

## **Trust Disruption and Preservation in the Covid-19 Work-from-Home Context**

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The paper posits that the enforced Work from Home (WFH) arrangement due to Covid-19 provides a unique setting for the study of trust in changing contexts. The purpose of our study therefore is to examine to what extent Covid-19 WFH changed trust relationships among remote employees, their managers and organisations and how this has taken place.

**Design/Methodology:** The study used semi-structured interviews with employees and managers from different organisations across different sectors. Interviews were supported with image prompts as suggested by the storyboarding method, and took place between November 2020 and February 2021. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

**Findings:** Our findings identified factors that contribute to trust disruption and factors that led to trust preservation within the changing workspace landscape enforced by WFH environment. Employees reported trust in their organisations, feeling as though their organisations proven resilient at the time of the crisis caused by the pandemic. Interestingly, managers reported trust in employees to remain productive but also anxieties due to the possible presence of others in the household.

**Originality/Value:** The study identified factors that affect intra-organisational trust that have not been previously recognized, exposing tensions and challenges which may disrupt trust relations between managers and employees, whilst also identifying evidence of trust preservation in the Covid-19 WFH context. The study has implications for workplace learning within the remote, WFH context which are discussed.

**Keywords:** *Work from home, trust, trust preservation, pandemic, remote work*

## **Introduction**

In the Covid-19 context, organisations regardless of size and sector had to transition their operations to allow for remote working (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Such transition has shaped not just the workspace landscape but also trust relationships between employees and organisations. With an increasing therefore number of employees working from home, and more organisations having to manage their dispersed employees and operations, intra-organisational trust, defined as trust that is constructed for and by people within an organisational context (Grey & Garsten, 2001) may suffer. It is our position that with the unprecedented workplace changes and the prevalence of the work from home (WFH) arrangement due to the pandemic, the study on the topic of trust is both timely and relevant.

At times of crisis, trust enables organisational members to respond effectively to challenging events and periods of organisational disruptions enabling agility and resilience (Balogun et al., 2015). Yet as a result of the pandemic, and the sudden lockdowns and travel restrictions, many organisations have found themselves unprepared to support their newly transitioned remote workers with the potential risk of disrupting intra-organisational trust. Organisations lacked policies on remote working and often failed to equip employees with dedicated work computers, leaving them to rely on personal devices (IBM, 2020). This was exacerbated by the quick deployment at the time of potentially unfamiliar technologies (e.g., Zoom, Slack, MS Teams) without appropriate training and due diligence checks for compatibility, security and privacy.

Within this context, there have been reports of increased surveillance through the prevalence of software to remotely monitor employee computer activity (Nurse, Williams et al., 2021) leaving employees confused and anxious, diminishing their trust in their employers as confirmed by earlier research (Fairweather, 2017). To add to these, the rise in cyberattacks during the pandemic has added to the challenges that employees and organisations faced (Lallie et al, 2021).

It follows therefore that the enforced WFH context necessitates rethinking trust dynamics in the WFH Covid-19 setting. What we currently know about how to maintain and develop trust for remote workers cannot be readily applied to the current situation. Similarly, what is currently known about the role of leaders and managers in developing trust among the geographically dispersed virtual team members (e.g. Panteli and Tucker, 2009 & Panteli et al, 2019) may not be applicable due to the different characteristics of the employees involved (Chamakiotis et al, 2021). The high degree of dependency on information and communication technologies (ICTs) to pursue work activities and support communications and collaborations, as well as technological advancement in monitoring remote employees are factors that may not only hinder the development of trust but also threaten the preservation of it. In particular, it is vital to understand the nature, structure and norms emerging in the post-Covid-19 era, as well as how new (and potentially negative) trust dynamics between employees and organisations can be mitigated to ensure a trustworthy WFH environment. The enforced and unprepared home-work blended environment provides a unique setting for the study of trust in changing contexts. Thus, the driving question of the study is: *“How and to what extent has Covid-19 WFH changed trust relationships among remote employees, their managers and organisations?”*

In what follows, we present the conceptual foundations of the study with a review of literature on WFH context pre- and during COVID-19 and review relevant literature on trust in organisations. Then, we outline the methodology adopted, and present the main results of our qualitative study. Finally, trust implications of the study are discussed with particular reference to the future of WFH and the conditions that are likely to support this new ‘normalized’ work arrangement.

### **The Work from Home Setting**

The pandemic has led to a significant rise in WFH, a form of a blended workplace where both work and home activities, responsibilities and roles take place almost solely within the home environment, supported by the use of ICTs. This kind of work arrangement is certainly not new. Researchers have been studying home-based work arrangements for a period of more than 20 years (Silver, 1993; Johnson et al, 2001). Literature on homeworking has focused on the opportunities that this form of work provides for flexible working and achieving work-life balance (Felstead, 2002; Tremblay and Thomsin, 2012). Due to increasing dominance of ICTs in work activities, homeworking has been used interchangeably with teleworking and virtual working.

A distinct feature of the pre-Covid-19 homework is that this form of work was a choice; one that has been driven by organisations in their efforts to reduce overheads associated with office facilities or to offer family-friendly employment contracts; or has been driven by individuals due to their preference for flexible working (Sayah, 2013). Further, this arrangement has traditionally been linked to certain members of the working population, notably women with caring responsibilities (Silver, 1993). Despite its notable advantages, some organisations had been resisting approving homeworking arrangements for their employees preferring instead to have all staff onsite. The cases of Yahoo in 2013 and IBM in 2017 are notable examples of organisations

that required all staff to work on-site claiming improved collaboration is an example of the arguments that can be used by organisations for avoiding homeworking (Pepitone, 2013; Simons, 2017). Researchers in this area have also examined the experiences with homeworking among different groups of employees and organisational members. For example, in their study, Donnelly and Proctor-Thomson, (2015) found that the experiences of homework differ between team leaders and employees, showing the former’s unease on how to manage remote workers’ performance. It was specifically noted that employees’ lack of visibility and presence whilst homeworking, has been a challenge for managers.

There are distinct differences between the pre-Covid-19 and the Covid-19 WFH arrangement. Table 1 captures these differences in the two periods.

<i>Pre-Covid-19 Homework</i>	<i>Covid-19 WFH</i>
<i>Limited</i>	<i>Widespread, the ‘new normal’</i>
<i>Choice</i>	<i>Enforced</i>
<i>Selective Workforce (pre-dominantly female); independent</i>	<i>Indiscriminate workforce</i>
<i>Planned and approved work arrangement</i>	<i>Unexpected, unplanned and unprepared</i>
<i>Work-life balance</i>	<i>Work and Home Disruptions</i>
<b>Table 1: Comparison between Pre-Covid-19 Homework and Covid-19 WFH</b>	

Homeworking has been identified as a *saviour* at times of crisis, such as natural or other disasters. This form of work was found to mobilize highly dispersed workforces (Golden, 2009) which can be critical for organisational survival especially when office buildings become inaccessible and

work sites are inaccessible (Donnelly and Proctor-Thomson, 2015). As a result of the pandemic, the travel restrictions that followed and the need for social distancing, WFH became for many professional and service organisations the only means through which to continue their operations. However, the switch to WFH took place suddenly, almost overnight with many organisations, traditionally collocated, being ill-prepared under the circumstances (Leesman, 2020).

Indeed, a key difference between the pre-Covid-19 and the Covid-19 WFH is largely linked to participants' involvement in the decision making, with the former depicting a degree of choice for both the organisation and the employees whilst the latter indicates an enforced form of work. Clearly, Covid-19 forced employees to work from home, instead of it being a voluntary decision; this led to a completely new working experience for millions worldwide who had never worked remotely before (Waizenegger et al., 2020). With organisations unprepared, employees had to often rely on their own computing devices to be able to carry out their work. The BYOD (Bring your own device) phenomenon is already recognised as a managerial challenge for it can harm the organisation's security systems (Barlette et al., 2020). It is fair therefore to say that the Covid-19 WFH was not only unexpected and unplanned but it also found organisations unprepared in terms of infrastructure as well as policies and practices linked to communication, information sharing and dissemination.

Further, in pre-Covid-19, homework has been a form of work that was associated with a limited, selective workforce. This would typically include specific types of professionals or employees, notably those with independent professions such as freelancers and entrepreneurs, and was popular

among those with caring responsibilities. In contrast, Covid-19 WFH affected the vast majority of the workforce across different part of the world indiscriminately as many workplaces have had to suddenly transition from the traditional collocated organisation to home and remote working. This included organisations that had not previously considered this way of working or even resisted it, preferring instead to have their staff on-site. In this new context, homeworkers involved different types of employees, including those who never before could or had any inclination to work from home. This category also includes individuals whose role or organisational level might have necessitated them to be collocated employees (e.g. managers). In contrast, therefore, to the pre-Covid home-working experience, Covid-19 WFH comprised distinct characteristics notably new kinds of homeworkers.

A further difference is that whilst the former tends to be associated with work-life balance, the latter brought imbalances and disruptions to the work and home dichotomy. With schools closed and home-schooling being the alternative, many individuals were unprepared both in technological and mental terms, competing for the use of computing equipment and wi-fi with others in the same household, thus juggling home-schooling, housework and full-time work (Oppenheim, 2020). Accordingly, the new homeworkers are found in environments where the workspace is shared with spouses, school children and housemates, thus adding to disruptions and tensions. Therefore, in the enforced WFH setting, it has become harder to maintain a clear dichotomy between work and home. Childcare responsibilities, family and housemates sharing the same physical space and also a difficulty in maintaining a social life with restricted leisure activities and close proximity to work devices (WEF, 2020), are all likely to negatively impact well-being and



productivity (Collins, Cox & Wootton, 2019; Wilson et al, 2020), creating further concerns about well-being (Platts et al, 2022), whilst compromising privacy and security.

Despite the differences between the pre and Covid-19 WFH context, researchers have identified benefits linked to the latter. For example, pre-Covid-19 homeworkers were said to be at a disadvantage as they were missing out on office interactions and relationships (Cooper and Kurland, 2002). In the Covid-19 enforced WFH context however with entire organisations moving away from headquarters and other offices, this dichotomy has been reduced. Waizenegger et al (2020), explained that in the new WFH context, due to the high ICT-dependency, there appear to be equal opportunities for communications due to a less hierarchical structure between managers and employees, bringing traditional homeworkers ‘socially closer’ to the previously office colleagues.

### **Trust Development and Trust Preservation**

Trust has received significant recognition as a phenomenon worthy of detailed study in organisational and management studies (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001). In organisations, individuals must often act under uncertainty with ambiguous and incomplete information. The lack of explicit knowledge introduces risk and thus the requirement for trust. Accordingly, trust is defined as the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party (Mayer et al, 1995); it represents a state of a positive, confident, though subjective, expectation regarding the behaviour of somebody or something in a situation which entails risk to the trusting party (Baba, 1999; Cook and Wall, 1980; Currall and Judge, 1995).

Numerous scholars agree that trust is highly beneficial for the functioning of organisations. Trust “is at the heart of knowledge exchange” (Davenport and Prusak, 1998, p.35), whilst high levels of trust are key to effective communication (Dodgson, 1993) as they “improve the quality of dialogue and discussions ... [which,] facilitate the sharing of ... knowledge” (Ichijo et al, 2000, p.200), and committed relationships (ibid). The centrality of trust is further accentuated by its absence: “mistrust ... makes success harder to attain” (Kanter, 1994, p.105) as it weakens relationships, increases dependence on less information, compromises rational and unprejudiced analysis and exploration, and undermines learning (Luhmann, 1979). Trust is an important mechanism for reducing complexity when operating under conditions of uncertainty or when information is incomplete and bolsters up good will, self-belief, openness and integrity in organisations (Adler, 2001; Fukuyama, 1996; Inkpen, 1996; Currall and Judge, 1995). Furthermore, it has been recognised that if trust is not prominent, this may lead to dissatisfaction, absenteeism and even intention to quit (Cunningham and MacGregor, 2000). At the inter-organisational level, trust also plays a vital role since it is found to affect the degree of cooperation among participating parties (Panteli and Sockalingham, 2005; Grabowski and Roberts, 1998).

In collocated work environments, where face-to-face communication is the norm, trust develops either positively or negatively, as the degree of familiarity with other people increases: i.e. the more we get to know others then the more likely it is that we trust or mistrust them. Lewicki and Bunker (1996) argue that trust varies over time and takes on a different character at the various stages (i.e. early, developing and mature stages) of a relationship. Trust therefore may develop as the more time we spend with other people, the more likely that our knowledge of their integrity

and competence improves. Based on this view, Lewicki and Bunker (1996) suggest three categories of trust, each corresponding to a different stage of the relationship: Calculus-Based Trust, the type of trust that is grounded in the rewards to be derived from pursuing and preserving the relationship or in the fear of punishment for violating trust within the relationship; Knowledge-Based Trust that assumes that the more information one has about others, the more able one is to predict their actions; and Identification-Based Trust, the type of trust that is characterised by mutual understanding among all parties to the point that each can effectively act for the other. These types of trust are “linked in a sequential iteration in which the achievements of trust at one level enables the development of trust at the next level” (p. 119).

Trust is particularly important in the digital era where interactions are technology-mediated and with digital technologies influencing business decisions. Researchers (e.g. Sharma and Sharma, 2019; Mohr and Walter, 2019; Panteli and Tucker, 2009; Sewell and Taskin, 2015.) have acknowledged the importance of trust in exploiting the collaborative advantages of modern forms of technology. Jackson (2011), for instance, found that organisations valuing trust between technology and people can lead to more successful technology uptake and use. The study highlighted that it is important for those responsible for managing and introducing technology into organisations to foster and build a culture which supports trust. Lack of trust or mistrust can have an unconstructive impact on building a culture conducive to ICT use, leading to reduced dependency on information, undermining learning, as well as promoting values of suspicion and protectiveness. It is not unsurprisingly therefore that researchers have shown a particular interest in the development of trust, seeking to understand the factors that enable its growth. Within this

literature, the consensus has been that familiarity contributes to trust development. As such, researchers with particular interest in virtual teams have further studied how familiarity can be developed within the dispersed work setting, positing the significant role that e-leaders play in this context (e.g. Chamakiotis et al, 2021; Panteli and Tucker, 2009). Within this literature, researchers have been particularly interested in trust development and dynamics within the dispersed, sometimes cross-organisational members of virtual teams. As the focus of this study is on the WFH context, we are seeking to examine intra-organisational trust and specifically trust relations between employees and managers within the same organisation. Grey and Garsten (2001) have defined intra-organisational trust as a ‘precarious, socially constructed accomplishment enacted through the interplay of social or discursive structures, including those of work organisations, and individual subjects’ (p.233).

Gustafsson et al (2020), who studied organisations that experienced major disruption during the global financial crisis of 2009, identified that trust preservation rather than trust development mattered most in this context. In particular they identified three trust preservation practices used in the successful case organisations, notably: 1) cognitive bridging that aims to promote shared understanding of the situation at hand; 2) emotional embodying which enable employees to collectively create social spaces within which to share their emotions and concerns; and 3) inclusive enacting which provide opportunities to employees to raise their voice and get involved in decision making on matters that affect them. The study posits that employees’ understanding of the established foundations of trust in the organisation, and their ability to mobilize these, are critical to the preservation of trust. According to the researchers, in order for trust to be preserved in disruptive contexts, there is a need for both familiarization and transformation of existing trust

practices. Clearly, for trust to be preserved there is the expectation that this was previously developed with the preservation triggered as a result of an environmental jolt (Meyers, 1982) that is a crisis that had caused significant disruption and carries potential damage in organisational relations. In what follows, we study intra-organisation trust within the enforced WFH Covid-19 context which has caused significant disruption to both individuals and organisations.

## **Methodology**

Due to the newness of the enforced WFH context, the study was exploratory in nature and applied the qualitative research approach. A series of semi-structured interviews were undertaken with individuals across different organisations. A total of 16 participants (aged 24-54, 56% female) were recruited from 13 different organisations for interviews about their experiences of WFH, all of whom were operating within the UK. The most common age bracket was 24-35 (9 participants). The 13 organisations represented a variety of sectors including technology, telecommunications, higher education, broadcasting, and banking. Of the 16 participants, ten participants were from organisations (62.5%) that had more than 50 employees, and six participants were from smaller organisations (37.5%). For each participant, we considered their perspective to be either an employee (following organisational policy with limited ability to control or influence that policy), or an employer (with responsibility or involvement in management and decision-making influence around working policies and practices). An incentive of £15 of retail vouchers was offered to participants for taking part in the study.

A semi-structured interview approach, which aims to understand a phenomenon from the subject's own perspective (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), was adopted. The interview questions included

sections on the WFH environment, the organisational approach to home working pre-pandemic and during the pandemic, technology usage, security considerations, work-life balance, participant demographic information, company background information, with a different set of questions for the employers and the employees regarding the organisational response to the pandemic and associated opportunities and challenges. There were specific questions related to the participant's own WFH environment, their relationship with their managers and other colleagues as well as views on their organisation response and support. Drawn from the storyboarding method (de Quincey, Turner, Williams, and Kyriacou, 2016) where images are used during interviews as prompts in addition to the verbal questions, participants were also asked to identify similarities and differences compared to their own experiences of working from home. Storyboards are a technique often used in usability studies to capture user interactions with a system, and in this work, we will instead be using them to capture the user activities and interactions within their home environment (de Quincey, Turne et al., 2016; Lupton and Leahy2019). A key advantage of this method according to Ayrton (2020) is that it enables a consistent attention among participants to the research topic. The interviews were conducted using online collaboration tools with the help of a research assistant. The default tool was Zoom, with the ability to use Microsoft Teams if required due to participant preference. The interviews took place between November 2020 and February 2021, and they lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interview sessions were recorded, and thereafter transcribed.

The analytical approach of the study was influenced by thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The interviews were first coded by two researchers independently using an inductive coding

process. Any disagreements were resolved through discussions between the coders and thereby agreed with the remaining members of the research team which subsequently finalized the core themes. Initially, there were 12 themes that emerged from the data analysis. These were: remote work experiences pre-pandemic, organisational reluctance to allow working from home, health and safety when working from home, cyber and data security, 'traditional' vs 'new world', lack of commute good for physical, mental health and financial considerations, work/life balance, IT issues in WFH environment, barriers to communication with colleagues in a virtual setting, positivity in a pandemic, well-being key to WFH success, productivity in remote working. Following these, we sought evidence of trust, by looking for direct reference to trust in the transcripts and thereafter by seeking to explore the relevance of trust across the different themes that emerged. There were 25 references to 'trust' in the data and having identified these, we sought to understand the context through which trust was mentioned by participants and how this was linked to the different themes that emerged. In what follows we present the results of our analysis.

## **Findings**

There was a general agreement among the study participants regardless of position in the organisation, that trust is important in the workplace as it has a major impact on employee performance:

*"... 'I'm hiring you because I trust you, until you prove me otherwise.' I don't think it gives good morale to almost treat someone like a criminal before they've done anything wrong. I tend to think if I trust the person, and I believe them to be true, they'll give me the best performance, and they appreciate that trust' (P4)*

With a specific focus on the changing workplace landscape as a result of the pandemic and the subsequent enforced WFH context, our results contributed to a differentiation between those factors that could disrupt trust relations and those that could help in its preservation. We present these in what follows:

### ***Factors contributing to Trust Disruption in the enforced WFH context***

Results revealed that there were four factors that contributed to trust disruption, notably work-home boundary-related tensions, privacy and security considerations linked to increased ICT dependence and shared workspaces in the home environment, and increased surveillance and monitoring. We illustrate these in this section.

First, tensions between work tasks and home life, and the challenges of juggling both roles within a single setting were dominant among the study participants. For some participants, the WFH arrangement had eroded any existing boundaries between work and home, and thus had created an “always on” culture that was difficult to separate themselves from. Several participants mentioned feeling that this was leading to experiences of burnout and overwork, with much longer working days with wellbeing becoming a major managerial concern:

*It became very obvious probably after two or three months that certain employees were definitely struggling just trying to get their day job done and actually trying to switch off and so people’s mental health, their wellbeing was a big concern to the organization (P2)*



Similarly, employees spoke about how WFH had affected their work-life balance, and the issues of balancing caring responsibilities and work responsibilities when both tasks could have non-negotiable commitments:

*...If the kids are at home because they're being homeschooled that's a bit difficult because I have to sort of flip between parenting and working constantly but if they're not here I'm just me and I'm just working ...I try to only do one thing. I try to just work or just be at home. Although if I'm listening to a boring meeting I start cooking the dinner during the meetin. (P16)*

*... ..it's just harder to focus I think when you're sitting at home in a kitchen rather than in an office setting' (P1)*

The above tensions and challenges could erode trust between employees and their managers especially if the latter are seen as not responding to challenges their employees face.

Second, there was an awareness among participants that in the WFH context, there was the possibility of increased employee monitoring of their online activity. Participants expressed a dislike towards online surveillance adopted by their employers, whilst others, notably managers (e.g. P6) indicated that online monitoring had not increased but rather stayed the same:

*I think some organisations will be much more surveillance oriented than others but I would expect most organisations to have dialled up their monitoring in response to this... I think some of them may have gone too far, I think some of it demonstrates the level of paranoia but also a level of distrust of their employees that is a little bit cliched but it's if I can't see you, how do I know that you're doing the work? But obviously that's nonsense because if you can see me, how do you know that I'm doing the work? (P10)*

*We're very open about it. We say at log-in screen, every time you log in your work is monitored, what you're doing, your email's monitored. It's in our acceptable use policy. People are very aware of it. Again, I don't believe there's been an uptick, but then I don't work in the technical side of security, but I've not had anything communicated through to me that says we're monitoring further. It was already quite high because it needs to be. The industry we're in, we need to be very hot on it (P6)*

Third, there were additional tensions that arose during the pandemic in relation to trust derive from concerns around security and privacy. Employees working remotely were exposed to new and different security risks – caused due to the adoption of new technologies but also employee behavior, and a vast increase of cyberattacks; this factor makes trusting remote working a challenge for managers. As such. there was a degree of management anxiety linked to the risk for information leakages within the WFH setting which was impacting trust relations. In the Covid-19 context, managers described difficulties in detecting security breaches due to on the one, no longer being as aware of the behavior of their employees, and on the other recognizing difficulties in dealing with any breaches taking place in the WFH setting. There was a recognition that with

the increased challenges of managing the WFH employees , there was a de-prioritization of privacy and security considerations, as there were other competing concerns.

*Uptake in phishing, people leaving laptops where they could be accessed by other people, working on insecure networks, that sort of stuff. It's just the move to working more remotely and having less face-to-face control of people using networks that aren't necessarily [our organisation's] (P6)*

Fourth, co-sharing in the home environment was adding to manager's anxiety. Some indicated that they could not completely trust their employees as they would not know who else was with them. There was the attitude that: "I cannot see [who else is there], therefore I cannot trust" as the following example shows:

*... if somebody were overhearing a conversation in an office it's quite easy to spot that. If employees are working from home I've got no means of knowing if they're having a confidential conversation on Teams and they've got a lodger or they've got a family member who could potentially be acting on inside information that they hear through that call or a builder, plumber, painter or whatever. People have lots of different people going through their houses ... (P10)*

### ***Factors contributing to Trust Preservation in the enforced WFH context***

Despite the above conditions that could disrupt trust relations, evidence also exists where certain other conditions enabled trust preservation. Three factors contributed to this happening: increased

employee productivity despite challenges and tensions, provision for wellbeing support, and adaptation of work practices.

The first factor is linked to employees' sustained and improved productivity despite the changed work landscape. Pre-pandemic, there was lack of trust from management that employees are working when not in office. As an employee put it:

*...there was probably a little bit of: are you actually working if you're at home kind of ideas or are you just sitting there watching Netflix (P1)*

Such perceptions however, were quickly eroded with employee productivity going up despite the challenges. As a manager put it:

*I think we've learnt massively that the organisation can function very effectively with people working remotely, that has been clear and has been recognised through the highest levels of the organisation and I think that came as a bit of a surprise. I think the expectation was that productivity would drop significantly if we were all working from home, it's gone up (P10)*

With the knowledge that employees' productivity increased despite the tensions and challenges experienced, managers' acknowledged that they could trust their employees when home-working and there were more accepting of this work arrangement:

*[Pre-covid] I'd say 90 percent of the time you'd be in the office. The odd day we would have worked from home ... ....the attitude has changed definitely significantly since we all have to stay at home now. I think going forward there'll be a lot more working from home*

*kind of – I know just people’s attitudes towards it have changed and we realize that this can work. (P1)*

*You’ve kind of got to give the employees some trust I think. If the work’s getting done and the work’s getting done to a very good standard then I don’t see what the issue is (P12)*

*... Ultimately you have to trust the members of staff that you have to be cognizant of the value and requirements of the data that they’re processing so it comes down to that relationship or metric rather than anything else. (P9)*

Second, there was evidence that organisations were responding to employees’ anxieties and mental health issues and putting practices in place to support their wellbeing:

*We were creating a culture and we’re very good when we’re in the office, but it’s so much harder when people are away and there could be the madness with kids running around, etc, etc, and so we promoted from the top of the organisation to say, “We really need you to let us know when you’re not available and that’s totally okay. You manage your diary and actually put it down on your email, let us know when you’re not available. That’s totally okay,” and we made it very clear that we were comfortable with that position (P2)*

Several participants were pleased with the way their organisation supported them during the challenging period. It was found that WFH policies and the increase in virtual meetings had in fact created opportunities and improved outcomes, such as allowing people to attend events from all

over the world and host meetings and social gatherings with those who would have been impossible to visit otherwise.

Third, despite the challenges, employees reported trust in their organisations, feeling as though their organisations, managers and colleagues had proven themselves resilient against this change, and thus would also be able to weather other large organisational changes in the future. Linked to these, there was an acknowledgement among participants that despite the enforced nature of WFH, this type of work arrangement is likely to continue as both employees and organisations are becoming familiar with the opportunities that this provides and develop a preference for it:

*My CEO himself has admitted to that as well, so I think there's been quite a big positive change in how they look at hybrid working, and I think there's been quite a positive change in how much they trust us not to take advantage of the idea of working from home and stuff like that (P14)*

*There is an element of trust within the team where stuff just happens which is quite nice and it's that sort of environment. So there hasn't been any monitoring in place. (P13)*

Participants also reported feeling that some of the previously unquestioned aspects of pre-covid-19 working now felt outdated, such as insisting on face-to-face meetings, travelling for work, and long daily commutes. There was a sense that whilst they are likely to return to working from the office or travelling to clients, the dominance of such activities could be questioned and there would now be more willingness to conduct business in these more efficient, virtual ways:

*I guess the fact that I'm thinking about how we retain some elements of what we're doing this year into next year speaks for the fact that it's obviously been quite a positive development.' (P9)*

Collectively, Our findings highlight that the enforced way of working had proven to be not just possible, but also preferred reinforcing previous studies on this topic (Razmerita et al, 2021). Our participants recognized the opportunities of remote work for them as individuals and a preference to keep at least some aspects of the WFH work arrangement.

## **Discussion**

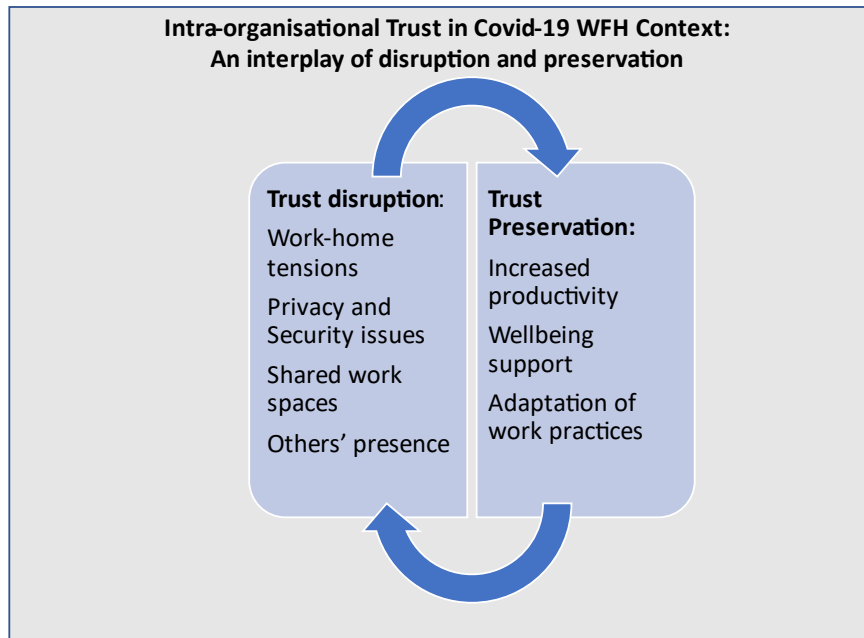
Our study was driven by an interest to examine the impact of the enforced remote work which was a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, on trust relationship between organisational members, notably employees and managers. In contrast to homeworking and virtual work practices pre-pandemic, the current WFH has introduced unique challenges. Our research has found that often difficult balances between work and home life needed to be made, whilst there were also concerns around wellbeing, privacy and security. The WFH context that includes co-located families or housemates, shared spaces and caring responsibilities introduces complexities around these conflicting identities, and the ability to keep work-life separate from home-life contributing to increased tensions among employees and managers. Data pointed to several tensions – e.g., security of corporate data, lack of employees' trust in the remote working environment, distractions faced by employees – which are specific to the working from home environment supporting research in this context (Nurse, Williams et al, 2021) with a recognition that risks have not only increased in

WFH but also changed. These as a result were found to potentially impact the trust relations within organisations, leading to trust disruption. Indeed some of the participants in the study with managerial roles indicated that intra-organisational trust was challenged by the (actual or possible) presence of other household members. This was due to an awareness that other household members were or could be in near proximity to the working individual and therefore could have access to confidential company data and information. Despite these, employees regardless of the challenges they faced with home-schooling and co-sharing of work spaces, were also found to perform well in terms of their work output, contributing to a changed managerial and organisational attitude towards this form of work. Because of the increased productivity, but also with wellbeing support, there was evidence of trust preservation between employees and managers.

It follows that intra-organisational trust in the Covid-19 context is influenced by an interplay of factors that disrupt trust relations and factors that preserve these. Figure 1 depicts these two trust dimensions and the factors the comprise each of them. Our study has shown that where the organisation responded to the cases of trust disruptions, this led to restoring and preserving trust; however if the organisation does not show will to preserve trust, this will lead to trust disruption. It is noticeable that trust development which has dominated research in trust and organisations appears to have been omitted in this context.

Figure 1: Intra-organisational trust in the Covid-19 work context





Our study confirms that at times of crisis, preservation rather than development of trust was evident (Gustafsson et al., 2020). In contrast, however, to Gustafsson et al (2020) trust preservation practices were neither formal nor intentional. Instead trust preservation emerged as a result of the challenges of the enforced WFH and encompassed a shared understanding of the situation that both employees and managers were in, the disruption to their normal work environment and even the need for new monitoring practices. In addition to the cognitive bridging practices found in the literature, our study showed that other factors contributed to trust preservation and these included the sustained employee performance and increased productivity, organisation's ability to adapt its practices to accommodate the new work characteristics and pressures and support towards the conflicting employees' demands.

Despite evidence on trust preservation, our study did not identify direct instances of trust development. Reasons that may explain the lack of effort in developing trust in the WFH context

might be twofold. First the pandemic was in general seen as temporary and therefore the expectation was that after a few months, employees would return to their normal work office-based environment. Therefore, in contrast to existing literature that argued for trust development at the early stage of a virtual project in order to ensure successful online collaborations and effective management of virtual teams (e.g. Panteli and Duncan, 2004; Zander et al, 2013), in our study of the enforced remote work, managers did not put enough effort to develop trust. One reason for this might have been that this changing landscape was considered as a ‘temporary’ work setting and that soon everything will return to normality (Waizenegger et al. 2020). Another reason might be linked to the fact that the newly transitioned remote or (virtual) teams were locally based, in the sense that there was already a high degree of familiarity with team members as they used to be co-locates, and therefore trust was an existing feature of these teams (Chamakiotis, et al 2021),.

The study presented here constitutes an initial step in exploring the impact the sudden move to WFH as a result of Covid-19 has had on trust within the enforced remote work context. Therefore, the study has implications for further research. As remote and hybrid work become more prevalent, attention should be given to the development of trust, not just its preservation. Within this context, there are opportunities to examine trust as well as learning as organisations adjust to new ways of working. Further research should examine the effects of leadership practices for different groups of employees; including whether there is a difference between preserving trust with existing employees working remotely, and developing trust for new employees who are recruited and onboarded remotely. Finally, our research highlights the support needed for both organisations and their employees to ensure that trust relationships not only continue to be considered, but also revisited in light of the new threat landscape. With both individuals and organisations showing a preference for remote and/or hybrid work further research is clearly necessary.

## **Conclusions and Implications for Workplace Learning**

Understanding workplace transformation following the pandemic raises new questions about how interpersonal relationships are developed and supported. In our study, which sought to examine trust relationships within the Covid-19 WFH context, several factors were identified that contributed to trust disruption and others that contributed to trust preservation in this context. The contribution of the study is that it extends understanding of intra-organisational trust at times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, presenting it as an interplay of interaction between trust disruption and trust preservation. In doing so, the study presents factors that affect intra-organisational trust that have not been previously identified. Several of these are external to the organisation factors such as cyberattacks and the presence of non-organisational members in the shared workspace, which may initially be seen as out of reach for managers. In traditional collocated workplaces, intra organisational trust was seen as being impacted by internal to the organisation factors and therefore more controllable by managers.

The study has several implications for workplace learning: it is important that organisations set up a clear WFH policy where they provide guidelines and set expectations on how employees should be working at home. Managers should allow employees to work flexibly when at home, and change their working hours so that to ensure that they have the privacy required to do their job in a secured place and avoid the risk of being overheard while others are at home. Further, it is advisable to provide employees – even to those who have a permanent remote work arrangement – the ability to return to the office if the need arises. This is particularly important when there might be home disruptions such as building work that necessitate ‘outsiders’ being in the house

where work normally takes place. In such cases, organisations should make provision for employees to return to the office by providing appropriate space and infrastructure. However, it is also important that employers and managers show trust in their employees to be able to minimise disruptions and secure a safe workplace at home. Intra-organisational trust cannot be preserved in the same way that it was pre-pandemic; the landscape has changed and as a result, new ways should be considered for trust preservation and development. With this in mind the focus should be on how to develop trust between employees and managers in the remote work setting recognising the idiosyncrasies of this setting. Further, there is a need for appropriate management and leadership practices as well as approaches to training and development including career advancement as well as wellbeing support for those who work remotely.

We readily acknowledge that the focus of our study was on intra-organisational trust whilst other dimensions of trust relations were not examined. This leaves open the possibilities for further research to be carried out and notably at the inter-organisational level allowing for the exploration of trust development and preservation across different organisations including clients and suppliers. As organisations move operations online and adopt hybrid work practices, further research in this area is needed. Further it is important to acknowledge that at the time of the pandemic there was increased adoption by employer organisation of surveillance and monitoring technologies which may erode trust relations (Nurse, Williams, et al., 2021, Bloomberg, 2020). Research therefore is required in this area as well as on the impact of such technologies on employees' work engagement and satisfaction.

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