Time Fungibility:

An inductive study of workers' time-use during COVID-19 stay-at-home orders

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The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled white-collar employees to work from home. In many cases, employees' children have also been housebound. The result is a new phase of work-life integration that scholars have only begun to assess.

Past research on flexible working suggests that workers resolve work-life conflict, at least in part, through the successful management of time (Kreiner et al., 2009). What remains less clear, however, is how workers attempt to accomplish this with children at home and peers working remotely as well. Thus, in this research, we assess how workers manage temporal overlap and conflict in the age of COVID-19.

We conducted an inductive study of workers impacted by a nationwide stay-at-home order. In light of our inability to extrapolate from past literature, and a concomitant minimum of *a priori* theoretical expectations, we employed a qualitative approach (Eisenhardt, 1989). We conducted 43 semi-structured interviews with government employees in the United Kingdom, ranging from 30-45 minutes per interview. We asked respondents about changes to their work lives, their family lives, and the interaction between the two. All interviewees were part of the financial services division of the organization. Within this division, interviewees represented a range of different levels or "grades" within the organization, different lengths of tenure, and diversity in terms of age, gender, and caretaking responsibilities. Some were in part-time roles (less than 37 hours per week) while others were in full-time roles (37 hours per week). Some had prior work-from-home experience, while others did not. All employees were working from home at the time of the interviews. Further, the interviews were conducted less than a month after the initial stay-at-home order was issued, which gave respondents time to settle into their new routines. With the exception of a few critical employees in the larger organization, all employees were required to work from home, while nationwide school closures impacted all employees with children.

We were surprised to find a limited prevalence of work-related temporal conflicts or challenges relating to temporal "entrainment"—defined as, "the adjustment of the pace or cycle of an activity to match or synchronize with that of another activity" (Ancona and Chong, 1996: 253). Through our inductive coding of the data, we uncovered *temporal fungibility* as a key driver for this finding. Temporal fungibility refers to the substitutability of time (Bluedorn and Standifer, 2006). One day becomes substitutable with another, and a given hour within a day with another. In the words of one of our respondents – "I think there's no distinction now…there's no Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, it's just day." Another talked about "the flexibility that if you can't do the hours during the day and you're finding like an hour in the evening then you can just switch on for an hour." In short, the highly-overlapped society-wide work-from-home setting has led to a situation wherein time is more fungible and employees have more discretion over their work-time.

We find that this outcome—greater fungibility and discretion—arises through two primary mechanisms. One, current work-from-home practice fosters greater empathy and accommodative behavior among colleagues. What was a hard deadline in the past is now a flexible one. When a subordinate prefers to shift some work to the weekend due to caretaking responsibilities, managers respond accommodatively. Our interview data shows that the source of this empathy is over-and-above the general compassion generated by the pandemic. It is driven more by an increased visibility into, and awareness of, a colleague's personal life and the competing demands on her time. For example, one manager noted – "I've got one staff member

in my team; he lives on his own in a flat, so I'm just conscious of that…I think we probably think of people's personal background more in this situation than what you normally would in an office, you know?" Another colleague showed empathy towards team members who are parents – "I'm just sensitive to the fact that people have got kids, but I can't even imagine what it's like to be entertaining one/two/three kids as well as working right now, you know, that's tough."

A second mechanism, contributing to the greater time discretion afforded to workers, is the use of technology. As online communication replaces person-to-person chats, the recipient of an e-mail has the option to ignore it, flag it for later, or address it immediately. In the past, a knock on the door would have interrupted the worker from her chosen use of time immediately (Sherman, 2020). Now, she has relatively more discretion over her use of time, and even informal chats require a greater degree of planning and scheduling. One respondent noted this reduction in ad hoc meetings – "I'm finding that people generally set up a meeting rather than call you sort of on an ad hoc basis with Skype." Another reported responding to emails differently than she would have responded to in-person requests – "if I receive an email, it's, like, "Okay, I'll turn to that, but I've got this to do first.""

We also note some downstream consequences of these findings. The greater empathy received from colleagues has led to expressions of guilt as workers make use of time in a fungible manner, but nonetheless feel that they should be accomplishing more and are being stretched too thin. One respondent reflected – "the reality is a lot of people…(have) that feeling of, like, not feeling they're giving their all to their work and not feeling they're giving their all to home-schooling." In addition, the substitutability of time appears to create a sense of monotony as the days blend into one another – "I think it just made my days just a bit more monotonous and a bit kind of boring".

Finally, a key implication is that workers are required to be far more self-directed than they were in the past. The flip side of an accommodating set of peers and supervisors is that workers can no longer rely on others to set deadlines and monitor progress toward meeting those deadlines. This was particularly pronounced for managers, whose work hours increased substantially as a result of attempting to accommodate their subordinates' varied schedules. We saw very little evidence that these managers were able to license themselves with regard to the cessation of work; instead, the autonomy paradox, wherein workers feel compelled to stay switched on all the time (Mazmanian et al. 2013), was pronounced.

We discuss boundary conditions for our findings, based on our specific research setting, and the nature of work within this organization. First, the national government setting entailed a higher degree of "role-modeling". The leadership wanted to make sure that government workers were setting the right example, and they made it a point to communicate a sense of empathy and accommodativeness from the top down. Most of our respondents cited the organization's leadership as positive influences in helping to manage the new reality of remote working. Second, the findings in this study are primarily generalizable to other instances of knowledge work, with low sequential interdependence of tasks. The nature of work carried out by most of our respondents was inherently more amenable to remote working than work in other sectors may be.

Taken together, our findings suggest that the mandatory, all-encompassing stay-at-home policies have precipitated an environment of greater fungibility of time-use and greater employee discretion regarding time-use. This has helped to manage the conflicts arising from other sources of work-life strain, such as caregiving and schooling responsibilities vis-à-vis children. As lockdown orders begin to ease and offices begin to re-open, further research will be needed to explore whether time fungibility, as we have uncovered in our current study, continues in an online-offline hybrid.

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