Breaking the silence of psychological impact while working from home during COVID: Implications for workplace learning

Roland K. Yeo and Jessica Li

Study Background

- COVID-19 Pandemic - The rapid transition to work from home (WFH)
  - Digital technology capabilities
  - The blurring of work-life boundaries
  - Changes in working conditions
  - Changes in ways of employee learning and development
  - Employee health and wellbeing
- Need for an integrated approach that examines the impact of WFH using the lens of employee psychological well-being and its impact on employee learning orientation and level of work engagement
  - RQs: What is the psychological impact of WFH due to the pandemic, and how does it affect how employees learn and engage with their work?

Relevant Literature and Research Framework

Work from home (WFH)

- A flexible work policy – research reported positive and negative aspects of WFH over the years.

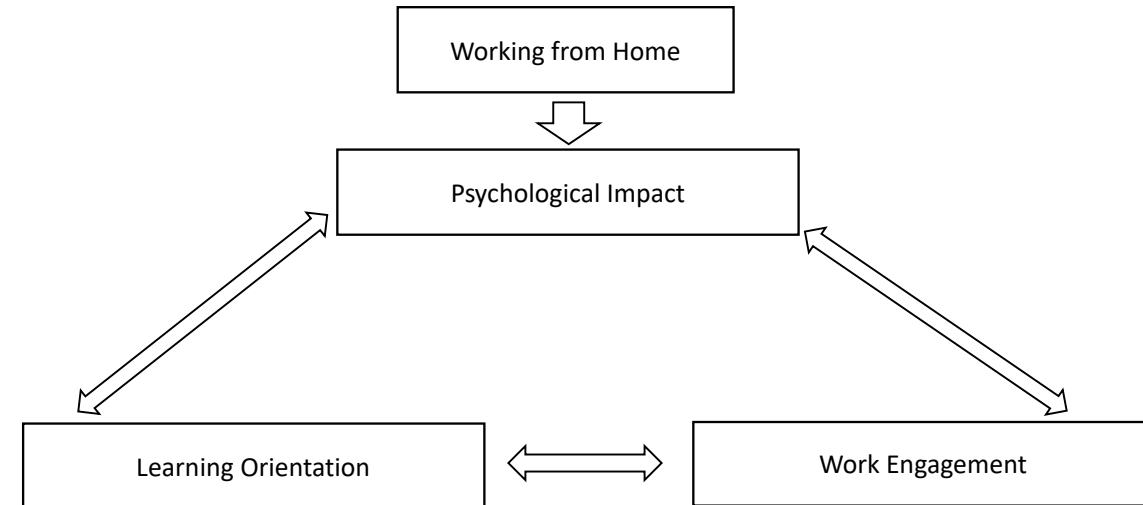**Job demands and job resources during WFH**

- Harmful: social isolation, family-work conflict
- Positive: job autonomy and self-leadership

Learning and professional development during WFH

- Learning urgent requirements to fight the pandemic
- Learning with interruptions
- Learning transcends formal and informal formats.

Engagement in unusual work situations

- Harmful: work and family conflicting demands
- Positive: Frequent communication with superiors and co-workers, work-life balance

```
Working from Home
        ↓
Psychological Impact
   ↙          ↘
Learning Orientation  ↔  Work Engagement
```

Research Methods

- The case- A large multinational training academy – Talent Co
  - Over 1500 employees
  - Talent development services and solutions
  - Had a sizeable digital learning portfolio
- Data collection
  - Time frame: A sequence of eight calls between May 2020-April 2021
  - Format: Individual and group calls using a set of predetermined questions and responses were captured using a template developed for data collection.
  - Interview team or frontline supervisors (1318 participated and 2671 calls)
  - Existing documents and archival records (e.g., training records, work progress reports)
- Data analysis:
  - Employees were grouped into four subgroups: non-critical, high risk, lockdown, self-quarantine
  - Constant comparative and thematic analysis
  - Using the proposed framework (psychological well-being, learning, and engagement) and pre-research driven dimensions such as contextual, cognitive, affective, and behavioral to help with the organization

Results – Key Themes

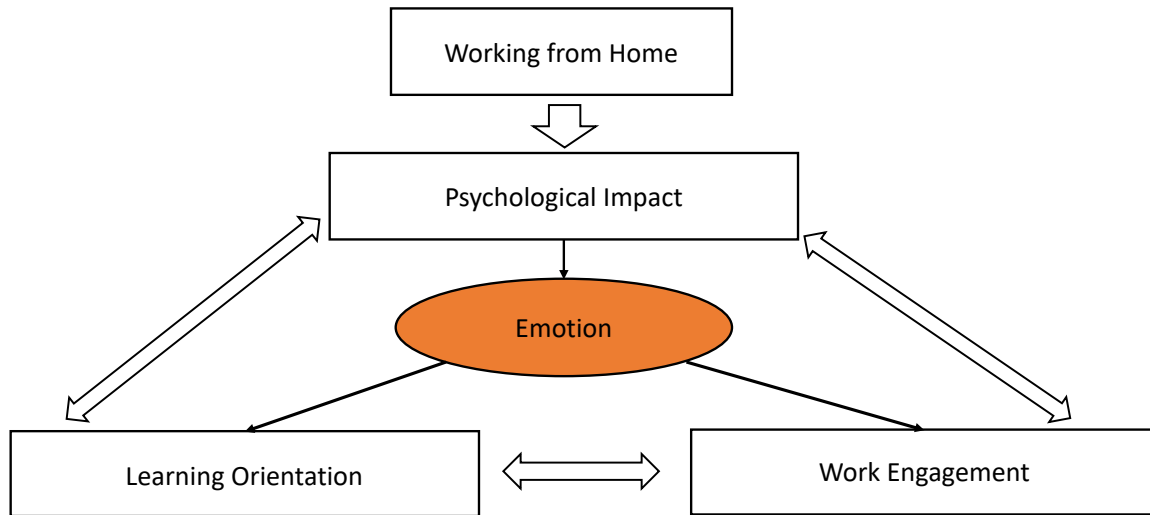|	Positive Psychological Impact	Negative Psychological Impact
Contextual	• Viewing WFH as **more than a safety measure.** • Building capacity for **work flexibility.** • Maintaining **quality of work.**	• Viewing WFH as **blurring work-life boundaries**. • Increasing role **conflict and work-life imbalance**. • Leading to **psychological stress.**
Cognitive	• Thinking about **longer- term adjustment.** • Modifying frames of references to gain **broader view of work.** • Re-conceptualizing work from **volume to value.**	• Thinking about **shorter- term adjustment.** • Considering WFH as **detrimental to work progress.** • Re-conceptualizing work as **static, disruptive, and temporary.**
Affective	• Turning void into a source of **energy and motivation.** • Feeling **useful and connected** to work. • Learning to **deal with silence.**	• Feeling **lonely and disconnected.** • Fearing **job security** based on **self-perception** as non- critical staff. • Experiencing **silence** as an **emotional burden.**
Behavioral	• **Learning to cope** with the 'new normal'. • **Challenging status quo** • **Improvising and unlearning** conventional ways of working.	• **Failing to cope** with the 'new normal'. • Being **stuck in status quo.** • Experiencing a **lack of motivation** to learn and/ or modify work routines.

Results – Comparative of Four WFH Groups

- All employees had a challenging adjustment period before regaining the desired level of performance: conflict between work and family demands, redefining work-life balance/boundaries, and adjustment in the meaning of work engagement.

- Planned groups (non-essential, high-risk) adjusted better - took a longer-term perspective, hence conscientiously developing coping strategies.
  - Some pushbacks because of perceived as non-essential – less valued(?)

- Unplanned groups (lockdown, self-quarantine) using a temporal frame toward WFH were less proactive in making the change, hence took longer to adjust.
  - Felt withdrawn from work – lack of IT infrastructure to complete work

Results – The Role of Emotion

Contextual influence of WFH

- Duality of roles; duality of space; work-life boundaries, and new mental models needed for define meaning of work and life

Psychological impact of WFH

- The planned and unplanned WFH affect employees differently
- Unplanned experience low supervisor support, greater task ambiguity, and longer adjustment – lead to psychological stress
- However, the experience also trigger employee to be more resilient, and develop self-motivation and accountability skills

The role of emotion

- Important for employee feeling of personal resources – readiness to learn and to engage. Greater emotional stability, better adjustment, and optimism about the future

Learning orientation – desire to improve

- High learning orientation - greater self-efficacy – increased learning participation

Work engagement

- Engaged employees are resilient, proactive, and innovative