



Editorial

Challenges in Work and Employment during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Since 2019, we have been living and working in close connection with the threat of an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The World Health Organization (WHO) [1] declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic on 11 March 2020. After that, countries all over the world took various preventive measures to secure the lives and health of their people. Many, if not all, of these measures, such as general lockdowns and social distancing, impacted people's everyday lives. Alongside various country-specific compensation and support schemes to aid businesses, work organizations strove to change their operations to meet the challenges presented by the pressure of simultaneous health and economic issues.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued for a second consecutive year, along with new vaccines, nations gained experience with many types of preventive measures. It was at this point in time that this Special Issue was launched, on 25 March 2021. For ongoing and future recovery actions, it was considered important to find out what types of initiatives had been taken with respect to work and employment and how they were appreciated. On a global scale, worldwide organizations (the International Labour Organisation [2], Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [3], and World Bank [4]) have monitored from their specific perspectives the effects of COVID-19 on work and employment throughout the pandemic. It was considered relevant to focus on the level of work organizations and people's life experiences while meeting the challenges of the new situations caused by the pandemic.

Thus, this Special Issue was intended to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of changes that occurred due to the preventive measures against the pandemic in the domains of work and employment as a basis for further research and new practices, which would potentially also be relevant in the long run after the acute crisis is over.

The topics covered by this Special Issue include job security and employment status; working hours at the workplace; working from home (teleworking); quality of working life, including national- and workplace-level employment relations; workplace culture; leadership, management, and supervision styles; trust and control; gender-based work practices; reconciling work and family; and professional work practices traditionally characterized by close contact with clients or students, such as social work and teaching, education, learning of vocational skills; workplace development, and workplace learning.

These topics have aroused international interest, and we were happy to see contributions from Canada, India, and South Africa in this Special Issue. In addition, contributions were co-authored by Norwegian and Belgian colleagues alongside Finnish researchers, while the enthusiasm of Finnish researchers in multidisciplinary working life research can be seen in the rest of the contributions.

Temporal or permanent unemployment is one of the most challenging effects of restrictive measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this Special Issue, the contribution dealing with pandemic-related unemployment comes from the Finnish cultural sector, which is characterized by established institutions, but also by self-employment and precarious work. Haapakorpi et al. [5] collected written texts by artists and professionals



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about their experience during lockdown, when activities in the cultural sector, particularly in the performing arts, were closed down due to regulations about social distancing. Unemployment and a shortage of assignments for self-employed workers were common consequences in the industry. The authors used a content analysis approach to find out the ways cultural workers maintained their agency in temporal and relational dimensions regarding work and non-work.

Social distancing regulations during the pandemic were experienced as obstacles for workers in inpatient substance abuse treatment. Ekqvist et al. [6] analyzed semi-structured focus group interviews with professionals about their experiences during the pandemic and describe difficulties in applying social distancing in the context of treatment based on therapeutic communities. The professionals had to balance the need to secure lives and health by preventing infection from spreading within treatment units while assuring the quality of their treatment services. The pandemic also presented challenges regarding communication and co-worker support among professionals. Additionally, it was noted that in-person mutual help groups, which offer peer support alongside the professional help received in inpatient treatment, were inaccessible or highly limited, which accentuated the experience of impaired care during the pandemic.

While the treatment practices in inpatient care cannot be transformed by technical solutions without impairing the care, there are other fields of work that have allowed this type of transformation. Syvänen and Loppela [7] present a participatory action research (PAR) case in which research-assisted workplace development that was usually conducted face-to-face and in dialogue forums took place online. The authors analyzed the challenges, learning experiences, and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on a social, healthcare, and special education development project within a framework of theories of dialogic development and leadership. They used data collected along the course of the case by using various assessments and a questionnaire. Neutral, negative, and positive experiences among two participant groups involved in the project, implementers and pilot organizations, with remote work, devices and applications, and remote and technology-based development processes, were recorded. Both participant groups reported increased pressure at work, social isolation, and professional loneliness, and, on the bright side, improved work control and efficiency. The pilot organizations learned the development method, and development work continued with the use of technology despite the pandemic.

Seema Singh [8] studied the status of women engineers in education and employment during the COVID-19 pandemic in India using a multimethod approach. Singh presents how women engineers in India are respected in their field of work and notes that this respect leads their families to support them and give them aid. This support and aid help them to reconcile work and family and overcome the intersectional stigma they experience as caregiving women in a male-dominated education and career.

The topic of working from home (teleworking) is frequently dealt with in the contributions, both theoretically and empirically. This theme also underlies a study of online workplace development and dialogues by Syvänen and Loppela, although it is not presented. Sheldon Bromfield [9] in Canada takes a theoretical stance. He presents the advantages of working from home from the existing work-from-home literature and draws on labor process theory to challenge these advantages. He concludes that when consenting to a work-from-home arrangement, workers are cut off from the benefits of in-person social relations of work and learning.

A study based on social workers' diaries by Saraniemi et al. [10] seems to point in the direction of Bromfield's approach. Their results highlight how the multilocation of work, together with a fear of viral infection and varying attitudes toward the viral outbreak, affected interactions between colleagues in the early stages of the pandemic, with increased tension and feelings of social distance between co-workers. The common professional values and knowledge base of social work, as well as the remote work practices developed during the first wave of the pandemic, supported interactions between colleagues. However, these could not fully replace face-to-face interactions and informal everyday

encounters between colleagues, which are essential for developing and maintaining social capital among work communities.

A qualitative study by Finnish working life researchers and their Belgian colleague, Tapani et al. [11], takes the lack of in-person social relations a step further as they place relatedness among the basic psychological needs. While relying on self-determination theory, they see that relatedness, together with autonomy and competence, affects health, well-being and productivity. As remote work may disrupt experiences of relatedness, the study calls for developing good remote interaction and leadership practices that convey care for the employees.

A study by Lilja et al. [12] applied a job demands–job resources model for circumstances created by COVID-19, and included the fear of infection, together with work–home conflict and increased workload, as a job demand variable in a digital survey conducted in Norway and Finland. Job resources are considered to consist of COVID-19-related organizational support and digital job resources such as a positive attitude toward digital solutions and well-functioning digital meetings. The authors studied the association and balance between job demands and resources and employee well-being among different occupational groups in the two Nordic countries, noting that the groups were not totally comparable. Mainly knowledge workers had the possibility to work from home, and health care personnel had to work on-site. The authors found that Finnish teachers and Norwegian health and social service sector employees experienced a fear of infection to the degree that it was connected to their exhaustion. As a whole, the results point out that job demands and resources were differently associated with employee well-being across occupational groups and countries. Furthermore, the authors conclude that COVID-19-related organizational support may act as a supportive element to sustain employee well-being during a pandemic.

The experience of working from home, a new type of job demand created during the COVID-19 pandemic, was also the focus of a study conducted by Iwu et al. [13] among South African academics in higher education. The results of this study, in which interviews were conducted by e-mail, emphasized the lack of preparedness when the pandemic reshaped the educational system from traditional face-to-face to online teaching and learning taking place at home.

Sjöblom et al. [14] conducted a study based on data gathered by an electronic survey and present new knowledge about self-leadership and psychological safety in the context of remote work. The study sheds light on the interrelatedness between self-leadership strategies, psychological safety, and occupational well-being. It presents a novel category of well-being-related self-leadership strategies and contributes to the measurement of both self-leadership and psychological safety. To both enable sufficient well-being and facilitate flourishing at work, it is imperative to support employees in learning and applying diverse self-leadership strategies and to ensure psychological safety at the workplace, especially in the context of post-pandemic multilocational work.

For the time being, as this Special Issue is being completed and this editorial is being written, the COVID-19 pandemic is still going on, but not as strongly as before. When giving a press conference on the weekly COVID-19 update on 19 September 2022, WHO pointed out that during the previous week the number of weekly reported deaths from COVID-19 was the lowest since March 2020 and interpreted further that the end of the pandemic was in sight. However, WHO stressed that “we are not there yet”. Despite the downward trend, WHO gave advice for all countries to plan for surges of cases [15]. According to the latest weekly update on 26 October 2022, the global numbers of new weekly cases and deaths have continued to decrease. The number of new weekly cases had decreased by 15% during the week of 17 to 23 October 2022 as compared to the previous week and the number of new weekly deaths had decreased by 13% [16].

Regardless of the future of the pandemic, working from home will probably remain as one part of remote or multilocational work. This, in turn, will mean that the issue of the quality of working life for remote workers will not lose its topicality in the near future. In

the contributions, the quality of working life as a whole is approached mainly from the point of view of employee or occupational well-being, while leadership and management styles are focused on as ways to provide organizational support amidst new job demands and elements of social capital as an aspect of workplace communality.

Hopefully, international readers will find the contributions relevant for some time despite some of the inherent limitations. The contributions are based on studies conducted in circumstances where the virus itself had a significant role, such as unemployment in the cultural industry because of total lockdowns, and care work and contact teaching of small children because of the risk of infection. In many other fields of the economy, the relationship with the pandemic as such was more distant, especially if working from home was possible, such as in higher education. Many production and service sectors also have key roles in keeping societies going and cannot function totally online.

The contributions also point forward, toward a future multilevel working life that may or may not be characterized by new crises. Further research would be useful at the level of social policy issues, work organizations, and individuals. The social policy level includes issues such as how to secure peoples' income during a pandemic. People working in different fields have different options to secure their income: they could find paid employment in a new field, choose entrepreneurship, or attempt a combination of both. At the work organization level, there was a lot to learn from the pandemic. There was little knowledge and a lack of strategies to reorganize work in order to meet the demands of social distancing and an intensified use of digital technology. At the individual level, adapting to working without face-to-face contact with colleagues or their social support and learning about new modes of work are current and future challenges.

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