Working from Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Workplace Relationships[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore what working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic means for workplace relationships. This study is based on semi-structured interviews with Swedish knowledge workers. Three approaches are identified as regards how employees maintain their workplace relationships when working from home: (1) being selective as regards social interactions, (2) being compliant and resistant during digital meetings, and (3) having less spontaneity and creativity when in the digital space. Further, our findings also point to the prioritization of the individual's interests and needs over those of the collective. The study indicates the importance of understanding the dynamics of the workplace relationships when working remotely.

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, an extensive number of employees did not have a workplace to go to since they were either recommended, or ordered, to work from home. Working from home and holding digital work meetings with colleagues became the norm (Arntz et al. 2020; Bonacini et al. 2021; Fackförbundet ST 2021). Employees needed to quickly get to grips with their work responsibilities during this unexpected disruption (Byrd 2022), a situation which could be compared to either 'radical decentralization' (Lee & Edmondson 2017) or a state of 'deregulation' (Allvin et al. 2013). For many employees, this entailed experiencing a rapid change when moving between their usual interactions with colleagues, during face-to-face encounters, and interacting solely with these colleagues in a digital environment (Oksanen et al. 2021). However, exactly how employees maintain relationships with their colleagues when needing to work from home during a pandemic has scarcely been studied in any detail (cf. Byrd 2022; Lal et al. 2021).

Working from home is not a new phenomenon (Allvin 2001), often referred to as teleworking or telecommuting in the literature due to telecommunications technology already allowing employees to work remotely. In previous studies of working from home, it has been observed that many employees prefer this way of working because of the flexibility it offers with regard to scheduling, maintaining the work-life balance, and enjoying freedom from interruption (e.g., van der Lippe & Lippényi 2019; Vilhelmson & Thulin 2016). However, it has also been noted that employees' performance and productivity suffer, and that employees may also suffer from social and professional isolation (e.g., Håkansta & Bergman 2018; van der Lippe & Lippényi 2019). In a study on working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, employee-experienced work productivity, performance, and satisfaction have all been linked to home/family circumstances, the physical environment, and access to the necessary tools and equipment (Mihalca et al. 2021). Other studies have illustrated that working from home can increase productivity and decrease psychological and physiological stress responses (Shimura et al. 2021). It has also been observed that, while stress levels may decrease, other health-related problems may increase (George et al. 2021). Working from home can increase work-related fatigue, which compromises the balance between a person's work and private lives (Palumbo 2020). There is, however, a lack of in-depth studies of how employees maintain social relationships with their colleagues when working remotely (Byrd 2022). Lal et al. (2021) show that social interactions persist when working remotely, but that these interactions become fewer and take place in a more organized form.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that there are essential differences within the context of working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang et al. 2021). Prior to the pandemic, workers with experience of working remotely were few. Working remotely was only occasionally practiced, and largely on a voluntary basis. The pandemic has required an unprecedentedly large number of employees to work from home, many of them against their will. When the physical workplace can no longer be taken for granted, opportunities for engaging in social relationships will be impacted (Pennanen & Mikkola 2016). This change in circumstances placed new demands on the individual's responsibility to maintain and develop relationships with colleagues when the work environment is purely digital (van der Lippe & Lippényi 2019). In studies focusing on the social dimension of work, it has been shown that this is associated with a sense of belonging, with a positive work climate, with receiving praise from one's colleagues, and with having access to social support and professional development opportunities (Garrett et al. 2017; Härenstam 2010; Sandberg 2019; Vauhkonen et al. 2021; Wenger 1999). Following Håkansta and Bergman's (2018) definition of the workplace-based community, we understand this as providing, on the one hand, social support and social engagement in the workplace context, while on the other hand, as providing joint learning and development, and establishing professional identity.

Research has addressed the importance of organizational responsibility to a functional work community or workplace relationships (Åkerström & Severin 2020; Tappura et al. 2014). For example, Valo and Mikkola (2020) stress the importance of all forms of interpersonal relationships to a sense of integration at the workplace. It has also been claimed that, if a work community is to be valued by an organization, then it should be actively managed and supported by that organization (e.g., Ansio et al. 2020; Tuisku & Houni 2015). Research has also shown that, in the absence of a work community, an organization's development will stagnate (Härenstam & Bejerot 2010). A

work community is, thus, something which needs support and which should continually be developed collectively.

This article aims to explore what working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic means to workplace relationships. More specifically, the study focuses on employees' perceptions and experiences. Thus, this study contributes to research on work and social relations and, more specifically, the nature of workplace relationships when working remotely in times of crisis. The study is situated in a Nordic context, with a particular focus on the Swedish labor market. In the Nordic context, work is described as a sphere of a person's life, the 'work-life sphere', with different stakeholders 'placing demands on quality, purpose, community, and influence, as it is in life in general' (Sandberg 2019, p. 15). Additionally, the physical workplace constitutes an integral part of our working lives and makes specific demands of us in terms of being a community with functional workplace relationships (e.g., Alfonsson 2015; Hyyppä 2007; Sandberg 2019).

Sweden makes a relevant case, as its population is generally quite experienced in using IT resources. Therefore, over the past several years, digitalization has been providing increased opportunities of working from home (Allvin 2001; Håkansta & Bergman 2018; Sturesson 2000; Vilhelmson & Thulin 2016). It should be noted that, during the pandemic, working from home was not regulated in employee contracts, or in collective agreements, which is the usual approach taken by the Swedish labor market, even though lots of work was done from home. However, it is quite likely that working from home will continue to be practiced to a greater extent by many organizations and companies even after the pandemic is over (Fackförbundet ST 2021). This raises several questions about maintaining and developing work communities. Having more knowledge of the phenomenon will better position organizations and employees to protect the work community during times of crisis.

This article is structured as follows: First, we propose a theoretical framework that explores how workplace relationships develop when work conditions change as well as what the implications are for workplace relationships when work conditions are shaped by increasing levels of individualization. Second, we present how data was collected during in-depth interviews with knowledge workers. Third, we present our results. We draw several conclusions about how employees maintain their workplace relationships with their colleagues. We conclude by discussing the consequences of our study and describing the workplace relationships arising under conditions informed by increasing individualization.

Theoretical framework

A relational perspective

A workplace is a place of belongingness and togetherness (Valo & Mikkola 2020), with relationships acting as the foundations of that workplace (Mikkola & Nykänen 2020). Workplace relationships are essential for wellbeing at work, for job satisfaction, and for professional learning and the strengthening of professional identity (Cooper & Kurland 2002, Mikkola & Nykänen 2020). Mikkola and Nykänen (2020) argue that workplace relationships are not dependent only on face-to-face interactions but can also occur even during digital interactions. Härenstam (2010), however, argues that the disconnection of

workplace interactions from space and time entails changes in terms of how individuals connect with their work and workplaces. Hence, Härenstam (2010) argues that we can no longer assume that the relationships existing in the workplace are the same now as they were before, and that the sense of belonging and togetherness can be described as 'volatile'. Against this backdrop, working from home raises several questions regarding the notion of the workplace community and the social aspects of employees having a workplace to go to.

A shared sense of community is essential to the human condition, involving finding one's place among other people in a manner that provides a clear framework for one's existence, and which builds on the notion of inclusion (Adler & Heckscher 2006; Asplund 1991; Baumeister & Leary 1995; Engström 2019). Adler and Heckscher (2006, p. 13) define community as 'the set of institutions that give a basis for this confidence, by establishing and enforcing mutual expectations – so that when I do something I have some idea of how you are likely to react, and how it will come out'. McMillan (1996, p. 315) discusses the sense of community and defines it as a 'spirit of belonging together, a feeling that there is an authority structure that can be trusted, an awareness that trade and mutual benefit come from being together, and a spirit that comes from shared experiences that are preserved as art'. We thus note that community, or a sense of it, relies on the existence of shared values and norms, and shared expectations. Furthermore, community also represents, on the one hand, the reconciliation of freedom with constraints on social integration, and on the other hand, of individualism with collectivism. Hence, it is about a sense of belonging and trust, as argued by Adler and Heckscher (2006) and McMillan (1996), but it also invokes shared experiences and benefits. In the context of work, these aspects are related to the exchange of knowledge and experience required for developing professional identity.

In employing a relational perspective, the intention is to understand the workplace as a dynamic entity. Such a relational perspective argues that 'social order is a product of moment-by-moment encounters in which people act in ways that open up relational possibilities' (Garrett et al. 2017). In this view, a sense of community is co-constructed, mutually constituted through interactions during ongoing relationships. Hence, a community at work is not something to be inhabited, but actively co-created through willful relationships.

An individual perspective

Research shows how work conditions are shaped by means of increasing individualization (Allvin 2008; Ebert 2012). The modern organization is becoming less paternalistic and individuals/employees are being given increased responsibility as regards how they perform and organize their work (Love 2007). Expressions of this discourse include the striving to create flexible organizations, with the aim of rationalizing and streamlining them. The responsibility for defining and structuring work is placed on the employee, not only leading to increased self-governance but also to less clear work conditions (Espersson et al. 2023). Working from home thus means both a relaxation of the traditional regulations and increased demands for individual responsibility. This means that our view of work and the role of the employee are changing, and that the institutional settings facing the individual are changing (Allvin 2008). Work conditions are being shaped by increased individualization.

In social organizations, 'rules are used to regulate individual activities in a systematic way, reproducing the organization as a whole' (Allvin 2008, p. 22). When work is no longer performed at a specific workplace, the work conditions are disconnected from the organization and the individual is given increased independence and responsibility (Espersson et al. 2023). The actions of the individual are still regulated, but differently from before (Allvin 2008). Allvin (2008), using Searle's (1969) distinction between constitutive and regulative rules, discusses a shift toward the regulative rules and hence the independence of the individual (i.e., the employee) from the system (i.e., the organization). Constitutive rules are 'the rules of the game' and cannot be understood separately from the actions performed in accordance with them. Constitutive rules define the actions as parts of a given system of rules. More concretely, the rules are defined by the organization, and the individual does not have to take a stance as regards whether these are functional or not, whether they are relevant or not. It is about getting them right. The regulative rules, on the other hand, are rules which guide actions and which presuppose a willful act. Regulative rules are 'followed' and can therefore be understood independently of the actions performed in accordance with them. Acting in accordance with regulative rules presupposes the individual seeing himself/herself as part of the organization, but still independent from it. One implication of such reasoning, according to Allvin (2008), is the relationship between organization and individual being based on choice rather than identity. It is up to the individual, and thus his/her actions are willfully regulated. One consequence of this is that the work community may be forged under work conditions shaped by increasing individualization.

Another perspective has been put forward by Love (2007). Discussing the implications of the disconnection of the individual, Love (2007) argues that one consequence here is that organizational support is replaced by the individual seeking support within his/her own workgroup. One consequence of this is that the role of work relationships becomes even more important, the feeling of belongingness and sharing trust.

The theoretical framework we refer to in this study exploits how relationships develop when work conditions change, and what the implications will be for workplace relationships when work conditions are shaped by increasing levels of individualization. Against this backdrop, we aim to investigate what it means for employees' perceptions and experiences of the workplace relationships with a focus on how everyday interactions between colleagues changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

Research design

This exploratory study (Patton 1987) aims to investigate what working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic means for workplace relationships and the work community. Our study was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic, at the end of 2020, with the research data being collected between March and August 2021. Since this study uses an interpretive approach, we found it suitable to perform a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews (Brinkman & Kvale 2014) so as to engage closely with our interview subjects (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2017).

Sampling method

We used several criteria when selecting participants for this study. First, the interviewee had to be working either full- or part-time from home, and working from home had to represent a change in his/her regular work routines that had taken place early on during the pandemic. The reasoning behind this criterion was that working from home entails a new way for the interviewees to organize both their everyday work routines and the way in which they interact with their colleagues. We didn't want employees who were typical teleworkers, but people who lacked previous experience of teleworking. Second, we only included employees doing knowledge work, since knowledge workers largely worked from home during the pandemic (Arntz et al. 2020). The third criterion involved covering the public, private, and non-profit sectors. Previous literature (Mohalik et al. 2019; Palumbo 2020) discusses differences between the public and private sectors as regards how working from home is experienced, with working from home being more common in the private sector.

Purposive sampling was used because it allowed us to select participants based on theoretically grounded criteria. To come into contact with our interview candidates, we turned to our established professional networks and used these to make contact with potential interviewees. Once we had established contact, via e-mail, with our first group of participants, we asked them to name further potential participants, something which is often referred to as snowball selection (Brinkman & Kvale 2014). Our final selection consisted of four software engineers, three system developers, two controllers, three communications officers, four study advisors, and three priests. Five men and fourteen women were interviewed, none of them with any prior experience of teleworking. The interviewees had work experience between 5 and 25 years, with the majority of them having been employed for at least 5 years by their current employer. In this study, we intended to find out the impact of employees working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace relationships. However, our intention was not to understand or explain any differences between professional affiliations, genders, ages, lengths of employment, etc.

Data collection

For our interviews, we prepared a semi-structured interview guide. This was established with reference to the literature review we presented on distance work, our theoretical framing of workplace relationships and the work community, and the COVID-19 situation in particular. In addition to several introductory background questions concerning the interviewees' biographical data, our interview guide also addressed five main themes: We focused on: (i) the nature of the employees' interactions with their colleagues and how they cooperated with each other before the pandemic when working at their designated workplaces; (ii) how their relationships and cooperation had functioned while they were working from home; (iii) what social and organizational support they had given to and received from their colleagues and superiors; (iv) how their relationships and cooperation had changed (in terms of content and extent) as well as how this influenced the work being done; and finally, (v) what experiences they would make use of when no longer working from home.

The candidate interviewees were contacted by email; we also included a description of our research project and the purpose of the proposed interview. Furthermore, we informed them that their names and their organizations' names would remain anonymous. The high rate of COVID-19 infections in the country at the time precluded us from conducting in-person interviews. The interviews were thus conducted using the Zoom video conferencing app. All of the participants agreed to their interviews being recorded. During each interview, two members of the research team were involved. The use of digital tools to conduct an interview can be experienced as challenging because the interview situation can be stressful for the interviewee, especially since the interviewer is unable to establish a rapport with the interviewee prior to the interview (Thunberg & Arnell 2021). It is impossible to know whether certain aspects were lost during the interviews, but we experienced the interviewees as openly sharing their experiences, with several reporting at the end that our questions had given them fresh insight into their new work conditions. The video function of Zoom allowed us to observe the facial expressions of the interviewees. During the interviews, we were also able to observe some aspects of the physical environments where the participants worked, prompting us to talk about these work environments. The biggest challenge we faced during the interviews was talking over the interviewees at times due to our different locations. This did not influence the quality of the interviews, however.

Analyzing data

Each of the interviews was approximately 90 minutes long. The recordings were transcribed using NVivo and then anonymized and archived using a secure digital safebox function. Coding the empirical material occurred in three stages (Rennstam & Wästerfors 2018). During the first stage, we conducted a broad search for specific expressions referring to the maintaining of workplace relationships, and for examples of interactions during workdays. Some of the most frequently occurring codes were 'choosing colleagues', 'avoiding', 'spontaneous contact', planned contact'; 'belonging', 'working without distractions', 'home routines', 'efficiency during meetings', 'self-exclusion', '(not) asking for help', 'problem solving', '(lack of) creativity'. During the second stage, and in accordance with how Ryan and Bernard (2003) describe 'repetition' as a technique for coding material and identifying themes for analysis, we started identifying themes. Our coding and thematic work provided us with three main themes: 'choosing and rejecting interactions', 'compliance and resistance during digital meetings,' and 'experiencing the (un)creativity and (un)spontaneity of the digital space', which are presented in the following section.

Results

The three themes identified in the empirical material constitute the structure of the Results section. In what follows, the focus is on how the employees deployed workplace relationships when working from home during the pandemic.

Choosing and rejecting interactions

In research into the work community, two aspects receive particular emphasis: (i) the feeling of belonging and (ii) opportunities for learning and professional development. These two dimensions were touched upon in different ways by our interviewees. One of the participants made the following remark, regarding the importance of a sense of belonging:

> In part, it's relaxing to chat with your colleagues if there's no work to do, but even then, you have to have fun and feel there's a good sense of community. You should have fun, laugh. But also, in the community, there's some comfort in having your colleagues around you, who can back you up if you have questions. It doesn't matter if it's your line manager, or one of your colleagues, but someone who understands your situation and can give you support. (Communications officer)

The second dimension addresses the importance of having and sharing common goals and visions, which is important for learning and professional development, expressed as follows by one of our participants:

> You share the same agenda in some way, and the failures and successes. You sit quite close together, and you know immediately when someone has a difficult problem to deal with. It shows, and you also notice when things are going really well for someone. (Software engineer)

Working at home and not getting to meet colleagues challenges these two dimensions. By way of introduction, we will examine the first dimension more closely. What was previously taken for granted, or perhaps missed, is now under close scrutiny. When colleagues are no longer physically close to each other, a feeling of loss emerges during everyday interactions between colleagues. One participant provided the following description:

> I miss my work colleagues, and then I also miss being interrupted. I miss how natural it is to pick someone's brain, or ask a question. So, it's those spontaneous moments that I miss very much, spontaneous conversations about matters big and small. (Priest)

It was the small things that were missed regarding the interviewees' interactions with their colleagues, like spontaneous conversations, chit-chat, or the opportunity to have coffee together. The participant describes herself as a sociable person, taking stimulus from encounters with colleagues. When no one else is around, it is easier to stay focused on work, even if you want to take a break. It is easy to end up in the hamster wheel of endless work and to down-prioritize breaks. One participant touched upon this aspect thus:

> What I experience when working from home is that it's more of a hamster wheel than your workplace. Then it was more straightforward, you heard your colleagues talking in the lunchroom, and you went there and grabbed a cup of coffee and sat with them. That

> part is now completely gone. That's what I've been feeling. I thought I wouldn't miss it, but now I notice that I do miss those bits. (System developer)

Those brief moments of taking a break disappear when there is no one to remind you. This was especially true in the case of this particular participant, working in a small team of four with a high level of individual autonomy. The buffer which social interaction represents in the day-to-day work community is gone, and it is now up to each individual to plan his/her breaks.

Working from home has also created a situation whereby employees no longer have the opportunity to meet their colleagues in the same way as previously. Consequently, everyday social interaction has disappeared from the workday, and is missed. However, the need to meet one's colleagues remains, and so the interviewees found alternative ways to meet. Nevertheless, the preconditions for continued social contact are dependent on having a previous relationship. Remarked upon thus by one participant:

> I have really nice colleagues, most of them. It's really nice to meet them, to chat and be together. Of course, that's something you don't forget, which lives on and is remembered now. You know each other; there's someone who'll call you and someone who actually invites you to have coffee while Skyping. And there are other colleagues you can call and chat with. If you hadn't previously been physically together at the same workplace, you wouldn't have formed these relationships. (System developer)

This participant explains the opportunity to be part of a context as a function of previously having come to know her colleagues and establishing some form of relationship maintainable from a distance. Previously established relationships continue, even when the way employees interact with each other has changed. Physical encounters have primarily been replaced by contact in digital meeting places, by email, or by using the chat function. These encounters take place between colleagues, thus providing an opportunity to discuss the challenges that working from home poses. One participant described his situation thus:

> I have some colleagues to whom I've spoken at length about this. Just because you get really depressed by it all and just need to let off steam about everything you can't stand at the moment, even when things are going well and you've been having fun. Chatting away for an hour is something you get to do, just helping each other to cope. And sometimes, you share the happiness too. (Software engineer)

For many co-workers, it is challenging to schedule times or specific forms of social interaction. The efforts made in this area fizzled out sooner or later. It was difficult to transfer traditional coffee breaks (which are commonplace at most Swedish workplaces) to a digital context. This point was raised in several ways, for example by this participant:

> We hold weekly meetings which are quite long, like two hours, every Wednesday. But before the meeting, I suggest going in half an hour earlier and just chatting with each other over coffee. Because I kinda needed it. And so we did that. But I must say that it came

to nothing in the end. We started it, perhaps in October, but then it fizzled out around Christmas. We didn't really get hold of it. So then we stopped doing it. (Study counselor)

The need for a social community was not met by planned meetings. Any attempt to compel anyone to engage in social meetings only worked for a short time, or not at all. One participant said the following:

I don't think I've had a single social meeting. At the beginning, we were gently encouraged to call someone, or to have a coffee and talk about whatever we liked, like we used to, like you'd see in the lunchroom. But I haven't done it, not even once. No, I don't know why. I haven't been aware of it, but it hasn't been easy. (Controller)

A key observation here seems to be the willingness to participate in social meetings and to choose people to meet. This was emphasized by one participant as follows:

You talk with your closest colleagues every day, anyway. We do that via Teams, but not always by phone. Also, we talk about serious things and trivial things, I think. But then there are other colleagues who you don't have much contact with, and some who I have no contact with at all. (Communications officer)

One may be in regular contact with one's closest colleagues, while others remain somewhat peripheral. Being sociable increasingly depends on what form of meeting one chooses and who one meets. One participant noted the following:

It's becoming more and more specific. You don't interact with everyone to the same degree. Some are in my circle, while others are outside it. It becomes quite clear who you prefer not to interact with. (Software engineer)

There is a duality about the interviewees' reasoning around engaging in social intercourse with their colleagues. Even though they missed their colleagues, they heard from each other less frequently, even choosing to avoid social meetings. The interviewees reported meeting their closest colleagues less frequently because their assignments did not necessitate that. Sometimes, this involved the conscious choice to avoid contact with specific colleagues, with regard to the situation and how they would engage in social contact, and who they would meet. Parallel processes of inclusion and exclusion took place, resulting in fewer spontaneous meetings, more selective social contacts, and a higher rate of planned meetings. Consequently, this implies changed social and professional interactions patterns when working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Compliance and resistance during digital meetings

When employees work from home, the previously physical meeting space then becomes digital, a change experienced as significant by most employees. Not only has the professional meeting been moved to a new context, so too has the way in which this kind of meeting takes place and the way in which the interaction between those present is

experienced and dealt with. In contrast to contexts where a sociable work community is placed center-stage, attendance at different kinds of digital meetings is not voluntary. The purpose of this kind of meeting is to drive a shared sense of duty forward. These meetings are unanimously described as more effective. This is highlighted by the remarks made by this participant:

> Discipline during meetings has improved thanks to Skype, or whatever tool you're using. Previously, it was not uncommon for people not to arrive precisely at one o'clock, especially if many people were supposed to attend the same meeting. There was always someone who was late and someone who said: "I have to go and get some coffee." The discipline at meetings has improved. Almost everyone is ready within a minute of the scheduled start-time. That's one thing. The other thing is that the actual quality of the meetings has improved, there's more of a focus. One person speaks at a time, we don't talk over each other because it doesn't work then. It just becomes a mess. (System developer)

The digital format of these meetings has had consequences for how they proceed. The interviewees described this in terms of efficiency, achieved by means of the employees being punctual and only talking about items on the agenda. At the same time, the digital format of meetings prevents people from talking over each other, or continuing to discuss things once the meeting has ended. These factors also influence how people express themselves: They plan what they are going to talk about in the digital meeting room. One of the participants stated the following:

> There were more complaints when we had meetings IRL [in real life]. That's my answer. The meetings were polite, but I think complaints were made more explicitly IRL. At the digital meetings, you plan what you're going to say more. (Priest)

From these remarks, we conclude that the digital meeting place is perceived to be more disciplined since people are more inclined to be punctual and remain on topic. In contrast to this, we also note that it is possible to remain somewhat invisible during a digital meeting and to prioritize one's own work over the meeting itself, especially when work is organized via teams and each team has the responsibility for its own project or task. Then, it is easier to choose when to be active, or not, during a meeting. One participant made the following observation:

> You feel that if you turn the video off, it's much easier to do something else during the meeting. Mess around with something, do some other writing. Only listening with one ear and perhaps not being so involved, compared to physically sitting at a meeting with someone else, or if the video was turned on for that matter. You notice people working during meetings quite a lot actually. (Software engineer)

Prioritizing one's own work while attending a digital meeting, but without making a contribution to that meeting, demonstrates that employees prioritize their own work over the joint work done during meetings. This behavior could explain why digital meetings do not take as much time as physical ones. On a deeper level, this could be understood as an act of resistance, that is, that an employee does not consider the topic of

discussion at the meeting to be of interest, or one that he/she is willing to contribute to. The interviewees reported that the opportunity to shift their focus from the shared context of a digital meeting to their own work is an advantage, without reflecting on how this might impact the content of the meeting. One participant made the following admission:

> But then it's been an advantage, actually, to be able to continue working on something that isn't really part of a meeting, and to keep one ear open. When I'm directly involved, I have an excellent focus. This is a good thing for me since I get so much information without being particularly focused. The meetings are more peaceful and have a greater focus, if you ask me. (System developer)

Another way of experiencing digital meetings, which we encountered in our empirical material, is when a few people dominate them. One participant said the following:

> If seven people are at a Zoom meeting, there's always one topic of conversation that's hijacked by one person. Then you can't easily change that topic of conversation without letting people talk one at a time. You miss that, being able to talk with someone who's sitting just next to you. (Study counselor)

The digital format makes it difficult to change the topic of conversation, or to express your own opinion. Furthermore, during a meeting, you lack the opportunity to ask a colleague a question about something that has just been said.

The interviewees also mentioned that it was more difficult to assess the atmosphere of a digital meeting. A participant emphasized this point with the following remarks:

> When you enter a room, you ask yourself "What's the atmosphere like here?" You get a sense of whether the atmosphere feels very nice or whether it's slightly strained. You don't get those feelings in a Zoom meeting. When you enter the room, you feel "Wow, what a lot of energy there is here!" This isn't something that you can sense via Zoom. (Study counselor)

In a digital forum, situations may arise that can influence the participants during the meeting and leave them feeling uncomfortable afterward, especially since the habit of interacting digitally was almost non-existent before the pandemic, as in the case of the following participant:

> I remember once that the boss wanted to tell us one of us had resigned to start a new job. There was silence. This person meant a great deal to the work team, and she was present, and nobody said anything like "No! Are you quitting?" or "Why?" or "We all wish you the best of luck!". Instead, it was completely quiet. It was an abnormal kind of interaction. There was silence. It was uncomfortable, I felt. (Priest)

Interactions in the digital format offer both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, digital meetings are described as more efficient, with participants sticking to the advertised schedule and keeping to the points on the agenda. At the same time, this also

means that time is seldom given over to social interaction. On the other hand, some people describe these types of meetings as less prioritized than their own work. Another aspect of this type of meeting is the fact that the atmosphere and the participants' feelings are difficult to read or describe.

Digital meetings provide a place for disciplined behavior and acts of resistance simultaneously. This disciplined behavior consists of adapting oneself to a stricter way of conducting meetings whereby the participants' frameworks regarding what can be done, said, and felt is more restricted. The acts of resistance, in contrast, consist of attendees doing their own thing instead of participating in group meetings. The latter challenges the former, in the long-run risking the degrading of work performance and eroding any shared code of conduct. One participant provided the following description of her experience:

> I think that things have really got worse. More often than not, you don't say anything. More often than not, you work on something else during the meeting. It's more distanced. (Priest)

In this section, we have highlighted the dynamics of digital meetings when working from home during the pandemic. It is shown how employees, in different ways, prioritize themselves and their own work, while distancing themselves from what they share. Thus, the acts of compliance and resistance on the part of the employees have a negative impact, not only on the quality of the meetings, but also on the work community per se.

Experiencing the (un)creativity and (un)spontaneity of the digital space

In the two previous sections, we have highlighted how individual interests sometimes challenge the common purpose. The link between the social context and the shared image of work goals made itself apparent when the interviewees reflected upon how challenging it was to recreate different everyday situations in the digital workplace. Seemingly inconsequential interactions between colleagues provided added value, both to the individual's work and to shared work. However, more work had to be done in order for these interactions to take place in the digital context. One participant said the following about this:

> You're no further away than a conversation, and you can make your voice heard on Teams and so on. But it can be the case that, when my colleagues are discussing something and I'm listening in, and recognizing what they're talking about, I can offer my own input on the matter. If you hear that they need some information, or that you can fix something that maybe contains an error. It's these types of discussions that you miss. But if you have your own small questions to ask, then the bar might be a bit higher than it was before. It's so easy to just sit on the other side of the desk and be like "OK, what was that all about?" You just can't ask this type of stupid question the way you might have done before. (Controller)

The physical proximity of colleagues is significant when it comes to helping each other out, including asking questions or supporting a colleague with a problem. One participant illustrated this sentiment with the following remarks:

> It's quite common that we solve a problem during our breakfast break, when one colleague asks another something, and maybe a third colleague has the answer. However, they can talk over each other for hours and they're not even close to finding an answer, even though it's really simple, actually. It's at times like that you can get a little bit of help from someone who overheard something about the problem, it can be very effective, I think. This never happens using Teams. (Software engineer)

When contact with colleagues is digital, the spontaneity of collaborating on different tasks disappears, and the threshold is raised as regards making contact with another colleague. It thus becomes more difficult and takes more time to complete an assignment. Similarly, one can miss out on information that is often informally shared in social contexts. Regardless of the nature of a task, serendipity and spontaneity are indicated as crucial for attaining the information and inspiration to complete a task, as commented on in the following quote from a participant:

> You miss all the watercooler chit-chat. You miss everything someone else might be talking about. You get no free information at all when you work from home, and neither can you take a quick reality check. You withdraw to some degree, "Listen, how did that work?" Any form of contact has to be actively initiated, you know. This mostly means that you don't do that. (Study counselor)

During a digital meeting, the participants' focus is on the immediate problems needing to be solved. Discussion seldom leads to anything, while innovative or creative discussion disappears, as described thus by one participant:

> Then there are things that aren't done or discussed in the same way they would've been if we'd been sitting together in the same place working. Innovative and creative discussions suffer slightly because not everyone shares the same information all the time, like when they're [physically] at the office. You hear someone having a problem, and someone else has the answer, and it's solved in five minutes. That's not really how it works now. (Software engineer)

Digital meetings and working from home imply a certain amount of predictability and this may cause some employees to lack engagement. One of our interviewees claimed that her role had become more instrumental in the context of the digital meeting:

> The negative thing is that everything takes place digitally. You don't get that sense of community you otherwise get, and you don't have that perkiness and energy, or the joy you feel when you go to work. "Who's here today?" So, you chat with someone, things happen. At home, things are very predictable, sometimes... I don't think you have the same commitment to the job. Instead, I think people just do their own thing more often. (Communications officer)

Another interviewee shared a similar sentiment, claiming that several dimensions favor creativity in ways that are difficult to recreate in the digital context. This participant argued:

> This issue of creativity, thinking about something together, using visual aids in the room where you're sitting having a workshop. Or you walk around the room thinking and sketching on the whiteboard together. No, this doesn't happen now. To be more creative during development work, I think it helps to meet up in real life. (Study counselor)

In this section, we have highlighted the drawbacks of digital meetings, as well as the significance of holding meetings in a physical space. Irrespective of whether the meeting is formal or informal in nature, it was argued by the interviewees that it is easier to help each other, to enjoy access to information, and to develop ideas and conduct creative discussions in a physical meeting. Physical proximity to one's colleagues was described as making work easier. Achieving similar effects was found difficult in the digital context. Thus, it was challenging to maintain creative processes and spontaneity while working from home during the pandemic. Moreover, we also want to stress that none of the interviewees reported that the digital space facilitated creativity and spontaneity at work.

Discussion

This article has explored what working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic means for workplace relationships and the work community. Our results show a change in employees' approaches to their workplace relationships, that is, (1) being selective as regards social interactions; (2) showing compliance and resistance during digital meetings; and (3) being less spontaneous and creative in the digital space. All in all, we understand these approaches as a more individualistic way of relating to one's colleagues when working remotely in times of crisis or when facing unexpected disruptions.

From our empirical material, we can see that our participants found different approaches or tactics for dealing with both their rapid transition into working from home and with the disconnection of workplace relationships from space and time, entailing changes to how employees connected with their colleagues and work. Pre-pandemic studies of teleworking show that these new ways of working impact workplace relationships between colleagues (Härenstam 2010; van der Lippe & Lippényi 2019); however, this impact has been scarcely discussed (Byrd 2022; Lal et al. 2021). Our results show that employees became more selective with regard to their social contacts and that interactions were restricted to a limited number of colleagues, a finding also supported by Lal et al. (2021). Some of our participants report choosing not to enter into social settings despite the fact that they missed these very things. Hence, we can no longer assume workplace relationships are as they used to be (Härenstam 2010). A lack of interactions does not mean a lack of relationships but changed relationship dynamics, whereby the meaning of togetherness or belongingness becomes more volatile (Härenstam 2010), and there is a risk of social isolation. However, our study provides a more nuanced picture of experiences and choices when considering social isolation as a choice that employees make in line with their individual priorities.

Several tensions are expressed by our participants as regards dealing with increasing numbers of digital meetings. The employees developed a number of approaches in order to maintain a 'normal' workday and as regards how to engage in digital meetings. As an act of resistance, individuals tended to behave more in accordance with what Allvin (2008) calls regulative rules, hence a focus on individual needs rather than on the collective. This act of resistance is expressed in terms of working during meetings, especially when the topic of the meeting was not directly related to one's own interests, or a lack of engagement or interest in contributing to the meeting. On the other hand, compliance has a rather instrumental meaning; the interest is in keeping meetings short and sticking to the agenda in order to gain time for one's own work task. Compliance is also driven by the digital format of the meetings, which is experienced as limiting participation. Our finding shows that social rules are contested at digital meetings; when sitting in front of a screen, it appears to be easier to neglect the other participants. Hence, digital meetings seem to pave the way for new relationships between the individual and the organization, that is, a distancing of the individual from the organization, a relationship whereby individual choices get more space and hence shape the work community. We also see, as Love (2007) discusses, that the individual seeks support to a greater degree from his/her own workgroup, and from the colleagues closest to him/her, while the others are pushed into the background.

The digital space is experienced as inhibiting informal learning, spontaneity, and creativity. To the participants in our study, spontaneous conversations are essential for acquiring information that would otherwise have been more difficult to find (e.g., Cooper & Kurland 2002). Innovative and creative tasks are more challenging to initiate and perform in the digital context. Physical proximity and sharing the same physical atmosphere, as well as the use of a whiteboard, are pointed out as bearers of creativity, something which cannot be reproduced in the digital space. What emerges here is the importance of the physical meetings and face-to-face interactions. Even though workplace relationships can continue in digital environments (cf. Mikkola & Nykänen 2020), there are implications, however, for creative work and informal learning (Cooper & Kurland 2002), as well as a negative impact on performance levels (e.g., Håkansta & Bergman 2018; van der Lippe & Lippényi 2019). Moreover, Håkansta and Bergman (2018) discuss the importance of social engagement and belongingness to joint learning and development. The participants in our study complain about missing out on informal learning, and that opportunities for spontaneous problem-solving are limited in digital settings. Digital meetings are thus experienced as less challenging and creative, and instead as rather administrative in nature. This has, according to our participants, a negative impact on their performance, as they have less opportunities to discuss new ideas or to gain inspiration.

To sum up, our study shows that workplace relationships are forged under working conditions that are informed by increasing levels of individualization. It is important to acknowledge that, for the great majority, working from home during the pandemic was an unexpected and dizzying change. It was a period fraught with anxiety and uncertainty, not only because of changed working conditions, but also because of societal worries and concerns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This might have shaped what employees' perceptions and experience of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic mean for workplace relationships.

Conclusions

How employees interact with their colleagues is important for their social and professional lives and development. We are arguing that the work community can be weakened by working from home. The theoretical contribution made by the study is the notion of the vulnerability of the work community in the absence of physical proximity. This contribution stresses the importance of understanding the dynamics of the work community in the absence of a shared workplace. Employees withdraw from the collective in different ways. Individuals put their own needs and interests first without giving much thought to the long-term consequences of this for the organization and sustainable working life. One consequence of this is that workplace relationships are weakened by working from home.

Taking a more individualized approach to one's own work resonates with other tendencies toward individualization, both on the labor market and in society generally. In Sweden, for instance, employees from various sectors have demanded continuing opportunities to work from home after the restrictions associated with the pandemic are lifted (Tjänstemännens centralorganisation 2021). We note that it is the needs of the individual, above those of the organization, that form the basis for this type of argument. As we move from doing our jobs in the workplace to doing them remotely, we are seeking collective dimensions in new ways. Instead of seeking support in the organization's collective rules, routines, and organizational support, we are seeking the collective support of our colleagues. To be able to do that, however, it will be necessary for us to be able to find new, distance-based ways of meeting and conducting dialogues, ways that will lead to the development of belonging, trust and knowledge exchange.

Thus, this study suggests the following practical implications. Employees and employers need to develop a common understanding of the impact of changed dynamics in workplace relationships when teleworking. Furthermore, it is essential to understand how working from home impacts creativity and spontaneity. Hence, an increase in working remotely requires continuous reflection with regard to what the consequences for workplace relationships will be.

One empirical limitation of the present study is that it only included employees with many years of experience in their respective careers, who are used to working independently and who are well-established at their workplaces, as well as in the collective context. Other results may be obtained with younger employees new to the labor market, or with newly hired employees. Last but not least, we suggest in-depth analysis of how the responsibility for workplace relationships is shifting from the organization to the individual.

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