Work-Related Stress during Home-Based Remote Work

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Remote work takes place outside a designated work location, such as corporate offices, and is often associated with working from home or working (home-based remote work) at a client's location. In contrast, telework can be conducted remotely as well, but also focuses on the use of personal electronical devices. Ideally, job demands and job resources behave in a dynamic, balanced manner that lead to or maintain employee health. However, when work demands exceed work resources and work resources are inadequate for work demands, an imbalance occurs that leads to WRS over time.

Keywords: self-efficacy ; work-related stress ; self-perceived health status ; remote work ; work-family conflict

1. Facets of Home-Based Remote Work and Job Stress

Despite the beneficial aspects of home-based remote work, previous literature suggests that working from home is associated with a higher level of WRS ^{[1][2][3]}. WRS is defined as a transactional construct, which describes stress as a direct product of the transaction between an individual and the environment impacting one's resources and wellbeing ^{[4][5]}. Contrastingly, other scholars present previous research results indicating that working from home is linked to many positive aspects such as the reconciliation of work and family life due to flexible working hours, increased productivity of employees, higher job satisfaction and many more ^{[Z][8]}. During the COVID-19 pandemic, home-based remote work was inevitable as an effective preventive measure to reduce infections ^[9]. Regardless of a pandemic situation and out of a corporate perspective, there are several economic aspects in favor of remote work such as lower rent expenses, lower maintenance costs of office space, less business-related travel and an increase in productivity amongst employees ^[Z]. Employees benefit from reduced distractions in the office realm by working from home. This especially applies to office workers whose execution of work tasks must be concentrated, focused and knowledge-based. The possibility of working remotely from home is also associated with greater job satisfaction and commitment amongst employees ^{[10][11]}.

On the contrary, most jobs—especially office workers—require a certain level of social interaction with superiors and/or coworkers. Working from home isolates employees physically from each other, which can be perceived as challenging for work-related activities carried out within teams ^[12]. The physical isolation and digital work execution thus limit the ease of addressing colleagues and superiors ^{[10][11][13]}. This claim is supported by previous research that shows that remotely working individuals felt isolated and rely on office interactions for social support ^{[14][15][16]}. Moreover, social interaction between coworkers and superiors is an important promoter of employee engagement and mental well-being ^[2].

A significant pillar of the ongoing discussion on the benefits of remote work is employee stress. While home-based remote work may lead to lower stress levels due to decreased commuting times and day-to-day office demands ^{[10][11]}, it is at the same time linked to an "always-on" debate. This may lead to a higher number of working hours, difficulties to switch off from work ^[17], and to a perceived need of being constantly available ^[8]. These behaviors are usually set as a cultural norm in remote work settings by superiors and coworkers and can lead to an overall poor well-being and mental health problems ^{[18][19]}.

2. Association between Work-Related Stress and Health Outcomes

The relationship between WRS and health has been extensively evaluated in the past. Studies show that a high level of WRS is inversely linked to health-associated outcomes ^{[20][21][22]}. In the context of remote work, evidence of an effect of WRS remains controversial. Remote work decreases psychological and physiological stress when it comes to reducing commuting times, increased flexibility, productivity or an improved balance of private and work life ^[23]. Simultaneously, previous studies report an increased perception of psychological WRS associated with presenteeism ^[23], work-family conflict ^[24], social isolation and declining health behaviors such as physical activity during after-work hours ^[21]. Additionally, the association between WRS and health is predominantly associated with psychological symptoms such as fatigue ^{[22][25]}, anxiety or depression disorders ^[21].

3. Persistent WRS Leads to Anxiety and Depressive Disorders

If WRS exceeds a certain level and persists over a longer period of time, job anxiety can arise ^[26]. Job-related anxiety is a person's response to WRS, where the stressor is either persistent or overwhelming to a person. Employees with job anxiety see themselves in a situation unable to deal with job demands such as heavy workload, long working hours, job insecurity or difficulties with co-workers. Studies reveal that employees with job anxiety or depressive symptoms show a significantly higher level of WRS ^{[27][28][29][30]} and a 'psychologically impaired well-being' ^[31]. Research in the context of remote work also suggests that job anxiety is not only favored by WRS, but also by a combination with private stress ^[28] ^{[32][33][34][35]}.

4. Self-Efficacy Is a Central Factor That Reduces WRS

Personal resources are a key element of dealing with WRS during remote work. Resilience, control or competenceoriented constructs such as self-efficacy are considered important personal resources in the JDR framework ^[36]. Selfefficacy has evolved from Bandura's social cognitive theory and is defined as 'a judgment of one's ability to execute a particular behavior pattern' ^[37]. The underlying mechanism is the perception of being in control when encountering a potential stress-related situation, which functions as an important buffer. This is particularly important because people with higher self-efficacy tend to take on more challenging tasks, exert more effort and show more perseverance in these tasks. ^[38]. Furthermore, previous studies found that self-efficacious employees are more likely to show an increased level of confidence in executing new tasks, handling new situations with a positive attitude, and they are more likely to succeed in these novel tasks ^[38]. In some cases, the relationship between self-efficacy and WRS has to be regarded independently, especially when challenging tasks become obstacles beyond a person's individual control, such as caring for others. In these cases, a U-shaped relationship can emerge ^[39]. Evidence on the inverse relationship between self-efficacy and WRS is well established ^{[29][30]}, but has not been extensively investigated in a remote work setting. Applied to the context of remote work, job demands, and thus WRS, tend to be even higher due to the cumulation of multiple stressors such as longer working hours, higher workloads or difficulties caused by the overlapping of work and private life.

5. Positive Mediating Effects on Health Associated Outcomes

The importance of self-efficacy increases when looking at health-associated outcomes. Self-efficacious employees tend to perceive less stress and feel in control of job demands. With people being at home, the support of supervisors or company resources is limited, as they cannot affect a person's private life or certain events at an employee's home. Employees have to manage their tasks mostly on their own and at the same time cope with the demands of their private life in addition to the professional ones. It is therefore an important skill to keep WRS at a manageable level. This, in turn, prevents prolonged stress episodes and the emergence of health-endangering risks. The lowering effect of self-efficacy on WRS leads to a higher job satisfaction, better health scores [40][41][42][43] and well-being [28]. At the same time, anxiety and depressive disorders are observed significantly less frequently with higher self-efficacy [44][45]. Employees with higher levels of job anxiety report high levels of job stress and low levels of self-efficacy ^{[29][30][45]}. Thus, it can be proposed that self-efficacy can be a crucial personal antecedent that is negatively related to WRS which in turn mediates the relationship between SE with overall health and job anxiety.

6. Remote Work Experience and Autonomy Promote Self-Efficacy

Given the inverse relationship between self-efficacy and WRS, the question arises as to which personal resources promote self-efficacy. Two concepts are directly linked to the level of self-efficacy, which are remote work experience and autonomy. Bandura ^[38] describes experience as one of the most crucial sources of self-efficacy alongside vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and physiological and affective states. When a person successfully completes a task, it generally has a direct positive impact on their self-esteem. A person then feels more confident to master similar tasks successfully, and self-efficacy improves. Several studies report a strong, positive relationship between work experience and self-efficacy; unfortunately, most of them were conducted in traditional work environments and not home-based remote work settings ^{[46][47]}.

7. Work-Family Conflict Is a Circumstantial Factor Influencing Self-Efficacy and WRS

Lastly, the increasing blending of work and private life raises the issue of work affecting family life (work-family conflict) and, conversely, how family affects work (family-work conflict). Work-family conflict emerges when pressure in the work role prevents a person from meeting the demands of the private situation ^[48]. In the past, the way work affects family life

was studied extensively, with particular attention to how shift work, overtime or constant accessibility affect workers' personal lives [35]. Work-family conflict is associated with a strong gender dependency, as in most cultures women are predominantly responsible for housework and caregiving [49]. However, the understanding of work-family conflict has shifted significantly due to two major aspects. First of all, the growing acceptance of remote work as a main working concept leads to a two-way phenomenon that includes work-family conflict and family-work conflict at the same time [50]. Working from home eliminates a local distance between work and family life, leading to distractions, interruptions, sharing a workspace, double responsibilities and burdens such as preparing lunch for the family or helping with homework [51]. Second, working from home is related to a higher workload and longer working hours [8][52], leaving less time for family and other personal life activities [8]. Regardless of whether remote work is voluntarily chosen or coerced, both aspects underscore that remote work involves a number of factors that impact work and family life [48]. Evidence from previous literature clearly supports a connection to various health-related outcomes such as work-related stress, work-related depressive disorders including burnout, as well as life and marital dissatisfaction ^{[24][51][53]}. High levels of work-family conflict are linked to a higher overall level of perceived stress, physical fatigue and psychological weariness [24][51]. Hobfoll's ^[54] 'Conversation-of-Resources' theory explains that work-family conflict ties up important cognitive, emotional and physical resources, which are then no longer available for work-related performance. Over time, this loss of resource will lead to increased anxiety, psychological strain and health problems [26].

8. Self-Efficacy Mediates the Effects of Work-Family Conflict on Work-Related Stress

As described above, self-efficacy is considered an important personal resource that enhances general resistance to stress, is related to higher levels of resilience and promotes positive coping strategies with environmental demands ^[55]. Compared to these demands, self-efficacious individuals show a high sense of control and self-evaluation which lead to less stress in general ^{[55][56][57][58]}. This mechanism, in turn, reduces the levels of work-family conflict and WRS. The mediating effect of self-efficacy is shown in different studies, but predominantly outside the context of remote work ^{[40][54]}[^{[59][60]}].

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Self-efficacy gives people the feeling that they can successfully solve tasks and challenges on their own. This, in turn, requires an appropriate framework of autonomy. In the context of remote work, methodological autonomy and decision-making autonomy are particularly important. Decision-making autonomy means that an employee can independently make decisions that lead to solving a problem, whereas work-method autonomy gives employees the power to decide how they want to solve a problem. Autonomy in general is positively associated with self-efficacy ^[61], which is also supported by various other studies in different occupational contexts ^{[62][63][64]}. Positive associations between job autonomy and certain indicators of psychological well-being were also reported in previous literature ^[65]. Not only is autonomy a 'powerful motivational tool' ^[61], it also gives an employee the necessary independence to deal with heterogeneous situations or problems. Contrary to that relationship, limiting a person's autonomy can lead to lower job satisfaction and higher job stress. The aspects of autonomy and self-efficacy were mainly considered against the

background of work design in terms of motivation and performance ^[66], but less in the context of health. Therefore, the concepts of experience and autonomy have huge potential in promoting self-efficacy in a remote work setting.

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