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# Remote Work Adaptability: Cabin Fever or Newfound Freedom?

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## Introduction

The enforced remote work due to Covid-19 crisis led to adaptation to digital new ways of working. This secured a fast transition to remote work and hybrid work for the future. Remote work has been proposed as an alternative method of working for organizations (Staples, Hulland, & Higgins, 1999), which in turn became the norm as more people worked from home (Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai, & Bendz, 2020). Organizations regardless of size and sector have transitioned their operations to allow for remote working, meaning employees of different professional backgrounds are now working exclusively through digital technologies. Reports showed that the number of remote employees at most knowledge worker-based industries rose from 10% to almost 100% over the span of a few days (Patel, 2020) in early 2020. Such transition shapes not just the workspace landscape but also has an impact on employees' work performance, work-life balance and overall well-being (Amis & Greenwood, 2021). In this, paper, we study employees' work adaptability, encompassing both adaptive behaviors, management practices, and self-management practices in the context of Covid19 enforced remote work. Adaptability is defined as a capacity to respond to challenges with resilience (O'Connell, McNeely, & Hall, 2008). Resilience is ability to bounce back and move forward, allowing for renewal, thriving and flourishing (Liu & Boyatzis, 2021). Therefore, we propose a new concept work adaptability which we define as a way of coping with a radical new situation, such as the Covid19 crisis. With our unit of analysis being the individual, individual adaptation and resilience, our theoretical lens draws upon the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), adaptability studies (O'Connell et al., 2008) and autonomy paradox (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013).

Self-determination theory emphasizes the innate needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness which have an effect on goal pursuit, effective functioning and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When people feel autonomous and competent people are more likely to be intrinsically motivated. Social-contextual factors may promote feelings of autonomy and competence enhance intrinsic motivation, whereas other factors may diminish these feelings and undermine intrinsic motivation, leaving people either controlled by contingencies or unmotivated (Gagné & Deci, 2005). This theory has explained drivers of individual behaviors and their consequences on knowledge sharing (Razmerita, Kirchner, & Nielsen, 2016), learning and work motivation (Belle & Cantarelli, 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). We study employees' work adaptability encompassing behaviors, **resilience-as a form of adaptability**, and **self-management practices**, in the context of Covid19 enforced remote work. The paper aims to investigate remote work adaptability and address the following research question: How have knowledge workers

developed work adaptability and resilience to remote work over the different phases of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis?

## Methodology

The study is based on a longitudinal qualitative approach entailing a series of semi-structured interviews with white collar professionals distributed over three phases across different sectors and organizations. We purposefully collected data in countries with severe lockdown such as the (UK, Denmark) and not so hard-hit countries (Sweden, Germany). In total 52 interviews with 34 individuals, primarily millennials between 24 and 35, were collected over a three-phase period with phase 1 covering the initial lockdown (March-April 2020), phase 2 covering the period December 2020 to February 2021 and phase 3 started in March 2021-till October 2021, to include a full year on from initial lockdowns. Some of the interviewees were re-interviewed in order to capture developments of experiences along the different phases of the lockdown. The interview guideline consisted of questions on the experience with work from home before and during the crisis, how they have been managed, expectations, support in organizing remote work but also sentiments related to remote work, motivation and challenges. Interviews were first recorded and then the audio files transcribed and coded. Data analysis was driven by the theoretical lens of the study and thus we sought evidence of work adaptability both in terms of self-management and resilience from a diversity of knowledge workers working primarily in the service sector.

## Findings

Findings pointed to different types of work adaptability during the pandemic: **reactionary** which refers to radical changes that have ensued after the first restrictions and lockdowns occurred; **developmental** phases where individuals realized that they developed professionally, took advantage of the opportunity that remote work offered to advance their learning and skillset; and **transformative** where participants showed greater confidence and were comfortable with their new work practices and routines that have been established by themselves and the organizations.

Initially, **in the reactionary phase** (see Table 1) many had to adapt to a new space, would work non-stop throughout the day or start a little earlier to finish earlier at home. For certain individuals **creating a routine and setting boundaries** helped productivity and decreased mental fog in the long term. Some interviewees found it " *very difficult at the start but gradually got into a routine although still tend to find it harder to give myself a break. I am pretty well motivated throughout the day but get distracted if others are around me. ...I like to work on my own, which isn't always good because I don't give myself any time away from work.*" In the first phase, respondents felt they would have benefited greatly with some advance notice and training to adapt. This radical change involved establishing new work practices, which have led to better practices over time. "*It has taken some time to get accustomed to but it's going well and I'm getting much more used to it. I miss the social interaction of having people around and working directly with colleagues. I enjoy it in a*

way, part of me just needs to be around people as I find it helps make the day go by quicker.” From the perspectives gained, at the individual level such motivation and work practices were initially linked to job security “meaning that if the work is not done then I lose the job, which is only fair and is to be expected as the same rule applies to any normal form of working.” This is complimented by: “the comfort of home as it makes me feel more productive as the setting and planning of the day is in my control so I can arrange it to fit me best.”

| Phase                      | Self-Management  | Resilience  |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| <b>P1 - Reactionary</b>    | <i>“I have done some small things which have had a big impact; early in the process I went into the office to grab some basic supplies, such as an office chair, mouse and mat to create a <b>better working environment</b> at home.”</i>                         | <i>“It has been difficult. I have had to <b>adapt</b>, having to use skills not necessarily had to use before... There has been a lot of reading and taking on a lot more information than usual.”</i>  |
| <b>P2 - Developmental</b>  | <i>“I’m finding motivation by setting regular <b>short-term goals</b> for myself, such as weekly milestones, communicating frequently with colleagues and <b>reflecting</b> on how successful we have been in these challenging times as a collective outfit.”</i> | <i>“It has all been a <b>learning curve</b>, in terms of having to adjust to working from home. But I was able to <b>adapt</b> quite quickly and have found new creative ways to work and get a hold of customers. These are things and <b>skills</b> that I will take with me for the future.”</i> |
| <b>P3 - Transformative</b> | <i>“Most the time I’m just left to crack on by myself, so don’t really have much <b>oversight</b> but I put that down to me proving <b>I am trustworthy</b>, and <b>I can work alone</b>. I personally don’t need much from a manager.”</i>                        | <i>“I started when the pandemic was ongoing, but we have been <b>resilient</b> from what I have experienced and have managed to replicate the office feel with all the tools we have been given. Overall, <b>very resilient</b>.”</i>   |

Table 1- Phases of Work Adaptability, Self-Management and Resilience as key elements

Interviewees also spoke of the importance of the digital tools deployed “getting used to interface technology such as zoom has been a big part of the process and getting used to the lack of normal human interaction has been challenging.” With it “mainly just having been sort of limiting myself and being very strict” as remote workers need help in dealing with the stigma of “out of sight, out of mind” mentalities. A lack of trust, feelings of being an outsider and lack of social support were also reported. Organizational support was another critical component in perceived experiences “...The key is communication; we have weekly zoom calls with the whole team where we are made aware of any major updates”. Some respondents had “a tight nit group” spurring each other on and watching out for each other. This camaraderie seemed to really help individuals and teams.

The **developmental** phase, which was more observed in Phase 2, included evidence of practices that contributed to the advancement of their skills and knowledge for future benefit: “...I’ve also built and developed a lot of skills that I had basic knowledge on by having to improvise and teach myself, trying to be as efficient as I can. The work I have been tasked with on top of time constraints, made me develop a lot of skills to become more adaptable and better at working under pressure. My leadership skills have also improved from it, at least virtually, and I feel more responsible, being able to handle responsibility. Everything learned in this period, over the course of the past year, has ultimately made me a better professional and added to my skills making me more adaptable overall.” Despite the challenges experience because of the enforced remote work, participants shown that they were able to take advantage of the opportunities provided: “I think overall it’s made many people realise what they want to do or would rather be doing, so are now using their

*extra time to learn how to become self-sufficient.[...] A lot of people seem to have learnt to become self-resilient and self-reliant. I don't really want to do this type of job for much longer so I'm investing in myself for the future, and now have got the time and money to focus on the future.*

**In the transformative phase** (Phase 3) we see the patterns of changes for both individuals and organizations. Time was a key element in adaptability that led to the developmental and transformative phase. “.. *our business has **changed** and now put infrastructure to work from home long term. The business has used it as an advantage to improve. We are going to have opportunities to work from home some days. Our employers have taken the opportunity to see how they can improve things.*” Many have used this time to reflect and reconsider their relationship to work and their lifestyle in general. Those that have really adapted well and enjoyed the experience seeking to continue, strive to perform well so that they don't lose these perceived privileges. However, our findings indicate possible long-term consequences for these people: overworked, feeling burn out and anxiety. “*I feel grateful that I can work from home, I work extra hard because I don't want these **newfound freedoms** taken away from me. It's just become more motivation. This is truly a blessing and not many people can work for themselves and work from home for as long as they want.*” It is important to note that some interviewees experienced stress during this time due to lockdown restrictions and resulting uncertainty, which was likened to **cabin fever**. This signals that working from home could become problematic, if it leads to a more isolated life where one would leave the home much less often resulting from habit developed over time: “*I felt trapped in my room, you sleep in the room, work in the room, exercise in the room, after a while it became like **cabin fever**.*”

## **Discussion and Implications**

The nature of work is ever changing due to new forms of organizing through emerging digital technologies. Work adaptability will become critical in a fast changing world where individuals must be adaptable and competent learners (Makarius & Larson, 2017; O'Connell et al., 2008). Our study aims to unpack remote work adaptability of knowledge workers during the Covid-19 crisis based on a longitudinal study. Organizations have been in crisis throughout this time, so our study aims to trace how the individual knowledge workers cope and adapt to new work practices. Furthermore, we aim to get insights into sustainability of remote work practices. The findings point towards individualization and self-managed of knowledge work but also towards knowledge intensification as previously emphasized by (Pérez-Zapata, Pascual, Alvarez-Hernández, & Collado, 2016). In such a context self-efficacy and self-discipline play an important role for successful work adaptability to crisis contexts. We provide insights into the phases of work adaptability at a time of crisis, focusing on resilience and self-management practices. The longitudinal nature of the study helped to identify different phases of remote work adaptability, as represented in Table 1. The different phases enrich our understanding of work adaptability at a time of crisis, with each phase signifying a different purpose.

Remote work undoubtedly has benefits and challenges for employees; the latter having been exacerbated especially as the enforced remote work coincided with lack of organizational readiness to support it. We found that employees with lower levels of trust finding remote work more challenging due to limited communication, lack of knowledge exchange opportunities and social isolation. Furthermore, we found an inherent focus of knowledge workers on work, as there are no chances for unplanned interactions through serendipitous encounters (Razmerita et al, 2021). The benefits for the individual employees included an ability to work autonomously, learning new skills by themselves, self-manage through development of resilience and an impression of enhanced work-life balance amidst different physical settings. Many knowledge workers who have reached a transformative phase expect new ways of working through flexible work arrangements for the future or plan to change carriers.

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