.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 ENGAGEMENT AND RISK OF EMPLOYEE ATTRITION

Kahn (1990) defined engagement as being physically and psychologically present and committed to an organization. Engagement is also positively linked to job satisfaction, performance, innovation, organizational commitment and reduced turnover intentions (Anitha, 2014; Boccoli, Gastaldi, & Corso, 2023; Saks, 2006; Saks & Gruman, 2014). The positive aspects of engagement reinforce why it is crucial for organizations' competitive advantage and overall success in the new hybrid/remote work environments (Sahni, 2021).

Industry literature from McKinsey (Alexander et al., 2021; De Smet et al., 2021), Boston Consulting Group (Dahik et al., 2020; Hilberath et al., 2020) and Gallup (Hickman & Robison, 2020; Saad & Wigert, 2021) has suggested that the future of work is hybrid. Flexible work opportunities boost engagement with

current employees while also ensuring competitiveness in the market, allowing for global talent recruitment and improved retention (Benjamin, 2020; Haines III, Guerrero, & Marchand, 2024; Naqshbandi, Kabir, Ishak, & Islam, 2023). Companies unwilling to adapt to this change will likely lose valuable talent, reducing their ability to innovate and thrive (Kossek, Gettings, & Misra, 2021; Stein, Hobson, Jachimowicz, & Whillans, 2021). Bloom, Han and Liang (2022), in their randomized control trial of 1612 employees of a large IT corporation, found that employees valued hybrid work opportunities. During the trial period, attrition was reduced by 33% and overall job satisfaction was improved. However, even the organizations embracing hybrid and remote work have found it challenging to boost engagement and morale in the long term (Grzegorzczak et al., 2021; Harter, 2023; Wilkie, 2019).

2.2 LEADERSHIP TRAINING AND LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

Successful flexible work environments require training for leadership and employees to build meaningful relationships, find work-life balance, establish trust in off-site workers and ensure career progression regardless of location (Adisa, Ogbonnaya, & Adekoya, 2021; De Smet et al., 2021; Lufkin, 2021; Pass & Ridgway, 2022; Sengupta & Al-Khalifa, 2022; Vyas, 2022). Dahik et al. (2020) suggested that this can be achieved by creating a culture of remote first, ensuring remote workers do not feel disadvantaged because of their off-site location or excluded from access to relevant information.

Bloom et al. (2015), in their work-from-home (WFH) experiment at a 16,000-employee travel agency, found that WFH resulted in a 13% boost in performance and productivity and improved work satisfaction. However, managerial reluctance to accept remote work as efficient resulted in a decreased promotion rate, where presenteeism appeared to be valued more than performance outcomes (Bloom et al., 2015; Lufkin, 2021). This speaks to the importance of leadership training to embrace management tools relevant to the new work environment (Kumari & Yelkar, 2022).

For flexible environments to succeed, leadership must authentically reflect the culture the organization wishes to develop. People leaders need to utilize technology to re-create practices standard for in-office settings, such as an open-door policy for employees to voice concerns or ideas (Cimperman, 2023; Pianese, Errichiello, & da Cunha, 2023). Furthermore, leadership and management need to encourage opportunities for team members to connect personally and professionally, leveraging the same communication tools to develop informal relationships and build trust (Jawad, Naz, & Rizwan, 2023; Kumari & Yelkar, 2022). In contrast, these communication tools can lead to increased stress, as Adisa, Ogbonnaya, and Adekoya (2021) pointed out. Online presenteeism and the inability to disconnect are associated with heightened anxiety levels, impacting employee performance and engagement. Leadership can reduce the stress of prolonged workdays by defining the earliest and the latest time that meetings can be booked (Dahik et al., 2020).

Clearly communicated expectations and a positive relationship with leadership impact engagement and improve performance in flexible environments (Benjamin, 2020). Also, Stein et al. (2021) stressed the importance of acknowledging and addressing the mismatch between what leaders think employees need and what they actually do need and cautioned against burnout in the hybrid environment. They reiterated the significance of employee autonomy and flexibility in task and time management. Moreover, they highlighted the value of finding and strengthening the connection between company and employee values to foster loyalty and commitment.

2.3 COST SAVINGS

Reimagining the need for and the use of office space can result in significant cost savings as facilities costs are often among organizations' top expenses (Boland et al., 2020; Chiarella, Marafante, & Palter, 2022; Griffin & Asker, 2021). Chiarella, Marafante and Palter (2022) offered an alternative to abandoning office space and highlighted opportunities for reimagining its use. Dropbox redesigned and optimized its studios, focusing primarily on collaborative work, training events and spaces designed for employees to connect and relax over free coffee. Furthermore, Raisner (2023), in reviewing the New York Return to Office Survey results (*Return to Office Survey Results*, 2023), pointed to only 52% of Manhattan office workers

returning to the office in early 2023, indicating an ongoing trend of location flexibility for at least a portion of the work week and a redefined need for office space.

2.4 WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Work-life balance is an essential factor impacting the engagement of flexible workers. While some thrive in the new environment and enjoy the benefits of the reduced commute, resulting in more time with family, others struggle with WFH (Benjamin, 2020; Bloom et al., 2015; Derndorfer, Disslbacher, Lechinger, Mader, & Six, 2021; Hipp & Krzywdzinski, 2023; Saad & Wigert, 2021; Vyas, 2022). This could be because of inadequate physical space at home, causing discomfort and inability to achieve uninterrupted focus. Moreover, for hybrid/remote workers, work spills over into personal life more easily and interferes with family dynamics (Carlson, Perry, Kacmar, Wan, & Thompson, 2023; Grzegorzczuk et al., 2021; Harunavamwe & Kanengoni, 2023). When WFH, women tend to assume the primary caregiver role and experience more stress and work-family conflict than their male counterparts (Graham et al., 2021; H. Kim & Gong, 2017). Sokolic (2022) emphasized the need to incorporate work-life balance into company policies, securing employee retention and engagement by setting boundaries around employee availability.

2.5 AUTONOMY AND TRUE FLEXIBILITY

Autonomy and flexibility to manage time and achieve a satisfactory work-life balance are important to employees in remote/hybrid environments (Benjamin, 2020; Grzegorzczuk et al., 2021; Naqshbandi et al., 2023; Saad & Wigert, 2021; Stein et al., 2021). This flexibility also benefits employers by allowing them to cut back on office space costs and increasing the talent pool they have access to (Bloom et al., 2022; Grzegorzczuk et al., 2021). Uru, Gozukara and Tezcan (2022), in their study of a randomly selected sample of 200 employees in the public insurance industry, found a stronger relationship between absorption of work and organizational identification in those working hybrid or remote compared to in-person workers. Kossek, Gettings and Misra (2021) defined "true flexibility" as the best way forward, both a top-down and a bottom-up approach focused on what flexibility looks like for employees and their teams. They further emphasized that it is essential to clearly communicate expectations and use metrics focused on the quality of work, not the timing or location of where work is performed.

2.6 MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

The flexible work environment has impacted how employees develop meaningful relationships with colleagues and leadership, and technology has become a crucial tool in developing a sense of belonging and combating loneliness (Benjamin, 2020; Dahik et al., 2020; Grzegorzczuk et al., 2021). Hybrid/remote workers reported missing social connections and spontaneous opportunities for "watercooler conversations" (Dahik et al., 2020). This pointed to the importance of company initiatives to support the use of technology to promote spontaneous relationship-building in the new work setting (Sokolic, 2022). Additionally, Dahik et al. (2020) found that employees' productivity and engagement increased when they were satisfied with the technology tools available.

The challenge organizations face in the new virtual environment is replicating the organic opportunities to connect that previously occurred naturally around the office (Dahik et al., 2020). Building such relationships is meaningful beyond the basic physiological needs for connection and belonging. It is linked to knowledge sharing, innovation, engagement and job satisfaction (Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska, 2021; Sokolic, 2022). Dahik et al. (2020) suggested simple practices that can help achieve this, such as leadership encouraging everyone to take time each week for virtual coffees and informal conversations. The hybrid work environment, as opposed to fully remote, has the benefits of in-person connections and collaboration while at the same time recognizing the significance of flexibility for employees to manage their time, work and family obligations (Saad & Wigert, 2021).

2.7 VISIBILITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION

Flexible workers are concerned that a lack of visibility will negatively impact their career progression (Grzegorzczuk et al., 2021; Lufkin, 2021). Sokolic (2022) pointed to the importance of managing these negative aspects of flexible work by acknowledging a shift in dynamic, a change in organizational hierarchy from a position-led authority to a domain of trust and aligned values. A focus on aligning values between employees and the company supports a sense of organizational justice where individuals do not feel penalized for lack of in-person attendance (Sokolic, 2022). Moving away from previous standards, from presenteeism towards a new structure of performance metrics and rewards is required for companies to compete in the new job market.

2.8 GENDER BIAS AND TRADITIONAL ROLES

A range of studies has identified the characterization of males as universal workers based on the false premise that maleness is neutral or the norm (e.g., Dickens, 1998; Fletcher, 2005; Hansen, 2002; Wajcman, 2000). Compounding the misrepresentation is the attribution to women of so called “typically feminine skills” (e.g., caring), which are claimed to be known innately. Meanwhile, skills associated with traditional “male” jobs (e.g., technical achievement) are viewed as qualifications that are achieved by men, in turn being valued more highly by organizations. Work is clearly not gender neutral and attempts to portray it as such only mask the politics and power relations of gender itself (Oakley, 2001).

Wilson (1996, p. 829) has suggested that the failure to incorporate gender and sexuality into organizational studies is “gender blindness.” However, being unable to see it is a different proposition to seeing and choosing to suppress it. Prominent management researchers such as Taylor, Weber, Mayo and Maslow were all aware of gender differences, yet their research actively worked to suppress differences (Linstead, 2000).

It can be argued that while the classic organizational theories of Taylor, Maslow, Mayo and Weber have been presented in a deliberately biased manner in terms of gender, not all management research that has failed to acknowledge gender issues, has done so deliberately (Brewis & Linstead, 2004). Much research that has followed the “classics” has failed to consider gender as an issue, which is gender blindness, as opposed to recognizing it and choosing to deliberately suppress it (Brewis & Linstead, 2004).

In today’s workplaces the hybrid/remote work environment has both risks and opportunities for women. Arntz, Ben Yahmed and Berlingieri (2020) have identified an opportunity to reduce the gender and wage gaps in the market as the perception of remote work is no longer linked to accommodating individual needs. However, there is risk associated with women resuming their traditional caregiver roles and shouldering the primary household burden, adding to the stress and work-family conflict and potentially negatively impacting their career prospects (Derndorfer et al., 2021; Graham et al., 2021). Frize et al. (2021) have found that men increased their involvement in family obligations during the pandemic and identified increases in workload, social isolation, stress and buying daily necessities as concerns. At the same time, women found childcare, juggling work and family and managing work and household duties to be the most challenging during lockdowns. These challenges signaled that women faced more issues managing family and work obligations than men (Frize et al., 2021; H. Kim & Gong, 2017). These findings emphasize the opportunity to define the parameters of the new remote/hybrid work environments to help women manage the burden of work and family better and advance their careers without penalties.

2.9 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework below presents the relationships and connections between the managerial challenge impacting organizations and employees, the streams of literature, theory, and the purpose of this research (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The literature streams identified are:

1. Needs, motivation and engagement
2. Gender inequality
3. Remote/hybrid work model

Green et al. (2017) further explored Maslow’s (1958) hierarchy of needs and developed the need-based theory finding a positive relationship between need fulfilment at work and positive work performance. Also, Hackman and Oldham (1976) found increased motivation when individuals’ “higher-order” needs,

such as meaningfulness and autonomy, were met. Bakker and Demerouti (2008) developed a work engagement model focused on the importance of engagement for the health of organizations and employees. In Goldin's (2014) pre-pandemic research on gender pay gaps in the workforce, the lack of schedule flexibility and incentivized overtime hours were found to be prohibitive to women's career progression. During the pandemic, mothers were torn between parenting tasks, running the household, and meeting the demands of their work (Goldin, 2021). On the other hand, WFH, as part of a hybrid model, seems here to stay because of its positive impacts on job satisfaction and employee retention (Barrero, Bloom, & Davis, 2021; Bloom et al., 2022). Protocols, guided by social constructivism and informed by the above streams in the literature, were developed to understand the management challenge through the participants' experiences.

3 METHOD

3.1 RESEARCH CONTEXT

The research setting was women in North America in service industries, already engaged in flexible work. Studying women in the workplace is important from the perspective of understanding the barriers women face in advancing their careers. Understanding the experiences of women in a range of workplace situations, such as flexible work modes, can advance understanding and create a more inclusive and equitable work environment.

The women were approached through a social media group comprising over 5,000 women in North America. The approach led to 74 potential participants, all women working flexibly. On a first come, first served basis, 46 potential participants were contacted with an initial message. Over a period of three weeks in 2023 fourteen interviews were conducted, transcribed, anonymized and analyzed. Interviewees were drawn from an online social network with 14 different professions represented. The age range of participants, as estimated by the interviewer, was from 25 to 50 years. Interviewees were geographically dispersed with the main regional areas of North America represented. Most interviewees were engaged in hybrid work, with the remainder doing wholly remote work. Length of employment ranged from 1 to 10 years with a median length of employment between 5 and 6.5 years. All interviewees had experienced remote, hybrid and wholly in-office work in their work lives. Details of interviewees are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of women interviewees

Interviewee	Location	Profession	Age	Current mode of work	Length of current employment	Modes of work experienced
1	Midwest USA	Marketing professional	35-40	Fully remote	2 years	In office, remote and hybrid
2	Canada prairies	University professor	35-40	Hybrid	7 years	In office, remote and hybrid
3	East Coast USA	Business development – IT sector	35-40	Hybrid	2 years	In office, remote and hybrid
4	West Coast USA	Healthcare research	30-35	Hybrid	9.5 years	In office, remote and hybrid
5	East Coast USA	Fundraising	30-35	Hybrid	4 years	In office, remote and hybrid
6	West Coast USA	Human Resources – Tech space	30-35	Hybrid	5 years	In office, remote and hybrid
7	East Coast-Canada	Communications- tech sector	35-40	Fully remote	5 years	In office, remote and hybrid
8	East Coast USA	US government agency – business development leader	30-35	Hybrid	6.5 years	In office, remote and hybrid
9	Mid Atlantic USA	Higher education-administration	40-45	Hybrid	3 years	In office, remote and hybrid

10	Southern USA	Legal	25-30	Hybrid	1-2 years	In office, remote and hybrid
11	East Coast USA	Sales	30-35	Hybrid	1 year	In office, remote and hybrid
12	East Coast USA	Consulting- government and municipal projects	25-30	Fully remote	2 years	In office, remote and hybrid
13	Southern USA	Paralegal	45-50	Fully remote	1.5 years	In office, remote and hybrid
14	Midwest USA	News reporter	40-45	Fully remote	10 years	In office, remote and hybrid

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

The research methodology adopted was qualitative with data collected by means of semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to share their detailed stories. A constructivist epistemology was used where reality is constructed in a social context through cultural and social interactions (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015; B. Kim, 2001; Tuckett, 2005; Vygotsky, 1994). Template analysis, a systematic but highly flexible approach, was used to provide a thematic analysis of these experiences (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Brooks et al., 2015; King, 2012).

Interviews allowing participants to share detailed accounts of their experiences were guided by a protocol developed from literature. Two sets of interview questions were developed to address the hybrid and remote work environments. Interviews differed primarily in questions relating to office attendance and physical office space to reflect differences in the two modes of work. When addressing engagement, performance, and motivation to change employers, the questions were the same for all interviewees. Codes were identified in the data with groups of similar codes clustered to form hierarchical coding (King, 2012). The iterative approach to template development resulted in defining well-structured, comprehensive themes and finding the relevant links between them (Brooks et al., 2015; King, 2012).

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

As foreshadowed above, data were analyzed using Template Analysis (Amineh & Asl, 2015; King, 2012). Following each interview, the data were transcribed and anonymized then manually analyzed, with codes assigned to each phenomenon identified in the data then transferred onto the template. Each phenomenon identified in the data was queried using the method advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990), namely 'What did she mean by that? What's going on here? Why did she say that? etcetera. Analysis included continuous and iterative coding to identify and code new and repetitive themes (Brooks et al., 2015; King, 2012; Waring & Wainwright, 2008). Codes were initially noted using an open coding process, with codes of similar meaning being combined in an axial coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). No new codes were identified in the last five interviews, which led the researcher to conclude that data saturation had been reached, and no new codes were likely to emerge should the interviews continue. This is consistent with a field study of Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) who encountered data saturation after 12 interviews. The 14 interviews resulted in 123 pages of transcribed data. The analysis was structured on the template in three levels of hierarchy; the first consisted of 116 codes, the second had 21 subthemes, and the highest level of hierarchy defined six overarching themes. The six overarching themes discovered from analysis were: (1) engagement factors; (2) employee monitoring; (3) the impact of the work-from-home model; (4) the impact of the hybrid work model; (5) the impact of return to office and (6) leadership. Triangulation of the findings is provided by differences in occupation, geographic location and experience of the interviewees (Creswell, 1998; McCann & Clarke, 2003).

The themes reflect the positive and negative experiences of women working in hybrid or remote environments, what they perceive the impact on their lives would be if a return to office was mandated, and their intentions to seek other employment should such mandates be implemented. The findings support themes already defined in the literature and further emphasize the importance of these new work models for individuals and organizations. The topics discussing the three work modes, fully remote, hybrid and

in-office, will be presented through sub-themes addressing the impact on the individuals and the organization.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 THEME 1: ENGAGEMENT FACTORS

All participants emphasized the positive impact meaningful and challenging work has on their engagement levels.

"I feel really engaged when I'm challenged, have realistic stretch goals if you will, but also a supportive team ..."

Most participants described feeling trusted and valued by their employers as significant drivers of engagement, with one commenting:

"And I like that they trust me to just get my work done. I appreciate that trust, I would never abuse that trust to go back into an office."

Participants further reported being grateful for the flexibility that allows them to manage their daily tasks and provide caregiving to children and the elderly. This improved their quality of life and established a sense of a work-life balance. A participant shared:

"I really do think at this time in my life, flexibility is the absolute biggest; that's number one on my list of priorities at work. I will compromise on salary. I'll compromise on benefits. I'll compromise on so much. I will not compromise on flexibility because I've worked so hard to have this time with my daughter. I've wanted to be a mom my entire life. I'm not gonna just hand her off to somebody else to raise her for me."

4.2 THEME 2: MONITORING EMPLOYEES

When asked about the recent news (Black, 2023; Cerullo, 2023; Hodgson, Quinio, & Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2023) regarding attendance and keystroke monitoring, participants were unanimous that such behavior, described as "Big Brother-ish" by a few, displays a lack of trust that would result in a decline in engagement and motivation, with one participant commenting:

"I mean, I think that's a little Big Brotherish. I would hope that my leaders could see my work and trust my capabilities. I think, trust is a huge piece of feeling engaged, feeling happy with your job and autonomous and knowing that your leaders have confidence in you having that trust, yeah. Having that trust questioned would actually really bother me and make me probably consider looking for another job."

While the majority of the participants were reasonably confident they were not monitored in these ways, they expressed disappointment with such practices focused on performative productivity instead of quality of deliverables and responsiveness. A participant shared:

"Honestly, that would really bother me if they did try to do that because I would feel like they don't trust me as an employee to get the job done. So it would make me feel like they just don't trust me, and that alone would make me completely unmotivated. It would make me disengaged, and I would probably look for a different employer."

4.3 THEME 3: IMPACT OF WORK-FROM-HOME MODEL

4.3.1 INDIVIDUAL IMPACT

Participants' comments were consistent with the literature (Benjamin, 2020; Grzegorzczuk et al., 2021) and supported previous findings that individuals placed great value on time flexibility and work-life balance. The ability to work remotely positively impacted their job satisfaction and performance. Furthermore, those living with disabilities, disorders, social issues or personality traits such as introversion stated they were more productive and efficient at home, with one participant commenting:

"I'm also naturally an introvert. So not having those little interactions that I know a lot of people value but for me are just draining and distracting, and so I know if I'm not on a meeting, I have quiet, and I like that."

Furthermore, WFH provided privacy during personally challenging times that another participant pointed out:

"The ability to work from home/work in a hybrid setting has allowed me to have so much more privacy during sensitive times that I otherwise would not have had, and 100% needed. For example, last year, I had two miscarriages. I was able to go through the early stages of pregnancy without anyone suspecting it. I was also able to process the diagnoses of my miscarriages in private, aka a lot of tears and a few weeks of depression, as well as the D&C procedures I needed 100% privately. But I was able to recover at home, in my PJs, while sending emails, and no one was the wiser."

Participants confirmed negative elements of remote work already identified in the literature (Adisa et al., 2021; Harunavamwe & Kanengoni, 2023), such as the spillover of work into family time. Some reported feeling compelled to overcommunicate their activities and a tendency to panic over their online presence, confirming organizations still need to develop a culture of trust towards remote workers. A participant shared:

"The pressures specific to hybrid workers. I do think there's, and this might be a me thing. I do think there's a dependency for me to over-communicate. ok going for lunch, ok, I'm stepping away or whatever."

Moreover, fear of career limitations due to lack of visibility was a salient theme when addressing concerns surrounding WFH. The majority of the participants confirmed visibility and stronger in-person relationships had a positive impact on career progression with participants sharing:

"I do miss the relationship building. I worry long-term about the impacts of not having direct face-to-face contact with my boss and my grand boss in terms of promotions or trying to build capacity for my team."

"I mean, I think there's definitely a culture of the people who got more face time are more likely to get advancement opportunities because it's also like they developed those relationships, they go to the happy hours, they schmoose the higher-ups."

4.3.2 ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACTS

The majority of the participants defined increased efficiency, improved work quality and job satisfaction as organizational benefits of WFH, with participants sharing:

"I am so much more productive at home, and for me, that correlates with job satisfaction. I love to be productive; I love to get stuff done, do good work and feel good about it, and be energized by what I've accomplished, and that happens more often at home for me."

"I think my deliverables were better quality because I could give them the focus that they needed rather than being pulled in a million directions."

In contrast, participants confirmed that inefficient communication and weaker interpersonal relationships could have negative consequences for organizations, as identified by Grzegorzczuk et al. (2021). A participant commented:

"There are definitely times when I'm like, this is the 12th email I've had to write about this very simple thing that I could normally in the before times, if you will, just walk over, find somebody and kind of troubleshoot in real-time. So, it definitely does slow down some level of communication."

4.4 THEME 4: IMPACT OF HYBRID MODEL

4.4.1 INDIVIDUAL IMPACT

Participants expressed that social interactions and the stronger relationships that are the result of some in-person time are some of the positives of hybrid models:

"Just having some of that face-to-face interaction and building some of that trust and comfort level that you get from meeting in person. And then being able to kind of take that back with you when you're remote to keep building that trust."

On the other hand, increased commute time, costs associated with being in the office, a disruptive environment and its impact on productivity were identified by participants as negative elements of the hybrid model, with participants sharing:

"I'd probably have less money because I'd be spending more on commuting and lunch and office clothes."

"I couldn't focus. There was so much noise happening so that kind of is gonna frame my answer to this question a bit, but I feel like working in an office, the negatives for me were just that constant, almost overstimulation all the time. That would sort of impact how much I was able to focus on my work."

4.4.2 ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACTS

Consistent with Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska's (2021) findings, participants stated that in-person time results in stronger interpersonal relationships and trust building, improving efficiency. It also benefits the organization by making brainstorming and problem-solving more efficient.

"Yeah, I think brainstorming and project development, I like to do in person having a whiteboard, sitting there and brainstorming and bouncing ideas off of each other, where interrupting is less intrusive than on Zoom."

In contrast, inefficient organization and communication regarding expected attendance were identified as negative factors, with one participant stating:

"I do think it's ineffective if they say you have to go to the office, but then no one else is in there, so they don't mandate the days. If I were going to the office today, I could go in, but no one on my team would be there. So that's kind of pointless. So I think having people come in on common days, but not every single day, really works well."

4.5 THEME 5: IMPACT OF RETURN TO OFFICE

4.5.1 INDIVIDUAL IMPACTS

While participants perceived the return to office overwhelmingly negatively, the positive elements they identified were linked to career progression, efficiency in communication and ease of knowledge sharing, with two participants sharing:

"So I do think it does hinder career growth, and when you're in the office, you do see the people who are coming in every day, and you have those little conversations, and maybe your boss pulls you into a meeting, you wouldn't have been invited to otherwise, so I think it can definitely help being in office for things like that."

"And you also just absorb so much when you're in a communal environment."

Participants expressed strong feelings regarding the return to the office, the physical and mental discomfort it would cause, and changes to their health and fitness routines. Eleven participants shared they would look for new employment immediately should these policies be implemented, and three said they would consider returning to the office.

"I would hate it; my co-workers and I discuss this all the time. We don't know how we used to go into an office all week. I think it's exhausting. And sometimes it makes you more productive, sometimes makes you less productive, but it's frustrating too. So, if I was told to go back in, five days a week, I would really be unhappy."

"I think just my quality of life would go down, the ability to work out and not have to rush into the office, have enough time to do all that in the morning, or I have more time to cook healthier meals, and I'm just more comfortable."

"No, I don't think I could go back to it, honestly. I might be willing to do a hybrid thing. But even then, I'd be unhappy about it. I mean, if I didn't have a choice, then I would do it. But I would be very unhappy. I'm so much more comfortable in this environment. I feel like that makes me more productive. So, I would be very upset if I had to go back into an office."

4.5.2 ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACTS

While some participants emphasized equal efficiency in both remote and in-person environments, others acknowledged the organizational positives of increased efficiency and stronger relationships, especially for new staff or those early in their careers, with one participant sharing:

"Doing things by email can increase confusion, especially if they're newer staff, where they're not either I'm not communicating exactly what I want, or they're not understanding. So, sometimes it's easier if I can just go to them in person and say this is what I'm looking for. And so I think sometimes it can add time to administrative tasks versus if I was in person, just going to their desk."

Furthermore, participants stated faster burnout and an increased need for time off/sick leave when working in the office, with a participant saying:

"When I was in office full-time, I had to take a lot more mental health days, personal days, sick days, whatever that looked like, because I get so burnt out so quickly. It's just too much. And even though I'm still working on my remote day, just the difference in comfort and ability to set my own schedule makes a massive impact on my mental health."

Additionally, when faced with a full-time return to the office, participants shared they would adjust their work commitment to reflect the changed environment, with one participant stating:

"I'd be very cranky, I would probably shift my work, I would not do any work for them outside office hours because right now I work all office hours. So, if I teach in the evenings, I'll start work later because I'll spend some time with my daughter because I've missed out on time with her. Whereas if they wanted me to teach in the evenings and then be in the office the next day, you're going to get what you're going to get, you'll get exactly what you pay for, which is here to here and nothing more. And I think that would be the case for a lot of my colleagues if they tried to force us. Ok then, you get from 9-4, no more, no less. And I think they would quickly realize that the fact they're bounding us is actually meaning we're doing less work. If I had to do it for a job and it was the only way I could survive, I'd do it, but I would give much less in terms of the work, and I would be much more closed about my time and my availability and the work I would be willing to do outside of my typical office hours. Whereas now, I don't calculate how many hours a week I'm working or for whom I'm doing what, but if they were trying to police to that extent, I would, and I would be much more founded in my abilities. "

4.6 THEME 6: LEADERSHIP

To bridge the inequality gap between in-office and remote/hybrid workers, participants strongly encouraged leadership training, clarity in communicating expectations, and a cultural shift that is inclusive of remote workers. Some participants expressed the benefits of company or team retreats as opposed to hybrid work models, emphasizing the social more than the business need to have in-person contact:

"I think it can be nice if it's in the context of a retreat or team building or a specific problem you want to tackle and maybe structure a day around it or if there's an event like a potluck or something like that, but I would label it as in-person socializing. I wouldn't say that there's any business critical reason why you need to be in person versus remote."

Re-emphasizing the importance of trust, some participants stated leadership that trusts their employees is trusted in return, with one participant sharing:

"I mean, it feels like freedom in your job, right? That your job is allowing you to work in the way that you see fit or that they trust you to do good work even though you are at home. It feels very freeing to be able to do that or to have that option, and in turn it gives me, I have more trust in my leadership because they trust me. I feel like that's a very reciprocal relationship, the more trust that they give me or more sort of bandwidth or leeway they give me, the more I acknowledge that and I don't want to take advantage of that, right?"

The research suggests that to stay competitive, retain and recruit talent, organizations should implement a hybrid work policy while also considering a number of fully remote positions. The participants confirmed Bloom et al. (2015) findings that a hybrid work environment increased performance and resulted in a boost in productivity while maintaining the same quality standards.

5 DISCUSSION

The findings fell into two main categories, those that impacted women individually and those that impacted the organization. These are now discussed.

Individuals - Quality of life, improved mental health, and the ability to 'be there' for family were the main reasons advanced in favor of flexible work. Participants claimed that greater efficiencies, particularly quality of work outputs, resulted from flexible work. It was argued that job satisfaction also increased from flexible work modes. Participants spoke of increased levels of engagement resulting from flexible work, with some associating increased engagement with a feeling that the organization 'trusted' them when working flexibly. The positive aspects of flexible work resonated with previous research (e.g. Adisa et al., 2021; Benjamin, 2020; Bloom et al., 2022; Bloom et al., 2015; Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska, 2021; Kossek et al., 2021; Sung et al., 2024; Vyas, 2022)

Although the flexibility of remote and hybrid working was appreciated it was recognized that being seen in the workplace was also important. Weaker interpersonal relations with colleagues were perceived as resulting from a lack of face-to-face situations. Encroachment of work on family time was also recognized as a negative aspect of flexible work confirming the studies of Carlson et.al. (2023) and Grzegorzczak et al. (2021).

Overwhelmingly, the participants confirmed a willingness to change employers to continue having flexible work choices. They viewed an attempt to mandate a return to the physical workplace as giving them no control over their mode of work. An intention to change employers based on a perceived lack of control over the work environment is a form of alienation (Etzioni, 1961; Penley & Gould, 1988; Vafeas et al., 2025). Alienation has two potential outcomes for organizations, both of which are negative.

Organizations - First, some employees will successfully find other employment, thus imposing a cost on their organization in terms of recruitment and selection, on-boarding, training and possibly organizational reputation. This outcome is obvious to organizations as alienated employees cease to hold organizational membership.

Second, disaffected women employees who remain, possibly from an inability to find other suitable work, or possibly for other 'side bets' (Becker, 1960), will likely exhibit alienative commitment (AC) (Penley & Gould, 1988). This outcome is hidden from organizational view and leads to dysfunctional behaviors from the alienated employees who remain. Alienative involvement was originally proposed by Etzioni (1961, 1975) in a theory of organizational involvement that was later operationalized as alienative commitment by Penley and Gould (1988). AC is characterized as a negative form of affective commitment resulting from being forced to follow a particular course of action, experiencing a loss of control, and lack of alternatives (Hornung, 2010, p. 1082). AC is 'the other side of the coin' to what is usually presented as affective commitment, which is associated with wanting to embrace and be identified with the values of an organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Penley & Gould, 1988; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974). Penley and Gould (1988, p. 56) argued "alienation occurs because an employee perceives no alternative for influencing the internal environment nor for finding an alternative source of employment. Therefore, the employee opts to remain but meet only the minimal requirements for retaining organizational membership." Penley and Gould's (1998) view is supported by later research suggesting that employees expressing alienative commitment continue to display work behaviors that suggest a desire to maintain organizational membership while continuing to experience alienation (Jernigan, Beggs, & Kohut, 2015).

The alienated employee ensures that work performance at least meets minimum standards while interaction with peers and superiors masks the reality that they want to leave (Jernigan, Beggs, & Kohut, 2002, p. 566). AC has been shown to be an aspect of work commitment theory that with just a few exceptions (e.g. Hung, Fisher, Gapp, & Carter, 2012; Jernigan et al., 2002, 2015; Lotta, Nieto-Morales, & Peeters, 2023; Peeters & Campos, 2022; Zangaro, 2001) has been neglected in organizational research. AC has the potential to impact negatively on an organization's performance particularly as the employer is so often unaware of its existence. We suspect that this level of unawareness would be the norm in most workplaces. The findings associated with alienative commitment extend the research of Vafeas et al., (2025) into alienation by providing further empirical evidence in an under-researched area.

Other findings include women's career progression that was identified as one reason why participants might opt for in-office work, recognizing that presenteeism is alive and well in some workplaces and

confirming previous studies (e.g. Bloom et al., 2015; Lufkin, 2021; Williams et al., 2013). Interviewees believed that flexible work should be judged on work results and outputs over physical presence. A full-time return to the office is dismissive of the performance achieved during the remote days of the pandemic and the positive impacts on individuals' quality of life. Moreover, those living with disorders, disabilities or social issues reported feeling relief when working from home and being able to dedicate uninterrupted time to their work and the quality of their deliverables.

As indicated by participants, trust is crucial for engagement as suggested in Dakek et al.'s (2020) research. When faced with the prospect of an organization that does not trust them, participants stated they would feel disengaged and would look for different employment. Therefore, leadership must learn to trust remote/hybrid employees and leverage technology to support communication and innovation in the new environment. A trusting culture leads to engaged employees motivated to perform well and remain within the organization. The trend of monitoring employees' activities instead of focusing on their performance and deliverables erodes trust and we argue should not be used as a performance measure (Boxall, 2012; Holland, Cooper, & Hecker, 2015). This is particularly the case where keystroke monitoring and similar measures of engagement are concerned (Black, 2023; Cerullo, 2023).

In summary, some aspects of the research confirm the desirability of flexible work, such as work-life balance, time flexibility and feelings of trust. However, the majority of respondents indicated they will seek other employment if forced to return to in-office work. The intent to leave stems from women's perceived lack of control over their mode of work leading to feelings of lack of trust and alienation. Those who leave are a cost to the organization while those who remain will experience the negative emotions associated with AC and remain dysfunctional employees. The new insights associated with conceptualizing feelings of lack of control, diminution of trust and alienation in terms of alienative commitment are unlikely to be transient and do advance knowledge of the post-pandemic workplace as advocated by McPhail et al. (2024). Perceptions of presenteeism may 'encourage' some people to return to work to maintain investments in their careers or to maintain their employment status. The erosion of trust associated with a forced change of work mode will potentially have a negative impact on engagement. The findings are important at an organizational level as they provide insights into dysfunctional and latent employee behaviors. The findings also extend the wider field of management by applying an important yet often overlooked aspect of work commitment to a contemporaneous situation.

6 CONCLUSION

6.1 CONCLUSION

Post-pandemic, organizations are facing pressure to offer new modes of work for existing and new employees to remain competitive in the market and continue to thrive and innovate. Employees have found a satisfying work-life balance in the flexible work mode available during COVID-19. They want to maintain that flexibility while having opportunities for career progression and relationship-building with colleagues.

This research has shown that women employees are most engaged when they feel trusted and challenged and are allowed to perform work from a comfortable location. The overwhelming majority of the women participants stated they would not return to the office full-time and would instead look for other employment opportunities, citing quality of life, mental health and family as key reasons behind their decision. This puts the organization at risk of either losing key team members or maintaining an alienated workforce. Women workers experiencing alienative commitment are likely to mask their negative commitment to the organization while continuing their dysfunctional behaviors behind the scenes. Therefore, organizations should give careful consideration before mandating changes to work modes that are popular with employees, build trust and have been shown to support functional behaviors.

6.2 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The research has provided meaningful insights into what women in North America perceive as benefits of remote and hybrid work, what they wish their organizations would implement to support them better

and how likely they are to leave employment should a return to the office be mandated. Despite the rich qualitative data collected, the research sample was small and included interviews with fourteen women working remotely or hybrid in North America. Thus, the findings are not generalizable. However, the sample size and inability to generalize does not impact the importance of the findings and the identified key themes. The absence of organizational perspectives is a significant limitation of the study.

Future research could consider the perspectives of employers. Alienative commitment as an organizational phenomenon associated with a forced return to the workplace and as an important construct should be considered. The measurement of alienative commitment in contemporary workplaces would contribute to further understanding of AC and to generalizability of the phenomenon.

Research did not consider the participants' age, geographic location, or industry, which could impact their perceptions of career opportunities, feelings of isolation and loneliness. This presents an opportunity for further research into the impact of age and location on this phenomenon. There is also an opportunity to further research the six key themes that were identified.

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The research points to the need for organizations to acknowledge and respond to the changes in the work environment. The recommendations will allow the organization to position itself as competitive and attract and retain top talent. The recommendations are centered around three pillars of change:

- 6.3.1 Implementing an appropriate hybrid model with a portion of permanently remote roles
- 6.3.2 Providing adequate training to leadership and staff
- 6.3.3 Identifying and implementing technical tools to support the new business environment

6.3.1 HYBRID MODEL

As Kossek, Gettings and Misra (2021) found, the hybrid model provides opportunities for meaningful in-person collaboration at key junctures while also creating space for cross-departmental interactions. It has been defined as the ideal approach by the majority of the participants. The in-person meetings do not have to be frequent. They should, however, occur as a result of social or business needs so that those commuting long distances to the office understand the value of the effort instead of arriving at an empty office, resulting in frustration. The organization should consider a percentage of fully remote positions to expand the talent pool they have access to. This will also allow some existing staff who thrive in a WFH setting to make such arrangements and reach their full potential.

Consulting with staff about what they consider crucial in-person activities and aligning with management's expectations will result in success during the change process. Following the consultation, a pilot hybrid program should be rolled out. To ensure success, employees should be anonymously surveyed once a quarter and manager check-ins should be tailored to support them in sharing their thoughts and experiences in the new work mode. The office space might need to be reimaged to support collaboration and innovation, not just individual work. Following the test year, the organization should roll out the version of the work model that best supports productivity, engagement, quality of deliverables and a positive and supportive culture.

6.3.2 LEADERSHIP TRAINING AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Participants defined trust in employees as a crucial engagement factor. They also expressed a propensity to remain with organizations with a trusting culture that allow remote/hybrid staff the same career progression as in-office employees. Therefore, leadership training is vital for a successful hybrid model. The training should focus on communication, expectations, performance management, recognition and rewards.

Often instigated by managers suspicious of remote performance, online presenteeism results in stress and overcommunication of work and activities, impacting productivity.

A participant who did not feel the pressure of online presenteeism and felt her career progression was equal to in-office staff stated she would consider relocating and returning to the office full-time to remain

with her current company but would not do that for any of her previous employers. As found by Bloom, Han and Liang (2022), this reiterates the impact a trusting culture can have on high-performing individuals and their sense of belonging and decision to stay with an organization. The organization should draft new work policies and provide adequate training to leadership and staff within six months. This will set up a solid base to build the new culture on. It will further support the processes required for the implementation of new technology.

6.3.3 TECHNOLOGY AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Concurrently with the hybrid pilot program the organization should implement a technological upgrade consisting of online communication tools and boardroom equipment to allow those at home and in the office to feel comfortable in hybrid meetings. The issues of communicating, problem-solving, and relationship-building in hybrid/remote situations rely heavily on technological tools, and it is important to select those best suited for the business and provide the necessary training. As found by Dahik *et al.* (2020), if employees are satisfied with the technology available, their productivity and engagement will increase. However, these tools should not be used as surveillance instruments to monitor employees or pressure them to be constantly “on”, resulting in stress and disengagement.

Management needs to clearly communicate expectations and personally demonstrate best practices regarding responsiveness and online presence, setting a positive cultural and behavioral tone. Training on the use of new technology should be provided for all staff, and surveys should be implemented regularly during the test period. An agile approach will allow the organization to define technical inadequacies, implement improvements and test their efficiency during the pilot year. The final version, tested and approved by the users, should be implemented as a permanent communications solution.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

Ethics approval

Ethics approval was granted by the University ethics committee in September 2023

Data availability statement

Data that support the findings of this study are available from the first author upon reasonable request

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