



Enhancing Workability and Work Inclusion Through Hybrid Work – A Qualitative Study of Norwegian Employees

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Early retirement due to work disability and health-related absences is a growing concern in most countries today. Using the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model as a theoretical point of departure, this article investigates how hybrid work impacts employees' workability. Data comprises interviews with 59 hybrid workers from the Norlife Remote Work – Qualitative Study (NorRemo-QS), in five Norwegian organizations where working arrangements underwent significant changes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings show that working from home can enhance employees' work-life balance, well-being, motivation and job satisfaction by providing new resources. Hybrid work lowers the threshold to work despite health or life phase challenges. Simultaneously, the boundaries between health and illness are blurred; the flexibility in hybrid work has raised the ability but also the expectations of employees to be available for work – even when they are ill. The findings underscore the potential for hybrid work to enhance workability, while noting emerging challenges for policymakers, unions, employers, human resource management and future research.

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INTRODUCTION

The significant shift to working from home (WFH) during the COVID-19 pandemic has brought continuous changes to professional life, introducing new and different approaches to work for employees in office-based jobs (Barrero, Bloom & Davis 2023). Today, there are high expectations for organizations to offer hybrid work arrangements – a combination of office-based and remote WFH. According to Bloom, Han & Liang (2022), hybrid work combines the ‘best of two worlds’; on the one hand, it offers the flexibility to adjust work to one’s personal life; on the other hand, it maintains social and professional interaction with colleagues at the office.

Research has shown that hybrid work has a dual impact on employees’ health and well-being, as elements of this work model, such as increased flexibility and autonomy, can serve as both stressors and motivators for employees (Charalampous et al. 2019; Dale, Wilson & Tucker 2024). Moreover, difficulties with drawing boundaries between work and personal life in a virtual work environment at home has changed employees’ health behavior in terms of, for instance, sickness presenteeism (working while ill) and absenteeism (Fiorini 2024; Nowrouzi-Kia et al. 2024) as well as employees’ perceptions of health at work (Ruhle & Schmoll 2021). These studies, however, were conducted in the context of the pandemic, and focused on employees who worked from home full-time. As organizations worldwide have endorsed hybrid work for their employees, updated knowledge about the potential of this flexible work arrangement for employees’ health and well-being is urgently needed.

Based on 59 qualitative interviews with hybrid workers in five Norwegian organizations, this study uses the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model introduced by Demerouti et al. (2001) as a theoretical point of departure. The article investigates how hybrid work may impact employees’ *workability*, and how the opportunity for hybrid work arrangements may contribute to a more sustainable working life for employees. Workability is conceptualized as the perceived balance between employees’ resources (including health, competencies, motivation) and demands (including private and work-related challenges) and how these might be affected by the context (Ilmarinen 2009). Thus, workability includes the individual’s health conditions, life phase, relational issues and caring for significant others, like dependent children or ill parents. Following Ilmarinen (2019), this holistic approach has an advantage over more specific outcome measures as it allows for an exploration of how hybrid work impacts workability in a dynamic process.

THE CONCEPT OF WORKABILITY

The concept of workability was developed in the 1980s in Finland as a result of the aging work force and as a response

to the overemphasis on work *disability* (Ilmarinen 2009). Starting out as a health-based concept, focusing on the fit between employees’ physical and mental resources to meet job demands, workability is increasingly recognized as affected by multiple factors (Cadiz et al. 2019). Workability is obtained by a sustainable balance between individual resources (health and functional capacities, skills and competence, values, attitudes and motivation), work conditions, content and demand of work within an environment where both proximal factors like family and social network, as well as distal, society factors play a role (Ilmarinen 2019). Thus, the holistic model of workability considers the interplay of factors across various levels that enable employees to function more effectively and sustainably at work over time (Maltby 2011).

Quantitative studies and systematic reviews have found a positive relationship between flexible work arrangements and work-related health outcomes (Fox et al. 2022; Shifrin & Michel 2021; Moen et al. 2016). For instance, employees working reduced-hours arrangements reported lower stress levels compared to their peers (Chandola et al. 2019). Findings also suggest that flexible work arrangements might function as a protective factor for those with health challenges or other life burdens. Workers with disabilities had lower absenteeism if they worked from home (Giovanis & Ozdamar 2019). However, few health outcomes (Fløvik et al. 2021) and consequences for well-being (Dale, Wilson & Tucker, 2024) have been investigated in high quality studies related to work from home and hybrid work (Lunde et al. 2022), and there is currently a lack of in-depth qualitative examinations of employees’ own experiences. Using ‘workability’ as an outcome, opens for a broader and more contextual debate about sustainable working life.

This article utilizes a qualitative design that aims to examine employees’ *perceptions* of their workability. Thus, the article expands the current knowledge from quantitative studies that examine objective assessments of workability to explore possible relationships between hybrid work and health. Furthermore, the impact of work and workplace policies on people’s workability is emphasized. By engaging with workability, the aim is to go beyond the mere positive or negative depiction of hybrid work and take into consideration the dynamic interaction between employees (across ages and life phases), job conditions and the wider environment in a more multifaceted manner (Ilmarinen 2009).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: JOB DEMANDS-RESOURCES MODEL

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, introduced by Demerouti et al. in 2001 (Bakker & Demerouti 2007; Demerouti et al. 2001), forms the theoretical basis for the article. The model assumes that all types of job

characteristics can be categorized as either demands or resources. Job demands consist of the physical, social, or organizational aspects of a job that require sustained physical or mental effort. Job resources consist of the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job that function either to achieve work goals, reduce job demands, or stimulate personal growth and development (Demerouti et al. 2001).

The JD-R model encapsulates the dual effects of flexible work (Ter Hoeven & Van Zoonen, 2015, p. 241). Flexible working can boost *job resources* such as autonomy (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Gajendran et al. 2024; Sardeshmukh, Sharma & Golden 2012). Autonomy can be a resource in two ways: through enabling employees to meet job demands and balance their work-life conflict as needed (Metselaar, Dulk & Vermeeren 2023), and by fostering motivation, work engagement and organizational commitment (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Schaufeli, Bakker & Van Rhenen 2009). Thus, flexible work arrangements function as a resource for the individual employee, as well as for the employers. People with health challenges or disabilities often find significant value in the flexibility of WFH (Klinksiek, Jammaers & Taskin 2023; Padkapayeva et al., 2017; Schur, Ameri, & Kruse 2020). Such flexibility has been linked to higher job satisfaction and productivity (Giovanis & Ozdamar 2019), and increased job retention (Holland & Clayton 2020). In addition, avoiding long and stressful daily commutes has a positive impact on employee well-being and commitment to the organization (Emre & De Spiegeleare 2021).

Another possibility of flexible work arrangements is that employees may choose to work even on days when they are slightly ill, a behavior conceptualized as ‘presenteeism’ (Miraglia & Johns 2016). WFH thus enables a form of presenteeism that could help mitigate future sick leaves by preventing the pile-up of work during periods of illness (Johns, 2008). A study by Karanika-Murray and Biron (2020) found that attending work during illness can be functional, and serve a therapeutic purpose, when it takes place in flexible work contexts with a high degree of self-determination and a supportive work environment. Moreover, presenteeism can have positive effects on employees’ health if the employees are able to adjust their work tasks to match their health condition (Lohaus et al. 2021) and if working is something they choose to do, rather than something they feel pressured into (Holland & Collins 2018).

However, autonomy is not only a job resource. The self-management required for flexible working can be experienced as increased *job demands*. Findings indicate that WFH can reduce the ability to psychologically detach from work, which in turn becomes a source of stress (Eddleston & Mulki 2017). When individuals struggle to detach from work and additionally experience reduced contact with colleagues and supervisors while WFH,

they are more likely to engage in a dysfunctional form of presenteeism, where they push themselves beyond their work capacity (Karanika-Murray & Biron 2020; Schmitz, Bauer & Niehaus 2023). Such presenteeism can result in a range of negative long-term physical and mental health consequences and is linked to increased sickness absence (Bergström et al. 2009). Brosi and Gerpott (2023) refer to the phenomenon of WFH while ill as ‘workahomeism’, highlighting its distinction from traditional presenteeism. They note that it represents an alternative decision-making option compared to the conventional understanding of presenteeism. When employees engage in workahomeism instead of resting at home, they feel less guilty toward their colleagues. Thus, the ways in which employees manage their flexibility and autonomy, particularly in relation to presenteeism, may lead to detrimental health effects over the long term (Skagen & Collins 2016; Steidelmüller, Meyer & Müller 2020).

Previous studies have demonstrated that hybrid work is associated with both increased job resources and job demands. As Chung (2022, p. 131) states, flexible working is not used in a vacuum, and how individual employees handle and experience it differs according to a variety of factors, such as personal boundary preferences, life phases, gender patterns, organizational context and national context. In the subsequent section, certain aspects of Norwegian working life that offer context for the current study are outlined.

HYBRID WORK AND WORKABILITY IN THE NORWEGIAN CONTEXT

Norwegian work organizations are relatively democratic and characterized by openness, trust and autonomy due to a strong tradition for collective bargaining between trade unions and employers (Dølvik 2013). Compared to other European countries, Norwegian employees score high on job satisfaction and report high levels on autonomy and experienced fit between the work and home domain (Aagestad, Bjerkan & Gravseth 2017).

Norwegian working life is distinguished by extensive legislation and cooperation concerning individual worker rights, work conditions and working time (Heiret 2012), such as family-friendly workplace policies (Håpnes & Rasmussen 2011), opportunity of flexible hours (Nergaard et al. 2018) and work inclusion policies (Government of Norway, The IA-Agreement, 2019–2024). The Norwegian Agreement on a More Inclusive Working Life (the IA-Agreement) is a tripartite collaboration between the state, employers and unions that aims to decrease long-term health-related sick-leaves and facilitate labour market inclusion for citizens with reduced work ability (IA-Agreement, 2019–2024). In terms of inclusion, the IA-agreement emphasizes early workforce integration with concurrent training and workplace adaptation, in

line with international trends (Corrigan & McCracken 2005). The workplace is considered the main prevention arena for work disability in Norway (IA-Agreement, 2019–2024). As shown in the results section, the increased opportunities for hybrid work align with this tradition of an inclusive working life.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, access to flexible work arrangements, such as hybrid work, has increasingly become a central subject for negotiation between employers and employees (Aksnes, Underthun & Hansen 2023). Whereas flexible work arrangements in Norway before the COVID-19 shutdowns in March 2020 were mostly associated with schedule flexibility, opportunities for WFH have become much more common, and today, as many as 53 percent of employees in Norway have access to hybrid work (Ingelsrud, Dahl & Nørgaard 2023).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

The article utilizes interviews with employees from the Norlife Remote Work – Qualitative Study (NorRemo-QS). We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 59 employees in five Norwegian organizations between April 2023 and February 2024, which lasted approximately one hour. Qualitative interviews are well-suited for understanding experiences and meaning (Warren 2001), in our case employees' experiences with hybrid work. Responding to the current lack of in-depth qualitative examinations of employees' own experiences, we utilized an exploratory interview guide with questions such as, 'Can you walk me through a typical workday when you work from home, from start to finish?'. The questions were designed to elicit detailed accounts of specific practices or situations (Spradley, 1979) of how, when, and why participants worked from home, while also uncovering underlying norms, ideals, and assumptions embedded in their practices (Mangset, 2024). We asked questions about work tasks and duties, work hours, time management and boundary preferences. We also questioned about their collaboration with colleagues and managers, as well as their psychosocial work environment. We probed into

comparisons between a standard day at the office and a standard day when WFH. The interviews were conducted at the interviewees' workplace or on Microsoft Teams. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the explicit permission of the interviewees. After finalizing each interview, we wrote a brief 'crash analysis' including key facts, main points, and initial impressions.

Before starting the data collection, we obtained approvals from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (SIKT). Interviewees were recruited via the human resource departments in each organization, who distributed information about the project to the employees, and those interested in participating contacted us directly to schedule an interview.

The five organizations include private (i.e., one law firm and media enterprise) and public (i.e., two public administrations and one labour/welfare office) organizations (see Table 1).

The five organizations had different flexible work arrangements regarding where employees could physically work prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas the media enterprise had extended experiences with 'working anytime, anywhere' due to their profession (journalism), employees in the municipal agency did not have a work laptop to bring home. In the public sector organizations, working out of office was limited to special tasks, such as site inspections (in the municipal agency) and following up of citizens with work training (in the labour and welfare office). During the pandemic, all five organizations implemented a mandatory WFH period that lasted for nearly two years. When WFH was no longer mandatory, the organizations continued to offer most employees the option of hybrid work.

During data collection (2023–2024), the typical hybrid work arrangement in the five organizations was a fixed schedule of up to two days of WFH. Most of the organizations had slightly different practices regarding their arrangements across various departments (in the large organizations). For instance, within the same organization, certain departments adhere to fixed office days (i.e., only Tuesdays and Wednesdays), while others offer greater flexibility by not specifying which days employees need to be present or by not enforcing a strict two-day work-from-home limit. The law firm offers full flexibility but actively encourages their employees

ORGANIZATION	SECTOR	NO. OF EMPLOYEES	NO. OF INTERVIEWEES	HYBRID WORK BEFORE PANDEMIC TO AFTER PANDEMIC
Labour and welfare office	Public	200	19	Seldom to fixed arrangement
Municipal agency	Public	550	17	Never to fixed arrangement
Law firm	Private	150	5	Seldom to full flexibility
Media enterprise	Private	260	7	Seldom to fixed flexibility
State directorate	Public	235	11	Seldom to fixed flexibility

Table 1 Overview of Organizations.

to maximize their presence at the workplace. Despite variations across departments and organizations, all interviewees perceived the pandemic as a turning point, and ‘a before and an after’ in terms of WFH.

This article focuses particularly on employees’ ability to work partially from home, emphasizing the flexibility and autonomy that a hybrid work arrangement provides compared to working full-time in the office. Although WFH is a major focus, it is essential to understand the implications for employees’ workability in the context of hybrid work. These implications would likely look different if the employees were working exclusively from home. The dialectics between WFH and working from the office

is clearly a topic of importance, but beyond the scope of this article.

The characteristics of the interviewees is depicted in [Table 2](#). We attempted to achieve gender balance among our interviewees, but the majority (66%) are women, reflecting the predominance of female employees in the Norwegian public sector. Among the interviewees, some seldom worked from home, while the majority did so on a regular basis. The interviewees represented a diversity of life phases and living situations. Among them, 9% were senior employees aged over 60 years, 49% had children, 73% had a partner, while 27% lived alone, and 12% were single parents. Despite substantial variations among our

INTERVIEWEE NO.	SECTOR	ORGANIZATION	GENDER/AGE	LIFE SITUATION
1	Private	Media	M/64	Single
2	Private	Media	F/53	Partner
3	Private	Media	M/52	Partner, 1 child
4	Private	Media	M/55	Partner, 1 child
5	Private	Media	M/58	Partner
6	Private	Media	F/32	Partner, 2 children
7	Private	Media	M/57	Partner
8	Public	Welfare office	F/32	Partner, 3 children
9	Public	Welfare office	F/55	Partner
10	Public	Welfare office	F/50	Partner
11	Public	Welfare office	M/40	Single
12	Public	Welfare office	F/57	Single
13	Public	Welfare office	F/32	Single, 1 child
14	Public	Welfare office	F/64	Single
15	Public	Welfare office	F/60	Single
16	Public	Welfare office	M/65	Partner
17	Public	Welfare office	F/41	Partner, 2 children
18	Public	Welfare office	F/50	Partner
19	Public	Welfare office	F/29	Partner
20	Public	Welfare office	F/35	Partner, 2 children
21	Public	Welfare office	M/63	Partner
22	Public	Welfare office	F/45	Single, 1 child
23	Public	Welfare office	F/33	Partner, 2 children
24	Public	Welfare office	M/61	Partner
25	Public	Welfare office	F/46	Partner
26	Public	Welfare office	M/59	Partner
27	Private	Law firm	F/27	Partner
28	Private	Law firm	F/41	Partner, 3 children
29	Private	Law firm	F/33	Single
30	Private	Law firm	F/42	Partner, 3 children
31	Private	Law firm	F/40	Partner, 3 children

(Contd.)

INTERVIEWEE NO.	SECTOR	ORGANIZATION	GENDER/AGE	LIFE SITUATION
32	Public	State directorate	F/61	Partner
33	Public	State directorate	F/45	Partner
34	Public	State directorate	M/58	Single
35	Public	State directorate	F/40	Single
36	Public	State directorate	M/60	Partner
37	Public	State directorate	M/50	Single, 2 children
38	Public	State directorate	F/50	Single, 1 child
39	Public	State directorate	M/34	Partner, 1 child
40	Public	State directorate	F/38	Partner, 2 children
41	Public	State directorate	F/52	Single, 1 child
42	Public	State directorate	F/40	Partner, 2 children
43	Public	Municipal agency	F/35	Partner, 2 children
44	Public	Municipal agency	F/58	Partner, 1 child
45	Public	Municipal agency	F/57	Partner, 1 child
46	Public	Municipal agency	M/61	Partner
47	Public	Municipal agency	F/52	Partner
48	Public	Municipal agency	F/49	Partner, 1 child
49	Public	Municipal agency	F/35	Partner, 1 child
50	Public	Municipal agency	M/49	Partner, 2 children
51	Public	Municipal agency	M/46	Single, 2 children
52	Public	Municipal agency	F/48	Single, 1 child
53	Public	Municipal agency	M/55	Partner
54	Public	Municipal agency	F/46	Partner, 3 children
55	Public	Municipal agency	M/31	Partner
56	Public	Municipal agency	F/50	Partner, 2 children
57	Public	Municipal agency	F/33	Single
58	Public	Municipal agency	F/48	Partner, 3 children
59	Public	Municipal agency	M/30	Partner

Table 2 Overview of Sample.

interviewees in terms of occupation, position and work tasks, they were generally highly educated and exhibited significant job engagement and commitment.

ANALYSIS PROCESS

The qualitative analysis process was initiated during data collection, as we paid close attention to important aspects and what appeared to be at stake when working hybrid arrangements, for the interviewees. While health was not initially anticipated to be a central theme in the study and not explicitly explored in the interview guide, it emerged as a central and salient concern for the interviewees. As the interviews progressed, interviewees frequently reflected on how hybrid work arrangements influenced their health, job satisfaction and overall quality of life. Notably, the option to work

from home appeared to hold significant implications for the interviewees, often eliciting strong emotional responses when discussing the motivations for choosing remote work several days a week. In response to these patterns, we adapted our interview approach to explore more directly the perceived implications of hybrid work for health and well-being.

Our analysis followed Eggebø's (2020) 'collective qualitative analysis' method, involving all authors in a four-stage process: (1) examining the data, (2) mapping significant themes, (3) structuring themes, and (4) developing a work plan. The purpose of following this collaborative procedure was to create a common space where the authors together could interpret, adjust and learn from each other (Eggebø 2020). First, we went through the entire data material collectively. Prior to

this, we had individually read and familiarized ourselves with each interview. The authors who had conducted the interviews presented them to the others, who took notes. At this stage, we did not delve into details but focused on bringing as much of the empirical data to the forefront as possible. We also had a brief discussion about similarities and differences among the interviews. After the initial meeting, the interviews were uploaded in NVivo for systematic code management, and the interviews were distributed among us for the more individual part of the coding process. The coding process was iterative as we shifted between inductive coding of the material and coding of predefined themes from the interview guides. Due to the substantial amount of data collected, we iterated between in-depth analysis of the richest and most insightful interview transcripts, and breadth analysis and comparisons of the interviews using the crash analysis (Glaser & Strauss 2017). Second, we arranged a code meeting to harmonize and structure the coding process and established a common codebook. At this meeting, we also discussed which themes from the data we wanted to pursue further.

The third stage in the collective qualitative analysis process entailed a discussion regarding the interrelationships among the various codes. Here, we considered different interpretations of the material and realized that the concept of workability could serve as the connecting thread between codes denoting how hybrid work positively affects people's daily life, health, well-being (e.g. 'life quality', 'job satisfaction', 'motivation', 'work engagement', 'reduced stress' and 'work-family balance'), and the potential to extend working lives.

In the fourth stage, we developed an outline for the article and a plan for the writing process. During writing, the analysis process continued into an even more thorough phase, in which also an additional theme of new demands in hybrid work was included. This phase entailed several discussions and meetings in the research group.

RESULTS: TO WHAT EXTENT CAN HYBRID WORK AFFECT WORKABILITY

The findings are divided into three parts: (1) *Hybrid work as a resource to increase workability for employees with chronic illness* concerns how hybrid work affects work and everyday life for interviewees with chronic illnesses, and their perceived ability to remain in work; (2) *Hybrid work as a resource for enhanced sense of mastery and well-being* shows how the heightened autonomy and flexibility rising from hybrid work policies serve as a resource for employees across life phases, enhancing their sense of mastery and well-being; and (3) *Hybrid work as both a resource and a demand to work despite illness* illustrates how WFH enables employees to continue working even

when they are sick, an opportunity that can be perceived both positively and negatively by the interviewees.

HYBRID WORK AS A RESOURCE TO INCREASE WORKABILITY FOR EMPLOYEES WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS

The sample consists of interviewees with various health challenges, like diabetes, migraine, musculoskeletal disorders, mental health problems, hearing impairment and symptoms of menopause. All interviewees who reported having a health challenge experienced the possibility for hybrid work as an important means of work accommodation, enabling them to do their work while following their own pace and experiencing symptoms alleviation:

I struggle with migraines – and they were suddenly almost gone [...] There was such a big difference physically, when I could take it easier in my home office [...] I'm obviously a person who has a low tolerance for everyday stress, not to mention the open landscape with constant chatter and noise and people running around. I hardly felt like I was getting anything done before (No. 3)

In the municipal agency, an employee suffering from diabetes noted that the flexibility of hybrid work allowed him to maintain productivity even during bouts of low energy, ultimately leading to less sickness absence. He could utilize his residual work capacity WFH, on days when he might have otherwise needed to take a full sick leave. Also, an employee in the media enterprise asserted that the option of WFH would probably extend his professional life. Hybrid work not only enhanced his job satisfaction and productivity but also enhanced his overall happiness in life, he said.

For some employees, WFH made them feel more included in the work environment through the increased option of participating through digital options from home. For example, an employee in the labour and welfare office who was on sick leave before the pandemic was able to start working again, more connected with her work contacts, when WFH became mandatory:

When we started WFH, I no longer needed to be on sick leave, because then I could log on from home. I thought it was absolutely fantastic. I could attend all the meetings, because now they were held on Teams. I felt much closer to my colleagues and my manager – now I saw my colleagues every day. We talked every day. (No. 12)

WFH during the pandemic was an eye opener for some interviewees, as it gave them time to reflect on their personality and personal needs as employees. It made them realize that they 'react very negatively to everyday

stress' and that going to the office every day is 'draining'. The period of mandatory working from home was described as 'a revelation', 'a release', 'a new era', 'a new life' and 'a rediscovery of myself as an employee and a person'. In the municipal agency, an interviewee stated that WFH enabled her to have energy for her life outside of work:

I feel much better as a person, and I feel much better as an employee. So, in that sense, it's a new life. And [...] given that you have more peace and quiet during your working day, it's also nice if you have enough energy to maybe walk down the street to meet your neighbour [...] or go swimming. I can plan my day, so it suits me as a person and an employee. I just see it as very, very positive. (No. 44)

The interviewees mentioned several reasons why hybrid work was beneficial for their health, such as increased opportunity for restitution and decreased disturbances. WFH allowed them to sleep longer and start their workday later, they did not need to commute, they could rest during the day, and they protected themselves from impressions and disturbances at the workplace. As such, WFH enables restitution and recovery that would not have been possible otherwise and thus holds the potential to contribute to health promotion and work inclusion, addressing both mental and physical issues.

All the organizations in the study, except for the law firm, utilized shared workspaces or clean desk policies. For interviewees with health challenges, these working conditions contributed to their increased stress and worsening of symptoms. WFH became a way to protect themselves from the noisy landscape of the workplace. These findings demonstrate how the practice of hybrid work can bolster workability, by equipping employees facing health challenges with the resources they require to remain active in the workforce.

HYBRID WORK AS A RESOURCE FOR ENHANCED SENSE OF MASTERY AND WELL-BEING

Interviewees who did not report health challenges also depicted the advantages gained by hybrid work as enhancements to both their professional and personal lives. This finding is prevalent across different age groups and life situations. For example, a journalist in his sixties claimed that the flexibility to WFH could prolong his working life by making it easier to combine work with a good life outside of work. 'WFH increases my personal well-being' he said. Another employee in his late fifties, in the state directorate, recalled the '8-16 at the office' schedule as old-fashioned, rigid, and unnatural for human beings. The flexibility and autonomy inherent in today's WFH policies have significantly enhanced his sense of balance in life, he

said. After the pandemic he had developed what he called a new philosophy, in which his working time and private time were more blended. For example, he could work out or go to a museum during the workday, but he also worked in the evenings or on weekends.

Mixing work and personal life helps me recharge. My work motivation has increased because I get energized by my surroundings. (No. 34)

For interviewees with children, hybrid work was valuable in helping them cope with their family situation and 'the time squeeze' in everyday life. WFH alleviated stress and led to less guilt about not spending enough time with their children, who otherwise would have longer days in school and kindergarten. A mother of three with a long commute, from the state directorate, said that WFH two days a week aligned with her understanding of a 'sustainable working life' and served as an important tool to prevent burnout. When explaining why he appreciated hybrid work, a journalist and father of a teenage daughter stated:

It simply has to do with life. I have discovered that life is better for me when I get the best of both worlds, both avoiding the commute and... We are two full-time working parents at home. It's always, even though my daughter is gradually getting older, nice to be together at home. I can also support her schoolwork and help her get better grades. (No. 4)

When reflecting on their professional and personal lives before and after the pandemic, several interviewees said that they now feel a greater sense of ownership of their job and reported an enhanced enjoyment of both work and life. A young mother employed at the labour and welfare office found her work more enjoyable after being granted the opportunity to WFH, as it instilled a sense of increased trust and responsibility from her employer. Being allowed to WFH, she felt that she was given greater autonomy to make her own decisions based on professional discretion rather than being micromanaged by her manager:

I have become fonder of my job after I started WFH. Because there's room for me to take on more responsibility when WFH. And I believe we have an enormous amount of knowledge that our employer didn't know we had, a competence that wasn't fully utilized and that we've now made visible because we've had to deal with things ourselves [...] I'm much happier in my job now that I'm not micromanaged all the time.[...] We've been given more responsibility, but it is also so trust-based. We are very bureaucratic, and much of

that has probably been toned down when we work from home because we can use our professional discretion more than we did before. (No. 8)

These descriptions point to advantages of WFH that are not directly related to health challenges but rather to aspects of well-being, such as quality of life, work-life balance, sustainability, trust, work satisfaction, and a sense of mastery, across different phases of life. These are all factors that can increase workability in the long run.

While we focus here on the interviewees' experiences of the benefits of WFH, the interviews also reveal that they value the balance between WFH and working from the office. They have different arrangements, as well as varying preferences, regarding how often they work at the office, but they appreciate being part of a work environment and meeting with their colleagues. None of them wish to work from home full-time.

HYBRID WORK AS BOTH A RESOURCE AND A DEMAND TO WORK DESPITE ILLNESS

The flexibility to choose to WFH appears to have lowered the threshold for employees to be digitally present at work even when they are sick. Although being considered a part of autonomy and flexibility, this trend also raises important critical questions from the material. A recurring theme is that the interviewees describe days when they WFH even if they are not feeling well. A mother of two in the state directorate remarked, somewhat in jest, that she would almost have to be close to death to stop working, and she observed the same tendency among her colleagues.

Meanwhile, as the next quote shows, employees did not necessarily work while sick because they were explicitly expected to. Most employees in the sample had task-based jobs, and often felt that 'work would pile up' if they were absent, like this lawyer described:

... it's totally acceptable to take a sick day. The problem is that there's twice as much to do when you come back. I am responsible for my own portfolio, and they are my cases and my clients. (No. 28)

Working while sick can be understood as a coping strategy for employees who have task-based jobs. Most employees within the sample fit into this category, and the opportunity to (partly) work when one is sick can therefore relieve stress. Several interviewees said that it is better to work than to worry about all the tasks awaiting them. Also, 'being sick can be boring' and they preferred working from the couch rather than 'doing nothing'. They pointed out that they enjoy working and therefore did not perceive working when unwell as something negative.

I get things done that I would otherwise worry about. In that sense, I think it's okay – at least for me. I manage to follow up or respond to some things or whatever, it doesn't have to be a big effort. I actually think it's okay. I know it's a slippery slope, but at least for my role, for me, it's alright (No. 2).

Despite most of the interviewees continuing to work while sick, as suggested in the previous quote, they also acknowledged that the blurred lines between illness and work could be challenging to navigate. On one hand, numerous interviewees felt an implicit pressure to work as a testament to their dedication and commitment to their job. On the other hand, they expressed concern over the potential long-term health repercussions of working while sick and expressed guilt towards their children for working when their child is unwell. The next quote from a journalist in the media enterprise illustrates how difficult she found this navigation:

The issue of sick days, whether you are unwell yourself or if you have sick children, is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the whole working from home situation. [...] it's like, "well, maybe I can work?". [...] There are others who are ill and work, and then it becomes like, "well, if they did it, I won't use a sick day either". Sometimes it feels like "how sick do you have to be to not work?". That threshold has increased a lot. (No. 6)

The findings suggest that when the threshold for sickness absence rises, so does the implicit expectations and pressure for employees to work when they are sick. Some interviewees expressed concern about the cumulative long-term health effects of working when one is not well, illustrated by this quote:

Last fall, there was a period when I was feeling unwell. So, I had a few days when I didn't feel well enough to go to work but thought I could probably work a bit [from home]. [...] In December, I felt I had chest pressure. Then I thought, this might be something building up. Maybe I should have taken that sick day in October and said that I'm sick now. So, I don't think there's less stress and pressure from constantly working. It's fine if you feel bad and can log in after lunch. But I don't think it's good in the long run if you always do that. (No. 40)

WFH may increase workability in the short-term perspective but may also have negative long-term consequences for employees' health. The opportunity to WFH has both positive and negative implications for workability. WFH changes the meaning of being sick in the work context, as being sick does not necessarily mean

being absent from work. For many employees, having more fluid boundaries between being able to work and not able to work, was perceived as positive for health, mastery, and quality of life. However, the increased workability accompanying the opportunity to WFH also has a downside: employees may feel less entitled to be off sick, care for sick children, or limit their work hours.

DISCUSSION

Ensuring longer and improved working lives is an ongoing challenge for society today. The current study examines the relationship between hybrid work and work-life mastery and well-being among employees with the option to work partially from home. Findings show that hybrid work can improve employees' workability. Across ages and life phases, the interviewees reported that hybrid work has enhanced their work-life balance, well-being, motivation, and job satisfaction by providing valuable job resources. These results are consistent with previous studies of remote work which show that work engagement fostering well-being is evident in employees able to use the flexibility of remote work to optimize demands and practice job crafting (Mäkikangas et al. 2022; Lichtenthaler & Fischbach 2018). For interviewees with health challenges, WFH was a significant means of work accommodation that could help prevent sick leave and absenteeism, as revealed in previous studies (Shifrin & Michel 2021). Thus, hybrid work is more than just a work arrangement, as it is inherently connected to resources such as flexibility, autonomy, trust-based leadership, and the absence of micromanagement. In this way, the findings align well with the advantages described in the literature on flexible work arrangements (Bloom et al. 2015; Gajendran & Harrison 2007; Gajendran et al. 2024; Metselaar, Dulk & Vermeeren 2023). They also align with research showing that employees who can choose to WFH, as our interviewees may, fosters the well-documented health promotion and well-being benefits associated with greater flexibility and control over work time (Fox et al. 2022; Moen et al. 2016).

Meanwhile, the new technological possibilities that enable WFH have also blurred the boundaries between health and illness (Steidelmüller, Meyer & Müller 2020). In the data material this blurring is expressed in two ways: firstly, by allowing chronically ill individuals to WFH instead of taking sick leave, and secondly, by enabling people to WFH despite illness. Below, these two forms of blurring boundaries are discussed separately, since they potentially have different consequences for workability.

The findings emphasize that hybrid work can enhance work inclusion as it increases workability among interviewees with health challenges. WFH allows employees with health challenges to follow their own pace, rest during the working day, and thereby maintain

health and job motivation. Thus, the findings are in line with studies that see flexible work and WFH as an important measure for people with health challenges to avoid sickness absence or early retirement (Giovanis & Ozdamar, 2019; Holland & Clayton, 2020; Padkapayeva et al., 2017; Schur, Ameri, & Kruse 2020). WFH has been revealed to reduce physical symptoms (Shifrin & Michel 2022), as well as stress and burnout, and promote well-being (Fox et al. 2022; Moen et al. 2016). For employees with health challenges, these positive outcomes of WFH might be even more important to sustain work. This seems to be the case in our findings. Simultaneously, the literature points to potential downsides with WFH for people with health challenges, such as the risk of social isolation and career-growth limitations (Schur, Ameri, & Kruse 2020). These downsides are not evident among the interviewees, however, which might be because they are hybrid workers rather than full-time teleworkers.

The extensive period of WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic, gave the interviewees the understanding that they could continue to work despite illness, a change in approach that has seemingly continued after the pandemic. This finding taps into recent studies showing that remote workers report more presenteeism than office workers (Fiorini 2024; Ruhle & Schmoll 2021; Schmitz, Bauer & Niehaus 2023; Steidelmüller, Meyer & Müller 2020). Whereas most studies have measured presenteeism in remote work quantitatively and highlighted various factors contributing to both functional and dysfunctional presenteeism, our study contributes to the presenteeism debate by exploring people's experiences of- and reflections on working despite illness. Most of the interviewees found it relieving to work when they are mildly ill, both because they had task-based jobs where work would pile up if they were absent, and because of the satisfaction derived from their work as such. Importantly, the interviewees emphasized that they did not feel pressured by their managers to work and that the decision to work while ill was entirely their own. Hence, our study adds to existing research on positive aspects of presenteeism, highlighting a voluntary and health-promoting form where the employees adjust their work performance to their health condition (Karanika-Murray & Biron, 2020; Schmitz, Bauer & Niehaus 2023). This might pave the way for new forms of presenteeism to arise in the context of WFH.

However, even when presenteeism is functional as it occurs in flexible work contexts with high degree of self-determination (Karanika-Murray & Biron, 2020), where employees can adjust work tasks to their health condition (Lohaus et al., 2021), and where they do not feel pressured to work (Holland & Collins, 2018), working while ill can be a slippery slope. The digital 'always-on' availability connected to hybrid work can create implicit expectations to work while ill and give rise to an unarticulated norm of presenteeism in organizations,

as employees observe and mimic their colleagues' and managers' behavior. The desire and motivation to work while ill can coexist with a sense of pressure to attend work, placing the responsibility on each individual employee to determine when they are well enough to work and when they are too ill to do so. For some, working while ill poses no problem, while for others it might be a self-endangering behavior (Schmitz, Bauer & Niehaus 2023; Steidelmüller, Meyer & Müller 2020). As Karanika-Murray and Biron (2020, p. 245) points out: *presenteeism suggests different stories for different presentees*. If presenteeism at home is to remain a sustainable alternative to absenteeism (cf. Ruhle & Schmoll 2021), it requires individuals to balance the resources provided by hybrid work (flexibility, autonomy, job control, and adjustment to health status) against its demands ('always-on' availability, implicit attendance expectations, and reduced ability to detach from work). This shows a potential 'workability dilemma': WFH while ill can offer an immediate sense of accomplishment and stress relief in the moment (resource), yet over time, it may impair people's workability (demand).

The workability dilemma can be added to the array of various dilemmas and paradoxes described in the literature of flexible working, such as the 'autonomy paradox' (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, W. J., & Yates 2013), the 'flexibility paradox' (Chung 2022) and the 'connectivity paradox' (Leonardi, Treem & Jackson 2010). One issue that these paradoxes have in common is that they all point to advantages and disadvantages of flexible working life, stemming from an *individualization* of work practices (Tavares et al. 2020). WFH during the pandemic intensified individualization processes as it forced employees into a high level of self-management. The findings presented in this article can thus be interpreted against this backdrop of increased individualization of work; it has become the responsibility of the individual to manage their own hybrid work life sustainably.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Adopting a workability approach can augment the proactive and preventative aspects of organizational and national policies (Ilmarinen 2019). The findings presented in this article have several implications for all actors in the working life – policymakers, unions, employers, human resource management, and employees, as well as for future research. Policymakers should be aware of how flexible work arrangements, such as hybrid work, can generally enhance workability, addressing both health and life-phase related challenges. For employers, developing and implementing hybrid work policies and arrangements can serve as a valuable tool for fostering a more inclusive work environment.

Our findings show that the flexibility to work hybrid opens new possibilities for the prevention of disability. As such, hybrid work enriches and nuances debates on sickness absence and early retirement concerns, facilitating the development of more accurate measures. Even though the facilitation for, and the expectation of employees to work despite health problems or illness already has been changing the last centuries (Corrigan & McCracken 2005; Pransky, Loisel & Anema 2011), the new flexibility that technology offers are blurring the lines even more. Hybrid work has increased the threshold for when it feels acceptable to 'call in sick' and refrain from working. This needs to be taken into consideration. WFH brings the boundaries between health and sickness to the fore. There is a risk that the flexibility offered by hybrid work could heighten expectations and establish norms wherein employees are presumed willing and capable of WFH, even when unwell. We encourage policymakers, employers, and unions to discuss expectations and guidelines for presenteeism and be attentive of situations where blurred boundaries could pose a challenge, such as for newly hired employees, for employees with young children, or for older workers.

Moreover, trade unions must critically engage with the potential *individualizing effects* of responsibilities, rights and regulatory frameworks that may emerge alongside flexibility driven workability. Employees may be inclined to continue working while ill, perceiving this as a personal cost they are willing to bear in exchange for the perceived privilege of flexibility. Such dynamics reflect a broader individualization of choice and responsibility in which the burden of safeguarding employee health and well-being is shifted from the employer to the employees. Moreover, this also reflects the individualization of rights, where the right to flexible work arrangements for the employees are being transformed into each individual's right to self-exploit as a price willingly paid for the flexibility. These developments have important implications for the future of union work. For unions, the collective is central to the fight for rights, with negotiations and agreements designed to prevent exploitation, such as ensuring employees can call in sick rather than work while ill. While unions would support the resource aspect of workability, such as flexibility, autonomy, job control, and adjustment to health status, the individualization tied to flexibility driven workability might weaken the collective dimension of organizing in the long run.

Drawing on the results of this study, we have identified several key recommendations for practice:

1. *Employers* should engage in dialogue-based exploration with *employees* to understand why they chose to WFH and if it is an appropriate solution. This can help uncover contextual factors that make WFH attractive for employees, such as health challenges, life phase, or other issues.

2. As WFH is a valuable workplace accommodation that can prevent long-term sickness absence and enable individuals to work despite health challenges or disabilities, it should be considered by involved *stakeholders* in office-based workplaces.
3. Recognizing the advantages and therapeutic effect of working despite illness, *employers, HR and policymakers* should make it clear that taking sick leave is completely acceptable and ensure that no unwritten rules at the workplace create pressure for employees to work while ill.
4. *Employers and HR* should raise awareness and encourage open discussion in the workplace about the consequences – both positive and negative – of working while ill.
5. Acknowledge the impact *employers and employees'* own decisions and work habits regarding working while ill have on coworkers.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The current study provides an in-depth exploration of the dynamic interplay between hybrid work, health and well-being, yielding a complex and nuanced understanding of workability. Nevertheless, there are limitations that need to be discussed.

First, both the organizations and interviewees joined voluntarily. Thus, there is a risk that the employees most satisfied with hybrid working arrangements volunteered to be interviewed. Less satisfied employees might have been reluctant to volunteer as their employer collaborates with the research project, which might lead to less pronounced negative perspectives and attitudes in our findings. However, some employees did express criticisms about their work environment, such as office layout or lack of interaction with colleagues and managers who often WFH.

Second, the organizations in the current study practiced a hybrid work arrangement, typically allowing to WFH for up to two days. Hence, it is challenging to generalize the advantages that these findings yield for employees with even more liberal WFH arrangements. Former studies have suggested that two days are seen as most optimal for employee outcomes (de Macêdo et al. 2020; las Heras & Barraza 2020). However, as these studies were conducted before 2020, there is a need for updated research on the appropriate WFH intensity in a post-pandemic context.

Third, we examined workability in a sample consisting of a privileged part of the workforce; with the majority having higher education, working in jobs with low physical demands and a high degree of autonomy and flexibility. Subsequent studies should broaden this scope to include

and compare employee groups from a more diverse population, going beyond the most privileged ones.

Fourth, caution is needed when generalizing findings from Norway's heavily regulated context, where flexible work arrangements are widely used (Ingelsrud, Dahl & Nørgaard 2023), to other settings. However, hybrid work is not unique to Norway and the dynamics identified in our study may have broader relevance. For instance, Bloom, Dahl & Rooth (2024) reported that the possibility to WFH likely have increased the proportion of workers with disabilities in the US, suggesting similar dynamics in other countries. To better understand the implications of hybrid work for workability, future research should investigate diverse worker groups, life stages, and circumstances (e.g., individuals living alone or older workers) both within and beyond the Nordic welfare state context.

CONCLUSION

According to Ilmarinen (2019), implementing successful interventions to enhance workability is a challenging endeavour. The COVID-19 outbreak created an 'enforced intervention' through the widespread adoption of hybrid work, offering a unique opportunity from which workers can continue to derive ongoing benefits. Our findings show that a benefit of hybrid work is increased workability among interviewees with health or life stage challenges, as WFH provides them with the flexibility they need to work while maintaining health and job motivation. However, while WFH when sick may provide immediate accomplishment and stress relief (a resource), this might gradually establish norms that expect employees to WFH, even when unwell (demand). This may in turn impair employees' workability. Herein lies the 'workability dilemma', of which all working life actors need to be aware. To safeguard the positive impact of hybrid work for workability, discussions about expectations and guidelines for digital presenteeism are needed.

Workability functions as a crucial resource not only for sustaining labour force participation but also for supporting senior workers in maintaining autonomy and independence in daily life. Given the global concerns about the aging population and shrinking labor force due to proportionally smaller younger (OECD 2023; OECD 2019), hybrid work arrangements may offer a particularly effective means of promoting continued labor marked engagement among senior workers and mitigate sickness absence and early retirement. The societal benefits of enhancing workability and promoting workplace wellbeing therefore extends beyond the immediate benefit of individual employment outcomes, potentially contributing to a broader public health and economic sustainability.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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