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

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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

Diagram:
- Working from Home
- Psychological Impact
- Learning Orientation
- Work Engagement

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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

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

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

- 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

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

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

- Engaged employees are resilient, proactive, and innovative