



# The Corona Pandemic and Working Life: Findings from a Longitudinal Danish Study<sup>1</sup>

■ **Thomas Bredgaard<sup>2</sup>**

*Professor, PhD, Centre for Labor Market Research, Aalborg University, Denmark*

## ABSTRACT

*There have probably not been any greater disruptions in working life since the Second World War than those experienced during the corona pandemic. This article examines how different occupational groups experienced the changes in their work life during the different phases of the corona pandemic. The study contributes to the growing literature on how the Nordic labor markets managed the corona pandemic and what we can learn from experiences to improve working life in the future.*

*The data material consists of longitudinal interviews with representatives of five occupational groups in different work life situations four times during the pandemic. Across the interviews, we find that the corona pandemic reinforced three incremental trends in working life: (1) the workplace as an important social arena, (2) reflections on work life balance, and (3) the potentials of homework and online meetings.*

## KEYWORDS

*change / corona pandemic / COVID-19 / Denmark / learning / working life*

## Introduction

The corona pandemic was a unique and dramatic moment in the history of working life at individual, workplace, and societal level. Working life researchers were also given a unique opportunity to study real-time transformations in work organization, work content, social relations, work life balance, wellbeing, etc.

This article focusses on changes in working life during the corona pandemic and reflects on the lessons learned among selected occupational groups in Denmark in different work life situations. Their experiences and lessons are neither representative of the Danish labor market nor the five occupational groups that they represent. Nonetheless, their experiences are valuable as a mirror to get insights into changes in working life during the corona pandemic and as a magnifying glass that enlarge and reinforce certain tendencies in working life.

The data material consists of 370 (short) interviews in total with workers from five different occupations during four different phases of the corona pandemic. During the first lockdown in spring 2000, we selected 105 respondents from five different occupational groups in different work life situations: Employees continuing to work from their physical workplace (nurses and grocery shops employees), employees working from their private homes (school teachers and employees in liberal professions like lawyers,

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<sup>2</sup> Corresponding author: Thomas Bredgaard, Aalborg University, Fibigerstræde 3, DK-9220 Aalborg, Denmark. E-mail: [thomas@dps.aau.dk](mailto:thomas@dps.aau.dk)



real estate agents, and accountants), and finally employees who were sent home because their workplaces were locked down (employees in hotels and restaurants).

In the Danish case, the first lockdown was relatively short from March to April 2000. Workplaces gradually reopened from April to August 2000. In the second phase of the pandemic, we reinterviewed the same respondents to understand their reactions, as they gradually returned to their workplaces. However, restrictions were gradually reintroduced from August 2000 to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and resulted in a full-scale lockdown from December 2000 until March 2021. We, therefore, conducted a third interview with the same respondents, which among other things, allowed us to compare the experiences with the first and second lockdown. From March to November 2021, workplaces gradually reopened for the second time, and we conducted the fourth and final interview with the respondents.

The data material, therefore, covers the period from spring 2000 until autumn 2021, but not the two ensuing phases of the pandemic in which the workplaces were partly locked down (November 2021-January 2022) and reopened again (January-February 2022). Currently, the Danish labor market is open and all restrictions in working life have been lifted. It is therefore an appropriate time to look back at how the corona pandemic affected working life and consider what we can learn from these experiences.

The next sections describe the research design of the study and the literature of the field. It is followed by an empirical analysis of the main results from the data collection as well as a discussion of the findings and conclusions.

## Methodology

The Danish government reacted quickly to the corona pandemic and was among the first countries to introduce a lockdown of society and working life (cf. Ornstorn 2021). The lockdown took effect from 13 March 2020. Schools and educational institutions were closed, and pupils and students switched to online education. Public employees in critical functions were transferred to emergency response units (e.g., doctors and nurses), while other public employees in non-critical functions were asked to work from home as far as possible. Private professions with close physical contact with costumers were closed (e.g., hairdressers, masseuses, and tattooists), while other private professions were encouraged to work from home (e.g., lawyers, real estate agents, accountants, consultants, etc.).

When we designed the study in the spring of 2020, the lockdown had created three interesting work life situations: (1) working from physical workplaces, (2) working from private homes, and (3) sent home from work (wage compensation program). The main objective of the research was to examine how the corona pandemic affected and changed working life for representatives of occupational groups in these work life situations.

We selected five occupational groups: two of them mainly working from physical workplaces (nurses and grocery shop employees), two of them mainly working from their private homes (schoolteachers and liberal professions), and a group that was sent home (employees in hotel and restaurants). The objective was to identify occupational groups that experienced transformations in their working life due to the corona pandemic and represented different working life situations. We also selected occupational groups from both the public and private sector to identify sectoral differences in

regulations and responses to the pandemic. This was not possible for workers being sent home, which only occurred in the private sector. In the following, we explain why we selected the specific occupational groups.

‘Working from the physical workplace’ were occupational groups in essential functions who, despite the risk of contracting COVID-19, continued to work from their workplace during the entire pandemic (e.g., doctors, nurses, social and health workers, employees in grocery stores, manufacturing industry, and the construction sector). In these workplaces, the job was to carry out work as before, but to avoid becoming infected with COVID-19 and passing the infection on to others. Thus, measures such as social distancing, distance markers, division into smaller teams, and protective equipment were introduced. We selected *nurses and employees in grocery stores* as examples of essential workers. These are typical examples of relational work, which is difficult to perform behind protective equipment or while maintaining social distancing. We expected that the risk of contracting COVID-19 would lead not only to insecurity and anxiety, but also to pride in and recognition for their roles at the front lines of the corona pandemic.

‘Working from private homes’ were mainly employees in non-essential functions who could work from their private homes. During the lockdowns, the authorities issued instructions or recommendations for large groups of employees to work from home. In spring 2020, one quarter of the Danish work force were working regularly from home compared to less than one in ten before the pandemic in autumn 2019 (cf. Statistic Denmark, [link](#)). We selected *schoolteachers* and certain *practitioners of liberal professions* (real estate agents, lawyers, accountants, and consultants) as examples of home-workers during the corona pandemic. As their homes became their workplaces, changes ensued regarding the work environment, work-life balance, and the transformation from physical to digital relationships.

‘Workers sent home’ were occupational groups in non-essential jobs that were closed during the corona pandemic because of a high risk of infection due to the close physical proximity between employees and customers. This included workplaces like hotels, restaurants, bars, discotheques, cafés, hairdressers, tattooists, and masseuses. Employees were sent home on public wage compensation and were not allowed to maintain formal relationships with the workplace, colleagues, or customers. At its peak in spring 2020, more than 250,000 employees received wage compensation, which was equivalent to 10% of the entire work force in the private sector. The wage compensation scheme was part of the relief packages negotiated between the government and the social partners to mitigate the negative economic consequences of the lockdown. The wage compensation scheme was a completely new scheme and raised interesting questions about the experience of being cut off from work without formal contact with colleagues and managers and without certain knowledge about the possibilities to return to the former work. As an example of workers on wage compensation, we selected *employees in the hotels and restaurants*. We expected that the abrupt discontinuation of work could have both negative and positive consequences for work-life balance and wellbeing in this group.

The research process in the project was unusual compared to ordinary research projects. The research was difficult to design in advance due to the unpredictability and novelty of COVID-19. The application process was also compressed and speeded up due to the sense of urgency. Only a month went by from the initial project idea to the completion of the first interviews. This meant that we had a general but not fully developed



research design when we did the first interviews. The initial design was meant to capture changes in working life among the selected occupational groups during the first lockdown. Research themes and questions were further developed during the project in line with developments in the corona pandemic. We expanded the number of interview rounds and adapted the research design in accordance with developments in the corona situation to capture the first reopening (autumn 2020), the second lockdown (winter 2020/2021), and second reopening (autumn 2021). We drew on different theories and approaches during the project that were relevant in relation to the different phases of the pandemic.

The longitudinal research design makes it possible to study how the different phases of the corona pandemic affected the working life of the occupational groups. We interviewed the same respondents four times during the pandemic. In April 2020, we recruited a total of 105 respondents (approximately 20 persons from each of the five occupations), who agreed to be interviewed several times during the corona pandemic. The respondents were recruited through the personal networks and social media of the researchers and their institutions (LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter). We conducted the first round of interviews (105 in total) in April–May 2020. We used three interview guides, one for each of the working life situations (working from physical workplaces, working from home, and workers sent home). The common themes were background information about the respondent and the workplace, changes in work life, work organization, and work content due to the corona pandemic, changes in social relations, coping strategies, wellbeing, mental health, and reflections on their future working life. We also asked specific questions relevant for each working life situation and occupational groups. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted over the telephone and typically lasted 20–35 minutes.

In October–November 2020, we conducted the second round of interviews (96 interviews in total). By this time, the labor market had reopened and respondents from hotel and restaurants, schoolteachers, and practitioners in the liberal professions had returned to their workplaces. We therefore focused on the five occupational groups and the changes in working life due to the reopening of workplaces and return to work and used one interview guide for each occupational group covering common and specific themes. We were specifically interested in changes in working life since the last interview, how the reopening of workplaces affected work life, work organization, work content, social relations, and wellbeing among the respondents.

The third round of interviews was conducted in February–March 2021 (89 interviews in total) during the second wave of COVID-19 and the second lockdown. This allowed us to compare experiences with the first and second lockdown, and especially how the prolonged lockdown affected wellbeing and mental health among the respondents. We could therefore largely reuse the interview guide from the first interview round.

The final round of interviews was conducted in October–November 2021 (80 interviews in total). This was a period when virtually all restrictions had been abolished, corona infection rates were very low, and COVID-19 had been downgraded from a ‘critical’ to ‘serious’ disease. There was a widespread perception that the corona pandemic had ended, and that working life and social life could return to normal. The interviews not only focused on the same themes as in previous interviews, but also what the respondents had learned from the corona pandemic and how it would change their working life in the longer term.

For each interview round, we published an online report in Danish (see [www.coronaogarbejdslivet.aau.dk](http://www.coronaogarbejdslivet.aau.dk)). This article summarizes the main findings from each of the reports. We analyzed the interviews in accordance with the themes and assumptions of the interview guide for each phase in the corona pandemic. In the research team, we identified the main findings for each occupational group and common findings across the groups by coding the most common topics and themes in the interviews.

Table 1 shows the number of interviews distributed among the five occupational groups.

**Table 1** Interviews by occupational groups.

|   | <b>Interview Round 1</b> | <b>Interview Round 2</b> | <b>Interview Round 3</b> | <b>Interview Round 4</b> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Nurses  | 23                       | 20                       | 20                       | 18                       |
| Employees in grocery stores   | 21                       | 18                       | 15                       | 12                       |
| School teachers   | 19                       | 18                       | 17                       | 15                       |
| Liberal professions (real estate agents, lawyers, accountants, consultants) | 21                       | 19                       | 17                       | 16                       |
| Hotel and restaurant employees  | 21                       | 21                       | 20                       | 19                       |
| Total   | 105                      | 96                       | 89                       | 80                       |

There was a minor dropout in each interview round, especially among employees in grocery stores. This is probably because job tenure is relatively low among employees in grocery stores and a higher proportion of respondents are young and under education. By comparing standardized measures for mental health and psycho-social work environment in the labor force in general with measures for the respondents in our study, we found that the respondents in our study have slightly better mental health and a slightly better psycho-social work environment compared with the labor force in general (Bredgaard & Hansen 2022).<sup>1</sup>

## Previous research

The following section summarizes the main findings from the previous research on the impact of the corona pandemic on working life for the three different work life situations created by the corona pandemic. We mainly focus on the relevant Danish literature, but also draw on international literature.<sup>2</sup>

## Working from the workplace

The changes in working life for employees in essential occupations revolved around preventing the workplaces from becoming sources of infection, for example, by introducing protective equipment, distance markers, and rules on social distancing (cf. Andersen & Trygstad 2021). Nabe-Nielsen et al. (2020), for example, examined the fear of infection



and the spread of infection among several of the occupational groups in the Danish public sector that were most vulnerable (elder care, hospitals/rehabilitation, psychiatry, childcare, and ambulance services). Data stem from a Danish survey among union members from early April 2020 (approximately 6 weeks after the first corona outbreaks). Most of the respondents in the five groups felt secure about the guidelines for contact with clients/patients who were infected, potentially infected, or non-infected. According to the study, fear of infection and the spread of infection had a negative effect on mental health and work motivation (Nabe-Nielsen et al. 2020: 4). Nabe-Nielsen et al. (2021) further investigated the importance of COVID-19 for work environment, feeling of cohesion, and infection experience among Danish teachers. The survey was based on questionnaires for teachers from May, June, and November-December 2020. Nabe-Nielsen et al. (2021) concluded, among other things, that a large proportion of teachers feared becoming infected or passing on infection, and that teachers experienced conflicts with colleagues due to different attitudes toward the importance of limiting the spread of infection. Distancing requirements and the use of face masks in teaching negatively affected relationships with students. The psycho-social work environment and relationships with colleagues were also negatively affected, and many teachers were concerned about learning outcomes.

## Working from home

The corona pandemic was a breakthrough for homeworking, telework, online meetings, and virtual management. In Europe, Danish employees were among those with the highest rates of homeworking during the pandemic (EuroFound 2020a, 2020b). Many commentators stress that the surge in homeworking is the most certain and lasting change in working life after the pandemic (McKinsey Global Institute 2021; Sostero et al. 2020). In a qualitative and quantitative study of virtual management during the first lockdown, Navrbjerg and Minbaeva (2021) not only found that most Danish managers experienced higher productivity among employees than they expected, but also that distance management was a major challenge. A similar result was found in Norway, see Ingelsrud et al., 2022. Andersen and Elmholt (2021) came to the same conclusion by interviewing Danish distance managers in knowledge and office work during the first part of the corona pandemic (Andersen & Elmholt 2021). This is supported in a comparative study by Ipsen et al. (2000). Based on a survey conducted in Denmark and seven other countries from March to May 2020, they found that experiences with homeworking were predominantly positive, and to a greater extent for employees than managers. In a survey conducted among knowledge workers in 27 countries, Ipsen et al. (2021) also found that more respondents were positive than negative about homeworking. Advantages were mainly related to work-life balance, higher efficiency, and greater autonomy in work, while disadvantages were related to social isolation, a lack of colleagues, and the physical work environment in private homes. An analysis of the Danish respondents in the survey showed that in general, managers found homeworking more challenging than employees, and this was mainly due to the challenges of distance management (Kirchner et al. 2021). Despite this general finding, the research on employee wellbeing during the pandemic clearly shows variations among employees. While some employees thrived with homeworking, others did not (Ipsen et al. 2021). Some groups

experienced a better work-life balance, with more free time and time for the family, while others worked more hours and worked more intensely (Eurofound 2020a). Families with young children were particularly hard hit during the lockdowns, when they had to attend to their work and their children at the same time (European Commission 2021).

## Workers sent home

The lockdowns led to historically high numbers of employees being sent home from work as their workplaces were forced to shut down (e.g., hotels, restaurants, bars, night-life, hairdressers). We did not manage to find any previous literature on the occupational groups sent home from work during the pandemic. General studies of the social and economic consequences of the corona pandemic, however, indicate that the pandemic reinforced social and economic inequality (cf. Alstadsæter et al., 2022; Cook & Grimshaw 2020; Eckert & Hentschke 2021; Eurofound 2020b) and that groups in vulnerable positions were at a greater risk of unemployment (e.g., young people, low-wage, self-employed, and temporary employees) (Alon et al. 2020; Eurofound 2020b; Hupkau & Petrongolo 2020; Ilsøe & Larsen 2020; Kott 2021; OECD 2023).

From this reading of the existing – mainly Danish – literature, we expect to find major variations among and within occupational groups in terms of the impact of the corona pandemic on working life and wellbeing. The literature indicates that the impact of the corona pandemic is highly context dependent in a complex relationship among individual coping abilities and strategies, work life situations, and occupational characteristics.

## Empirical analysis

The following section analyzes the main results from the research project and the four interview rounds. The structure follows the phases of the corona-pandemic, reporting first on the general findings from each study and then on the specific findings from each of the five occupational groups. Due to space limitations and the scope of this journal, we mainly focus on the impact of the corona pandemic on work life and to a lesser extent on wellbeing and mental health. For more details, please refer to the four reports of the project (Bredgaard & Hansen 2020; Bredgaard et al. 2020, 2021a, 2021b).

## The first lockdown

The first interview round showed that there were both common and different experiences among the five occupational groups (cf. Bredgaard et al. 2020). The most important common experience was that COVID-19 prevented previous modes of physical interaction and led to new forms of social and digital interaction. All five groups experienced less social contact during the first lockdown, regardless of whether they were working outside the home, working from home, or sent home from work. At this time, the majority of international studies and experts suggested that the corona pandemic would affect mental health negatively, for example, in the form of fear, nervousness,





anger, loneliness, insomnia, anxiety, and depression (Brodeur et al., 2020; Pfefferbaum et al. 2020; Rajkumar 2020; Torales et al. 2020; Vindegaard & Benros 2020). We also expected that the lockdown would have a negative effect on the wellbeing of respondents, but could not detect a general negative effect of the lockdown on mental health. However, we did find several examples of fear of spreading the infection among those working outside their home, stress among home-workers with young children and insecurity among those who were sent home. The data showed that the consequences of the lockdown depended on the work life situation, occupational group, and context of the individual respondent at the time of the study.

*Nurses* managed several detailed guidelines to protect patients and citizens as well as to avoid the spread of infection. The guidelines changed the content and organization of the work and led to high levels of work pressure. As one nurse express it:

.. there has been heaps of guidelines that we have had to implement with very short deadlines, this has really meant a lot of work pressure... and this has meant that there has been no dialogue about it... new guidelines have been sent out, for example on Friday afternoon, which then took effect over the weekend.

Nurses generally experienced the social distancing to patients and citizens as an obstacle to practicing their profession, for example, in relation to difficult conversations and care tasks. As one nurse say:

It is particularly difficult if you need to deliver a difficult diagnosis or explain a difficult treatment. There I might sit on the edge of the bed or put a hand on the shoulder.

Online meetings or telephone conversations were not considered suitable alternatives to physical presence by most respondents. A positive experience that the interviewed nurses mentioned was that the corona pandemic enabled collaborations across former occupational boundaries. Nurses also experienced public recognition for their work during the first lockdown, which positively affected their wellbeing. But there were also nurses who feared infecting family, friends, and acquaintances and therefore self-isolated, which negatively affected their wellbeing.

*Employees of grocery stores* did not experience the same major changes in their working lives and wellbeing. In grocery stores, guidelines were few, simple, and uniform across all stores, making them easier to implement. As one employee in a grocery shop explains it:

Everything came from the top management. I feel good about that, because then I know that it is the same in all stores.

However, there were examples of customers who did not respect the guidelines and employees who had to act as ‘corona police’, which was unpleasant:

For example, there was a family of five persons with three teenagers who came shopping together. So, I had to be the corona police and asked them if it was necessary. I can’t help it. I think it’s a lack of consideration. Lack of respect for staff and other customers.



Employees experienced a sense of purpose and community in aiding society through the crisis, as well as some public recognition for their efforts.

*Schoolteachers* shifted almost overnight from classroom teaching to online teaching and homeworking when schools were closed. Schools did not have contingency plans or guidelines for the new digital school. Schoolteachers were left to their own devices, as one of the respondents explain:

Was there some kind of plan? No, there was not any plan. We had the strategy that now we ourselves had to figure out somehow to keep in touch with our students and teach.

This not only produced major differences within and among schools, but also resulted in job satisfaction from being able to organize work more autonomously. Experiences with digital teaching were very mixed and depended to a large extent on individual skills and experiences. Schoolteachers were on a steep learning curve and gained important experiences with online teaching. Many schoolteachers worked more hours than usual in an abnormal work environment:

I now work from 8am to 10pm. I am on all day, which suits me well. I also have more time to talk to students who are having a really hard time. So, we have some conversations which are good.

Other respondents did not thrive in this work environment and felt that their work-life balance was challenged, especially those with children living at home. While some schoolteachers experienced a calmer and more efficient working day, others found it difficult to concentrate and remain efficient.

In the beginning I was probably very efficient, but I just as quietly stopped being that. In any case, it's something that I've been thinking about for the last few days... it's incredible how little I get done, but I find it difficult to concentrate.

*Practitioners of liberal professions* (lawyers, real estate agents, accountants, and consultants) were not required but instead encouraged to work from home as much as possible. Most of the respondents we interviewed decided to work from home during the first lockdown. They did not see this as a major change in their working life, as most of them already had some experiences with homeworking. Their experiences with homeworking were predominantly positive. Most respondents found homeworking more efficient, spent less time on commuting, and experienced shorter meetings. As one lawyer said about the lockdown:

I have never experienced anything like it. I have been so efficient and worked more than usual with all clients. At the same time, I have driven less than ever because we hold digital meetings.

Although most of the respondents worked more hours, they had greater flexibility in working hours and could distribute the work throughout the day and week. The skepticism that employers in liberal professions had about homeworking quickly evaporated



and they expected more online meetings and homeworking in the future. As one partner in a law firm explains it:

As partners, we have experienced that our employees have been very loyal. That is an important learning from this... at the management level we have always been very skeptical about letting people work from home. But we can see from their time records that they have been extremely loyal working from their homes.

*Hotel and restaurant employees* were in a new situation where they were neither at work nor unemployed, which gave rise to different reactions. Some experienced the new work life situation as insecure, frustrating, and stressful, while others enjoyed the freedom from work and the time to reflect on life. This is seen in the quotes below from employees in restaurants:

You have had time to think about life. But then you think about things. Whether what you are doing is right and could you do something else. And is it the right job you have. I have thought about that.

I will say I have spent a lot of time reflecting. So where in the world am I? What place do I have? What it means to me. Looking inward has meant a lot to me. Being able to define why I do things like this. Even if it is a job, you do not really need, why do you keep doing it even though there is no need for it.

For most respondents, it was an abrupt transition from a busy and often physically demanding job to a daily life without work and without a fixed time structure. The respondents had to find new structure and routines in life on their own. The lockdown created uncertainty and insecurity about the future and some of the respondents wondered whether they should change jobs or leave the labor market.

## The first reopening

The second interview round was conducted in the autumn of 2020 in a period when most employees returned to their workplace for a working life where corona was a new and unwelcome guest (Bredgaard et al. 2021a). The first part of the period was marked by optimism, reopening, and an expectation that COVID-19 was history. The second part of the period was marked by a resurgence of COVID-19 and new restrictions. During the study period, most nurses returned to the jobs they had before corona and to a more normal work situation. Employees in grocery stores continued to work largely as before but had to get used to wearing face masks at work. Schoolteachers also returned to the schools, but to a workplace with guidelines and restrictions to avoid the spread of infection. In the liberal professions, there were only minor changes in working life during the period, but a demanding workload due to a positive business development. Most hotel and restaurant employees also returned to the jobs they had left in the spring of 2020 and were subsequently sent home for the second time.

A common feature of all five groups was that working life with restrictions was marked by variability, unpredictability, and a high workload. For similar results in Norway, see Dahl, 2022. It appeared to be more complicated to reopen than to lockdown

workplaces. Reopened workplaces should avoid becoming sources of COVID-19 by preventing larger gatherings, enforcing social distancing, implementing distance markers, etc.

Across the groups, we also found that COVID-19 restrictions challenged and changed social relations at the workplace. Most of the respondents expressed social deprivation during the lockdown. The reopened workplaces made it possible to reactivate social relations while still observing social distancing. Large groups were replaced by small groups (e.g., the ward rather than the hospital, and the team rather than the school). Large social events were replaced by smaller social events or canceled (e.g., summer lunches, Christmas lunches, and anniversaries). As a nurse explains it:

There is more distance between us. After all, we work quite closely together, physically, when we stand over a patient and we work together on long shifts of 10-12 hours at a time. We also used to talk about personal things. But now we talk about corona all the time, so there is not so much of the personal interaction anymore. And I miss it.

Relations with people outside the organization also changed. Customers, patients, and students were suddenly a source of infection. Employees in grocery stores had to ensure that customers used face masks and complied with the rules on social distancing. Schoolteachers and nurses had difficulty practicing their profession when keeping distance from the students or communicating a difficult message to a patient through a face mask and protective equipment. Hotel and restaurant employees had difficulty communicating and interacting with guests. As one employee in a restaurant explains it:

We use face masks. Only the bosses use visors. So, it's a bit difficult when you can only see the eyes when they smile or can't see the mouth when it moves. You really must use a completely different body language than before. So, it's a bit annoying both for us and for the guests.

In the liberal professions, experiences were more positive and gave a preview of hybrid working life after COVID-19 as the respondents could decide to work from home or work from the workplace.

On this basis, we found that the corona pandemic had at this point not brought about fundamental changes in working life and mental health for the five occupational groups, but instead reinforced existing trends. The pandemic had magnified, for example, the importance of socially critical functions (nursing, food supply, and education) and reinforced trends already present in working life (such as homeworking, online education, and work-life imbalances). I will return to this in the discussion and conclusion.

## The second lockdown

The third interview round was conducted over the winter of 2020-2021 (cf. Bredgaard 2021b). The second lockdown was different from the first lockdown. It was much longer and occurred during the winter months of 2020-2021. It impacted workers' wellbeing



more negatively this time, even if workplaces were better prepared and could draw on the experiences and procedures from the first lockdown.

*Nurses* experienced how hospitals came closer to their capacity limit with increasing numbers of COVID-19 patients. However, the vaccination roll-out made the nurses feel secure and optimistic about the future. Although COVID-19 occupied much of their working lives, the procedures were familiar and manageable. The nurses continued to experience that their professional practices and relationships with patients were hampered by the guidelines regarding social distancing, face masks, and protective equipment. Communication was difficult and it was challenging to show empathy at a distance. Social life in the workplace was put on 'hold' and relations with the larger collegial community were limited. An increasing corona fatigue and exhaustion could be detected among the nurses; some were defeatist and felt that it was unfair that public recognition could not be exchanged for a higher salary. This fatigue is expressed in the quotes from the nurses below:

I am getting tired. Too little happens both at work and privately.

Now it is like a year later. It's slightly more mechanical. There is not the same fear in it. There is a bit more despondency maybe, I think.

I do not care. I am a bit more defeatist. I go to work and do what I am told to do, but the joy is not there in the same way because there is not that opportunity to be normal.

Just as during the first lockdown, *employees in grocery stores* did not experience major changes in their working lives during the second lockdown. The use of face masks had gradually become commonplace but was still described as challenging in relation to customers and colleagues. When asked about what has happened since the last interview, an employee in a supermarket gave a reply that was typical for many of the respondents in grocery stores during the second lockdown:

It's the same as it's been all along, I don't think it's changed. [...] It has become common for the customers to wear a visor and mask. There are of course still a few who forget, but then they run out again and apologize. I personally think it is hard to wear for so many hours, 6-7 hours straight.

The respondents expressed that they missed the social aspects of work and the informal social relationships with their colleagues. Like the nurses, the grocery store employees also expressed that they felt safe about going to work, and with the vaccinations could glimpse hope ahead for a working life without corona.

*Schoolteachers* were sent home for online teaching and homeworking for the second time. However, they felt better prepared than during the first lockdown. This was especially true in relation to the teaching of students who did not thrive in the digital school. Collegial relationships remained limited and there was a need for more informal conversations and meetings.

I really miss talking to other colleagues. I miss that unity that exists at school, because right now, we are completely divided into atoms. And when you meet someone, you walk

in a curve around each other, some walk with a visor, you don't touch handles and sanitize all the time. Everyone sees everyone as a potential risk. It's such a weird way to be "not together".

There were also several examples of 'corona fatigue', where the changes in working life and lack of opportunities to plan working life became exhausting.

*Practitioners in liberal professions* experienced minor changes in their working lives. Most respondents followed the recommendation and worked mostly from home. They generally thrived but articulated a social deprivation and were gradually getting tired of corona restrictions in working life and social life. One of the major changes we observed was that managers in liberal professions had become more positive of homeworking and online meetings. As a partner in a law firm explains:

I think this means that many people would like to have regular days for homeworking. We had difficulty dealing with that years ago. We thought that it would simply not work. We almost regarded it as a day off ... We are not afraid of that at all now. That would be all well and good.

*Hotel and restaurant employees* differed from the other groups, as the majority did not work during the second lockdown. They described it as easier to be sent home a second time, but a more difficult period to be at home without a job. It was easier because they knew the routines from the first lockdown, but more difficult due to the winter, the longer duration of the lock-down, and the uncertainty about the future. Although hotels and restaurants are an uncertain business that fluctuates with the business cycle, the respondents experienced increased uncertainty and unpredictability during the corona pandemic:

I have survived three rounds of layoffs and keep thinking: What will happen next? ... but I have really pushed it further back this time. Because you cannot do anything about it.

The limitations on social relationships with colleagues, managers, and customers negatively affected well-being and job satisfaction. Several respondents also expressed that unlike the first lockdown, they found the second lockdown less legitimate.

## The second reopening

The fourth interview round was conducted in the autumn of 2021. It was a period when restrictions were abolished, and respondents got a taste of working life after the corona pandemic. The respondents not only generally described the workplaces as returning to 'normal' before COVID-19, but also gave various examples of changes. There were examples of increased use of homeworking and digital solutions. There were examples of extra workloads due to prevention of infection, hygiene, sanitation, managing outbreaks of infections, and sick leave. There were also many examples of changes in social relationships (e.g., social distancing, no handshakes with new colleagues, patients, or customers).



Respondents rarely experienced that their management systematically collected and evaluated the new practices and experiences. There were several respondents who extracted their own private lessons and reflected on their working lives and work life balance. While some were confirmed they had the right job and work life balance, for others, the corona period proved to be the impetus needed to change path or otherwise bring about a change in working life. The corona period thus served as a catalyst and strengthened the incentives for individuals to actively change their work life situations.

*Nurses* experienced that work was almost the same as before the corona pandemic despite a backlog of tasks that had been postponed due to corona and an extra layer of corona-related tasks. The autumn of 2021 was also marked by a wage conflict with the government and their employers, which for some of the nurses commanded more attention than the corona pandemic. The public recognition from the spring of 2020 was gradually regarded as an empty gesture. The wellbeing of the nurses was generally better than during previous interview rounds but continued to be challenged by high work pressure. A lot of attention was still paid to preventing the spread of infection and ensuring good hygiene. There were also some examples of innovations in working life, for example, in the use of digital meetings and digital consultations. Social relations were gradually reestablished, although relations with patients and their relatives were still affected by the prolonged use of protective equipment and social distancing. We did not find many examples of systematic collection of the lessons learned during the corona period, but we found many examples of nurses making their own private lessons. Several respondents expressed that they had almost had enough of the work pressure and considered leaving the profession. As one nurse express it:

I have kind of given up on thinking and getting frustrated with how it is here. It makes it a little easier. I cannot change how this department is, there are others who must take care of that. It has become more and more hopeless during corona. It is generally hopeless at the hospital, operations that are replaced, positions that cannot be filled.

*Grocery store employees* experienced minor changes in their work lives during the corona pandemic. The respondents looked back on a challenging period in which unity and the sense of community among colleagues became stronger. This was expressed in the final interview with a team manager from a large supermarket:

We have come closer, and we also talk about other things than just work. I think wellbeing has improved ... I think people have started to appreciate that we can see others and see each other again now that we can meet.

Respondents in grocery stores were generally happy to be able to go to work and felt grateful to have a workplace to attend during the pandemic. Some respondents expressed gratitude that it had not gone worse, but nonetheless called for the sense of community and recognition that they experienced during the first lockdown. In the autumn of 2021, grocery stores were largely operating as before the corona pandemic. However, some workplaces preserved sanitation, plexiglass barriers, distance markings, and extra cleanings. Almost all the respondents found that the customers had forgotten

all about sanitation and social distancing. Respondents were especially relieved that they no longer had to wear face masks during work and found that it improved the physical work environment and communication with customers and colleagues.

*Schoolteachers* expressed that work and social relations were almost the same as before the corona pandemic. However, COVID-19 was still an unwelcome guest at schools that required extra attention to hygiene, cleaning, and sickness absenteeism. While the fear of infection still plagued some of the respondents, they thrived being back at school with the students and being able to deliver a more normal teaching day. Despite the many changes and challenges during the corona pandemic, some teachers had become reaffirmed in their choice of profession. This is expressed by this teacher:

I think maybe I have been confirmed that I am doing what I am supposed to. After all, I tried something else for a long period [online teaching]. Then I thought that if this is what I am going to do, I should not be a teacher. I need the physical contact and the presence of my students.

With a few exceptions, there was not any systematic collection of experiences and learning from the corona period in schools either.

*Practitioners in liberal professions* experienced few restrictions in their working life during the corona pandemic and expressed that their working life was largely back to normal when we interviewed them in autumn 2021. Homeworking and online meetings have become a more integral part of working life. This was typically not the result of strategic decisions, but instead a result of individual decisions. The lessons were that homeworking saved time on commuting and online meetings were often more efficient. The respondents were also more aware of the advantages of physical meetings, for example, better contact with customers, improved opportunities to negotiate, space for small talk, and building relationships. Respondents also mentioned examples of minor changes concerning handshakes, sanitation, and sick leave practices. For some of the respondents, the corona period had given rise to reflections on their working lives. Many felt that they had been too busy before, and that work should occupy less of their lives. A few of the respondents decided to take the consequence and for instance reduce their work hours. This is expressed by one of the respondents who worked as an independent consultant for a large state employer:

I found that there were so many other things worth spending my time on ... I have a quieter life now, a life that suits me a lot better.

*Hotel and restaurant employees* experienced major changes in their work lives during the corona pandemic, with some of them being sent home up to three times. Since the first interview in the spring of 2020, one-third of the respondents changed jobs, for instance, to less stressful work with fixed working hours. The hotel and restaurant employees still in the business described the autumn of 2021 as very busy. There was an unprecedented shortage of skilled labor, as hotels and restaurants struggled to catch up and recover the financial losses from the lockdowns. This meant that the employees experienced an unprecedented level of work pressure, which challenged their wellbeing. Some of the respondents considered changing jobs if the pressure did not ease. Other respondents were reaffirmed of being in the right occupation and felt that their jobs were





an important factor in their wellbeing. There were few traces of the corona pandemic left in the workplace, apart from the high workload due to postponed events and an increased focus on hygiene. Several respondents described how guests seemed to have forgot all about the guidelines for avoiding COVID-19. This is expressed by a chef in a restaurant:

You no longer feel that there is something called corona, or that there has been. It is very, very, very rare that anything is mentioned today.

## Conclusion and discussion

The corona pandemic was a major disruption of normal work routines, work organization, social relations, and working life. In the public debate, there has been a great deal of interest in whether the corona pandemic leads to lasting changes in working life and mental health. While some commentators argue that ‘everything has changed’ and nothing remains the same as before the corona pandemic, others argue that ‘nothing has changed’ and work life will quickly return to normal (cf. Navrbjerg & Minbaeva 2021; Jensen & Schultz 2020).

Our study shows that there is not one common experience, truth, or learning from the corona pandemic, but instead many different experiences, truths, and insights. The respondents we interviewed are neither representative of the labor market as a whole nor the occupational groups they represent. But the interviews provide a unique insight into how representatives of different occupations experienced and handled the changes in their working life during the corona pandemic.

The respondents in our study experienced both major and minor as well as positive and negative changes in their work life. For instance, some employees in hotels and restaurants were sent home and their workplaces closed three times in less than two years. Other groups, like employees in grocery stores, experienced minor changes to their working life during the pandemic. Some groups, like nurses, experienced a stressful and challenging working life during the pandemic, while others discovered the benefits of homeworking and online meetings. It illustrates the variations in the impact of the corona pandemic on working life and wellbeing among and within occupational groups.

The stories and experiences of the respondents are on the one hand unique and on the other hand a mirror that throws recognizable reflections back at the viewer. Their reflections and experiences can be considered like a ‘developer fluid’ that makes tendencies and regularities in working life more visible.<sup>3</sup> Our data indicate that the corona pandemic has not so far produced any fundamental transformation in Danish working life. Despite all the differences in the interviews, we did identify some important commonalities and similarities. The corona pandemic reinforced three trends in working life. For each of the trends, there are different experiences, as our interviews illustrate.

- (1) The corona pandemic reinforced the workplace as an important social arena. The lockdowns and social distancing changed social relations and led to social deprivation for the respondents. They were reminded that the workplace is also a social arena and that work has important social aspects that can promote well-being and

job satisfaction. Despite experiments with digital alternatives especially during the first lockdown, it gradually dawned on many respondents in our study that it is difficult to establish and maintain social relationships online. This was especially the case with employees performing relational work (e.g., nurses, schoolteachers, and employees in hotels and restaurants) who found digital interactions to be work of poor quality and a poor substitute for physical presence. Jobs with a high degree of relational work therefore intended to return to 'normal' as soon as possible after the corona pandemic.

- (2) The corona pandemic reinforced reflections on work-life balance. The corona pandemic disrupted working life and affected the work-life balance for most of the respondents. For some respondents, their work-life balance improved because they were able to work more flexibly from home. Others experienced more boundaryless work and had difficulty separating work and private life. Many respondents were busier and had to deal with frequent changes of restrictions and guidelines. For some, this was accompanied by a greater sense of meaning and recognition for jobs in essential services; for others, it triggered a desire to change jobs, working hours, or work organization. The experiences and desires for a new work life balance should be explored and recognized by workplaces and could be a reservoir to recruit and retain employees.
- (3) The corona pandemic reinforced the potentials of homework and online meetings. The lockdowns showed that many jobs and tasks could be handled by homeworking and through online meetings. Our study shows that homeworking and online meetings have both advantages and disadvantages. For some respondents, homeworking allows them to focus and concentrate on work without interruptions, provides flexibility in the work schedule, and reduces commuting, while others experience a more intense and stressful working day and deteriorating work-life balance. After the corona pandemic, many workplaces are struggling to find a new hybrid balance between physical attendance and homeworking where the advantages of homeworking outweigh the disadvantages (cf. Christensen 2022).

It seems that most workplaces of the respondents are now back on track compared to before the corona pandemic and have returned to a kind of 'normal'. While this does not mean that workplaces and employees have not learned from the corona pandemic, there are few examples in our interviews of a systematic dialogue or collective collection of experiences and instead many examples of individual lessons and learning. We recommend that workplaces and employees pause and collectively reflect on how to use this major experiment in work life changes that the corona pandemic has been to improve the future of working life.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For each interview round, the respondents also received a short questionnaire with standardized questions about background information, mental health, job satisfaction, psycho-social work environment, work-life balance, and social relations. The psycho-social work environment is measured by the Danish Research Centre on Work Environment (NFA) in biannual surveys by employing four items on a scale from 0 to 100 (job satisfaction, collegial relations, purposefulness in work, and experiences of recognition). To establish a reference point, we asked our respondents similar questions and compared with the survey response for the labor force in general.
- <sup>2</sup> In each of the reports from the project, there is a more detailed literature review (Bredgaard & Hansen 2020; Bredgaard et al. 2020, 2021a, 2021b).
- <sup>3</sup> The metaphor ‘the developer fluid’ has also been used by Jensen (2020) to understand the types of governance that pandemics has evoked and by Lauta (2021) to understand the social and political repercussions of natural disasters.