

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the reported research is to understand how neurominorities experience remote working in the times of crisis and what are the implications of this for Human Resource (HR) professionals.

Design/methodology/approach: The rich qualitative study builds on ten semi-structured interviews with nine neurodivergent employees and two HR practitioners to understand the lived experiences of dealing with crisis in a remote working environment.

Findings: Moving to remote work resulted in the lack of routine, distractions, and working long hours difficult to monitor by line managers. Further problems with communication in a virtual environment and lack of understanding by others were found to be particularly burdensome to neurodivergent individuals. On the positive note, remote working in the times of crisis allowed for avoiding sensory overwhelm and was seen as an important step in creating a healthy work-life balance.

Practical implications: The findings of this study point HR practitioners' attention towards building a more neurodiversity-friendly post-pandemic workplace and prompt employers to offer working arrangements which better suit employees' domestic and personal circumstances.

Originality: This study addresses the lack of research on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on neurominorities. In doing so it answers recent calls to move away from universal HR as a route to positive employee outcomes and facilitates a more accurate reflection of organisational reality for disadvantaged members of society.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic ignited a crisis like no other, forcing businesses to test their resilience and adaptability to remain operational. In this situation, Human Resource (HR) departments are at the forefront of ensuring their organisation has an effective strategy in place to manage the immense changes and minimise damage caused by the global pandemic. While the existing research focuses on employee behaviours during times of crisis (e.g., Adkins et al., 2001; Stoker et al., 2019), it is the Covid-19 crisis in particular that amplified the position of HR (Hamouche, 2021) and its central role in responding to this unprecedented crisis in organisations globally (Collings et al., 2021).

Among others, HR departments are preoccupied with the impact of Covid-19 on employees' wellbeing, health and safety, implementing new work arrangements, and upholding engagement. Indeed, recent research discusses how the current crisis forced organizations to move its staff to working from home (Aczel et al., 2021), its effects on family structures (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020), or how HR are handling furloughs and layoffs (Szulc and Smith, 2021). However, the efforts involved in managing employees during the Covid-19 pandemic should not lead us to underestimate the differential impact of HR across different employee groups. For instance, it was argued that there have been significant inequalities in how different groups of workers have experienced the economic dislocation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Butterick and Charlwood, 2021) and calls have been made to balance multiple stakeholders needs (Collings et al., 2021) by moving away from universal HR as a route to positive employee outcomes (Cafferkey et al., 2019).

The reported research addresses the above calls by focusing on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the wellbeing of the ~~minority~~ and arguably vulnerable population of neurominority employees. Neurodiversity refers to the cognitive diversity in all humans (Chapman, 2020) whereas neurominorities are an umbrella term for the subset of neurodivergent conditions, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, dyspraxia, and dyslexia (see: Bottema-Beutal et al, 2020; Doyle, 2020). While the current crisis brought about many challenges to individual employees, Covid-19 was reported to have a particularly negative impact on these specific groups of individuals. Precisely, it was found that it leads to mental health problems and rises anxiety levels (Davidson et al., 2021; National Autistic Society, 2021) and increases difficulties in managing daily family activities (Colizzi et al., 2020).

Since coping with complex changes and unpredictability associated with the current global pandemic may exacerbate the risk of worsening of the wellbeing and mental health of the neurodivergent employee (Davidson et al., 2021), our research seeks to understand how this can be mitigated in the context of remote working. New norms of working have been established in the current crisis and organizations have been forced to alter work structures by moving to work from home (WFH). While WFH poses new challenges for the organisations and employees, there is currently an urgent need to consider the differential impact it may have across different employee groups. Through in-depth interviews with neurodivergent individuals and HR practitioners, we provide an answer to the most pressing HR problems associated with remote working of neurominority workforce. In doing so we contribute to the literature in several ways.

First, while we have increasing knowledge on the impact of Covid-19 on working practices and HR, the debate is accused of offering only a generic guidance (Aitken-Fox et al., 2020). This paper, in turn, explains the differential nature of the perceptions of, and reactions to the universal HR practices by neurodivergent workforce. In doing so, it addresses the lacuna of research on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the well-being of neurominorities. Second, it further answers recent calls to move away from universal HRM as a route to positive employee outcomes (Cafferkey et al., 2019) and thus facilitates a more accurate reflection of organisational reality (see also Kinnie et al., 2005) for disadvantaged members of society (Szulc et al., 2021). Third, while diversity management is a core competency for HR scholars (Bierema, 2010), the areas of study are largely limited to age, gender, and race with little emphasis paid to neurodevelopmental and cognitive disability (Procknow and Rocco, 2016; Szulc et al., 2021). Our study adds to the existing limited research scrutinizing how to manage neurodivergent employees for employee satisfaction and increased wellbeing in the times of crisis. Practically, we discuss critical aspects of HR practice with implications for the organisational ability to meet business needs through managing its employees in the times of crisis.

In the sections to follow, theoretical rationale and empirical basis for the current study are outlined. The research design and method are presented and justified. The interview data is analyzed, and the main findings are discussed considering their theoretical and practical contributions. The discussion is concluded with directions for future research.

Literature review

The changing role of HR

Prior to the current crisis associated with the Covid-19 disease, the changing nature of work and employment was widely acknowledged (Park and Park, 2021). The age of technical disruption, changing demographics, or increasing diversity all had significant impact on the way people are managed in the workplace context (Tomczak, 2021) and expanded the role of HR (Kim, 2012). Since the role of HR is to be responsive to new challenges and circumstances, there is a general agreement in the existing literature that the Covid-19 crisis will further shape how HR is conceived and delivered in the coming years (Harney and Collings, 2021). Indeed, as agents of organizational change and experts in uncertainty, HR is strongly positioned to provide leadership suited for the times of crises and assist organizations in implementing agile workforce strategies (see: McGuire et al., 2021).

It is argued, however, that to be equipped to navigate the shifting landscapes that confront the field, HR theory needs to be more receptive to the ongoing changes and contemporary challenges (Harney and Collings, 2021). For instance, Butterick and Charlwood (2021) argued that the Covid-19 crisis revealed that some aspects of HR theory are partly responsible for persistent economic inequalities and contribute to amorality in people management. McGuire et al. (2021: 26) further discussed how the pandemics unmasked ‘significant and troubling’ inequities and injustices in the treatment of different groups of employees. They further criticised the well-established in HR resource-based view for not recognizing that the employee experience of organizations is heterogeneous. The authors called for promoting a more humanistic and employee-centred approach to HR which should build on shared values of equality that respect human difference and attend to individual needs.

The differential impact of crisis on the workforce

It is important to recognise that distinct categories of employees have different needs and require specific HR practices to contribute to organisational performance (Kinnie et al., 2005). For instance, HR practices may have different effects based on employment modes (Lepak and Snell, 2002), occupational identities (Cafferkey et al., 2020), employee demographic dissimilarity (Jiang et al., 2017), or neurodevelopmental differences (Szulc et al., 2021). Regarding the latter, some neurodivergent workers may experience difficulties with social interaction, stress control and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Hedley et al., 2018).

Such difficulties that neuro-minorities face may be further exacerbated in the light of the Covid-19 crisis.

More specifically, recent changes to working patterns and new modes of communication may have a negative impact on job experience (Kelly and Senior, 2021) and may be particularly difficult to navigate and manage for individuals who experience difficulties with adapting to change (Annabi et al., 2019). The pandemic also led to the digitization and automation of work which, on the one hand, allowed employees to work effectively from home (Kulik, 2021). On the other, it increased loneliness and isolation (Gao and Sai, 2020), thus posing considerable risk to mental health and well-being (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). While most research on the challenges associated with the Covid-19 crisis is targeted at employees with children (Kelly and Senior, 2020), or those who are single and/or childless (Gao and Sai, 2020), the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on neurodivergent workforce remains largely unknown.

Remote work and associated challenges

The current crisis not only forced organizations to alter work structures but also showcased the potential for new communication technologies to enable working from home (Kulik, 2021). If effective, remote working is associated with higher organizational commitment, job satisfaction and job-related wellbeing (see: Felstead and Henseke, 2017). However, such benefits may come at the cost of work intensification and inability to switch off (Chawla et al., 2020).

Such inconsistent outcomes associated with remote working may be partly explained through the lens of the boundary theory which captures how boundaries between work and family are created and maintained (Ashforth et al., 2000). More specifically, the theory suggests that individuals use different strategies to maintain an optimal level of work-home segmentation. Such boundaries simplify the environment into domains that dictate one's role, such as being an employee or a parent (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015). The demands associated with such different roles compete for individuals' resources and thus, may be a source of conflict which leads to blurring the boundaries between work and non-work domains (Eddleston and Mulki, 2017).

To better understand the experience of remote working for neurodivergent employees, we combine the insights provided by the boundary theory which focuses on daily role transitions

(Ashforth et al., 2000: 472) with border theory which focuses on the ways in which employees manage and negotiate the work and family spheres in order to achieve work-life balance (Clark, 2000: 751). Border theorists argue that remote working heightens negative work-home spillover resulting in the difficulties associated with switching off at the end of the workday (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). This may be particularly prevalent when individuals are isolated from social and emotional interactions present at the work environment (Bentein et al., 2017).

While both theories proved to be useful frameworks to understand the work-home interface, it is important to acknowledge that perceptions of, and reactions to the same practices may differ for employees, and thus we need a more accurate reflection of organizational reality (Kinnie et al., 2005), particularly for disadvantaged members of the society (Szulc et al., 2021). For instance, individuals with strong segmentation preferences face challenges crossing boundaries. In contrast, those with strong integration preferences face challenges in creating and maintaining boundaries (Field and Chan, 2018). The theories lead us to believe that people assign different meanings to work and life as well as the difficulty of transitioning between the roles. The specific research questions guiding this study are, therefore, concerned with understanding how neurodivergent individuals experience remote working in the times of crisis and what are the implications of this for HR professionals.

Methodology

This study is part of a larger research project exploring neurodiversity in the workplace. For this specific part of the research, a qualitative approach was adopted to provide a comprehensive exploration of the experience of neurodivergent individuals relating to remote working in the times of crisis and its implications for HR professionals. Since qualitative research design allows the researcher to build relationships with research participants and establish trust to get an insightful understanding of the topic (Bansal and Corley, 2012), it appeared particularly relevant from the standpoint of the reported research.

Specific methods within this study included semi-structured interviews. Respondents were sampled using purposive and snowball techniques. The choice of data sample was informed with the selection of information-rich cases that could be studied in-depth. To inductively explore the research questions guiding this study, a focus was placed on neurodivergent employees and HR professionals working for organizations employing neurodiversity-friendly practices. The sample included eleven individuals (see Table I).

Table I: Sample characteristics

IDENTIFICATOR	GENDER	POSITION	CONDITION	INTERVIEW LENGTH
P1	Male	General manager at construction and materials company	Autism	60 min
P2	Male	Engineer and neurodiversity champion at oil company	ADHD, Dyslexia	55 min
P3	Female	Business owner in project support	ADHD	90 min
P4	Male	Aerospace engineer	Autism	60 min
P5	Female	Life coach	ADHD, Autism	90 min
P6	Female	Trainee solicitor	Dyslexia	45 min
P7	Female	HR Manager in education	n/a	32 min
P8	Male	Inventor of medical devices	ADHD, Autism	55 min
P9	Male	HR Advisor in healthcare	Bipolar	50 min
P10	Female	HR Business Partner	Dyspraxia	90 min
P11	Female	Business partnership advisor & carer	n/a	90 min

Interviews were conducted online via Teams software and lasted on average 63 min (shortest 32 min; longest 90 min). Prior to interviews, all participants were provided with an information sheet with details about the study and asked to sign a participant consent form. We also shared interview questions ahead of interviews as this is aligned with good practice of conducting research with neurodivergent individuals.

Interview questions were designed to find information on individuals' experiences of remote-working in the times of Covid-19. The interview commenced with more generic questions to find out about the research participants and their employment. We then discussed the concept of neurodiversity in the context of work environment and Covid-19 related changes. After this introductory phase, the questions pertained to experiences of neurominorities working from home with special emphasis being given to the work-home boundaries and the ways in which they strive to achieve work-life balance. We then covered more specific issues of communication, feedback, autonomy, support, teamwork, and the role of technology when working from home. Although an interview agenda was used to maintain consistency (see Appendix 1), respondents were encouraged to engage in more complex discussions relating to the themes that they perceive to be most important. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The process resulted in 509 pages of transcripts.

The formal analysis of the interview material was conducted collaboratively by the three authors using Template Analysis (King, 2012). Transcripts were first inspected to account for possible mistakes. Second, each member of the research team used a subset of the data to develop a preliminary coding scheme. We then cross-checked the emerged themes to ensure

inter-coder-reliability (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020). Third, we applied this coding template to the completed dataset. In a final fourth step, we revised and refined it after careful consideration of each transcript. This process generated a final version of the template, which served as the basis for the interpretation of the dataset. While the third author was assigned primary responsibility for creating, updating, and revising the codes (Guest and MacQueen, 2008), the entire research team engaged in intensive discussions to reach a consensus on the final coding template during documented team meetings to increase the reliability of the study (Saldaña, 2021).

Findings

Careful examination of participants' perceptions of working in the times of crisis revealed commonality between participants' views on the positives associated with remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the related problems. In terms of the positives, we found that moving work environment to home enhanced the working experience of neurominorities through allowing them to create comfortable space where own rituals were followed and sensory overwhelm was effectively avoided. On the other hand, we further found a number of problems that this new way of working raised, i.e., issues related to maintaining a positive work-life balance and communication challenges. Our themes are summarized in the Table II below. We discuss these in more detail in the next sections.

Table II: Key themes and sample quotations

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Positives of remote work	Own space	<p>If the heating is too cold, we can turn this up ourselves. It's you know, I think some benefits to working from home. (P2; Male, ADHD, Dyslexia)</p> <p>I've adjusted well because it's my home environment and because I'm quite structured. (P3: Female, ADHD)</p> <p>Working from home has been great because it has allowed me to do rituals and routines... I like printing out things and I wasn't allowed to print out and I need to scribble and see things printed. (P10: Female, Dyspraxia)</p>
	Sensory overwhelm avoidance	<p>Speaking to my neurodiverse colleagues... we certainly appreciated maybe being at home in that environment, maybe it's quieter, maybe there's less sensory distractions... we have a lot more control (P2; Male, ADHD, Dyslexia)</p> <p>[When working remotely] there are less distractions because I'm not in an open plan office (P6; Female, Dyslexia)</p> <p>Remote working would have been better for her [neurodivergent sister] because part of her issues were the stimulants, the stimulation of noise in the office (P11; Female, n/a)</p>

Negatives of remote work	Work-life balance maintenance	<p>Ability to stay on task at the beginning of the day and ability to stay on task at the end of the day - and the best time of a day... for me to cut out all distractions (P5; Female, ADHD, Autism)</p> <p>[When working from home] you are missing that social element a little bit, as much as you can have a pub quiz online it's not the same (P6; Female, Dyslexia)</p> <p>Some neurodivergent employees struggled with homeworking, they preferred coming into work and I can understand that in terms of blurring the lines between home and work (P8; Male, ADHD, Autism)</p>
	Communication	<p>[Speaking of a neurodivergent colleague] has a manager who wants to create a virtual team chat on an App and they cannot use this as they can't understand when different people are all commenting (P3; Female, ADHD)</p> <p>Online meetings where my team is people of ten but I don't see them...all black screens and microphones on mute...it can be difficult to read between the lines (P4; Male, Autism)</p> <p>[When working from home it's important for managers to remember] the invisible challenges will exist around neurodivergents in terms of organization, preparedness and social connectedness, and the need for clarification of directions and instructions (P5; Female, ADHD, Autism)</p> <p>One thing I've noticed is a pattern of feedback, there isn't enough clarity and there isn't enough feedback [after moving to remote work] (P11; Female, n/a)</p>

The positive side of remote-working in the times of Covid-19

Remote working is often deployed as an effective adjustment for neurominorities (Doyle, 2017). For instance, Doyle and McDowall (2021) recently suggested that, in the context of the ubiquity of remote access technology, practitioners should carefully re-consider if a full-time attendance in a busy and crowded space with additional cognitive burden should be a requirement for neurominority employees. Our findings shed additional light on such a view. Namely, our respondents highlighted how the move to remote working provided “*less sensory distractions*” and increased their ability to “*control heating, lighting and noise*” (P2; Male, ADHD, Dyslexia). This appears particularly important since neurodivergent minority often faces difficulties in processing their environment due to being vulnerable to sensory overload (Tomczak et al., 2021). Avoiding such a sensory overwhelm by the introduction of remote working may be an important step towards the provision of less distraction and increased scope productivity for neurodiverse people.

Another closely related advantage associated with remote work in the times of the Covid-19 crisis was participants' ability to create their own space where they felt comfortable. As evidenced in the following quote, "*Working from home has been great because it has allowed me to do rituals that otherwise I wouldn't do in an office...I am very lucky I have a great space with lots of screens and a nice big wall planner*" (P10; Female, Dyspraxia).

It appears that a move to the remote-way of working during the Covid-19 pandemics could have contributed towards more control over one's work environment. Since home context is easier to customize than one's office, it may play a fundamental role in helping neurominorities with attention deficits maintaining focus. Importantly, the positives of remote working in the times of Covid-19 should be considered in the light of the difficulties that participants reported. We turn to them now.

The negative side of working remotely in the times of Covid-19

The flexibility of working from a comfortable place has been already found to offer salient advantages for people with disabilities (Moon et al., 2014). Despite these positive prospects, accessibility issues in existing remote collaboration tools and ableist organizational norms have been also highlighted (Tang et al., 2021). Referring to neurominorities in the workplace specifically, existing research started to highlight the differential effects of working from home during the pandemic on neurodivergent professionals' work practices and routines (Das et al., 2021). Our findings contribute to this emerging line of research by suggesting that remote working arrangements can bring both advantages and challenges. Namely, the problems resulting from working from home were reported with regards to maintaining a healthy work-life balance and some communication challenges. We discuss them next.

Work-Life-Balance

Discussion surrounding the challenges associated with remote-working in the times of Covid-19 revealed that it was difficult for participants to create a positive work-life balance (WLB), otherwise known as a negative spillover between work and home life (Wolfram & Gratton, 2014). More specifically, this challenge proved difficult for neurodiverse individuals who, prior to the pandemic, had the ability to dedicate extreme hours to their work without experiencing burnout, "*Nothing is impossible...if I've got a project I don't go to bed for a week*" (P1; Male, ASD). Similarly, another extract shows how one participant found herself in a similar situation:

“Late at night I’d often be there after everyone else had gone home, sometimes because it’s that consciousness that I’ve got to do this, we’ve been given a deadline and you’re taking it literally” (P3; Female, ADHD).

When neurodiverse individuals moved to remote working during the global pandemic, it became evident that their ability to work past working hours can pose difficulties for managers who cannot monitor this, nor create boundaries in order to achieve a healthy WLB. As a result, this can be identified as an important HR issue in that such overworking and lack of boundaries can create burnout which is detrimental to employees’ wellbeing and aligns with the border theorists' approach (Piker-Binder, 2017; Zheng et al, 2015).

WLB was also discussed in terms of lack of routine and distractions which, for some, also came as a result of the introduction of remote working. One participant highlighted, “*If boredom creeps in that’s when the distraction comes in and the poor time management*” (P3; Female, ADHD). This idea demonstrates how the opposite case of WLB can be achieved, i.e., a disinterest in work in a home environment may be compensated by increased commitment to family life. Indeed, existing research highlighted how time management can be harder to achieve when remote working, particularly as the physical environment differs (Wang et al, 2021). Evidently, poorer time management can alter the amount of WLB achieved dependent on how distracted employees become.

Communication Challenges

Participants identified several challenges that arose as a result of remote working introduced during Covid-19 in terms of communication. Firstly, the use of group calls posed issues as indicated in the following representative extract:

“With all blank screen and microphones on mute... it can be difficult for autistic people to read between the lines where you do not see people’s faces” (P4; Male, ASD).

Problems of this nature may be frustrating for everyone (Wang et al., 2021). However, they are particularly burdensome for neurominorities (Oomen et al., 2021) and therefore should not be overlooked. For instance, Participant 1 explained how demanding keeping up with virtual meetings is because it involves writing down every single detail to avoid a possibility of misunderstanding: “*I write with far too much detail because I can’t bear to miss anything out... a possibility of misunderstanding*” (P1; Male, ASD). Similarly, P2 (Male, Dyslexia, ADHD)

revealed how a neurodivergent intern “*had some issues with communicating and keeping up to date with the line manager*” in a virtual environment. Indeed, pre-Covid-19 crisis research suggests that line managing neurodiversity may be complex, time consuming and often emotionally draining (Richards et al., 2019). Our findings suggest that the pandemic has made this task even more difficult. Such problems that are specific to the current situation are particularly well exemplified in the following quote:

“Misunderstanding can lead to unfortunate action...like disciplinary action and investigations because if they perceive comments as disrespectful...this is a challenge, especially when you can’t see the person you are talking to” (P4; Male, ASD).

The above example shared by Participant 4 was his personal experience of a disciplinary hearing which he described as a “*horrible ordeal causing much stress and anxiety*”. This clearly demonstrates how the challenges with communication associated with remote working can negatively influence one’s mental health and wellbeing and are thus a challenge for HR managers that urgently needs to be taken into consideration.

Other participants shed light on the different ways they engaged with remote-working and how some of their variations in communication became challenging for neurotypical people to understand. For example, one participant highlighted how “eye-contact is something I struggle with online” (P1; Male, ASD). Another person emphasized how she is commonly misunderstood by others:

“I like to doodle in meetings... people look at me as if I’m not paying attention (...) But it helps with keeping attention and focus and getting hyperactivity out” (P3; Female, ADHD)

Furthermore, a common pattern identified throughout the interviews was the need for clear feedback. This became more apparent in a remote-working environment where it was sometimes harder to find one-on-one time with managers. This is illustrated by Participant 4 (Male, ASD) who suggested “*I need immediate and personal feedback which I cannot always get on group calls*”. Similar responses were shared by others who emphasized the need for “*clarity with feedback*” (P6; Female, Dyslexia) and feedback that “*needs to be completely honest*” (P1; Male, ASD). Employees generally tend to engage in feedback-seeking behaviors (Krasman, 2013). However, our findings suggest that remote working in the times of Covid-19 hindered the scale at which feedback was delivered and emphasized the need to do so.

The findings indicate that the pandemic has indeed influenced neurominorities and their wellbeing through the changes to remote-working and the challenges which this can bring. Evidently, there is a common misunderstanding about the coping mechanisms which are useful for neurodivergent individuals which needs to be tackled by managers whilst also providing solutions to better wellbeing through improved WLB.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

Our study contributes to the existing line of research where a tendency is to move away from focusing on privileged workers (Ashley and Empson, 2013) to acknowledge the important role of disabled employees in the workplace context (Luu, 2018; Scholz and Ingold, 2021). Indeed, research on the implications of neurodiversity for HR has grown significantly in the past years (e.g., Johnson et al., 2020). However, the work in this area has been criticized for being largely atheoretical (Szulc et al., 2021) and often relying on the perspectives of the ‘experts’ as opposed to neurodivergent employees themselves (Tomczak et al., 2021). By building largely on the lived experiences of individuals perceiving themselves to be or being diagnosed with neurodiversity, we offer a more holistic understanding of the impact of the current crisis and the associated change to working patterns on their lives through the lens of the border and boundary theories. In doing so, we also contribute to the limited knowledge about the wellbeing of neurodivergent employees beyond studies that show autistic minority groups suffer disproportionately from social isolation (Hedley et al., 2018) with potentially detrimental effects on their mental health (Mastroianni and Storberg-Walker, 2014). Finally, we contribute to the lacuna of research on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis in particular on this vulnerable group of employees and thus answer recent calls for more research in this important area (Davidson et al., 2021).

We further contribute to the more general stream of research on the benefits and risks of remote working. While it may be assumed we already have a sufficient evidence in this area (e.g., Grant et al., 2013), existing research on remote working has been accused of lacking contextual relevance in the current Covid-19 crisis (Wang et al., 2021). We therefore add insights about the nature of remote work and its associated challenges in the specific context of the Covid-19 pandemics and its own unique demands. In addition, by focusing specifically on the nature of remote working for neurodivergent employees we further address the calls to move away from

universal HR (Cafferkey et al., 2019) and to provide a more accurate reflection of organizational reality for disadvantaged members of society (Szulc et al., 2021).

Practical implications

It is surprising that an overwhelming majority of HR professionals do not consider neurodiversity in their practices. For instance, in the context of the UK, only 10% of HR departments designed actions in an attempt to create a more neurodiversity-friendly environment (CIPD, 2019). However, our research demonstrates that certain solutions which can be implemented in organisations are often inexpensive and have potential to create traction for recognition of the importance of embracing individuals with a disability. Control of environment to preferences is acute for sensory sensitive neurominorities, but also relevant to those with mental health needs, other disabilities, or introverted personalities.

The findings from this research imply that offering remote work opportunities may come with certain advantages for neurominorities. This perhaps is not surprising given that existing research starts to outline how this form of work leads to avoidance of sensory overwhelm, improvement in concentration and reduction in social communication demands (Doyle, 2020: 117). However, the findings from our research further imply that working from home can bring not only advantages but also challenges. These include difficulties with maintaining a healthy work-life balance and communication problems.

Existing research acknowledged that a lack of appropriate work life balance can have a detrimental impact on health and undermines improvements in work quality (Felstead and Henseke, 2017; CIPD, 2019). The risks of overworking, presenteeism, burn out and drop in productivity are noted as potential concerns. We suggest that these can be redressed with allocations of time, regular manager check-ins and genuine consideration of flexible working. Offering working arrangements that better suit employees' domestic and personal circumstances create many opportunities to engage in non-work activity or caring responsibility.

While offering working from home opportunities will support neurodivergent individuals, we suggest that care needs to be exercised should this be a partial arrangement and staff are expected in the office for some of the working week. Neurominorities may find hot-desking distressing through the lack of regular and routine space. Similarly, Morris et al. (2015) noted issues with open plan offices which are particularly distracting, and suggested a quieter, home environment or wearing noise-cancelling earphones could be most beneficial.

Organisations are getting better at considering mental health and well-being as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Hamouche, 2021), which has rightly pushed this ‘front and centre’ for organisations. However, not much is known about managing neurodiversity in the times of crisis. The findings of our research suggest that communications and conversations with neurominorities must be honest and clear. Since communication can take place through many different channels, HR, managers and the neurodivergent individuals should discuss how this is best approached; it could be formal and structured, informal, face to face, remotely by video call, verbal, written, wiring diagram or project brief. In addition, it appears beneficial to ensure that managers are informed and supported. For instance, training on different neurodiversity strands will raise awareness and bolster their soft skills to manage their human resources well. Such a managerial training should not be a ‘one-off’, but something that is reviewed, refreshed, and has a supervision or support mechanism built into it.

Limitations and future research directions

The use of different methodology and analytical processes could complement, compare or contrast with the findings from this research, adding more to what is known about the experiences of neurodivergent individuals at work. The reported research recruited a small number of participants who had personal experience or professional input into the support for neurodivergent individuals in the world of work. In her blog article, Cara Pelletier (2020) discusses how more distressing ‘coming out’ as autistic was compared with her coming out as gay was. This implies that there needs to be an appreciation of the need for a safe, non-stigmatising culture, but also that participants who are neurodivergent individuals in full time work may be a hard-to-reach research group. As such, identifying neurodivergent research participants may be a difficult task. In fact, existing research has been argued to over-rely on the perspectives of the ‘experts’ as opposed to neurodivergent employees themselves (Tomczak et al., 2021). We therefore suggest that future research should seek to identify neurominorities as a research sample to provide a holistic understanding of the lived experiences of this particular group of individuals. A larger sample would also add depth of discussion and generate further awareness of structures within organisations that do, or do not, support the needs of not only neurodivergent individuals, but also neurotypicals in better work. In analysing the views and experiences of neurodivergent individuals, we are able to contribute to the body of academic knowledge and to developments in the furtherance of good operational HR practice, better work and better working lives.

Our findings, however, should be carefully interpreted in the light of the difficulty of teasing out which of the reported effects are related to remote working and which would only be relevant during the Covid-19 pandemic. The qualitative nature of the study and a small sample do not enable us to evidence for directionality of causation. Consistently, more research is needed to understand whether the impact of the pandemic is experienced through the mediator of remote working or if other factors and relationships come into play.

Additionally, further research which reviews the support mechanisms neurodivergent individuals may find accessible, relevant and supportive would be valuable. The isolation, communication and lack of managerial support was of concern for participants, and all deemed it detrimental to health and well-being. Understanding more about the support neurodivergent individuals would appreciate could allow a focused offering within the HR policy which provides support and is cognisant of the concerns raised in this research. Moreover, all research which is undertaken directly with those who have lived experiences will broaden academic and practitioner knowledge and understanding of the perception thus far under explored.

Finally, even though our sample consisted of different neurominorities, it is important not to generalise any advantages and benefits of remote working for neurodivergent professionals. Neurominorities are individual and even two individuals with the same condition will often have different preferences and needs (Kirby and Smith, 2021). Consistently, an aspect of remote working that brings benefits to some may pose challenges for others. Our research therefore flags some considerations that could be relevant, but which are also very much context dependent.

Conclusions

The adage, treat others as you would wish to be treated, resonates more when working with neurodivergent individuals, but this should be extended to consider how organisations can adapt their approach to the individual rather than trying to adapt the individual to fit.

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Appendix 1

Flexible interview schedule

Introduction & icebreaker	<p>Introduce the research team (who we are, why are we interested in this topic).</p> <p>Introduce the research (the aim of this research is to understand the experiences of neurominorities working from home during the global pandemic)</p> <p>Explain what the interview would look like and how long it will last.</p> <hr/> <p>Start with a generic, introductory question: Tell me more about your professional role.</p> <hr/> <p>Shall we talk about neurodiversity at work? I'd be interested to find out more about your experiences, especially in the times of a global pandemics.</p>
Main interview	<p>How do you support neurominorities in your job?</p> <hr/> <p>What would you say about the competencies of neurodivergent individuals?</p> <hr/> <p>From your perspective, how has the pandemics changed the way neurominorities experience workplace?</p> <hr/> <p>How would you describe the experience of working from home?</p> <hr/> <p>What benefits associated with this form of work, if any, do you recognize?</p> <hr/> <p>From your perspective, what are the most pressing problems neurominorities face in the workplace environment during the Covid-19 pandemics?</p> <hr/> <p>What can be done to overcome these problems?</p> <hr/> <p>Having moved to a remote way of work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- what do you think is the most effective way to hold neurominorities responsible for work-related outcomes?- how could work-related results be communicated effectively? <hr/> <p>Do you think technology could help to create a more inclusive work environment? If so, how?</p> <hr/> <p>What else can we do to build an inclusive work environment?</p> <hr/> <p>Do you want to add anything? Is there anything else we should know?</p>
Conclusions & a thank you	<p>Thank participant for their time and inform about the expected outcomes and ways these will be communicated/disseminated.</p>
