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## Remote work and work-life balance: Lessons learned from the covid-19 pandemic and suggestions for HRD practitioners

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### ABSTRACT

Popular representations of remote work often depict it as a flexible, technologically feasible, and family-friendly work arrangement. Have the images of remote working as a desirable work arrangement been challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic? What have we learned from the widespread involuntary remote work imposed on many employees during this time? To answer these questions, we analysed 40 recent empirical studies that examined work-life balance while working from home during the pandemic. Our analysis was informed by the person-environment fit theory and complemented by literature reviews on remote work conducted prior to the pandemic. We found four themes representing misfits between desirable expectations and the undesirable realities of remote work: (1) flextime vs. work intensity, (2) flexplace vs. space limitation, (3) technologically-feasible work arrangements vs. technostress and isolation, and (4) family-friendly work arrangement vs. housework and care intensity. We highlight the important role HRD practitioners can play in assisting employees to achieve a fit between their expectations and experiences of remote work.

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Firms have been providing remote work options as a competitive edge to attract and maintain talent for many years (Eversole, Venneberg, and Crowder 2012; Morgan 2014) and to enhance their employees' work-life balance (Felstead and Henseke 2017). Organizational leaders that endorse remote work acknowledge its role in strengthening the psychological contract between employees and organizations, and employees who use remote work perceive their employers as supportive of employee well-being (Danna and Landry 2011). Providing remote work arrangements could symbolize an employer's willingness to alter the work environment in response to employees' needs (Shockley and Allen 2012). It may also be perceived by employees as reflecting or allowing a better fit between themselves and their job, which is an aspect of positive work role adjustment (Shockley and Allen 2010). Above all, workplaces support remote work as a family-friendly option offered to enhance work-life balance (Hyland, Rowsome, and Rowsome 2005).

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The COVID-19 pandemic and stay-home orders created an uncharted territory for remote work, where many workers had to switch to a new mode of work with minimum preparation (Bin et al. 2021). The situation was complicated further by the fact that many workers simultaneously had to undertake care responsibilities and to facilitate home learning (Vaziri et al. 2020). Many employees had to spend time learning new technologies to complete their work and to adjust to repeated changes in work procedures. While managing these changes, employees were constantly worried about the well-being and health of themselves and their family members (Fogarty et al. 2021). As many scholars have argued, the shifts in work and nonwork patterns during this time have influenced employees' work-family balance, which, in turn, impacted employees' adjustment to and satisfaction with remote work (Carillo et al. 2021) and their work performance (Burk, Pechenik Mausolf, and Oakleaf 2021). Scholars have called for more inclusive research acknowledging the challenges and experiences that potentially impact remote workers' work-life balance, well-being, and work outcomes (Bolino, Kelemen, and Matthews 2021). As Bierema (2020) argues, the disruptions brought about by the pandemic present unprecedented opportunities to HRD scholars and practitioners to re-imagine the organizational, developmental, and leadership solutions and voice remote employees' concerns and needs.

The consequences of the pandemic for remote work and work-life balance describe an extreme context, which provides a unique setting to study a 'hard-to-get-at' phenomenon (Hällgren, Rouleau, and de Rond 2018, 112). Given that extreme contexts facilitate gaining insight into 'best and worst' situations – where assumptions may be challenged and common practices fail (Hällgren, Rouleau, and de Rond 2018) – the pandemic provides a great opportunity to ask the following questions: Have the perceptions of remote working as a desirable work arrangement been challenged? What have we learned from the widespread involuntary remote work imposed on many employees? To answer these questions, we examine the scholarly research that has been published so far around remote work and work-life balance. Aligned with HRD's moral and ethical commitments to both employee and organization well-being and performance (e.g., Caldwell 2017; Fenwick & Bierema 2008; Holton 2002; Kuchinke, 2010; McGuire, Germain, and Reynolds 2021), our review offers the HRD community insights into the current knowledge and practices that could be utilized to improve employee outcomes.

We approach the topic from a person-environment fit theory, which enables outlining the (mis)fits between the expectations and realities of remote work. Accordingly, we borrow from integrative literature review principles (Torraco 2005) to synthesize studies on remote work and work-life balance to develop a new understanding of the topic. We provide suggestions for HRD practitioners to consider when supporting remote workers. Our review incorporates studies of remote workers residing in multiple countries – including Western developed and non-Western developing – to include accounts of diverse groups of remote workers and to encompass the research developed during the pandemic.

## Literature review

Given the multi-disciplinary interest in remote work and work-life balance, it is not surprising that both concepts have been referred to by various terms and defined in different ways. A well-rounded definition of remote work<sup>1</sup> refers to it as an alternative

work arrangement that involves individual workers performing tasks away from their primary offices, using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to interact with others inside and outside their organization (Spreitzer, Cameron, and Garrett 2017). Remote work can follow a full-time arrangement (i.e., employees work outside the office for five or more days a week) or a part-time arrangement (i.e., workers alternate days working at home with days at a central office location) (Bailey and Kurland 2002). Most researchers have focused their studies on implications of the voluntary remote work based at home (Gajendran and Harrison 2007) before the pandemic, very few have examined the outcomes of involuntary remote work experiences (i.e., employees are given no choice but to work somewhere other than their offices) (Anne et al. 2019; Johnson, Andrey, and Shaw 2007). Another prevalent theme in the literature reflects that remote work can generate surveillance and monitoring mechanisms by managers (Valsecchi 2006). Pre-pandemic research on telework and employment relationships have also investigated perceived social and economic advantages and disadvantages of working from home (Illegems, Verbeke, and S'Jegers 2001).

Work-life balance research spans multiple disciplines (e.g., management and organizational studies, HRD, psychology, sociology, family studies) resulting in a large body of empirical evidence (Beigi and Shirmohammadi 2017; French and Johnson 2016; Powell et al. 2019; Perry-Jenkins and MacDermid Wadsworth 2017). Depending on the theoretical lens through which work-life balance has been defined, there are multiple conceptualizations and operationalizations of this construct (Kalliath and Brough 2008). The authors of the papers we reviewed had adopted various definitions of work-life balance, depending on their theoretical lens (Beigi, Shirmohammadi, and Otake-Ebode 2019). Throughout our findings, we have integrated and reflected the reviewed articles' findings. In some sections of our review, where we provide suggestions for research and practice, we used Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep's (2009) definition of work-life balance: satisfaction with the amount of physical and psychological involvement with work and nonwork roles.

Work-life balance is generally considered to be an individual-level concept that equates balance with lack of conflict or incompatibility between workers' family and work roles (Saroj and Greenhaus 2002; Allen 2012). A central focus of work-life scholarship has been the exploration of causes of balance or inter-role incompatibility. Early research focused on demographic characteristics such as gender and marital status as predictors of balance (Byron 2005), and subsequent research predominantly revolved around individual work and family demands and characteristics (Eby et al. 2005). Later studies emphasized personality attributes that relate to balance, arguing that dispositional variables explain balance beyond situational work and family variables (Allen et al. 2012). Meta-analyses have found relatively large effect sizes for four primary categories of work-related and family-related antecedents that impact work-life balance: role stressors, role involvement, social support, and work or family characteristics (Michel et al. 2011). Work-related stressors (e.g., work role conflict and work time demand) and family-related stressors (e.g., family role conflict and parental demands) have been strongly correlated with work-life balance (Carlson 1999; Byron 2005; Michel et al. 2011).

Person-environment fit theory (Edwards, Caplan, and Harrison 1998; Hesketh and Gardner 1993) provides a useful theoretical lens to understand work-life balance while working remotely. Although the person-environment fit was originally applied to the

work domain, scholars have extended it to the nonwork domain and work-life interface as well. Early research documented that the fit between work and family demands and resources was strongly associated with work and life satisfaction (Voydanoff 2005). The theory has previously been used to explain both remote work and work-life balance and can serve as a useful framework to integrate research that examines the link between the two topics. The term fit refers to the congruence between attributes of an individual and those of the environment (Shin 2004). Its central proponents suggest that stress and conflict arise from the misfit or incongruence between an individual and their environment (Edwards and Rothbard 1999). When an individual's experiences do not match their expectations of a work or nonwork role (here, working remotely), a lack of fit develops, which ultimately leads to stress and interferes with balance (Voydanoff 2005). Also, the reciprocal relationship between people and environment accounts for work outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Rounds, Dawis, and Lofquist 1987), which explains the role of workplace practices in facilitating the fit between individual expectations and their work experiences. Hoffman and Woehr's (2006) meta-analysis showed that person-environment fit functions as an important predictor of employee outcomes such as performance and organizational citizenship behaviour.

## Methods

In this review we examined 40 empirical studies published on the topic of work-life balance while working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic between March, 2020, and August, 2021. The articles were selected from a larger dataset collected for the purpose of another project. Using SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) logic (Cooke, Smith, and Booth 2012) we included articles that (1) presented samples and data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) focused on the work-life interface while working from home phenomenon, (3) were empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals, (4) rated by our research team an overall quality of above three out of five, and (5) used quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. We conducted a search in publication titles and abstracts in the Web of Science Core Collection using the keywords 'work-from-home\*', 'telework\*', 'telecommut\*', 'covid\*', and 'pandemic.' We complemented the dataset with nine literature reviews and meta-analyses that examined work-life balance and flexible work arrangements conducted prior to the pandemic.

To answer our research questions, we synthesized the findings of the reviewed studies by conducting a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis enables researchers conducting literature reviews to systematically synthesize and identify core ideas from the past research (e.g. Sterman et al. 2016; Thomas and Harden 2008). This allowed us to find similarities across concepts explaining remote work and work-life balance through the person-environment fit lens. Thematically analysing previous literature reviews and meta-analyses helped us portray the desirable characteristics of remote work (i.e., flextime, flexplace, technologically-feasible work arrangement, and family-friendly work arrangement), and the pandemic-induced research assisted us to outline the undesirable aspects (i.e., work intensity, space limitation, technostress and isolation, and housework and care intensity). The themes revealed the paradoxical nature of work-life balance while working remotely, especially during the crisis situation of the COVID-

19 pandemic. Borrowing from the principles of integrative literature review, we brought the themes together ‘such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated’ (Torraco 2005), including our conceptual classification and organization of past research (Torraco 2005; Doty and William 1994).

Before we delve into the findings, we provide a brief overview of the empirical studies we tapped into for our review. Most of the studies used a quantitative approach (72%), while 23% applied a qualitative methodology, and only 5% of the studies utilized a mixed-method approach. The studies were conducted in many different countries (including the United States, Italy, India, Australia, China, France, the Netherlands, Canada, Spain, Israel, the UK, Germany, Lithuania, Romania, Greece, Turkey, Iceland, Ireland, Singapore, Ghana, and Argentina). Most studies (80%) focused on a single-country, six studies spread across different countries, and two did not specify their location (Table 1 presents a list of the studies).

## Findings

Our analysis revealed four themes representing the contrast between the desirable expectations and undesirable experiences of remote work. In other words, as Figure 1 displays, the characteristics of remote work fell on a spectrum with one end representing the greatest benefits and the other the most difficult challenges of remote working. Although the pandemic and public crisis contexts had allowed the dark side of remote work to become more observable than before, most employees’ experiences probably fell somewhere between the extremes of the spectrum. However, the showcased contrasts in Figure 1 and in our themes help us understand remote work in light of the ‘best and worst’ situations by describing the extreme ends of the four dimensions presented in our findings. We acknowledge that our themes may not be inclusive of all possible experiences of remote work.

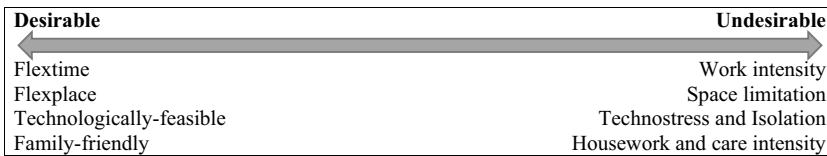
Traditionally work-life balance research that has used the person-environment fit perspective has referred to the environment as office-based workplaces (Voydanoff 2005). Given the distinctive difference between office-based and remote work contexts, the fit or congruence between the individual and the remote work environment needs further exploration. We suggest that the lack of fit or congruence between the person (i.e., the remote worker) and the remote work environment (i.e., the desirable and undesirable dimensions presented in Figure 1) gives rise to stress, which negatively impacts work-life balance. A fit between individual remote workers’ expectations (of remote work) and the remote work environment increases work-life balance and leads to positive individual and professional outcomes.

### *Flexitime vs. work intensity*

One of the advantages of remote work discussed in the extant literature is flexitime, which refers to flexibility in the timing of work (also called schedule flexibility or temporal flexibility) (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). An assumption in the remote work literature has been that flexibility in the timing and execution of tasks enhances employees’ perceptions of autonomy, which improves remote workers’ work-life-balance (Allen and Shockley 2009; Beigi, Shirmohammadi, and Stewart 2018), because they can integrate

**Table 1.** Themes representing desirable and undesirable aspects of remote work.

Desirable aspects of remote work	Undesirable aspects of remote work	Pandemic-induced empirical studies	Reviews with major components related to remote work
Flexitime	Work intensity	Akuoko, Aggrey, and Dokbila Mengba 2021; Burk, Pechenik Mausolf, and Oakleaf 2021; Craig and Churchill 2021; Del Boca et al. 2020; Ipsen et al. 2021; Mihalca, Irimias, and Brenda 2021; Monica et al. 2020; Parlak, Celebi Cakiroglu, and Oksuz Gul 2021; Bin et al. 2021; Ştefan 2021	Allen et al. 2013; Allen and Shockley 2009; Byron 2005; Gajendran and Harrison 2007; Hill et al. 2001; Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran 2006; Michel et al. 2011; Raghuram et al. 2019; Spreitzer, Cameron, and Garrett 2017
Flexplace	Space limitation	Allen et al. 2021; Ayuso et al. 2020; Carillo et al. 2021; Craig 2020; Hertz, Mattes, and Shook 2021; Ipsen et al. 2021; Karl, Peluchette, and Aghakhani 2021; Risi, Pronzato, and Di Fraia 2021	
Technologically-feasible work arrangement	Technostress and isolation	Carillo et al. 2021; Ipsen et al. 2021; Monica et al. 2020; Ştefan 2021; Toscano and Zappalà 2020; Vaziri et al. 2020; Bin et al. 2021	
Family-friendly work arrangement	Housework and care intensity	Akuoko, Aggrey, and Dokbila Mengba 2021; Ayuso et al. 2020; Burk, Pechenik Mausolf, and Oakleaf 2021; Carillo et al. 2021; Chung et al. 2021; Clark et al. 2020; Costoya et al. 2021; Craig 2020; Craig and Churchill 2021; Del Boca et al. 2020; Goldberg, McCormick, and Virginia 2021; Hennekam and Shymko 2020; Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir 2021; Monica et al. 2020; Parlak, Celebi Cakiroglu, and Oksuz Gul 2021; Petts, Carlson, and Pepin 2021; Ştefan 2021	



**Figure 1.** Desirable vs. undesirable aspects of remote work.

or separate work and nonwork according to their preferences (Raghuram et al. 2019). Studies that have focused on women’s remote work experiences have suggested that schedule flexibility allows mothers to maintain full-time employment upon childbirth (Chung and van der Horst 2018). However, because of pre-existing barriers such as ideal worker culture (Lott and Abendroth 2020; Peters and Jan Blomme 2019) and gendered norms (Blair-Loy 2001), flexible working hours can potentially reinforce traditional gender roles in workplaces and households (Janet and Stokoe 2005).



The pandemic-induced research suggests that remote work is accompanied by work intensification (e.g. Akuoko, Aggrey, and Dokbila Mengba 2021; Craig and Churchill 2021; Parlak, Celebi Cakiroglu, and Oksuz Gul 2021; Bin et al. 2021). Participants of some empirical studies conducted during the pandemic reported excessive workloads and low work-life balance while working from home (Del Boca et al. 2020; Monica et al. 2020). Working from home typically increased work hours due to employers' expectation that employees should be 'always online' available and respond immediately to work requests (Bin et al. 2021). Also, working late at night was a common practice among many mothers working from home during the pandemic (Hertz, Mattes, and Shook 2021; Minello, Martucci, and Manzo 2021; Parlak, Celebi Cakiroglu, and Oksuz Gul 2021). When work engagement and productivity remained the same as before the pandemic, and workplaces overlooked remote workers' family obligations, employees' work-life balance suffered (Burk, Pechenik Mausolf, and Oakleaf 2021; Craig 2020; Hertz, Mattes, and Shook 2021).

### ***Flexplace vs. space limitation***

By definition, remote work involves 'flexplace,' i.e., flexibility in the location where work is completed. Such locational flexibility is the key feature of remote work; the earliest proponents for remote work were transportation and urban planning researchers who highlighted its positive outcomes, such as reduced pollution, reduced fuel consumption, and real estate savings (Allen et al. 2013; Gajendran and Harrison 2007; Raghuram et al. 2019). Since its emergence, remote work has included satellite offices, telecenters, and client offices, but research has predominantly focused on in-office versus out-of-office locations (Allen and Shockley 2009). Out-of-office remote work refers, implicitly or explicitly, to work conducted at home (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). Work-life balance researchers view the choice of working away from a central location as an advantage for employees, as they can use the saved commute time and energy for family and personal activities (Raghuram et al. 2019).

Research conducted during the pandemic suggests that adequate workspace at home – characterized as good physical conditions, free from distraction and noise – was a key to employees' successful adjustment to remote work and to their work-life balance (Akuoko, Aggrey, and Dokbila Mengba 2021; Carillo et al. 2021; Craig 2020). During the extreme situation of stay-at-home orders, where households' activities were predominantly confined to the home, space limitations became a challenge for many remote workers (Hertz, Mattes, and Shook 2021; Karl, Peluchette, and Aghakhani 2021; Risi, Pronzato, and Di Fraia 2021). Although workers had the locational flexibility to work away from their main offices, not all remote workers had the privilege of having a dedicated home office or enough space to designate for work. Also, managing work, personal, and family life at home required sharing and reorganizing space to ensure multiple household members could meet their work commitments and children could complete their schoolwork. Adequate space to work was necessary for employees' satisfaction with remote work, work-life balance, and well-being.



### ***Technologically-feasible work arrangement vs. technostress and isolation***

The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) makes remote work possible (Raghuram et al. 2019). It makes physical presence in the office less necessary and allows employees to be available virtually anywhere and to work anytime (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). Scholars have acknowledged the importance of technology and infrastructure to enable remote work, describing the access to technological tools as a necessary condition for remote work's success (Golden and Raghuram 2010).

Research conducted during the pandemic highlighted technostress and isolation as two major challenges that employees working from home confronted while depending on ICTs to work (Bin et al. 2021). Adjusting to the use of ICTs and the complexity of platforms increased the psychological burdens employees experienced, especially for those who worked from home for the first time, felt unprepared, or lacked the appropriate technological tools (Carillo et al. 2021; Ipsen et al. 2021). The use of ICTs was associated with increased time needed for work communication, which, in turn, increased the remote workers' stress. Also, remote workers felt they were constantly connected to work, because of their availability through the internet and mobile devices, which also increased the level of stress they experienced (Monica et al. 2020). While ICTs made working at home possible, remote workers faced difficulty drawing boundaries between work and nonwork activities while working from home (Monica et al. 2020; Vaziri et al. 2020).

Also, during the pandemic, communication with colleagues and supervisors through ICTs led to feelings of professional isolation and loneliness (Carillo et al. 2021; Ipsen et al. 2021), because social interactions were low quality, leading to less closeness between peers (Bin et al. 2021). The feelings of isolation, in turn, contributed to stress and reduced productivity among those working from home (Toscano and Zappalà 2020).

### ***Family-friendly work arrangement vs. housework and care intensity***

Remote work could be viewed as 'a good thing' that provides the possibility to take care of family members (Gajendran and Harrison 2007), facilitates integration between work and family roles (Hyland, Rowsome, and Rowsome 2005), and offers means for employees to adjust their work schedules to meet household needs and care responsibilities (Allen and Shockley 2009). Work-life balance scholars have found remote working beneficial for reducing work-family conflict, because it helps workers juggle professional work and personal responsibilities (Gajendran and Harrison 2007) and saves time and energy for family roles (Raghuram et al. 2019).

Research conducted during the pandemic revealed that a massive amount of housework and intensive childcare demands were imposed on families and remote workers (Carillo et al. 2021; Craig and Churchill 2021; Del; Boca et al. 2020). Parents and caretakers' access to help for domestic and care work, paid or unpaid, was limited because of mandatory stay-home-orders and social distancing (Parlak, Celebi Cakiroglu, and Oksuz Gul 2021; Risi, Pronzato, and Di Fraia 2021). Intensified housework and childcare negatively influenced remote workers' ability to concentrate on work-related tasks and imposed additional demands on working parents, leading to experiences of work-family imbalance (Burk, Pechenik Mausolf, and Oakleaf 2021; Del; Boca et al. 2020; Minello,

Martucci, and Manzo 2021). Most of the additional housework during the pandemic was still handled by women (Ayuso et al. 2020; Del; Boca et al. 2020; Parlak, Celebi Cakiroglu, and Oksuz Gul 2021), while men assumed increased responsibilities at home, especially regarding childcare (Akuoko, Aggrey, and Dokbila Mengba 2021; Ayuso et al. 2020; Craig 2020; Craig and Churchill 2021; Parlak, Celebi Cakiroglu, and Oksuz Gul 2021). Mothers participating in the reviewed studies reported dissatisfaction with the distribution of housework during the pandemic (Craig and Churchill 2021).

Before proceeding to the discussion section, we bring a gap we observed in the reviewed studies to future HRD scholars' attention. It seems that the urgency of responding to the crisis and the rush to collect data has resulted in many studies not reporting the theor(ies) that informed their studies. Limited theories were referenced throughout the literature, including boundary management theory (e.g., Allen et al. 2021; Kerman, Korunka, and Tement 2021), conservation of resources theory (Chong, Huang, and Chang 2020; Charlene, Yu, and Marin 2021), and theory of work adjustment (Biron, Peretz, and Turgeman-Lupo 2020; Carillo et al. 2021). Limited use of theory restricts how we could conclude the overarching theoretical contributions of this body of research. Moving forward, HRD researchers could engage further with theory to advance the theoretical understanding of work-life balance and remote work during times of change and crisis. We suggest that future scholars take the cue from the person-environment fit theory (Edwards, Caplan, and Harrison 1998; Hesketh and Gardner 1993) and our review to examine the congruence between individual workers and those of the changing work environment.

## Discussion

To align our paper with the focus of the special issue of *Human Resource Development International*, we focus on HRD practitioners' role as they work with individual employees and employers. Our suggestions complement those of previous HRD scholars who have encouraged practitioners to acknowledge the complexity of individual situations and adopt a participatory, inclusive, and supportive approach to build sustainable and healthy workplaces during and post-pandemic (McGuire, Germain, and Reynolds 2021; Bierema 2020). Below, we propose suggestions that can help HRD practitioners who intend to (a) offer remote work as an option, (b) prepare to support transition and remote work, and (c) provide ongoing support to sustain remote work (see Table 2). We have taken the cue from ethics of care as practiced by HRD practitioners enacting moral and ethical commitments to both employee and organization well-being and performance (Caldwell 2017; McGuire, Germain, and Reynolds 2021).

**Table 2.** Practical Suggestions to Support Remote Work and Work-Life Balance.

1) Offer remote work as an option	2) Prepare to support transition and remote work	2) Provide ongoing support to sustain remote work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing a balanced preview of remote work</li> <li>• Offering a range of remote work options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing skills required to support remote workers</li> <li>• Supporting employee transition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening to remote workers</li> <li>• Developing -deals through dialogue</li> <li>• Facilitating access to development opportunities</li> </ul>

### **1) Offer remote work as an option**

Our review has shown that, depending on many contextual factors, remote work can lead to work-life (im)balance or other (un)expected outcomes for remote workers and their employers. Although there is an increasing appetite for remote work, HRD practitioners need to help employers make informed decisions about the type and dynamics of remote work they provide. Below, we outline two themes based on our review that call for HRD practitioners' attention.

#### ***Providing a balanced preview of remote work***

The effectiveness of providing potential employees with a realistic job preview – a foreshadowing of job requirements and demands – has been documented in a wide swath of job types (Earnest, Allen, and Landis 2011). We borrow from the realistic job preview literature and apply it to the context of providing remote work options to employees. We suggest that HRD practitioners encourage and facilitate providing a balanced preview of remote work options, accompanied with tools and resources to help employees develop a realistic understanding of their work and how it can interface with their nonwork. Particularly, it is important to make sure employees are aware of the potential effects of remote work on mental health (e.g., due to work and nonwork intensity and social isolation) (Gascoigne 2021) and suggest practices (e.g., self-care, seeking help, and setting boundaries) (McCarthy et al. 2020) that protect employees' psychological well-being while working remotely. Raising awareness can happen through eliciting and sharing authentic stories from those who have already engaged in remote work within the organization. Providing a safe informal forum in which remote workers can communicate and share work-life balance strategies, resources, and advice can promote balanced perspectives on the remote work experience as well. Other resources that organizations may provide to address remote workers' mental health include well-being, mindfulness, meditation training, and counselling services. ILO (2021) recommends the introduction of a 'right to disconnect' workplace policy to mitigate the risk of overwork and blurring of work and personal life. At the organizational level, higher management should set the tone and encourage organizational culture and practices that focus on well-being and appreciate boundary setting (Gascoigne 2021). Meanwhile, coaching can help managers notice early signs of reduced well-being, discuss well-being confidently, and create opportunities to have open and supportive conversations about mental health (Gascoigne 2021).

#### ***Offering a range of remote work options***

Remote work can be operationalized in multiple ways depending on many factors, including the nature of the job and the resources available to the organization and to the employee. Many businesses are now engaging with projects to explore future ways of working and are making adjustments that create win-win situations for themselves and their employees. Through this process, we encourage developing a nuanced understanding of remote work, and that it should be operationalized and provided with flexibility to accommodate employee work-life balance in different situations. For example, the number of days or hours that employees work remotely could be part time to fulltime, with hours per week distributed to accommodate both work and family essential needs.

Developing a portfolio of remote work options, accompanied by the requirements and implications of each, would be a good starting point. However, our review demonstrated that one type of remote work option may not work for employees in all situations; for example, parent workers might have different work schedule preferences based on their children's school, activity, and holiday schedules. Some employees may opt for a remote work option that proves to be ineffective for them later. Therefore, HRD practitioners need to adjust work design and job descriptions with changes in employee preferences and contingencies in mind.

According to recent reports, moving forward, the diverse range of remote work arrangements, including hybrid formats, will gradually increase depending on organizational and individual preferences and contingencies (Gascoigne 2021). HRD practitioners may need to adjust their strategies and prepare supervisors, managers, teams, and individuals to navigate such changes. For example, HRD practitioners may focus on dedicating time and resources to reinforce team cohesion, a sense of connection, and organizational belonging (Gascoigne 2021). Formal opportunities for team and social events involving interactive activities, games, celebrations, recognitions, and food could enhance engagement and informal relationships and bring regular, remote, and hybrid workers together.

## **2) Prepare to support transition and remote work**

Although remote work has been in place for a few decades, before the COVID-19 pandemic it was not a prevalent work arrangement available to most employees at multiple levels or in multiple organizational positions. Therefore, HRD practitioners may need to take specific actions to prepare for supporting remote work. Although the pandemic forced a quick transition to remote work, and our review revealed many negative outcomes of the abrupt transition, this should not be the case in future. We provide suggestions that can pave the way for smooth transitions to remote work that consider and promote employees' work-life balance and other desired outcomes.

### ***Developing skills required to support remote workers***

Supporting remote work and being prepared to address the requirements of remote workers have not appeared in the job descriptions for many contemporary supervisors and managers. Therefore, most current supervisors and managers have not received any training to prepare them for working with employees who do not follow a 9:00–5:00 schedule and are not always physically present at a workplace. Having conversations about employees' work-life balance or well-being may not be a task that all supervisors and managers find necessary or have been trained to do. Given the significant role of supervisors and managers in how employees experience work-life balance (Kossek, Perrigino, and Gounden Rock 2021), we suggest HRD practitioners should complement the guidelines and information circulated among many organization members with targeted remote-work support training with specific learning outcomes. Trained supervisors and managers, prepared to support remote work, can pose good questions during recruitment, weekly meetings, or performance appraisal sessions to learn more about employee expectations and personal situations to design good solutions to support employee work-life balance.

HRD practitioners may help identify remote work practices that facilitate productivity, employee engagement, satisfaction, and well-being (Bierema 2020). Examples of such practices include training managers and supervisors to (a) develop the required skills for managing and supporting hybrid and remote workers (Gascoigne 2021; McCarthy et al. 2020); and (b) balance regular communication and check-ins – to prevent remote workers' feeling of social isolation and loneliness – and micro-management (McCarthy et al. 2020).

### ***Supporting employee transition***

HRD practitioners may encourage remote workers to reflect on their experience to help them understand their work and nonwork patterns and habits. Upon reflection, the individual can invest in developing work and nonwork boundary management, self-care, communication, planning, help-seeking, and coping strategies that help them manage demands, schedules, space, and resources. New remote workers may need help with arranging and setting boundaries for work and nonwork and sharing them with others at work and home. Only after developing a clear understanding of the resources and demands generated because of remote work and communicating those demands, can an employee move towards balancing work and nonwork. HRD practitioners may encourage employers to allocate a budget to support remote workers financially to ensure they have the right equipment and tools, especially in the early stages of their transition to remote work. Also, HRD practitioners may facilitate a sense of community and enhance bonding among remote workers and their colleagues by providing virtual water cooler informal chat spaces and other social activities. Finally, HRD practitioners should not lose sight of vulnerable groups of workers, including single parents, employees with caring responsibilities, and employees with disabilities, and give voice to their needs and concerns when necessary (Bierema 2020).

### ***3) Provide ongoing support to sustain remote work***

Our final set of practical suggestions are for HRD practitioners who desire to provide ongoing work-life balance support to remote workers. It is important for them to acknowledge the stress involved in remote work, to listen to workers' anxieties and concerns, and to empathize with workers' difficulties, especially when the shift to remote work has been abrupt. HRD practitioners need to offer encouragement and support to help employees establish new work and nonwork routines and strategies that work for them.

### ***Listening to remote workers***

HRD practitioners can use various ways to ensure remote workers receive task and social support – two factors that play a key role in employee work-life balance (Kossek et al. 2011). Task support could be reinforced by sharing information among teams in a timely manner, offering relevant job aids and resources, enabling remote workers to complete their tasks independently, without relying on office-based peers or facilities. It is important to be mindful of the task and social support needs of employees with disabilities. While reports have shown that remote work seems to facilitate employment for individuals with disabilities (ILO 2021; Stengel 2020; Bramwell 2021), it is necessary to ensure that these workers are offered various

opportunities to socialize using virtual strategies. As highlighted by ILO (2021, 56), ‘working from home is likely to be positive for workers with disabilities if it is indeed a choice and not the only option left open by a society that ignores or dismisses their needs.’

While supervisor monitoring, including daily reports and logs and clocking in and out via applications may help remote workers accomplish work tasks, practitioners should avoid excessive monitoring. Research suggests that constant and excessive monitoring negatively influences remote workers’ productivity and creates work-family conflict (Bin et al. 2021). HRD practitioners need to encourage employers to invest in various means to provide social support to remote workers. Research shows that social support from supervisors, especially regarding remote workers’ family demands, space limitations, and technology needs, enables remote workers to experience a positive work-life balance and to feel supported (Vaziri et al. 2020).

### ***Developing i-deals through dialogue***

HRD practitioners can use dialogue and consultation techniques to facilitate negotiations between remote workers and their employers for I-deals (Severin, Glaser, and Rousseau 2010). The I-deal can be an open and ongoing dialogue between an individual remote worker and their employer, which can enable win-win scenarios and account for changes in employee needs and preferences. Research shows that whenever flexible I-deals have been used, they have been effective in reducing work-family conflict and increasing unpaid overtime (Severin, Rousseau, and Glaser 2008). I-deals enable employees to have a voice in the remote work arrangement and to exercise work and nonwork patterns that are best for them. It also allows enabling supporting vulnerable employees who may have childcare or eldercare responsibilities, home-schooling, or children with special needs (McCarthy et al. 2020).

### ***Facilitating access to development opportunities***

Remote workers may have limited access to benefits such as training opportunities and professional development activities (ILO 2021). The potential downsides of remote work for young and early-career employees include the reduced access to mentoring, informal learning through interactions with experienced employees, and possibilities for professional network development. These may have long-term and negative implications on remote workers’ personal and professional development and career progression (Gascoigne 2021). HRD professionals could facilitate the establishment and maintenance of a wider support network to compensate for the loss of informal learning (Gascoigne 2021). Other helpful strategies include providing structured training and development opportunities that create opportunities for younger and less experienced remote workers to connect and work with older employees.

## **Conclusion**

This paper provides a timely contribution to our understanding of remote work that has become more prevalent since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. We synthesize the post-pandemic literature that has examined work-life balance and remote work and compare it with the findings of pre-pandemic reviews to develop a more nuanced understanding of the contingencies of remote work in the context of crisis. Therefore, we extend our



understanding of remote workers' work-life balance experiences and offer new perspectives to the HRD community that could play a key role in supporting remote workers' well-being.

## Endnotes

1. Other terms used to refer to remote work are telecommuting, telework, work-from-home, and virtual work.

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