Employees’ preferred extent for working from home – relationships with emotional job and childcare demands

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Abstract

Abstract – Purpose – To better understand employees’ preferred extent for working from home (WFH) setting that implies physical distance from clients and co-workers and enhanced physical proximity to others at home, this study, relying on job-demands resources (J-DR) theory, aims to investigate the relationships between this preference with both the perceived increase in emotional job demands and the exposure to childcare demands. Thus, this study aims to investigate the mediating role of perceived job difficulty in the relationship between emotional job demands and the preferred extent for WFH, and the moderating role of gender in the relationship between the number of children and the preferred extent for WFH.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 239 employees who began WFH during the pandemic completed an online survey. Structural equation modelling was conducted to analyse the data and test the hypotheses.

Findings – As expected, an increase in emotional job demands had a significant negative indirect association with the preferred extent for WFH, through perceived increase in job difficulty. Furthermore, the number of children was negatively related to the preferred extent for WFH among male but not female employees.

Practical implications – The findings provide insights for promoting employees’ preferred extent for WFH.

Originality/value – The study points to a relationship between emotional job demands and employee attitudes towards WFH in terms of increased job difficulty and the preferred extent for WFH. It also points to the need to investigate the interaction between sex and number of children to understand employees’ preferred extent for WFH.

Keywords J-DR theory, Emotional job demands, Working from home, Job difficulty, Gender, Number of children, Job demands and resources

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees began working from home (WFH; Alon et al., 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020), and the integration of WFH or hybrid work as a common practice became a pressing issue (e.g. Barrero et al., 2021; Gifford, 2022; Kniffin et al., 2020). Thus, expanding our knowledge of employees’ preferred extent for WFH is imperative. Such knowledge and potential insights are essential in improving the design of tasks required from employees.
employee WFH, attracting employees and avoiding deleterious motivational consequences (Bailenson, 2021; Bloom et al., 2015; Kniffin et al., 2020). Hence, this study aims to investigate the relationship between this preference and both the nature of a given job (i.e. job demands) and the home-work environment (e.g. non-work demands).

Previous WFH research has focused on the consequences of this work arrangement (i.e. its effect on job performance and employee well-being) but neglected factors related to employees’ preferred extent of WFH (e.g. Bloom et al., 2015; Galanti et al., 2021; Qu and Yan, 2023). Generally, two primary motives have been identified as underlying the motivation for WFH (Allen et al., 2015). Firstly, there is the desire to increase efficiency and work performance (e.g. to avoid office politics and/or interruptions). Secondly, there is the desire to accommodate non-work needs (e.g. to attend to dependent-care issues). However, there is still a lack of research regarding the relationships between both work and non-work factors and employees’ preferred extent of WFH. Specifically, there is a gap in the literature regarding job content in terms of the tasks and demands imposed and undesired exposure to childcare demands while WFH. This study aims to fill this gap and advance prior knowledge of WFH by applying the job-demands resources (J-DR) theory to investigate the relationships between these demands and with employee preference for WFH. The J-DR theory is a leading theory used to explain employee outcomes, such as burnout, engagement, attitudes and performance (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001). According to this theory, job demands require sustained physical and psychological effort, and they are therefore associated with physiological and psychological costs and impair employee well-being, whereas job resources help in achieving work goals, reducing job demands or stimulating personal growth (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Some research has demonstrated that different types of job demands may have different patterns of relationships with specific employee outcomes (e.g. Afshari et al., 2022; Livne and Rashkovits, 2018). This theory has recently been applied to the WFH setting. It has mainly been used to investigate the relationships between job demands and employee outcomes, such as burnout, job performance and turnover intentions (e.g. Jamal et al., 2023; Scheel et al., 2023). No research, however, has yet applied this theory to deepen our knowledge of employees’ preference for WFH. What types of job demands reduce this preference, and what is the mechanism by which job demands affect employee preference for WFH? What non-work demands are involved in this preference? The current study aims to consider these queries and gaps in the prior research.

WFH implies physical distance from clients and co-workers and enhanced physical proximity to others at home. Firstly, physical distance may cause changes in the way job tasks are handled as compared with an office setting (Qu and Yan, 2023; Kniffin et al., 2020). Specifically, emotional job demands, that is, coping with charged and complicated interpersonal interactions (Heuven et al., 2006; Peeters et al., 2005), may be more difficult to handle remotely. Hence, we suggest that increased emotional job demands may play a crucial role in how difficult employees perceive their job at home as compared to an office setting (i.e. a perceived increase in job difficulty) and, thus, shape the extent to which employees prefer WFH. Hence, we aim to expand prior J-DR research by investigating the relationship between emotional job demands and the perceived increase in job difficulty in the WFH setting. Furthermore, we intend to investigate the extent to which the relationship between increased emotional job demands and the preferred extent of WFH is mediated via the perceived increase in job difficulty.

Secondly, WFH increases physical proximity to others at home. Prior WFJ research has shown that attending to dependent-care issues is an important motivator of the desire for WFH and that others may perceive the WFH parent as someone who can more easily
shoulder childcare demands (Allen et al., 2015). Some research has also applied the J-DR theory to work-home conflict (Bakker et al., 2008). However, the possibility that increased exposure to childcare demands while WFH interferes with employees’ preference for WFH still demands research attention. In this study, we also apply the J-DR framework to investigate this possibility. Parents’ physical availability while WFH may either support or collide with various gender role expectations (e.g. Lyttelton et al., 2020, 2022). Therefore, we suggest that the number of children at home and employee gender may be interactively related to the employee attitudes towards WFH. For employees who are secondary childcare providers, WFH may involve more exposure to childcare demands, which may be reflected in a lower preference for WFH. Due to gender role expectations, women provide childcare in most societies and so do more regularly than men do. Hence, WFH increases men’s exposure to childcare demands (e.g. Alon et al., 2020). Thus, we suggest that gender may moderate the relationship between the number of children and the preferred extent for WFH (see the research model in Figure 1).

In the following sections, we first turn to changes in the nature of the job itself, meaning employee perceptions of work-task demands while WFH as compared to working in an office setting. Next, we turn to the non-work demands, specifically exposure to childcare demands.

**Increased emotional job demands and job difficulty**

Employees engaged in the same task may experience their jobs differently (Gerhardt and Luzadis, 2009). WFH may shape the challenges and nature of work experienced by individuals (Bilotta et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021), particularly the subjective experience of difficulty associated with performing the tasks or coping with the demands they impose. Coping with certain job demands in a home setting may be more difficult than coping with others because the home environment restricts the resources required to cope with the former (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

The literature identifies three types of job demands: quantitative, mental and emotional (e.g. Livne and Rashkovits, 2018; Peeters et al., 2005). Quantitative job demands refer to workload and time pressure. Mental demands refer to the cognitive component of work and the degree to which investment in mental resources (e.g. information processing and concentration) is required. Emotional job demands are mainly concerned with coping with emotionally charged interpersonal interactions, such as customer misbehaviour (e.g. Heuven et al., 2006; Peeters et al., 2005).

In this study, we focused on emotional job demands because WFH requires remotely coping with interpersonal interactions and may, therefore, introduce enhanced challenges.

**Figure 1.** Research model

Source: This figure is the property of the authors
Mental and quantitative job demands are not the focus of the current study because the home setting is likely not as challenging in this regard. Quantitative job demands are exhausting and have a negative effect on employee well-being (Demerouti et al., 2001; Leiter and Stright, 2009; Livne and Rashkovits, 2018; Ong and Johnson, 2023), and therefore, a perceived increase in quantitative job demands may lead to a perceived increase in job difficulty. However, WFH does not impose constraints on the resources needed to cope with quantitative job demands; in fact, it may be easier to cope with quantitative job demands within the home setting due to the increased flexibility in terms of time management (e.g. Bilotta et al., 2021). Next, research has shown that mental job demands positively contribute to psychological empowerment and reduced burnout (Livne and Rashkovits, 2018). Similarly, a recent study conducted among employees WFH during the pandemic found that increased learning and decision-making demands, which are mental (cognitive) demands (Kubicek et al., 2015), were related to reduced burnout (Afshari et al., 2022). Thus, an increase in mental demands in the WFH setting should not contribute to employees’ perceptions of increased job difficulty.

Emotional job demands are associated with burnout, exhaustion and reduced engagement across various occupations (Lewig and Dollard, 2003; Li et al., 2023; Livne and Rashkovits, 2018; Xanthopoulou et al., 2013). Moreover, coping with emotional demands (i.e. complex or charged interpersonal interactions) remotely may pose increased difficulties, as interpersonal interactions conducted via technological devices restrict the ability to send, perceive and comprehend non-verbal messages (Bailenson, 2021; Brodsky, 2021; Daft and Lengel, 1986; Nadler, 2020). Non-verbal cues are an important resource for understanding and empathising with others, and empathy can enable satisfying, rather than exhausting, interpersonal interactions while coping with emotional labour or emotional job demands (Lee and Madera, 2019; Peng et al., 2010; Xanthopoulou et al., 2018). Because WFH requires interpersonal interactions via technological devices and restricts the ability to obtain clear non-verbal cues regarding others’ emotions and needs, it seems to interfere with the development of genuine understanding and empathy (Grandey, 2000; Peng et al., 2010).

Thus, based on the above research, we focus on emotional demands and suggest that coping with increased emotional job demands while WFH, as compared to at the office, is expected to have a noticeable relationship with the perceived increase in job difficulty. Thus, we hypothesise as follows:

**H1.** Increased emotional job demands while WFH, above and beyond other job demands, are positively associated with increased job difficulty.

**Increased job difficulty and the preferred extent for working from home**

According to J-DR theory, because increased job difficulty requires the investment of more effort and is associated with costs that people prefer to avoid (Demerouti et al., 2001), it may reduce employee preference for WFH. Furthermore, research-based on planned behaviour theory has shown that expecting a negative consequence, such as increased job difficulty, for a behaviour of interest, such as WFH, will “turn” attitudes against it (Ajzen, 1991, 2020). Thus, experiencing an increase in job difficulty when WFH as compared to the office setting decreases the preferred extent of continuing to work from home. Thus, we hypothesise as follows:

**H2.** There is a negative association between increased job difficulty while WFH and the preferred extent for WFH.
Increased job difficulty as mediating the relationship between emotional job demands and the preferred extent for working from home

In the above sections, we hypothesised that increased emotional job demands while WFH would be associated with a perceived increase in job difficulty and that this increase in job difficulty while WFH, as compared to in an office setting, would be negatively associated with the preferred extent for WFH. Taking together these two propositions, we suggest that emotional job demands are indirectly associated with the preferred extent for WFH through the perceived increase in job difficulty.

Thus, we hypothesise as follows:

\[ H3. \quad \text{There is a negative indirect association between increased emotional job demands and the preferred extent for WFH, which is mediated by increased job difficulty.} \]

Exposure to childcare demands

Scholars have concluded that the desire to accommodate non-work needs, such as attending to dependent-care issues, is an important motivator of the desire for WFH (e.g. Allen et al., 2015). While WFH, employees are more physically available to meet childcare needs. WFH, as compared to in an office setting, provides higher flexibility in terms of coping with and being able to attend to childcare demands (e.g. taking a break to pick up the children from school or prepare their meals) and saves commuting time to and from work, which can be redirected towards meeting childcare needs (e.g. Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Golden and Gajendran, 2019). For those who are the main childcare providers, this availability may be a resource that assists them in managing this role. However, WFH and being physically nearby may expose secondary caregivers to greater demands in terms of attending to childcare needs. For example, it is not easy to ignore one’s children quarrelling in the next room or avoid one’s child knocking on one’s door to ask for assistance with school assignments. Furthermore, others may perceive the WFH parent as someone who can more easily shoulder childcare demands and, thus, expect more from them (Allen et al., 2015).

Thus, WFH may either support or collide with gender role expectations (e.g. Lyttelton et al., 2020, 2022; West and Zimmerman, 1987) and, accordingly, influence employee attitudes towards WFH.

To date, both conventional societal norms and gender roles support the notion that mothers, rather than fathers, are expected to be the primary child caregivers. Although women’s roles have changed and expanded beyond the household, they are still expected to continue providing the most childcare (Alon et al., 2020; Czymara et al., 2021; Fisher and Ryan, 2021). Thus, research on gender role expectations suggests that men and women may experience job and home demands differently (e.g. Lyttelton et al., 2020, 2022; Peeters et al., 2005). Accordingly, some researchers have contended that women with more children may be more prone to WFH (Arntz et al., 2020). However, this preference may be different for men, as WFH increases their availability for childcare and, therefore, exposes men with children to higher expectations in terms of attending to childcare needs (Lyttelton et al., 2020, 2022). Prior research has shown that WFH due to the pandemic increased the exposure of male employees to childcare demands (Alon et al., 2020). Although women continued to attend to childcare needs during the social restrictions (Feng and Savani, 2020), fathers’ share of total childcare increased more than that of mothers because their contribution was, on average, much lower prior to the pandemic (Craig and Churchill, 2021; Hupkau and Petrongolo, 2020).

Previous WFH research has separately considered the effects of gender and childcare demands, according to marital status, number of children or age, on employee motivation.
and attitudes. However, there is a gap in the research pertaining to the effect of the interaction between gender and childcare demands on employee motivation or attitudes regarding WFH (e.g. Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Dunatchik et al., 2021; Alexander et al., 2021). Attending to this gap and relying on the J-DR theory, we suggest that because exposure to childcare demands involves being expected to invest more effort, which is associated with costs that people prefer to avoid (Demerouti et al., 2001), the preferred extent of most male employees for WFH will diminish as the number of children increases. This is because they are exposed to more childcare demands at home than while working in an office setting. Therefore, we suggest that an increased number of children will lead to a decreased preference for WFH among men but not women:

Thus, we hypothesise as follows:

\[ H4. \] The relationship between the number of children and the preferred extent for WFH will be moderated by gender, and this association will be negative among men but not women.

**Methods**

**Participants and procedure**

The study took place after the removal of the lockdowns that were declared in Israel due to the COVID-19 pandemic (May 2021). During the lockdowns, many employees were required to work from home. This allowed us to recruit participants who had begun WFH and compare their job experience while WFH and while working in an office setting (Qu and Yan, 2023).

The participants were recruited by 40 MBA students enrolled in a big data analysis course. The students were instructed to recruit participants living in Israel and working in different occupations and organisations who had begun WFH.

The participants were asked to complete an anonymous online questionnaire and received a link to the research questionnaire on Microsoft Forms. As participation was voluntary, the instructions included an explanation that there was no obligation to respond to the questionnaire or any of the specific questions included. This study was approved by the College Ethics Committee (YVC EMEK 2021–68).

A total of 247 people were recruited. To ensure that no respondents were WFH previous to the pandemic and that all had started WFH full time due to the social restrictions, they were asked to respond two questions:

\[ Q1. \] What percentage of your work (0%–100%) did you perform from home before the social restrictions began?

\[ Q2. \] What percent of your work (0%–100%) did you perform from home during the social restrictions?

Only respondents that indicated 0% on the first question and 100% on the second question were included in the sample. We also excluded questionnaires with missing data. Thus, the final sample comprised 239 participants. This sample size is considered adequate for the analyses performed in the current study (Kyriazos, 2018). The sample consisted of employees from multiple occupations, organisations and industries (e.g. education, finance, government services, high-tech and academia), and all of them were living in Israel. The mean age of the respondents was 39 years (SD = 9.95), and 60% were female. All participants were married, 25% had no children, 29% had one or two children and 45% had three children or more. Approximately 9% had a high school education, 12% had secondary education, 47% had a bachelor’s degree, 29% had a master’s degree and 3% had a PhD.
Measures
To assess the three types of job demands, we used the relevant scales of the Questionnaire on the Experience and Evaluation of Work (Van Veldhoven and Meijman, 1994; van Veldhoven and Meijman, 1994). The scales of this highly recognised and commonly used questionnaire (e.g. Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008; VanVeldhoven et al., 2002) were previously validated as part of the validation of this questionnaire. The questionnaire has been constructed using Mokken scale analysis (Mokkan and Lewis, 1982; Molenaar, 1982). The underlying psychometric theory is called item-response theory. Items of scales constructed according to the principles of item-response theory meet more strict mathematical criteria than items of scales constructed using more traditional methods, such as factor analysis combined with the analysis of internal consistency. If the items of a measurement scale meet the mathematical criteria of the Mokken model, the resulting scale scores are shown to have at least an ordinal measurement level. All scales used in this study meet the Mokken criteria, their unidimensionality was good (Loevinger’s H of at least 0.40) and their internal consistency was good also (Cronbach’s alpha of at least 0.75). We adapted these scales’ items to reflect the comparison between performing a job at home and the office. We first performed exploratory factor analysis and omitted two items (one regarding quantity demands and another regarding emotional demand). After this omission, a confirmatory factor analysis (measurement model) indicated a good fit (model fit values: \( x^2 = 132; \text{df} = 41; \ GFI = 0.914; \ CFI = 0.949; \ TLI = 0.931; \ RMSEA = 0.091 \)) of the model of the three factors: emotional job demands, quantity job demands and mental job demands (see Table 1). Further, we assessed the discriminant validity between emotional demands to the two other factors by the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). If the HTMT value is below 0.90, discriminant validity has been established between two reflective constructs. We found that the emotional demands versus quantitative demands HTMT value was 0.81 and that the emotional demands versus metal demands HTMT value was 0.80.

Furthermore, as seen in Table 1, the factor loadings for all items exceed the recommended level of 0.7, and all factor loadings are significant at \( p < 0.001 \). The internal consistency of the measurement scales has been assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. As reported below, the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct/factor</th>
<th>Loadings</th>
<th>Std. err</th>
<th>( t )-values*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quantitative job demands</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QJD1</td>
<td>0.787</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>25.414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QJD2</td>
<td>0.808</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>25.414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QJD3</td>
<td>0.556</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>11.607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mental job demands</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MJD1</td>
<td>0.768</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>27.555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MJD2</td>
<td>0.865</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>46.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MJD3</td>
<td>0.890</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>54.313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MJD4</td>
<td>0.864</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>45.992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional job demands</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EJD1</td>
<td>0.712</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>19.882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EJD2</td>
<td>0.838</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>32.243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EJD3</td>
<td>0.715</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>20.097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EJD4</td>
<td>0.704</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>19.288</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Model fit indices: \( x^2 = 132; \text{df} = 41; \ GFI = 0.914; \ CFI = 0.949; \ TLI = 0.931; \ RMSEA = 0.092 \)
*All \( t \)-values are significant at \( p < 0.001 \)
Source: This table is the property of the authors

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis results
Cronbach’s alpha (see Table 2) for each scale was found to be higher than the benchmark value of 0.70.

Considering that the study examines gender differences using psychometric measurements for some of the variables, we also assessed configural and measurement invariance. Checking for these forms of invariance is crucial to establishing the validity and reliability of the measurement instrument and accurately interpreting and comparing the results between the gender groups. The results of the configural invariance test indicated that the same model holds for both groups, meaning that the underlying structure of the measurement model is consistent across gender groups (GFI = 0.893; RMSEA = 0.085; CFI = 0.953; TLI = 0.942).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Preferred extent for WFH</td>
<td>44.870</td>
<td>30.920</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Increased job difficulty</td>
<td>4.007</td>
<td>1.856</td>
<td>–0.207**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.520**</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Increased emotional job demands</td>
<td>4.318</td>
<td>1.612</td>
<td>–0.102</td>
<td>0.534**</td>
<td>0.635**</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Increased quantity job demands</td>
<td>4.189</td>
<td>1.520</td>
<td>–0.080</td>
<td>0.534**</td>
<td>0.635**</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Increased mental job demands</td>
<td>4.692</td>
<td>1.637</td>
<td>–0.114</td>
<td>0.437**</td>
<td>0.693**</td>
<td>0.73**</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Number of children</td>
<td>1.636</td>
<td>1.286</td>
<td>–0.236**</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>–0.031</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Gender</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>–0.107</td>
<td>–0.032</td>
<td>0.113</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). Sex was coded as follows: male = 1; female = 2. Number of children was divided: 1 = no children; 2 = one or two children; 3 = three children or more

Source: This table is the property of the authors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Standardised path coefficient</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Pr &gt;</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EJD1 → Increased emotional job demands</td>
<td>0.725</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>19.565</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EJD2 → Increased emotional job demands</td>
<td>0.812</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>27.045</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EJD3 → Increased emotional job demands</td>
<td>0.682</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>16.750</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EJD4 → Increased emotional job demands</td>
<td>0.670</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>16.085</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDJ1 → Increased mental job demands</td>
<td>0.773</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>26.79</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDJ2 → Increased mental job demands</td>
<td>0.882</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>49.080</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>MDJ3 → Increased mental job demands</td>
<td>0.872</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>45.938</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDJ4 → Increased mental job demands</td>
<td>0.850</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>40.126</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QJD1 → Increased quantitative job demands</td>
<td>0.744</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>20.588</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QJD2 → Increased quantitative job demands</td>
<td>0.759</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>21.686</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QJD3 → Increased quantitative job demands</td>
<td>0.568</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>11.517</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased emotional job demands → Perceived increase in job difficulty</td>
<td>0.421</td>
<td>0.119</td>
<td>3.524</td>
<td>0.0004</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased mental job demands → Perceived increase in job difficulty</td>
<td>–0.417</td>
<td>0.219</td>
<td>–1.908</td>
<td>0.0564</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased quantitative job demands → Perceived increase in job difficulty</td>
<td>0.586</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>2.705</td>
<td>0.0068</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased job difficulty → Preferred extent for WFH</td>
<td>–0.267</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td>–3.190</td>
<td>0.0014</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased emotional job demands → Preferred extent for WFH</td>
<td>0.173</td>
<td>0.138</td>
<td>1.2543</td>
<td>0.2097</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased mental job demands → Preferred extent for WFH</td>
<td>–0.422</td>
<td>0.279</td>
<td>–1.515</td>
<td>0.1299</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased quantitative job demands → Preferred extent for WFH</td>
<td>0.276</td>
<td>0.275</td>
<td>1.001</td>
<td>0.3168</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender → Preferred extent for WFH</td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td>0.108</td>
<td>0.853</td>
<td>0.3938</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children → Preferred extent for WFH</td>
<td>–0.168</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>–2.135</td>
<td>0.0327</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender * Number of children → Preferred extent for WFH</td>
<td>–0.253</td>
<td>0.113</td>
<td>–2.246</td>
<td>0.0247</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Sex was coded as follows: male = 1; female = 2; model fit indices: $\chi^2 = 196.57$, $\chi^2$ df = 81; GFI = 0.901; CFI = 0.940; TLI = 0.912; RMSEA = 0.077

Source: This table is the property of the authors
Furthermore, the results of the measurement invariance analysis indicate that the factor loadings are the same on both groups, meaning that the measurement items are functioning equivalently for males and females (GFI = 0.857; RMSEA = 0.096; CFI = 0.929; TLI = 0.927).

For concrete unidimensional variables in which a single item adequately covered the content domain of interest, we used single-item measures (Fuchs and Diamantopoulos, 2009). Single-item measures reduce criterion contamination and repetition, have superior face validity and interpretability, decrease response rate bias and increase response accuracy (Houdmont et al., 2021).

**Independent variables**

*Increased emotional job demands.* To measure increased emotional job demands, we used four items from Van Veldhoven and Meijman's (1994) Emotional Demands Scale. These items, as described above, were adapted to reflect the comparison between performing a job at home and at the office using a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = “To a very small extent” to 7 = “To a very large extent”). A sample item is “Performing my job tasks from home required more emotional effort in comparison to the period before”. The reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.83 (see Table 2).

*Number of children.* The participants indicated the number of children they had at home. Based on their number of children, the participants were divided into three categories: no children (frequency = 61), one or two children (frequency = 70) and three or more children (frequency = 108). This division is supported by previous research (e.g. Huws et al., 1990).

**Mediator variable**

*Increased job difficulty.* We measured this variable with the following item: “How did WFH during COVID-19 affect your role tasks?” This was measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = “Made them much easier” to 7 = “Made them much more difficult”). Using a single item to measure increased job difficulty is accepted in the research literature (e.g. Scheel et al., 2023).

**Moderator variable**

*Gender.* Participants were asked to indicate their gender.

**Dependent variable**

*Preferred extent for WFH.* This variable was measured with a single item: “Indicate the percentage (from 0 to 100) of work you would prefer to perform from home after COVID-19”.

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model pathways</th>
<th>95% Confidence intervals</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased emotional job demands → Increased job difficulty → Preferred extent for WFH</td>
<td>-0.112 -0.208 -0.016</td>
<td>&lt;0.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased quantitative job demands → Increased job difficulty → Preferred extent for WFH</td>
<td>-0.157 -0.317 0.004</td>
<td>&lt;0.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased mental job demands → Increased job difficulty → Preferred extent for WFH</td>
<td>0.111 -0.032 0.255</td>
<td>&lt;0.129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* This table is the property of the authors.
Control variables
Using the other two types of job demands (quantitative and mental job demands) allowed as to assess the contribution of the emotional job demands above and beyond the contribution of the former variables.

Increased quantitative job demands. To measure increased quantitative job demands, we used three items from Van Veldhoven and Meijman’s (1994) Quantitative Demands Scale. These items, as described above, were adapted to reflect the comparison between performing a job at home and at the office using a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = “To a very small extent” and 7 = “To a very large extent”). A sample item is “Performing my job tasks from home required working faster in comparison to before”. The reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.73 (see Table 2).

Increased mental job demands. To measure increased mental job demands, we used four items from Van Veldhoven and Meijman’s (1994) Mental Demands Scale. These items, as described above, were adapted to reflect the comparison between performing a job at home and at the office using a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = “To a very small extent” and 7 = “To a very large extent”). A sample item is “Performing my job tasks from home required more continual thought in comparison to before”. The reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.91 (see Table 2).

Results
Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations and inter-correlations of the research variables.

Hypothesis testing
Structural equation modelling was used to conduct a path analysis. As shown in Table 2, the results indicate a satisfactory fit on the part of the model, with.

$\chi^2 = 196.57; \text{df} = 81; \text{GFI} = 0.901; \text{CFI} = 0.940; \text{TLI} = 0.912 \text{and RMSEA = 0.077.}$

As depicted in Table 3, the outcomes of the path analysis showed that H1 was supported by a highly significant positive relationship between emotional job demands and the perceived increase in job difficulty while WFH ($\beta = 0.421; p < 0.000$).

As shown in Table 3, H2 was supported by a significant negative relationship between the perceived increase in job difficulty and the preferred extent for WFH ($\beta = -0.267; p < 0.001$).

As shown in Table 4, H3 was supported by the significant negative indirect relationship between emotional demands and the preferred extent of WFH (point $= -0.112$, 95% CI $[-0.208, -0.016]$).

Finally, as shown in Table 3, H4 was supported, as the interaction term for the number of children by gender was significant ($\beta = -0.253; p < 0.01$). As shown in Figure 2, as the number of children increased, the preferred extent for WFH decreased among men but not women.

Discussion
As WFH becomes more widespread, it is important to obtain a deeper understanding of employees’ attitudes towards this practice. Research on WFH has increased because the pandemic, but studies on the factors leading to employee preference for WFH are still scant. In response, the current study proposed a model and empirically examined the relationship between both, work and non-work demands and this preference. WFH implies physical distance from clients and co-workers and enhanced physical proximity to others at home. Thus, this study focused on the relationships between emotional (interpersonal) job demands and exposure to childcare demands and the preferred extent for WFH. It is the first study on the preferred extent for WFH to investigate the relationship between this...
preference and both, the job itself (i.e. job demands and difficulty) and non-work aspects (i.e. exposure to childcare demands).

The results of the current study have theoretical and practical implications. They contribute, in several ways, to prior knowledge on WFH, and expand J-DR research. Furthermore, they current study provide insights into how to encourage an employee preference for WFH.

**Theoretical implications**

Generally, by applying J-DR theory to promote prior knowledge regarding employee preferred extent for WFH, we were able to point to specific types of work and non-work demands that are related to employees’ preferred extent of WFH.

Prior J-DR research has mainly focused on psychological states, such as burnout, and resulting job attitudes and behaviours, such as turnover intentions and turnover behaviours (Afshari et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2019; Podsakoff et al., 2007; Spector et al., 2007). The current results, however, show the utility of this theory in understanding employees’ attitudes towards WFH. More specifically, the results showed that increased emotional job demands during WFH were prominently associated with employees’ preferred extent for WFH via the perceived increase in job difficulty, while this mediated relationship was non-significant with other types of job demands.

These results support previous J-DR research showing that different patterns of relationships exist between different types of job demands and employee outcomes (Livne and Rashkovits, 2018). However, our results expand this line of research to include employee attitudes towards WFH, specifically employees’ preferred extent of WFH. No previous research has considered the importance of different types of job demands regarding this employee preference. Coping with emotional job demands remotely is more challenging and exhausting than doing so face to face (Lee and Madera, 2019; Peng et al., 2010; Xanthopoulou et al., 2018),

**Source:** This figure is the property of the authors

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**Figure 2.** Relationship between number of children and preferred extent for WFH among men and women

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Gender:
- Women ———
- Men ———

**Emotional job and childcare demands**
and therefore, an increase in this type of demand decreases the preferred extent of WFH via the perceived increase in job difficulty.

These results also point to aware perception of job difficulty as an important mediator between job demands and employee attitudes and, thus, expand the prior focus of J-DR research on psychological states such as burnout and job engagement as mediators (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017).

The results also contribute to WFH research, which has mainly focused on gender and number of children separately, by considering the effect of their interaction on employees’ attitudes towards WFH (e.g. Feng and Savani, 2020). The current results showed that having more children was negatively related to the preferred extent for WFH among men but not women. Being physically near to the children may assist primary caregivers in managing childcare demands, but it also exposes secondary childcare providers to more childcare demands (Allen et al., 2015; Alon et al., 2020). Thus, in support of J-DR theory, increased exposure to demands that people prefer to avoid, such as the investment of more effort in attending to childcare needs, decreases motivation (Demerouti et al., 2001).

Practical implications
This study suggests several recommendations for successfully implementing WFH as a practice that is desired by employees. Firstly, it is important that organisations avoid increase in emotional job demands for employees WFH. It is advised that HR analyse the tasks employees required to perform in the WFH setting and the various types of demands they impose to recognise the complex and interpersonally charged aspects of these tasks and the resulting emotional demands. Human resource professionals are advised to develop new work methods for conducting tasks in the WFH setting that restrict emotional demands. One way to achieve this goal is by increasing mental demands. For example, college instructors may be required to develop exercises and self-guided assignments instead of conducting lectures via Zoom, thereby replacing emotional job demands (required for conducting a Zoom lecture) with mental job demands (required for developing exercises and assignments).

In recent years, J-DR theory has proposed several proactive work behaviours, including job crafting or optimising demands. Optimising demands refers to proactive efforts to simplify work processes, make work more efficient and bypass unproductive work processes (Bakker et al., 2023). Employees who participate in training interventions can learn to use job crafting strategically (Demerouti et al., 2021; Oprea et al., 2019). Thus, HR managers are advised to offer employees trainings in strategically using job crafting and developing themselves work methods that replace emotional job demands (e.g. coping with complex and charged interpersonal encounters) with mental demands.

Furthermore, HR specialists and employees are advised to sort the interpersonal encounters that their role requires and assign those that involve more complex or charged interpersonal interactions to office days rather than the WFH setting. For example, lectures that aim to evoke discussions and the expression of different views may be better performed face-to-face in the campus setting, not via Zoom.

In addition, WFH requires managers to be aware to employee life demands. Organisations are advised to be sensitive to fathers who are WFH, particularly fathers with many children. It is advised to offer them support and adequate resources to assist them in responding to childcare demands. Resources such as more flexible work schedules may empower these fathers WFH and extend their role as childcare givers, instead of avoiding exposure to childcare demands by working in the office. Thus, organisations may contribute to a more equal distribution of childcare between men and women.
Limitations and future research

Because the study had a cross-sectional design, and the data were collected via self-report measures, causal inferences are limited and some relationships may be subject to common method variance (CMV). Nonetheless, two independent variables, namely, gender and number of children, were objective variables. Furthermore, we followed recommendations to limit this bias via procedural means, such as using different types of scales to measure different variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Thus, as detailed in the Measures section, we used different types of scales to measure the independent variable (i.e. emotional job demands), the mediator variable (i.e. perceived increase in job difficulty) and the dependent variable (i.e. the preferred extent of WFH) to limit CMV.

During the lockdown, childcare centres and in-person schools were closed, placing a heavier burden on parents and this study was conducted after the removal of the lockdown. However, and the participants were asked about their preferred extent of continued WFH in the future. Thus, their preferences do not refer to WFH under the exceptional conditions caused by the pandemic. Nonetheless, further research is recommended to test the role of gender in the relationship between number of children and the preferred extent for WFH. Because the results show the potential importance of considering the interaction between gender and number of children on the preferred extent of WFH, future research may also consider the effect of this interaction on other attitudes related to WFH as well.

Because this study was conducted in a specific country, future research may test our results in different countries and cultures.

Further study may consider the perception of job difficulty as a mediator of the relationship between job demands and various employee outcomes. Moreover, the current study addressed the mediating role of increased job difficulty in terms of changes in the job tasks. Future research may incorporate the role of the difficulty of WFH. This construct may mediate the relationships between both work and non-work demands and the preferred extent for WFH.

Finally, because all children need care and, as the number of children increases, there are additional childcare demands, we used the number of children as a proxy for childcare demands. However, future research may refine this proxy by considering each child’s age, dependency and special needs, as well as the assistance offered by other family figures and educational facilities.

References


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