Adapting to the Enforced Remote Work in the Covid 19 Pandemic

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Abstract Remote work provides an alternative method of working for organisations, which in turn became a norm during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this, paper, we study adaptation practices introduced by both individuals and organisations as a way for managing the enforced remote work. The study draws upon 33 interviews collected over a year during different phases of the Covid 19 pandemic. We apply adaptation theory lenses to examine the adaptation process over time and new digital working practices. In our study, we extend technological practices by including organisational and behavioral practices. We approach adaptation as a way of coping with a radical change or dynamic situation and building resilience. Based on the data analysis, we expend the adaptation theory in relation to different forms of adaptation to new remote work practices (e.g. at technological, organisational, and behavioural level).

1   Introduction

Remote work has long been recognised as alternative work arrangements for organisations (Staples, Hulland & Higins, 1999), which in turn became a norm during the Covid-19 pandemic. National and regional lockdowns and travel restrictions caused by the spread of Covid-19 have triggered an astonishing and forced transition into remote work among knowledge workers and professionals, which are likely to secure an avenue for the future of work and lead to a permanent transformation of the workplace. Organisations which had no digital capabilities, have struggled to adapt to the dire set of locked down circumstances. As a result of the pandemic, remote work has become essential among both employees and organisations (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Organisations regardless of size and sector have transitioned their operations to allow remote working, also referred as "locked-down digital work" (Richter, 2020), meaning employees of different professional backgrounds are now working exclusively through digital technologies (Leonardi, 2020). Even before the pandemic, part of their digital transformation, organizations have deployed social-collaborative platforms (e.g. enterprise social media) to streamline knowledge processes (in particular communication and collaboration) and support more efficiencient ways of working. Beyond efficiency such platforms were also deployed to support more transparent forms of knowledge work, innovation, retention of employees and their knowledge (Kirchner & Razmerita, 2019). Such social platforms facilitate formal and informal communication, and the articulation of personal into collective knowledge in a synergistic approach (Razmerita et al., 2014).

Remote work has been defined as a flexible work arrangement where workers have no personal contact with coworkers, but they are able to communicate using technology (Wang, Liu, Qian, & Parker, 2020). Remote work doesn't always have to specifically be at home. Concurrently, there is an essential need to analyse and understand the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, in this paper, we study adaptation practices introduced by both individuals and organisations as a way for managing the enforced remote work and the perceived effects (e.g. on their productivity, work-life balance). Further, in this paper we seek to assess the Covid-19 pandemic effects on remote working attitudes according to different professional backgrounds and possible implications for the changing nature of work. We aim to

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address the following research question: How individual knowledge workers and organisations are adapting to enforced remote work?

Our study findings suggest that on one hand such transition advanced the digitalisation transformation and the associated individual digital work practices, on the other hand it shapes not just the workspace landscape but also the role and meaning of the organisation as an entity. In what follows, we present a brief review of the extant literature on telework and virtual work pre-Covid-19, and then we compare this to the Covid-19 related remote work arrangement. We then introduce the concept of adaptability as the theoretical lens of the study before we present the methodological approach and findings of our study.

2 Remote Work

2.1 Remote Work in the Pre-Covid-19 work Context

Researchers have been studying remote work, including home-work, telework and virtual work arrangements for a period of more than 20 years (among the more recent ones Makarius and Larson, 2017; Raghuram et al. 2019). Literature on remote work has focused on the opportunities that this form of work provides for flexible working and achieving work-life balance (Felstead, 2002). A distinct feature is that this form of work has been presented as a choice driven by the organisation in its efforts to reduce overheads associated with office facilities, or a choice driven by individuals due to their preference for flexible working. Furthermore, it allowed organisations to hire across borders, to attract talents that are difficult to find locally or to offer family-friendly employment contracts to those who do not want to relocate. For this, remote work has been defined as work that is 'technologically feasible, flexible and autonomous, desirable and perhaps even inevitable, family- and community-friendly' (Bryant, 2000: 22).

Remote work or teleworking is most suitable and beneficial for employees who mainly perform knowledge-based tasks with limited face to face contact (Rupietta and Beckmann, 2017). A study on 273 knowledge workers from different professional backgrounds including: engineers, accountants, sales & marketing found that they perform better in virtual work, so long as their role doesn't require social collaboration (Golden and Gajendran, 2018). On one hand working from

home increases employee autonomy, on the other hand it lowers the firm's ability to monitor their employees. This all too familiar, all-encompassing scenario describes a typical principal-agent dilemma, wherein employees have incentive to abuse the power afforded to them through their autonomy, by reducing their individual work effort thus resulting in shirking behaviour (Rupietta and Beckmann, 2017).

Makarius and Larson (2017) suggest four key competences which lead to successful remote working and performance outcomes which improve effectiveness and satisfaction such as: establishing behavioural guidelines, developing trust, coordinating information, using media. Setting boundaries through behavioural guidelines is almost akin to a code of conduct policy style which sets boundaries for employees in virtual work. Coordinating information in order to have at disposal to be able to accomplish tasks to best possible and most accurate standard. Finally using media for communication putting it to best use such as via phone, email or now with the many conferencing applications currently at our disposal (Makarius and Larson, 2017).

2.2   Remote Work in the Covid-19 context

Regardless of the aforementioned literature, existing studies do not provide a thorough investigation of the enforced work from home as emerged due to Covid-19 locked-down (Waizenegger et al, 2020, Richter, 2020). Indeed, there are some distinct differences between the pre-Covid-19 and the Covid-19 remote work arrangement noted to the fact that although remote work is not new (e.g. Sayah, 2013), the Covid-19 context is. As a result of the pandemic, the switch to remote work took place suddenly with many organisations, traditionally collocated, being ill-prepared under the circumstances. Henceforth, many employees felt increasing pressure to 'make digital work, work' (Richter, 2020) which have led to a change of mindset but also to misconceptions or potential negative associations. Among these are: 1. digital work is more stressful and tiring, 2. adaptation and appropriation to digital work technology, 3. online (digital conferences) versus physical meetings, 4. autonomy and visibility.

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Recent study on remote work identified the main benefits and challenges for remote work during Covid 19. On one hand among the identified benefits are: it frees knowledge workers from office distraction and commuting, it helps concentration on individual tasks, and it allows knowledge workers to have flexibility in their schedule due to increased work autonomy. On the other hand, the overall use and wide range of available ICT it creates an "always on" culture. Furthermore individuals working remotely may feel alienated, isolated or worried (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Further, remote work has brought some additional stress and impact on well-being of employees bringing imbalances to work and home dichotomy especially for women (Amis and Greenwood, 2020). Another study by Dubey and Tripathi's (2020) aimed at analysing the sentiments and emotions of workers towards working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their study revealed that more than 73% of people had positive sentiments towards working from home whilst 27% people had a negative perception towards working from home experience. Furthermore, over 60% of the people responded with emotions of trust, anticipation and joy for work-from-home culture while a handful replied with fear, sadness, anger and disgust. Their obtained results show that experiences of homeworking had a positive perception, globally.

3   Theoretical Lens of Adaptation

Adaptation is a concept that has been used in organisational and management studies in different ways to signify a response to a change situation. Within organisation studies, adaptation has been seen in terms of fidelity and extensiveness. The former implies practices that may be modified through localisation or re-invention (Ansari 2010). Extensiveness takes account of the degree of change and transformation of a given practice and this may vary from symbolic to substantive. Adaptive behaviour has been identified as a prerequisite for effective job performance and career development (Griffin & Hesketh, 2003; Cullen, et al, 2014). This body of literature has focused on individuals and their ability to adapt in changing situations. Park and Park (2019) have studied the antecedents of individual adaptive behaviour and found factors ranging from individual personality, skills and motivation, to job characteristics including the degree of autonomy and task inter-dependency to group and organisational characteristics entailing the support gained and learning environment, Further, work by (Makarius & Larson, 2017) focused on successful individual adaptation to virtual work. The study emphasized the need

to focus on individual cognition in virtual work and they propose the concept of virtual intelligence associated with behaviours and skills for the individual to adapt successfully to virtual work.

Studies have also examined adaptation practices both across organisations and within organisations. Ansari et al (2014) studied how a multinational organisation has managed the adaptation processes within the corporate and subsidiary levels. They argued that adaptation is an engineered practice that aims to vary from one location to another and therefore accommodating diversity in the local settings, increasing acceptance in this way. The literature also makes reference to team adaptation with its significance being linked to team performance (Woolley, 2009). Klein and Pierce (2001) defined adaptive teams as *"teams that are able to make the necessary modifications in order to meet new challenges"* (p. 4). The authors recognised that adaptation is a complex process, dependent on a number of dimensions which are specific to the team at hand. Further, adaptation theory has been used to examine adaptation practices within virtual teams (Thomas and Bostrom, 2010 a,b), notably switching, expanding, merging, modifying and creating new practices during the adaptation process. In a different study, the authors made reference to technology adaptation as a process that "involves the acquisition and usage of new ICTs or new features, and the modified usage of existing features in ICTs" (Thomas and Bostrom, 2008, p. 47). In their study on technology adaptation, Tyre and Orlikowski (1994) made reference to the temporal dimension of the adaptation process arguing that the process is not always linear nor incremental and continuous, but rather highly discontinuous with instances of bursts and stops. In this study, we extend adaptation theory applied previously in studies on virtual work by including organisational and behavioural practices in addition to technological practices. Adaptation within our study is defined as the acquisition of new practices, at both individual and organisational level, as a way for building resilience and coping with a changing and dynamic situation caused by the pandemic. Successful adaptation is a way of coping with the changing and dynamic situation over time.

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4   Research design

The study has been designed as a qualitative, longitudinal study in order to explore the remote work experiences and practices during the different pandemic phases. It applies an abductive interpretivist approach that help theorizing the remote work phenomenon (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007; Van Maanen, Sørensen, and Mitchell 2007).

The study is based on a series of semi-structured interviews with white collar professionals distributed over three phases across different sectors and organisations in hard-hit countries with severe lockdown such as the UK and not so hard-hit countries with less severe lockdowns (Sweden, Germany). In total 33 interviews were collected over a three-phase period. The first phase (P1) included 10 interviews and took place not long after the start of the intial lockdown (March-April 2020); the second phase (P2) included 14 interviews that took place between December 2020 to February 2021. In the third phase, which took place at the beginning of March 2021, we have re-interviewed 9 of the 10 interviewees from the first phase, in order to understand how their work from home practices and their attitudes have changed. Further insights from the authors' experiences have been integrated. The latter phases of interviews gave us the opportunity to expand on interviewees' remote work experiences following a period of adaptation for both individual employees and their employer organisations. In particular, we have expanded on aspects related to experience, learnings and adaptation to new remote work practices.

The interview guideline consisted of questions on the experience with remote work, how they have been managed, expectations, support in organising remote work but also preferences related to remote work, experience with work from home (WFH) prior to the pandemic, motivations and limitations. The interviews were conducted via telephone or video call, due to the pandemic circumstances, as well as being an international sample of interviewees. The interviews were structured in a 30-to-60-minute interview arranged with each participant. Interviews were recorded and the audio files transcribed. Our analytical approach was based on thematic analysis and was based on the core dimensions of adaptation theory in the enforced remote work context, notably technological, organisational and behavioural adaptation.

5   Findings

Most of the respondents had no prior experience of (paid) working from home, as part of their current or previous jobs up to this point. All seemed to be coping well with most the stresses coming from the situational side of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown regulations rather than the actual working from home. They generally agreed that the benefits outweigh the negatives and as of now their bigger concerns were regarding the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on their respective businesses. Not surprisingly all interviewees shared the opinion that there was a general lack of preparation from themselves and their respective employers in the first phase (P1). Several of the interviewees noted that a strong sense of organisational culture and camaraderie was lacking during the abrupt transition to enforced remote work. The authors engaged in several rounds of data analysis and discussion of coding in relation with remote work experiences in a transparent, iterative way. We tried to identify more surprising or unexpected findings in relation with extant literature, during the second and third phase of data collection that could expand both remote work and the adaptation theory. We have agreed to focus on the digital knowledge work adaptation practices at different phases of the crisis.

Findings show that adaptation practices have been introduced by both individual employees and their respective organisations. Interviews emphasized the importance of self-management, setting goals and milestones "*I'm finding motivation by setting regular short-term goals for myself, such as weekly milestones, communicating frequently with colleagues and reflecting on how successful we have been in these challenging times as a collective outfit.*"(P2) Routine was found to ultimately be beneficial from P2 onwards: "*I've just been splitting up my day so that I wake up and have my breakfast as usual, then go through my emails and then I'll just work on through however long it takes me to get through the work once I've done it then I'll do lighter duties.*" Finding in turn that "*this has helped me take a much more structured approach to my life which I never really had before the pandemic.*"

Resilience is another element that has been discovered during the process "*For me personally, it has shown how resilient and flexible I can be in terms of learning new things quickly, so I've learned a lot a lot of new skills in a short time span.*"(P2) Interviewees also spoke candidly of the importance of the digital technologies deployed in P2 "*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.*" Those with young children, particurlarly

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mothers, seemed to have extra hurdles "*adapting to work from home where I'm also a mother has been difficult to juggle at times but now I just plan to do most of my work during the hours when the kids are in school.*"(P2) which also reflects on the intrusive nature of work in the family/home setting.

From the perspectives gained, at the individual level, motivation in the 1st phase simply came from 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.*" which can become perpetuate 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*."(P1) Yet noticeably, distractions didn't appear as anything too dissimilar from the traditional office "*I haven't got too many distractions at home and feel they sort of even themselves out with the office anyway because you may have electronic devices and so on at home but it's a lot quieter and more peaceful as opposed to a buzzing and noisy office which can be very distracting in my line of work.*"(P2).

Individual adaptation does include behavioural adaptations, but also work environment adaptation such as: the adaptation of private space and general lifestyle adaptation. One respondent would switch on the TV to simulate the background noise present in any busy office."*Whilst the TV can be a distraction for some, I actually enjoy having it on in the background, mostly just for some background noise which I feel replicates the background noise of an office somewhat and this makes me more productive because I prefer not to work in silence.*"(P1).

With it "*mainly just having been sort of limiting myself and being very strict*"(P2) as remote workers became familiar with "*out of sight, out of mind*"(P1) mentalities. Many identified; a lack of trust, feelings of being an outsider and lack of social support. Some respondents had "*a tight nit group*"(P2) so had been spurring each other on and helping each other out as much as possible. This camaraderie seemed to really help, providing harmony and unity thus increasing the overall performance of the team.

Whilst at the organisation level, such adaptation practices include providing the necessary education and continued support to help members adapt to remote work. The organisation "*understands the importance of the pandemic and is investing for the future and not just looking for a quick fix*" by "*investing £100,000 in a new telecoms system during the pandemic, to make life easier for the staff working from home*"(P2) such organisational

adaptation takes place through various layers which include management support, if assistance is required, as well as elements that pair with technology adaptation. For example, contact lines were made accessible for urgent assistance or adoption of new collaborative technology to support communication: "*The contact lines are open, and we have been made aware of this, so we can contact superiors or colleagues at any time if assistance is required. We have also created WhatsApp groups between different departments in order to communicate easily with other colleagues, this has been a great addition both for technical and morale support and is an addition I imagine will remain once we return to normal.*"(P1) However, employees were missing "*the social interaction of having people around and working directly with colleagues… part of the organisation has been doing monitoring just as a precaution to measure if they want more funding for various departments to take home more members of staff as our business books continue to grow*"(P2).

The second and third round of interviews were much more favourable to partial remote working schedules in the future compared to varying degrees of preference in the first round with less scepticism around it as exampled here *"I'm very much of the mindset that whatever I do from here on out, it must be majority remote. I have become very accustomed to it."*(P3). Overall, out of the 33 interviews, all the respondents had successfully adapted to digital technology, despite some inital difficulties. What the data indicates is that regardless of preferability, sentiments and attitudes towards remote work have not impacted knowledge workers' percieved efficiency. A great majority of respondents (18 out of 24) have actually had a positive association towards remote work despite the certain inherent difficulties to adapt to this new way of working. Although it is worthwhile noting that the negative sentiments were more pronounced, sentiments such as "*I'm still mostly against it. I feel it's not good for me or my mental health.. Collaborating with people is the big one. Working from home you can't work on problems together and learn from each other. If I have a question, in the office there is always someone around that can answer, discuss, and look at the computer together to work it out together which I find better for learning."*(P3) particurlarly stand out, even if fewer instances of such negative sentiments occurred. Employees have to find digital ways to learn to replace traditional knowledge sharing and transfer which take place in a traditional organization. Those thriving the most, over time, had set schedules, stayed active, took responsibility and accountability for their time and learning, finances and health through daily planning and routine setting.

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6   Discussion and Conclusions

Adaptation is important in any organisational change (Ansari, 2010). This study was driven by an interest to investigate the enforced adaptation to remote work and thus to contribute to research on knowledge work, changing nature of work, and new digital ways of organising through technology.

Remote working has led to greater employee autonomy over how, when & where they work and how knowledge work is organised. This has inadvertently further blurred the boundaries between personal and working lives. Adaption has proved to be a critical factor in determining the success of enforced remote work for both individuals & organisations. Individual adaptation refers to new work practices (communication & collaboration via digital technologies), new routines, spatial adaptation, life-style adaptation, new-skill development & self-management. This study's findings present different levels of adaptation that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic: the first order adaptation takes place as a way to cope with the sudden changes due to the enforced lockdowns (e.g. learning new technologies, new collaboration tools) and the second order adaptation that involves more profound transformations at both individual and organisational levels. We identify a variety of factors that are intrinsic to individual experiences, those developed by individuals during the different phases of the Covid-19 pandemic, including work environment adaptation as well as management support and organisational adaptation.

The study indicates the feasibility and challenges of long-term remote work on a mass scale. Most of the respondents were able to succesfully adapt to the use of technology and have a positive sentiment towards remote work. This is in line with previous findings by Dubey and Tripathi (2020). However, the majority of respondents expressed a desire to go back to the office st some stage and find a hybrid mix between work from home and office work in the future. Remote work undoubtedly has benefits and challenges for both employer and employee; certain factors were found to moderate the effectiveness of remote work. These variables are twofold: at the individual level, an ability to work autonomously as well as an ability to self-manage through the adaptation processes. Increased autonomy led to employees being socially isolated, less connected with their colleagues and their organisations.

Whilst at the organisational level we find that the degree of digitalisation and type of work practices prior to the crisis could predict remote working success. Several barriers also emerged in accordance with remote work. On the individual level we found that employees with lower levels of trust found remote work to be more challenging due to limited contact with colleagues & supervisors, lack of knowledge exchange opportunities and social isolation. For individuals who had experienced remote work prior to the Covid-19 crisis, adaptations came easier. Whislt at the organisational level we observed that many firms lacked the proper tools and training systems thus requiring more time for adequate adaptation. Organizations also initiate new forms of distant management which consist of regular formal or informal meetings, updates by email, prerecorded videocasts or podcasts. Findings have shown that adaptation happened over time and it was on a continuum basis. As organisations were trying to respond to the needs of their remote employees, whilst individuals were learning to cope with changes to new technologies and a new work setting where they often had to negotiate their work space in a shared household.

Previous studies have pointed to the affordances and challenges of team collaboration (e.g. Waizenegger et al, 2020), opinions on potential effects of digital work (Leonardi, 2020) and digital work during the first phase of locked-down (e.g., Richter, 2020), while our study has investigated work processes adaptation based on a longitudinal study, over three critical periods of the Covid 19 crisis.

In conclusion, we examine work adaptation practices in the Covid-19 work context over three time periods and gained better insights of this enforced type of remote work. Our study contributes to the knowledge work literature by applying and extending adaptation theory; we do so by identifying technological, orgainsational and behavioural dimensions of adaptation in the enforced remote work context. A limitation of our study is that this did not sufficiently examined the organisational view; this should be in the agenda of future research. Further research is also needed to understand how increased use of remote work will impact organisational learning practices, organisational policies and cultures, but also how this experience may impact individuals' employment choices.

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