Enforced Work-from-home and Its Impact on Psychological Conditions: A Qualitative Investigation in India

Abstract

Purpose: Enforced work-from-home (EWFH) was the norm during the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to be implemented by many organizations owing to long term financial benefits. This study aimed to understand the consequences of EWFH on the three psychological conditions of employee engagement: psychological safety, psychological availability, and psychological meaningfulness.

Design: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 employees from different Indian companies. Thematic analysis was adopted to understand the consequences of EWFH on employee psychological safety, availability, and meaningfulness.

Findings: The findings demonstrated that psychological meaningfulness, availability, and safety were adversely impacted owing to limited choice and autonomy in EWFH.

Implications: Organizations should consider various aspects of EWFH and make decisions to improve employees' experience at work. Meanwhile, this study contributes to literature by examining the concept of EWFH in relation to the psychological conditions, which is novel and relevant. Also, the job demands and resources framework and the COR theory is used together to explain the findings, which strengthens the concept of EWFH.

Originality: This study focuses on an unexplored area and facilitates a better understanding on the concept of EWFH and its impact on employees' psychological conditions. The study is valuable for both management professionals and organizations considering the continuation of EWFH after the pandemic. It also offers new avenues for future research.

Keywords: Employee engagement, psychological meaningfulness, psychological availability, psychological safety, India

Article classification: Research paper

Introduction

Work from home (WFH) is a flexible work arrangement that allows employees to choose where and when to work, thereby giving them control over resources such as time, attention, and energy (Allen *et al.*, 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments worldwide have introduced social distancing, restricted non-essential movements, and enforced lockdowns (ILO, 2020). Many organizations have implemented enforced work-from-home (EWFH) to continue their operations. Contemporary research explores the impact of EWFH on individual and organizational outcomes. However, the results are divergent, inconclusive, and fragmented. Giauque *et al.* (2022) demonstrate that EWFH supports employees' work-life balance, which positively affects work engagement. However, Fajri and Haerudin (2022) indicate that work-family conflict and disruptive work environments associated with EWFH reduce employee work engagement.

According to the job demands and resources model, employees' well-being, performance, and engagement levels are influenced by the available resources and job demands (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Giauque *et al.* (2022) suggest that resources, such as support from colleagues and managers, could enhance engagement in EWFH. However, knowledge about the additional job demands employees experience while working in an EWFH environment is limited. The lack of a definite understanding of the varied job demands and resources in EWFH could explain the divergent or inconclusive findings regarding EWFH's influence on employee engagement. Our study addresses this research gap.

Psychological meaningfulness, psychological availability, and psychological safety directly influence employees' willingness to engage at work (Kahn, 1990). EWFH is a major change in work practices and its impact on psychological conditions is unclear. For example, an employee's inability to work in physical collaborative spaces can influence employee engagement levels and the psychological meaningfulness of the job. Access to physical collaborative spaces is unavailable to employees who work remotely. EWFH will continue as many organizations have accepted it as a new work model[1]. However, knowledge of how job demands and the (un)availability of various job resources influence the psychological conditions associated with employee engagement is limited. The present study addresses this gap by exploring how the various job demands and (un)availability of resources influence the antecedents of employee engagement—psychological meaningfulness, psychological

[1] A BCG 2021 report states that 89% of the workforce will work remotely in some form post pandemic.

availability, and psychological safety. Understanding employees' lived experiences can assist employers in developing strategies to enhance engagement levels, thus improving employees' experience at work.

This article is structured as follows: The theoretical background and literature review present the seminal and contemporary literature, which led to the formulation of the research questions. The method section explains the study's use of the qualitative-interpretive method, and the findings enhance our understanding of EWFH. The discussion connects the findings with the theoretical underpinnings of engagement. The conclusion presents the study's theoretical and practical implications and offers directions for future research.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Engagement is a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Engaged employees express and apply themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally at work. The three psychological conditions associated with engagement are meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Kahn, 1990). High performance work systems positively influence work engagement through the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Beltrán-Martín *et al.*, 2023).

Psychological meaningfulness implies that an individual perceives a return on their investment in professional work in terms of physical, cognitive, and emotional energy, and manifests as feeling valuable and worthwhile (Kahn, 1990). Status and rewarding work interactions with co-workers and clients relate to meaningfulness and promote dignity and self-appreciation (Kahn, 1990). In this context, meaningfulness is the perception that one's work has significance and value (Lee *et al.*, 2021).

Psychological safety frees an individual from the fear of negative consequences related to self-image, status, or career; it enables individuals to engage in work roles and situations that are unclear, inconsistent, unpredictable, threatening, or that adversely impact safety (Kahn, 1990). Psychologically safe environments allow employees to take risks and make trivial errors without the fear of punishment (Lyu, 2016).

Psychological availability is the sense of possessing the resources necessary to invest in role performance, and depends on an individual's physical and emotional energy, insecurity level, and engagement in matters outside the workplace (Kahn, 1990). It is an individual's perception

of whether they have the personal, emotional, and cognitive resources needed to complete the work (Barrick *et al.*, 2015).

The psychological conditions of engagement are examined under two theoretical lenses. First, the conservation of resources (COR) theory suggests that the long-term scarcity of resources in a work environment could result in high stress levels (Hobfoll, 1989) and dysfunctional job attitudes and behaviors (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Stress experienced in the WFH environment depletes vital social and personal resources, thus negatively impacting engagement levels (Adisa *et al.*, 2023). Second, the job demands and resources theory argues that both job resources and demands influence employee engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Kwon and Kim, 2020). Job resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007) are the psychological, physical, social, and organizational dimensions of the job that facilitate achievement of work goals, stimulate personal growth and development, and reduce the physiological and psychological costs of performing the job. Job demands, however, are the physical, social, and psychological efforts employees must invest to accomplish a task. An increase in job demands, along with limited job resources, such as inadequate technology and furniture, create a feeling of powerlessness in dealing with work responsibilities (Khanna and Kalaga, 2021) and could result in low engagement levels.

In a WFH scenario, resources such as teamwork, autonomy, communication, and support from supervisors, colleagues, senior management, and family members are required. Giauque *et al.* (2022) found that EWFH supported work-life balance and decreased commute times (Weideman and Hofmeyr, 2020). In an Indonesian context, WFH employees were more satisfied and had higher work motivation (Susilo, 2020). A South African study highlighted that employee performance improved in productivity, work quality, and internal and external customer satisfaction (Weideman and Hofmeyr, 2020)

In contrast to the above findings, some research found that WFH heightened job demands owing to the lack of skills required to work remotely (Xiao *et al.*, 2021), reduced access to collegial networks (Cooper and Kurland, 2002), and increased work-life conflict (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020) leading to emotional exhaustion, cynicism, cognitive stress (Vander Elst *et al.*, 2017), and decreased productivity (Kaushik and Guleria, 2020). In addition, research findings suggested that employees could perceive WFH additional effort, leading to work intensification (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010). Further research evidence also indicated that prolonged WFH could cause negative thoughts, decreased life satisfaction, and health issues such as cardiovascular diseases (Lissak, 2018).

Insert Table I about here

The contrasting evidence from the previous literature is summarized in Table I. This evidence clearly indicates that although WFH/EWFH has positive aspects, its adverse impact on employee engagement is also significant. Few researchers have argued that the impact of WFH on employee engagement is not fully understood (Bilotta *et al.*, 2021; Franken *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2021). In addition, most studies that have presented these contrasting findings have focused on engagement as a construct but have not examined the impact of WFH/EWFH on the psychological conditions leading to employee engagement, namely, psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability. EWFH provides a unique opportunity to explain the influence of both job demands and job resources on the psychological conditions of employee engagement, which has presented a challenge for many previous studies (Raghuram *et al.*, 2019; Allen *et al.*, 2013). Understanding the impact of WFH/EWFH on psychological conditions that enable employee engagement is important to improve the theorization on both WFH and employee engagement. Hence, this study explored the following three research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What is the impact of EWFH on psychological availability?
RQ2: What is the impact of EWFH on psychological safety?
RQ3: What is the impact of EWFH on psychological meaningfulness?

Method

This research adopted a qualitative-interpretive method, which captured data from individuals' life experiences to provide a fundamental understanding of phenomena and improve qualitative outputs (Patton, 2014). Miles and Huberman (1994) also inspired the research methodology. These methods are suitable for exploring unknown phenomena and improving comprehension of a topic (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Purposive sampling was used to select the respondents, and ensured that the selected sample was representative of the study population, had experience with the study's context, and could provide in-depth responses (Creswell, 2013). It is also named judgment sampling, as the participants were chosen considering their relevance, ability to understand the context, and willingness to provide information owing to their experience (Bernard, 2002). This method is mainly applied in qualitative research to acquire richer information using the least number of resources (Patton, 2002). This study collected in-depth data from a few respondents for an exploratory purpose, which was best performed using

purposive sampling (Saunders *et. al.,* 2009). Data were collected across different parts of India between May 2021 and January 2022. Personal referrals and contacts were used to identify the respondents. A researcher in the team used their network to reach professionals who had been forced to work from home for at least six months, either continuously or discontinuously, between March 2020 and January 2022. All participants were full-time employees in various industries, such as manufacturing, information technology products or services, e-commerce, and analytics. The final list of completed interviews comprised 21 working professionals from 10 global companies across seven cities in India. Seventeen participants were men and four were women; 18 were married and three unmarried. Their average work experience was approximately 14.3 years.

Qualitative research allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of the subject and its connection to the participants' various lived experiences (Cassell *et al.,* 2009). Participants were executives in managerial roles. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews, which ensured thematic consistency across participants and allowed the elaboration of their viewpoints. National lockdown measures were implemented in March 2020 in India, and >80% of employees were required to work from home during this period. Hence, the interviews were conducted virtually following COVID-19 protocols. This was helpful because the participants were spread across multiple locations in India. The interview questions are presented in Appendix I.

As the first step of data analysis, open coding (first-order codes) was performed to summarize and capture the essence of the data. Second, the first-order codes were grouped into themes. Finally, the themes were clustered into theoretical categories, and subsequently iterated with the existing literature to refine the categories. The codes, themes, and aggregates are presented in Tables II, III, and IV, respectively, consistent with the Gioia Method (Gioia *et al.,* 2013).

Findings

The findings of this study are presented in three parts, each delineating the impact of EWFH on psychological availability, safety, and meaningfulness. The impact of EWFH on psychological safety is detailed in Table II.

Insert Table II about here

Due to limited body language cues, EWFH caused participants' increased caution while communicating with others, negatively affecting clarity and openness. Interactions on a virtual platform prevented individuals from expressing themselves fully; thus, many felt constrained and excluded at times. While intentions could be easily misconstrued in virtual meetings, face-to-face interactions made it possible to go back and provide clarifications. Employees' emotions or feelings were less evident on virtual platforms than in-person; hence, they refrained from voicing opinions. A respondent stated that before EWFH, most individuals would speak in meetings, but very few spoke virtually. Personal discomfort was easily visible during face-to-face meetings, but on virtual platforms, the video feature was often turned off. In some cases, employees had to turn off their videos due to limited internet bandwidth.

Two major factors that decreased cohesion in work teams during EWFH were reduced confidence, trust, and belongingness in work relations, and reduced camaraderie in teams. Work (or effort) was invisible, which created constant pressure to live up to others' expectations. A respondent stated that team harmony was missing due to loss of physical connections. In the virtual work environment, individuality increased, and employees put prerequisites in place before accepting a task or assignment as a safer option; whereas, in co-located workspaces, employees were confident working together and willing to take risks. Thus, load sharing was reduced in EWFH.

The lack of in-person interaction reduced the sense of confidence between managers and employees. In a physical setup, it was easier to discuss difficult topics or new ideas with managers; however, this was not possible on a virtual platform, thereby reducing employees' confidence in working relationships. The work effort was invisible on virtual platforms, and the number of calls or emails was considered an indicator of effort, which in many cases may not have been completely accurate. As a result, the managers' trust suffered.

Insert Table III about here

The impact of EWFH on psychological meaningfulness is detailed in Table III. EWFH significantly reduced informal learning and fun at work. Due to the reduced number of discussions and ideations, iterative learning opportunities at work also decreased. This concurs with an earlier study that confirmed learning encourages engagement (Pattnaik and Panda, 2020). In virtual working, creative discussions were scarce; as one respondent indicated, there

is no replacement for personal connection. Across-the-table discussions were more creative and facilitated bonding between employees, which was strengthened due to informal discussions over a cup of coffee or through "water cooler" conversations. A respondent stated that virtual working was like a machine functioning without healthy discussions, and another mentioned that virtual platforms were very restrictive and timebound. Workshop models could be more effective as they enabled individuals to creatively build on each other's ideas and brainstorm in a co-located place. Supervision, which facilitated employee learning, was also reduced on a virtual platform, as it was difficult to connect, build relationships, and learn from others. Additionally, for new employees in an organization, the transfer of knowledge and learning from existing older employees became difficult due to lack of in-person interaction, which usually generated a personal connection. The element of fun at work was reduced, and informal chit chat was no longer present. A respondent stated that work used to occur organically; individuals took breaks, cracked jokes, and then resumed work. This aspect of working together was missing with EWFH.

Work efficiency also decreased due to a need for greater clarity on roles and tasks, and the increased time and effort required to complete a task. In a co-located work environment, individuals could reach out and seek clarification; however, this was difficult in a virtual setting, as some discussions required scheduling meetings. The ability to clarify work tasks in EWFH was limited. This was a particular challenge for new employees, as they did not know anyone and may have only met their colleagues virtually. As communication on a virtual platform could be delayed, the interactions were formal and limited; thus, more time was required to complete the job. One respondent stated that issues previously handled through a two-minute chat now required a 15-minute video call.

The participants also noticed the reduced visibility of their contributions and a decrease in their influence at work with EWFH. Employees who were not directly linked to the company output or were in support roles felt they needed to add more value. A respondent stated that EWFH induced a feeling of being left out and an erosion of worth. Another stated that virtual working was 100% faceless. When working in a physical setup, ideas flowed and people contributed; as these actions were visible to managers, employees believed their worth was felt. In face-to-face meetings, it was easier to influence and build contacts.

Insert Table IV about here

The impact of EWFH on psychological availability is detailed in Table IV. Participants reported reduced emotional energy with EWFH, primarily caused by reduced motivation and emotional connections due to the lack of in-person interactions. Interviews revealed that interactions in physically co-located spaces were more enjoyable than those in virtual platforms and made it easier to exchange ideas. EWFH reduced opportunities for physically interacting with individuals as they could no longer meet over lunch or coffee. A respondent stated, "I do not get time to relax by having a conversation. We are social animals." The virtual relationships conducted during EWFH differed from those developed while working in a co-located space. Physical handshakes and the warmth of meeting other individuals in person were not possible. A respondent stated, "I used to have a cabin, but it is my choice that I can go sit and chat with my team. That gives you much energy being amongst like-minded people. Here it is sitting in a room alone most of the time."

Participants indicated an overall reduction in well-being primarily because participating in continuous calls affected their physical well-being; communication inefficiencies on the virtual platform extended their work hours. They reported that in virtual working, there were practically no breaks; the lack of a commute led to continuous work and back-to-back meetings that extended beyond normal work hours. This adversely affected employees' physical condition and caused tiredness. Quick face-to-face conversations over coffee were more effective; work took longer over virtual platforms, reducing employees' personal time or downtime despite being at home. One respondent critically stated that although they saved time by not commuting, their work-life balance deteriorated due to virtual inefficiencies.

EWFH increased work-life overlap. Routines were adversely impacted by EWFH owing to the transition from a professional to a home environment. One respondent stated that sleeping and working conditions had become similar; another indicated that when their child was shouting, they needed to respond, which meant leaving work. Furthermore, they were expected to assist with household chores because they were home. The participants thought that work and personal lives were impacted because of EWFH. Prior to EWFH, work was time-bound, and they could spend time with their families after office hours and on weekends. However, during EWFH, work was a continuous commitment, which minimized personal time.

Discussion

EFWH results in the loss of job resources and a simultaneous increase in job demands. Information is a critical job resource that accumulates through communication, learning, and

feedback, and involves processing at both an individual and interpersonal level. Knowledge about the self, other people, and other organizational activities or processes are significant.

The findings demonstrated that EWFH adversely impacted psychological safety. This included reduced conversation effectiveness due to limited body language cues, decreased cohesion in work teams, and employee-manager relationship strength. These factors created a strain in the intergroup-group dynamics and interpersonal relationships. Individuals' fear of negative consequences was the fundamental reason for the deterioration of interpersonal relationships and communication processes. In the absence of non-verbal cues, responses could not be modulated easily. The fear was an outcome of the loss of informational resources required to execute tasks effectively. Informational resources were also necessary in building and sustaining relationships, and this loss resulted in increased job demands in the form of cognitive stress and emotional exhaustion (Vander Elst *et al.*, 2017).

This study's findings indicated that opportunities for informal learning and having fun at work had decreased with EWFH. The reduction or absence of informal learning opportunities signified employees' struggle with loss of informational resources that supported personal growth and development. With fewer opportunities to have fun at work, the psychological costs of doing a job increased. The participants emphasized that reduced informational resources with a simultaneous increase in job demands manifested in reduced work efficiency. Employees also perceived that their impact as leaders had been reduced to an adverse impact on psychological meaningfulness. The restricted ability to understand the impact of one's work input and the inability to influence others in a team signified a loss of job resources at both the individual and team levels. Other job resources in the form of feedback from team members, colleagues, or supervisors were also lost.

The findings also demonstrated that EWFH led to reduced emotional energy and well-being along with an increase in work-life overlap, adversely influencing psychological availability. The adverse impact on emotional energy reduced employees' ability to invest the emotional labor required in role performance. Similarly, well-being was related to physical strength and readiness and could affect role performance. The distractions due to the increase in work-life overlap indicated that employees were preoccupied with more than just performing their role. The increased work-life interference indicated the heightened job demands of EWFH, whereas the lower levels of emotional energy and well-being meant that EWFH required more emotional, physical, and cognitive efforts. With increasing job demands, the employees' psychological

availability suffered as they experienced a loss of job resources at both the individual and team levels.

The inaccessibility or inability to capture others' body language, reduced informal learning, reduced informal opportunities, reduced clarity on tasks, reduced visibility of one's own contribution, and reduced physical wellbeing due to continuous virtual meetings were some of the key findings. These factors could also be explained using COR theory. All the challenges associated with EWFH caused employees to expend more resources, eventually leading to resource depletion and stress. These factors could also be perceived as limited resources available at work leading to unfavorable work consequences. Similarly, the increased time and effort required for task completion and increased caution in conversations resulted in enhanced job demands, which required a greater investment of resources from employees without much organizational support.

Conclusion and Theoretical Implications

While previous research has contributed to the literature by highlighting the positive and adverse impacts of WFH on employee engagement, this study examined how EWFH affected different psychological conditions. The common belief is that any type of WFH provides flexibility and will have similar effects in enhancing employee engagement. Additionally, many employers perceive WFH as a cost-reduction method because expensive office space is not required, which leads to an EWFH scenario. The findings indicate that EWFH has a more negative impact on the psychological conditions. This research provides more evidence to support earlier studies on the negative impact of WFH/EWFH on psychological conditions.

This study has several significant theoretical implications. EWFH emerged as a phenomenon during and after the COVID pandemic across different countries and workplaces. Although more research is emerging to understand this phenomenon and its impact on different employee and organizational outcomes, the context in which EWFH is implemented needs to be understood in more detail. Our research suggests that EFWH results in the loss of job resources and the simultaneous increase in job demands. This could explain why the impact of EWFH is not conclusive. It may be possible for employers to provide more resources commensurate with the level of enhanced job demands; hence, EWFH could create positive engagement levels.

Another theoretical contribution of this study is that information is a critical job resource that accumulates through communication, learning, and feedback, and involves processing at both

individual and interpersonal levels. EWFH as a phenomenon not only limits the smooth flow of information and knowledge (reduced job resources) but also heightens job demands as the need for more cognitive efforts increases.

As our study utilizes both the job demands and resources framework and the COR theory, in the context of EWFH, we could explain the reduced or missing resources, the resources employees tried to conserve, and the heightened levels of job demands. Integrating both the job demands and resources framework and the COR theory enhances the contextual understanding of EWFH and how it impacts the psychological conditions of employee engagement.

Practical Implications

The results indicate that individuals exercise caution when they communicate virtually, which makes communication ineffective. The team camaraderie and trust and confidence in superior-subordinate relationships are also reduced, which negatively impacts psychological safety. Managers and supervisors should try to understand the team dynamics in an EWFH scenario and initiate team-building activities on a regular basis to enhance trust and cohesion among their employees. In a similar vein, the reduced learning opportunities, increased time spent on tasks, and inability to gauge one's own contribution and influence presents a challenge to psychological meaningfulness. With the support of HR professionals, managers could review and redesign performance appraisal and feedback processes in the context of EWFH so that employees are able to understand their contributions. HR professionals could also consider how to support on-the-job-learning in the EWFH scenario especially with the increase in available digital platforms. Furthermore, EWFH also influences psychological availability as it involves isolation from colleagues, continuous virtual meetings, and interference of the work-life balance, adversely impacting emotional energy and well-being.

Limitations and Future Research

This research has some limitations. First, we have not analyzed the responses from a gender perspective. Finer differences could be observed in how both genders consider EWFH due to their different roles at home and in society. Second, we have not analyzed the findings considering the respondents' hierarchical level. Organizations could extend EWFH to employees at different organizational levels in different ways, leading to varied EWFH experiences. Finally, we did not consider the respondents' age or marital status when analyzing

the data. Individuals living alone could have different perspectives on EWFH than those living with family.

These limitations could serve as avenues for future research on EWFH. In addition, future researchers should focus on three important directions. First, flexibility is an important factor in the EWFH scenario, and could mediate the relationship between EWFH and psychological conditions. Second, autonomy is another important factor in the EWFH scenario, and could also mediate the relationship between EWFH and psychological conditions. Finally, the nature of work based on the industry or sector could influence the psychological conditions associated with EWFH in different ways, and its impact needs to be studied.

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Appendix I:

Interview Questions

- How long have you been WFH?
- Has there been a change in the WFH policy pre- and post-COVID-19?
- Does the current policy force you to WFH, or is it a choice?
- Who decides whether you must WFH, you or your manager?
- Is the policy the same for all, or is it decided on a case-to-case basis?
- What is your understanding of psychological meaningfulness?
- What are the hindrances you see in achieving psychological meaningfulness?
- What is your understanding of psychological safety?
- What are the hindrances you see in achieving psychological safety?
- What is your understanding of psychological availability?
- What are the hindrances you see in achieving psychological availability?