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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Missing voices: Office space discontent as a driving force in employee hybrid work preferences

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on rich qualitative and survey data to show that employee discontent with office space is a major driving force in employee hybrid-work preferences. Despite voice marginalisation, employees wish to take advantage of increased control over their physical working conditions and the locus of work that hybrid work has unexpectedly brought in their working lives. Taking cues from the literature on employee voice, this paper suggests that employee missing or silenced voices can be conceptualised as latent: hidden but potentially influential and inactive but potentially triggered by shifts in the labour market conditions or other external to organisations changes. The paper also brings attention to empirical academic studies as an employee voice mechanism.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The pandemic-enforced working from home has debunked the assumption that employee productivity suffers when working remotely. Staff visibility serves the purpose of managerial control, but not necessarily management's key functions, including organisational efficiency or the conversion of employees' capacity for labour into actual labour (Littler, 1990). Studies have shown that working from home has driven productivity up for large segments of the workforce, despite adverse conditions during lockdowns (Feldsted, 2020). This paper focuses on debunking

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another workplace myth: the belief that large shared office spaces, whether open-plan or hot desking, are essential in our organisational lives. While open-plan offices may be justified by direct control or cost containment, they often come at the expense of productivity and well-being for many employees (Morrison & Smollan, 2020). Despite scholarly work highlighting the drawbacks of open-plan offices and hot desking, these physical work environments remain prevalent and disliked by employees. For instance, a 2016 Gensler workplace survey report revealed that the majority of workers in the United Kingdom worked in open-plan environments (Tidd et al., 2016).

Our study challenges the conventional view of the ‘watercooler moment’ as a creativity booster and illustrates that mandated on-site work can mask the costs to productivity from frequent arbitrary meetings and audio-visual distractions at the workplace. Furthermore, we argue that a significant reason why many staff members prefer hybrid work is the control they have over their physical work environment. This paper offers two contributions.

Building on empirical studies documenting employee positive attitudes towards flexible work (Felstead & Henseke, 2017) and aversion towards open-plan offices (Morrison & Smollan, 2020; Richardson et al., 2017), we argue that both conventions owe to limited opportunities for employees to voice their preferences and participate in decision making. Yet, we note modicums of change. We find that post-pandemic employee voice on hybrid work preferences is partially harnessed, while employee voice on the physical working space remains ignored. Furthermore, we posit that workers’ physical working environment shapes flexible work preferences, and this relationship is also ignored by management practitioners. Office-space preferences can push employees away from on-site working, influencing their hybrid-work preferences. This finding suggests that what may appear as a missing voice may better be described as a latent one, hidden until triggered by wider conditions or informally affecting other areas of work.

Next, we highlight the function of academic research as an employee voice mechanism. Empirical studies on employee experiences and preferences, such as remote work or office space, represent worker voice at the macro, policy, or organisational level. However, academic research is often an external voice mechanism of low formality, and management practitioners or policy-makers may not fully consider it.

The paper is structured as follows: The first section on employee voice serves as a framework for understanding how organisational imperfections are silenced. The paper then provides a brief overview of developments in home-based and hybrid work in the United Kingdom, followed by a selective review of literature on open-plan offices and hot-desking. We describe the methods employed to collect primary data, move on to data analysis, and conclude with the discussion and concluding remarks.

2 | EMPLOYEE VOICE

Research on employee voice in the past three decades has been extensive, encompassing various scholarly traditions like employment relations, human resource management, and organisational behaviour (Wilkinson et al., 2018). According to Dundon et al. (2004), understanding employee voice involves considering the diverse mechanisms for voice (such as union recognition, joint consultative committees, attitude surveys, or complaining to line managers), its purposes (e.g., to rectify a problem with management, provide a countervailing source of power to management, or seek improvements in the work organisation), and

outcomes (e.g., exit vs. loyalty, identity vs. apathy, and influence over managerial decision making vs. marginalisation of voice). These mechanisms include union recognition, joint consultative committees, attitude surveys, and complaining to line managers. The purposes of employee voice range from rectifying management problems to seeking improvements in work organisation and providing a countervailing source of power to management. The outcomes of employee voice vary from exit versus loyalty, identity versus apathy, and influence over managerial decision-making versus marginalisation of voice. Discussions on employee voice revolve around differentiating it from employee engagement and participation in decision-making, as employee voice does not necessarily grant organisational power (Dundon et al., 2004).

Scholars have highlighted that employee silence (Cullinane & Donaghey, 2020), unheard, missing or repressed voices (Syed, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2018), are influenced by societal, organisational, and individual factors, with marginalised groups' voice being the least heard (Bell et al., 2011; Priola et al., 2014; Syed, 2020). The literature on employee voice extensively examines why individual employees may remain silent in organisations (e.g., Brinsfield & Edwards, 2014; van Den Broek & Dundon, 2012; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). It also highlights that structural barriers, rooted in hierarchical relations, often lead to employee silence, as decision-makers may choose to ignore issues that matter to staff (Morrison & Rothman, 2009), or they may intentionally discourage formal employee representation by forestalling unionisation or union campaigns (Cullinane & Donaghey, 2020). Furthermore, certain matters may not be high on union agendas. For instance, a concern discussed two decades ago was the low participation of women and minorities in United Kingdom trade unions' decision-making, hindering the prioritising of diversity in union agendas (Greene & Kirton, 2006).

Employee silence comes at a cost. Scholars consider voice a means to promote organisational efficiency and outcomes (Appelbaum, 2002; Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Harley, 2020), while others consider it essential for the democratisation of organisations (e.g., Patmore, 2020). Ignoring employee voice, we add, is at odds with evidence-based management practice (Briner et al., 2009; Rousseau, 2012) as it disregards valuable information from employee work experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings.

Academic research serves as a systematic, rigorous, and empathic means of capturing employee voice, similar to other employee representation mechanisms communicating experiences, ideas and suggestions (Pohler et al., 2020). However, academic research, being an external form of representation, may have limited direct or indirect impact on management decisions (Dobbins & Dundon, 2020). It can be a form of promotive voice, aiming to improve organisational effectiveness, and at times, a form of remedial voice, seeking to prevent harm and promote worker rights and interests (Morrison, 2011). Academic research resembles staff feedback collected by employers, serving as a voice mechanism of 'low' or 'medium' formality—neither as informal as an open-door policy or a suggestion box, nor as formal as grievance procedures (Harlos, 2001, p. 331). Surveys, in particular, are widely discussed as a voice mechanism that seeks improvements in work organisation and productivity while allowing employees to express concerns, dissatisfaction, ideas, and experiences (Dundon et al., 2004). Surveys are, thus, promotive of employee voice regardless of how effective they are in promoting participation in decision making. As Wilkinson et al. (2018, p. 715) put it, employee feedback can be heard, but often 'no action follows' and 'the caravan moves on'. We highlight staff feedback's capacity to promote voice and its limitation in influencing decision making and shaping organisational outcomes.

We offer here two examples where academic work had limited and incremental impact on management practice respectively: research on working spaces and flexible work. The latter, we

argue, is currently gaining more attention due to the large-scale experiment in remote work enforced by the pandemic. The former remains of limited influence.

Despite decades of scholarly work demonstrating positive organisational outcomes (e.g., Hickey & Tang, 2015 or Bloom et al., 2015) and that employees perceive remote (and other forms of flexible) work as work-life balance promoting (e.g., Beauregard & Henry, 2009; Hill et al., 1996; Wheatley, 2017), the impact on management practice pre-pandemic had been modest (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Fleetwood, 2007). For example, 2019 UK data show that working from home (WFH) occupies only a modest percentage of the labour force and was highly concentrated on higher-paid and self-employed workers (ONS, 2019). It is perhaps no accident that the flexible-work regulatory framework in the United Kingdom has not been meaningfully supportive of workers' remote work requests (Fleetwood, 2007), despite its recent progressive update (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2022). Similar to the lukewarm adoption of remote work prepandemic, the literature highlighting the drawbacks of open-plan offices and hot-desking has not yet had a considerable impact in turning the tide away from physical work environments widely disliked by employees (Morrison & Macky, 2017, Morrison & Smollan, 2020; Richardson et al., 2017; Roper & Juneja, 2008).

3 | HOME-BASED AND HYBRID WORK

Since the pandemic, hybrid work has initiated work reorganisation and dominated discussions about the future of work. Despite adverse conditions of physical and social isolation, organisations across the United Kingdom and beyond are trialling hybrid work patterns with or without staff consultation. Employee preferences on hybrid work schedules show they are hard to manage, with typically 7%–10% preferring working from home only, up to 10% preferring a full return to the office, and the majority of staff preferring 2–3 days of office work (Barrero et al., 2021; Skountridaki et al., 2021). A 2021 Grant Thornton survey suggests most businesses expect to continue offering hybrid working conditions, albeit to a lesser extent than employee expectations, indicating a gap between staff-management hybrid work preferences.

Earlier studies have established that working from home is often associated with an improvement in employees' well-being, work-life balance, and productivity, although not uniformly. Existing evidence points to the blurring of work and home boundaries, longer working days, greater intensity for each hour worked, and an expectation of enhanced voluntary effort (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Moore, 2006). Remote working has also had a negative relationship with career progression (Bloom, 2015, 2021). Extensive data on the impact of homeworking under the extreme scenario created by the COVID-19 pandemic have provided unique insights into the future of work. Studies show an increase (or at least no decrease) in productivity (Felstead & Reuschke, 2020) and satisfaction with the lack of commute (Beck & Hensher, 2021; Marks et al., 2020), but also concerns about a reduction in informal learning opportunities for new staff (Saks & Gruman, 2021), the blurring of work-life boundaries, and a potential deterioration in mental or physical health (Parry et al., 2021). Irrespective of the balance between benefits and drawbacks of hybrid work, change and work reorganisation inevitably challenge power balances and open new opportunities for renegotiating employment relations. For example, similar to remote work, hybrid work necessitates the deployment of new control mechanisms by management when staff presence goes missing or becomes less visible. Availability, as opposed to responsiveness, becomes a basis of social control (Sewell & Taskin, 2015), and managers attempt boundary strategy management in terms of work-life balance (Kossek et al., 2006).

Simultaneously, hybrid work may appeal to staff as a new opportunity for increased work autonomy, associated with positive outcomes in performance and wellbeing. The staff-management gap in hybrid work preferences, as captured by surveys like Grant Thornton (2021), and warnings of the ‘Great Resignation’ in the United States indicate that contestation between staff and management in the new world of hybrid work is already present. It is essential to uncover the reasons why hybrid work appeals to employees as a form of flexible work. Our research highlights that employee aversion towards noisy physical working environments, such as open-plan offices or busy homes, largely accounts for their hybrid work preferences. The next section provides an overview of research on employee office experiences, often ignored by management practice.

4 | THE RHETORIC AND REALITY OF OPEN-PLAN OFFICES

Research studies consistently relate open-plan offices and hot-desking to poor productivity and well-being outcomes, with minority groups often experiencing worse outcomes (Morrison & Smollan, 2020). Open-plan offices are associated with increased auditory and visual distractions, deterioration in concentration levels during complex tasks (Roper & Juneja, 2008), and progressively worse face-to-face interactions and collaboration as staff socially withdraw from peers and increase electronic communication (Bernstein & Turban, 2018). Shared working environments do not improve work friendships, and staff perceptions of supervisory support drop, while distrust and uncooperative behaviours increase (Morrison & Macky, 2017). Hot-desking is linked to heavier workloads and lower sense of fairness, often making hot-deskers feel marginalised (Hirst, 2011). It also disrupts informal relationships among staff, leading to depersonalisation and a sense of identity loss (Barnes, 2007). Staff resistance may lead to tension as they resettle into desks and personalise reclaimed spaces (Elsbach, 2003). In addition to poor productivity, open-plan offices are associated with deterioration in employee well-being (Morrison & Smollan, 2020), leading to higher sick leave absences, increased emotional irritation and stress (Richardson et al., 2017).

Open-plan offices are associated with deterioration in productivity, social and work relations, well-being, and equality and diversity, raising the question of why such office design goes unchallenged (Morrison & Smollan, 2020). Taking cues from the employee voice literature, we suggest its persistence may relate to the employee voice being ignored by management and limited opportunities for employee participation in decision-making, both of which are not uncommon. It may also be that it is not a priority in the agendas of unions and other organisations promoting employee voice. Regardless of the reasons, we show how staff’s unheard voices and silenced preferences on different areas of work shape one another under management’s organisational noses.

5 | METHODS

5.1 | Research design, sampling and data collection

This paper draws on data collected from staff of a large employer in the United Kingdom higher education sector. The study involved 19 focus groups with 165 staff members in spring 2021, followed by a survey distributed in summer 2021, which received 5.6k responses. The focus

groups and survey functioned as staff feedback mechanisms for the organisation and supported participant recruitment. The research findings were also made available to all staff members through an internal webpage.

Focus groups are typically used in three ways (Wilkinson, 1998). First, as part of multi- or mixed-methods research designs. Second, as a primary method of data collection to capture experiences and views on new or older research areas. Third, as participatory action research to encourage social change. In this study, the focus groups were conducted as part of a mixed-methods approach and informed the design of the survey (DiMaggio & Garip, 2011; Posner, 2004). This paper primarily relies on the focus group data, supplemented with a selection of key survey findings to support its main argument.

The focus groups aimed to capture home-working experiences and hybrid preferences of both professional services and academic staff. The design of the online questionnaire survey was informed by the focus group findings, particularly in the hybrid work section of the survey. The most relevant aspects to this paper are the improvements or deterioration in staff's working lives in the office versus at home (or an alternative location), aspects related to the physical environment, work relations, and wellbeing (see Appendix A for focus group guiding questions).

5.2 | Sampling: Focus groups and survey

Focus group volunteers were recruited via emails sent to all staff members. Interested individuals then signed up for one of several scheduled time slots during March to May 2021. Due to a high number of volunteers, some were excluded based on their demographic characteristics to allow for a more diverse sample. The sample is therefore self-selected but adopted to maximise diversity as the aim was to capture all voices.

Focus groups were conducted online via Zoom during working hours, with each session lasting about 1.5 h and being audio-recorded with participants' consent. Most focus groups had 8–10 participants, with a few having a smaller turnout due to last-minute cancellations and a few having larger numbers for scheduling convenience. In all sessions, at least one (and occasionally two) moderators and two note-takers were present. In total, 165 ($n = 165$) staff members participated in the focus groups. There were 11 focus groups with professional services staff and eight with academic staff, intentionally kept separate based on their different job roles, though staff with and without managerial responsibilities were not invited in separate groups.

After brief introductions around the virtual table, participants were explicitly encouraged to discuss the impact of home-based work on their domestic life (i.e., physical space and social relations) and work life (self-perceived productivity, work relations, and work–social relations). They were also encouraged to discuss the rationale behind their hybrid work preferences and how it was influenced by their personal circumstances and job demands. Findings were then used to design questions for the hybrid work section of the survey.

A short questionnaire survey was developed and administered via Qualtrics, an online survey management software (Qualtrics, 2021). The survey was designed to be completed in 15 min and was distributed via a hyperlink in emails to all staff members in the organisation during May and June 2021. The sample ($n = 5574$) is again a convenient one.

5.3 | Data analysis

Audio recordings of the focus group conversations were auto-transcribed and manually corrected by two research assistants. The transcripts amount to over 400,000 words. The first two authors independently engaged in thematic analysis through iterative coding (Braun & Clarke, 2012) to identify subthemes relating to the reasons why staff prefer working on or off-site. The first author performed the analysis by hand, while the second author used MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021) to aid the coding process. The researchers compared and discussed the coded subthemes after analysing all of the transcripts. A final set of subthemes was then collated and used for final analysis, specifically those connecting to the broader themes.

Cyr (2016) highlights that focus group data can be analysed with three units of analysis: (a) the individual, (b) the group, and (c) group interactions. Researchers may focus on capturing individual experiences, participants' agreement or disagreement on a matter, or group dynamics, as interactions can reveal tensions, ambiguities, spark new ideas, or lead to participants' change of heart/mind during the deliberative process of the focus groups. Building on this distinction, the present paper takes both the individual and group as units of analysis.

At the group-level analysis (Cyr, 2016), the data indicate there has been 'consensus' among staff about the rationale underpinning hybrid work preferences. In particular, the justification of their preferred work location in relation to their working time gravitates around promoting their well-being/work-life balance and a sense of fulfilling their job responsibilities, with an emphasis on their perception of productivity (where they feel most productive and for what portion of their weekly working time).

At the individual-level analysis (Cyr, 2016), our coded subthemes were organised into factors relating to the physical working environment, work relations and interactions, well-being/work-life balance, and job role-related factors and commute. These are presented as 'push away from the office/home' and 'pull to the office/home' factors to highlight office open-plan design as an organisational limitation and make implications for management practice relevant and actionable.

5.4 | Results from the questionnaire

We use survey data to further support our focus group findings. To do so we present responses to selected survey questions (pre-COVID office type, hybrid work preference, working conditions on- vs. off-site spaces). The third author analysed the responses to these questions presented in the findings section. After checking for assumptions (independence and normality of variables), descriptive and exploratory statistics were performed using *t*-tests and chi-square tests at 0.05 significance level. The tests were conducted with R (version 4.0.2) using RStudio 1.3.959.

Employee perceptions of their physical environment and counter-productive social interactions, were examined through the literature on (missing) employee voice and contextualised through rich research findings on (largely unpopular among employees) shared working spaces. The juxtaposition of the two approaches addresses the research question surrounding the conditions of organisational silence and inaction on imperfect physical working environments, mostly represented by open-plan offices.

6 | FINDINGS

In our focus groups with academic and professional services staff, we identified several factors shaping staff hybrid work preferences. Notably these are (a) factors relating to the physical working environment (on/off-site working spaces and social/work interactions within these spaces), (b) wellbeing/work-life balance, (c) job role-related factors, and commute. These are presented as ‘*push away* from the office/home’ and ‘*pull to* the office/home’ factors to highlight the significance of office design in working lives; stress when the office design functions as an organisational imperfection and finally make implications for management practice relevant and actionable. No participant is quoted more than once in this paper.

6.1 | Pull to work on-site factors

First, there are certain factors that entice staff to work on-site. These include work-related demands, work/social interactions, the perceived quality of the on-site working conditions (physical space and workstation), and the role that working on-site plays in staff wellbeing by creating time and physical boundaries and encouraging informal exercise, such as active travel.

6.1.1 | Physical space as a reason why staff favour working on-site

The role of physical space (on-site) played out as a strong theme in most focus groups. While, as we will expand on below, physical space often acted as a push away from the office factor, a significant number of focus group participants suggested they had missed the opportunity to work on-site. For example, academics often prefer their office set-up and workstation, access to office-stored books and materials, and the ability to work there around the clock.

I've got quite a small office [...] but actually that space is quite useful for getting things done, that I couldn't get done in other spaces. It's got material around that I would use, it's about quietness, it's about just being able to concentrate. (Academic, with caring responsibilities, living with family, Woman)

6.1.2 | Productive work and social interactions as reasons why staff favour working on-site

Most staff largely value online collaboration and meetings, with several finding homework surprisingly productive. However, a recurring finding is their yearning for in-person socialisation. This longing is rooted in team bonding, trust-building, informal learning, and mutual support—vital for tasks like IT troubleshooting. Moreover, face-to-face interactions keep them engaged, informed, and efficient. Incidental meetings breed innovation and quick problem-solving. For example,

The sort of incidental discussions that you have when you're in the office and you're walking past somebody and they ask how are you getting on, and you talk about projects ... that serendipity, when you're sitting having lunch with somebody

you start to realise this is something we can discuss further. (Professional services, No caring responsibilities, living with family, Man)

Some staff feel on-site work boosts visibility to senior colleagues, vital for career growth or contract renewal.

6.1.3 | Routine, work life boundaries and active travel

Some staff miss the clear boundaries of on-site work. Commuting often helps transition between work and nonwork and acts as a coping strategy for demanding tasks. For example,

Because there was so much that I was learning, very quickly, it was very easy to have work completely take over [my life], and so having a place to go and come back from helped me slightly limit the amount of work I was doing in these first semesters of teaching, creating courses from scratch, etc. So I found that transition quite essential. (Academic, with caring responsibilities, living with family, woman)

6.1.4 | Job role-related reasons why staff favour working on-site

Work demands include interaction with students, with teaching-active academics and student-facing professional services staff suggesting that online interaction with students is mutually beneficial, yet in-person contact is irreplaceable. Some jobs require physical presence on-site for equipment maintenance, lab-based research, or studio-based teaching activities. Sensitive or emotionally demanding meetings with junior or new staff are also preferably held in person. For example,

At the moment, with everyone working from home, it's really, really difficult to get to know who everyone is and what everyone does. In a way, if you're in the office, you'll find this stuff out just by helping people and having a chat while you're making cups of tea (Professional services, No caring responsibilities, living with family, woman).

6.2 | Push away from on-site work

6.2.1 | The physical working environment

Noisy working environments, visual distractions, poor lighting, poor access to amenities such as toilets or kitchen, inability to control room temperatures, and lack of space are factors making several participants' home a more compelling than the office space to work from. For example,

When I was in the office, we would share an office that would be about eight or nine of us in a sort of small open-plan dark dingy office and really now we've

realised how bad it is [...] how did we ever work in this office (Professional services staff, No caring responsibilities, living with family)

My job [...] is very creative and my space really dictates the level of creativity, so having a quiet space is brilliant for me. In our [...] nice old office we both work inside an open kitchen. And I think other people can cope with that noise really well, but I really couldn't because I just can't get into that flow state to have great ideas. (Professional services, no caring responsibilities, living with family, woman)

Several academics' narratives also indicated that their offices were a pushaway factor from on-site work. For example,

Because I'm new, they gave me a very big, shared, it's like a hot desk office so anybody can come and go (Academic, No caring responsibilities, living with co-residents/friends, woman).

Lack of suitable on-site space was a reason staff have created a more suitable home office, cascading a cycle of factors pushing staff to work away from the office. Similar to the account above, this member of staff adds,

Office space [on-site] is currently inadequate. I would very much like to work [in the office] 100% of the time, but with adequate facilities. If they are not available, then I am not going to work on-site unless absolutely necessary. I moved flat and now walking to work is more difficult than before. One of the reasons for my move, however, was to enhance working from home by getting a bigger flat. (Academic, man).

Some neurodivergent staff indicated difficulty in noisy environments or open-plan offices. One noted struggling to maintain concentration or avoid behaviours perceived as antisocial by colleagues. This leads to the second theme: counterproductive work interactions in open-plan offices.

6.2.2 | Too much of work and social interaction? Interaction as a push away from on-site work factor

Many staff find social interaction at work distracting. Informal interactions are seen as excessive, leading to a loss of control over their working day and time management. Shared and open-plan offices, designed for collaboration and rapport, can also cause counterproductive interactions, as suggested by our participants' narratives. For example,

I have felt pretty good actually about home working. I've felt like less distracted, I'm actually more productive in a funny kind of way, I think, because I do communications. I don't know, I think sometimes in the office I get pulled into a lot of discussions (Professional services, with caring responsibilities, living with family, man).

[The open-plan office] is fine, for working on tasks that are routine [...] detailed, focus work is difficult to achieve when you're working in an office and it's more difficult to achieve when you're working in a hot desk because you're working with different people around you, and some people like to chat a lot. At home [...] I'm more focused on what I'm doing (Professional services, No caring responsibilities, living with family, man)

Unsurprisingly, lack of space and distractions at home can push individuals away from working there. The physical working environment, shared with colleagues or co-residents, affects concentration and effective work. For most, hybrid work was seen as a way to balance productive and counterproductive informal interactions in shared/open-plan offices or at home.

6.3 | Pull to home/off-site work

6.3.1 | Physical space and work environment (perceived as superior to on-site office space)

Home office space and comfort significantly influenced participants' preferences. Those who 'invested' in a dedicated workspace and workstation at home welcomed increased remote work opportunities. For example,

At the beginning of the lockdown I hated working from home. But I changed my work environment significantly, I think the key part was having a space where I could go away from and switch off, which I appreciate (Professional services, No caring responsibilities, living with family, man)

Chronic health conditions, pain, short-term conditions (e.g., pregnancy-related fatigue or nausea), and disabilities frequently drove staff to prefer remote work for part of the week. These reasons varied from back and neck pain to disabilities and were often linked to commuting challenges. The quote below is indicative,

I suffer with health conditions, and so the commuting [name of suburb] in town city centre was particularly difficult at times, depending on pain flare ups and so since [...] doing predominant amount of work from home the flare ups have reduced in frequency (Professional services, with caring responsibilities, living with family, woman).

When working from home, these staff have the opportunity for brief breaks. Informal hybrid work arrangements may benefit those staff who choose not to or feel uncomfortable sharing the details of their condition. Some staff shared that before COVID, they had not requested reasonable adjustments for undisclosed disabilities; a few had their requests ignored by managers; others with chronic pain had not requested remote work because they wanted to avoid being perceived as 'difficult'. Discussions with pregnant women also indicated that they occasionally preferred not to share pregnancy news with colleagues until the end of the first

trimester. In contrast to home working, they struggled to maintain privacy when feeling nauseous on-site, especially in shared or open-plan offices.

6.3.2 | Work-life balance: Caring responsibilities and nonwork activities are reasons why staff favour working at home

Some parent participants suggested that working from home strains their relationships with their children (see next section), while others felt that remote work enables them to be more present in their children's lives or better fulfil their caring responsibilities. For example,

That flexibility [of remote work] actually is wonderful, so I want to maintain that because it's obviously easier for me to pick up the kids from school or look after kids if I'm [working] from home (Academic, with caring responsibilities, living with family, man)

Staff with caring responsibilities for parents or neighbours expressed similar views. Many participants also noted that they could better care for their pets while working from home.

6.3.3 | Lack of commute: Savings in terms of effort, time and expenditure as a reason why staff favour working at home

Avoiding the commute is a crucial factor influencing staff's preference for working from home at least part of the week. For example,

The commute's a massive thing that has a huge impact on my day. And it'd be really good to be able to have the flexibility of not worrying about doing maybe an extra hour in the morning or an extra hour at night because you're not worried about when's my bus and when I'm getting home (Professional services, with caring responsibilities, living with family, woman).

Long commute is more of a burden to those living far from their office. Even several staff living near work also suggested they would benefit from less commute.

6.4 | Push away from home factors

Most reasons why staff dislike working from home relate to existing tensions at home or personal preferences. However, disentangling private matters from work can be challenging. For instance, some staff found it difficult to disconnect from work when communication continues beyond 5 pm. Similarly, some staff have tailored their lives and living spaces to their pre-COVID professional lives, such as living in smaller properties near work for convenience. Such factors were not within this study's scope, but it's important to emphasise that most staff must navigate complex decision-making to balance private and professional responsibilities.

6.4.1 | Physical work environment: Lack of space at home

Many participants struggled to share the same space with family members or coresidents and lacked a spare room for work. As earlier quotes show, staff living alone might hesitate to introduce a workstation due to limited space (e.g., one-bedroom flats). For example,

If you live in a city centre, smaller place [home] it is. It's perfect for us, but it's not enough to devote another space to work (Professional services, with caring responsibilities, living with family).

6.4.2 | Counter-productive social interaction with coresidents and other distractions at home

Many parents felt they could better manage work and caring responsibilities when working from home and 'be there' for their children. However, some parents preferred to keep work separate from home and their children. For example,

You have expectations [that] in your domestic space, your relationship to the other people is not defined by your professional identity. It's not good for that relationship [with my kids], for me to have to slam the door in their face, they're too small to understand that's not a personal rejection (Academic, with caring responsibilities, living with family, woman).

Furthermore, several staff mentioned that their home involved too many distractions, either that was domestic work, interruptions from co-residents and family members or noise from the street or neighbours.

6.4.3 | Well-being: Social isolation

Several staff either living alone or with family/co-residents feel they miss the social interaction at work (as opposed to work interactions). For most participants, this had been harsh during the social distancing measures, which prohibited much of social activities. For example,

I get more done at home than I did in the office because there's nobody coming in constantly asking you for favours [..], but it is a lot lonely at home, I still prefer the office any day over being at home (Professional services, no caring responsibilities, living with family, woman).

Several non-UK staff suggested they feel additional isolation as they do not have the social networks that locals have.

6.4.4 | Disconnecting from work might be difficult

Having a sense of 'living at work' as opposed to working at home was mentioned in several focus groups. The collapse of physical boundaries, thus, also jeopardised time boundaries.

Drawing from the above findings, we designed a survey to capture the role of office space and social/work interactions in a hybrid work setting. This is where we now turn to. We focus on pre-COVID office type and hybrid work preferences to delve deeper into employee preferences and what drives them at the aggregate level.

6.5 | Survey data

Our survey findings show strong staff support for hybrid work. Figure 1 shows that only 11% of the sample prefer working full-time on-site (7%) or fully remotely (4%). The remaining of the respondents prefer some form of hybrid work, with the majority (49%) preferring 2 or 3 days a week off-site (or full-time equivalent).

To better comprehend the factors underlying staff hybrid work preferences, respondents were provided with a set of statements and asked to use a slider (see Appendix B) to indicate whether the statement pertains to working from home (off-site) or in the office (on-site). Numerical values were not displayed to participants, but numbers were assigned to the slider. Scores near 0 signify that the statement characterizes working from home, while scores close to 10 indicate that the statement characterises working in the office. Scores around five suggest similar conditions at home and in the office. Statistical analysis (*t*-test with *p* set at 0.05) was utilised to compare mean scores with 5 (indicating similar conditions).

Figure 2 displays the mean scores for each statement, ranked from 0 to 10, with the number of participants who responded to each question/item indicated in parentheses. All mean scores

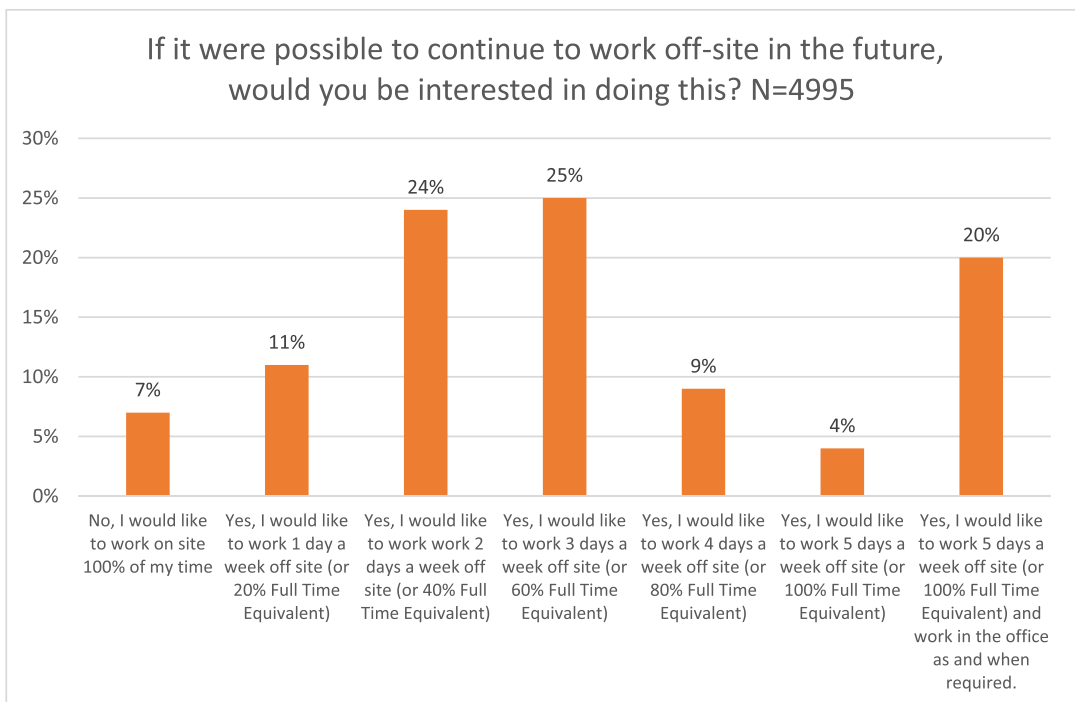


FIGURE 1 If it were possible to continue to work off-site in the future, would you be interested in doing this?

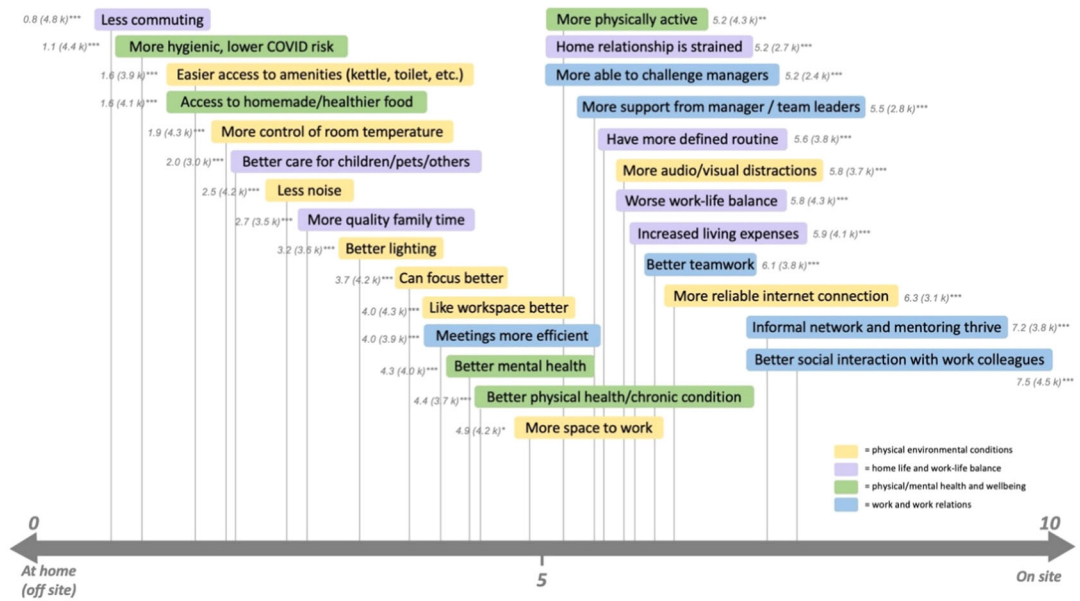


FIGURE 2 Visual representation of responses to what conditions are perceived better on vs off-site.

presented were significantly distinct from 5, denoted by asterisks ($*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$). The statements are colour-coded for clarity (yellow for statements regarding physical environmental conditions; green for physical/mental health and wellbeing; purple for home life and work-life balance; blue for work and work/social relations).

Figure 2 illustrates that statements concerning improved physical working conditions (colour-coded yellow) were generally associated with home working (off-site) rather than on-site work, except for one statement (I have a more reliable internet connection). These findings align with the focus groups' outcomes. Although mean scores do not capture individual variations (such as those of parents or those living alone or in smaller flats), they do offer insight into (pre-COVID) office working conditions at the aggregate level. Overall, physical working conditions at home were perceived as superior on average compared to those on-site.

However, on-site experiences with physical working conditions differ based on office type. Segmenting these results by office type (see Figure 3) reveals noteworthy distinctions, with single occupancy offices offering on average a superior physical working experience. Shared offices presented a mixed picture, likely due to significant variability in factors like size, occupancy, location, and door presence. Therefore, they were excluded from the analysis presented in the bar chart (Figure 3).

In the bar chart, a mean score exceeding five (5) signifies association with office working. Individuals with single-occupancy offices attributed many more statements to on-site work (as indicated in Figure 3, where blue bars consistently outpace others), except for four statements, which happen to be the only statements with negative connotations. Conversely, employees in both open-plan and hot-desking environments perceived these negative statements as characteristic of on-site work (mean score above 5). Concerning the physical environment statements, the chart indicates that those in open-plan and hot-desking setups reported significantly more audio/visual distractions on-site on average. Understandably, these same

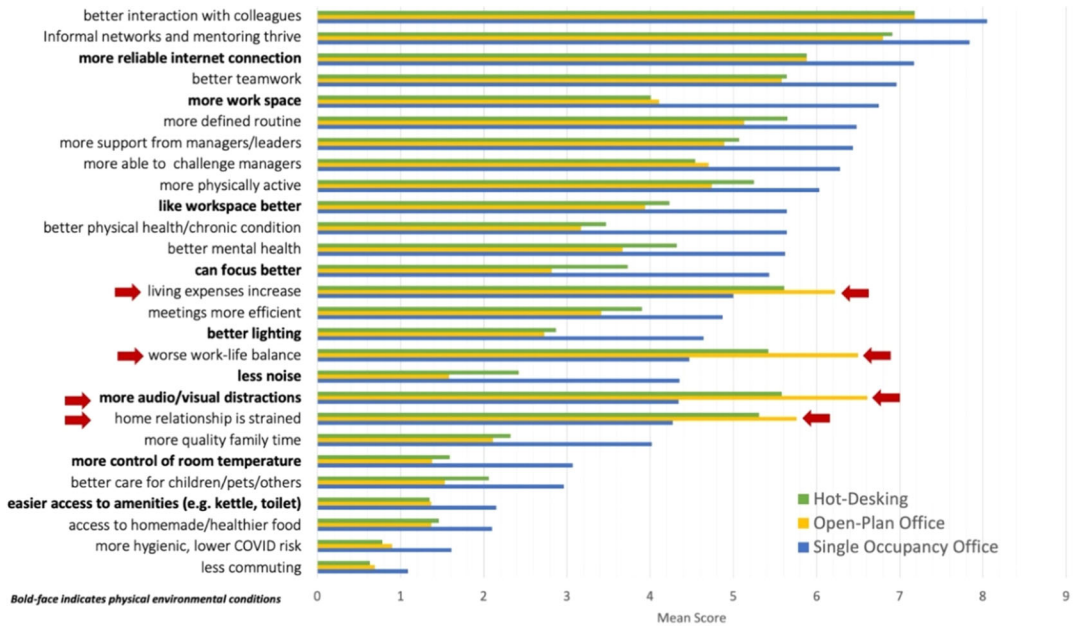


FIGURE 3 Office-type breakdown of responses to what conditions are perceived better on vs off-site.

employees tended to prefer their home-working/off-site environments and reported better focus when working off-site. In fact, most of them have more space to work at home.

The survey data, thus, corroborate the focus group findings. Offices associated with less control over the physical working conditions act as a factor pushing staff away from on-site work.

7 | DISCUSSION

Our findings highlight the contrast between the postpandemic (at least partial) effectiveness of employee voice on hybrid work and its ineffectiveness on discontent with the physical environment. These findings also reveal the interrelation between these two aspects, with open-plan working spaces emerging as a significant factor pushing staff away from on-site work.

These results largely align with prepandemic academic studies on remote work, which indicated that despite its drawbacks, working from home is widely desirable among employees (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). Similarly, our findings corroborate research on office design, which has consistently demonstrated workers' aversion to open-plan offices (Morrison & Macky, 2017; Morrison & Smollan, 2020; Richardson et al., 2017; Roper & Juneja, 2008). Our focus group findings also reaffirm that certain vulnerable groups resent open-plan and large shared spaces (Richardson et al., 2017). Therefore, we argue that such office spaces represent an organisational imperfection that requires reconsideration.

Drawing from the employee voice literature, it could be argued that although employees have effectively voiced their preference for hybrid work postpandemic, open-plan office spaces remain a silenced organisational imperfection. In this context, we emphasise the overlooked opportunities for employee voice representation offered by substantial research evidence.

Academic research, which communicates employee experiences, ideas, and suggestions (Pohler et al., 2020), serves as a participatory, nonunion form of representation, showcasing the practical implications of research findings to organisations, industries, or the broader labour market. While academic studies capturing workers' experiences can also be a form of promotive voice (Morrison, 2011), they lack the direct power to influence management (Dobbins & Dundon, 2020). Similar to staff feedback, these forms of representation possess low or medium formality (Harlos, 2001) and can be easily marginalised (Wilkinson et al., 2018), resulting in variable success in promoting worker rights and interests at the organisational or legislative level. The prevalence of open-plan offices attests to the limited impact of empirical scholarly work on organisational practices, indicating the missed opportunity to represent employee voice effectively.

In the organisation where the collected data originated, staff experiences related to remote and hybrid work were expressed through focus groups and survey findings, acting as staff feedback voice mechanisms. Staff voice effectively affirmed the decision to widely adopt flexible work, but discontent with the physical environment received a different response. Despite an interest in changing office space, there is little evidence to suggest that staff dissatisfaction with open-plan offices and hot-desking led to a shift away from such office arrangements. Therefore, staff feedback on this issue was not effectively utilised. This situation presents a missed opportunity, especially considering that the discontent contributed to pushing staff away from on-site work, potentially deterring them from returning to the office for longer hours.

Second, we aim to contribute to the literature on employee voice by suggesting that instead of being missing, employee voice can be better described and conceptualised as latent. This form of voice remains hidden and inactive until changing circumstances trigger new disputes and conflicts between management and employees. Such shifts may be driven by evolving dynamics in the employment relationship and the labour market. We demonstrate this by highlighting the role of office space as a driving factor in employee preferences for hybrid work. Specifically, open-plan spaces and limited control over the physical environment serve as push-away factors from on-site work.

Although often hidden, our findings indicate that the recent reorganisation towards increased remote work has paved the way for employee workspace preferences to surface. These preferences have not significantly altered trends in office design, especially in terms of reducing shared spaces. However, our data show that an extended period of working from home prompted several participants to reconsider their engagement in specific types of flexible work, notably their locus of work. Staff members desire more autonomy over the location of their work (to avoid, e.g., commuting time and expenses), but more importantly, they seek increased control over the physical conditions of their work environment. For most participants, hybrid work offers a solution to balance productive and counterproductive interactions that may occur in open-plan offices.

The latent nature of employee voice may be relevant to other historically 'missing', silenced or unheard voices (Wilkinson et al., 2018), for example, those of minorities. While meaningful change in terms of equality, inclusion, and diversity (EDI) in organisations remains a distant goal in organisations, EDI has gained a place on organisational agendas. Voice has been dismissed as of limited significance compared to participation or engagement in decision-making (a distinction which remains at the heart of discussions on employee voice), yet, its theoretical significance lies, not least, in its latent nature. Silence is contextual and temporary, and our findings emphasise that voice (over office space and physical working conditions) can be suppressed yet remain influential (playing a crucial role in hybrid work arrangements).

8 | CONCLUSION

We argue that the long-standing expectation of full-time office work has suffered a major postpandemic setback. However, what remains little understood or ignored by management is the role that open-plan offices have played in shaping staff's expectations regarding hybrid work. This is evident not only in new office design trends, which prioritise better-designed but still large shared spaces, but also in the downsizing of office space that many firms have swiftly pursued. While it is arguably too early to predict the success of staff claims for autonomy in various geographical locations, institutional contexts, sectors, and occupations, we wish to emphasise that employers seeking to retain staff in the office for longer than their employees' preferences require improvements in the physical working environment. This is necessary to minimise counter-productive social interactions and disruptions for their workforce.

The significance of the physical working environment in employees' work lives is also of interest to unions and other organisations promoting employee voice. Against the backdrop of stagnant or shrinking real wages (Blanchflower, 2019), gender and pay disparities, and the recent cost-of-living crisis, unions may not prioritise the enhancement of the physical working environment in their agendas, unless the issue is linked to health and safety concerns. It is likely, therefore, that employee preferences regarding their physical work environment will remain formally side-lined. Morrison and Smollan (2020), in their relatively recent paper, seem to have grown sceptical about the possibility of reversing office design trends ("Open-plan office space? If you're going to do it, do it right"). Ironically, in the new landscape of hybrid work, physical space has already become a battleground for control contestation between staff and management, with noisy environments acting as a deterrent from on-site work.

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APPENDIX A

The future of hybrid and remote work Focus Groups' question guide.

Ask everyone to briefly introduce themselves (name, school/college and job role); their home arrangements (living alone or with co-residents, caring responsibilities, pets); and their home office arrangements (the room they work in, whether they share it, whether they live in a flat downtown, a house in a suburb etc.)

Q1: How would you want to organise your home-office, were you to work 3-4 days a week from home? In terms of physical space, furniture, and quality of space (sound, view, light, heating, disturbances, etc.)?

Why? (explore how the impact on non-work time, relationships vis-a-vis work needs, aspirations etc shape this)

Prompt about ideal home office - what their 'dream' set up would be? and prompt them to use examples that perhaps they have seen elsewhere (or preconceived notion of what an ideal home-working space would be?)

Q2: How would you want to organise your home-office, were you to work 1-2 days a week from home? In terms of physical space, furniture, and quality of space (sound, view, light, heating, disturbances, etc.)

Why? (explore impact on non-work time, space, relationships vis-a-vis work demands)

Prompt about ideal home office - what their 'dream' set up would be? and prompt them to use examples that perhaps they have seen elsewhere (or preconceived notion of what an ideal home-working space would be?)

Q3: What would be the ideal hybrid work scenario for you considering work needs, work demands and aspirations, including collaborative work, informal learning opportunities and social interaction?

If any participants wish to work 100% from home, ask about their ideal home-office

Q4: What would be the ideal hybrid work scenario for you considering preferred life-style and responsibilities?

APPENDIX B

Selected survey questions:

Hybrid work preference

Given the nature of your role, if it were possible to continue to work off-site in the future, would you be interested in doing this?

No, I would like to work on-site 100% of my time

Yes, 1 day a week off-site (or 20% full-time equivalent)

Yes, 2 days a week off-site (or 40% full-time equivalent)

Yes, 3 days a week off-site (or 60% full-time equivalent)

Yes, 4 days a week off-site (or 80% full-time equivalent)

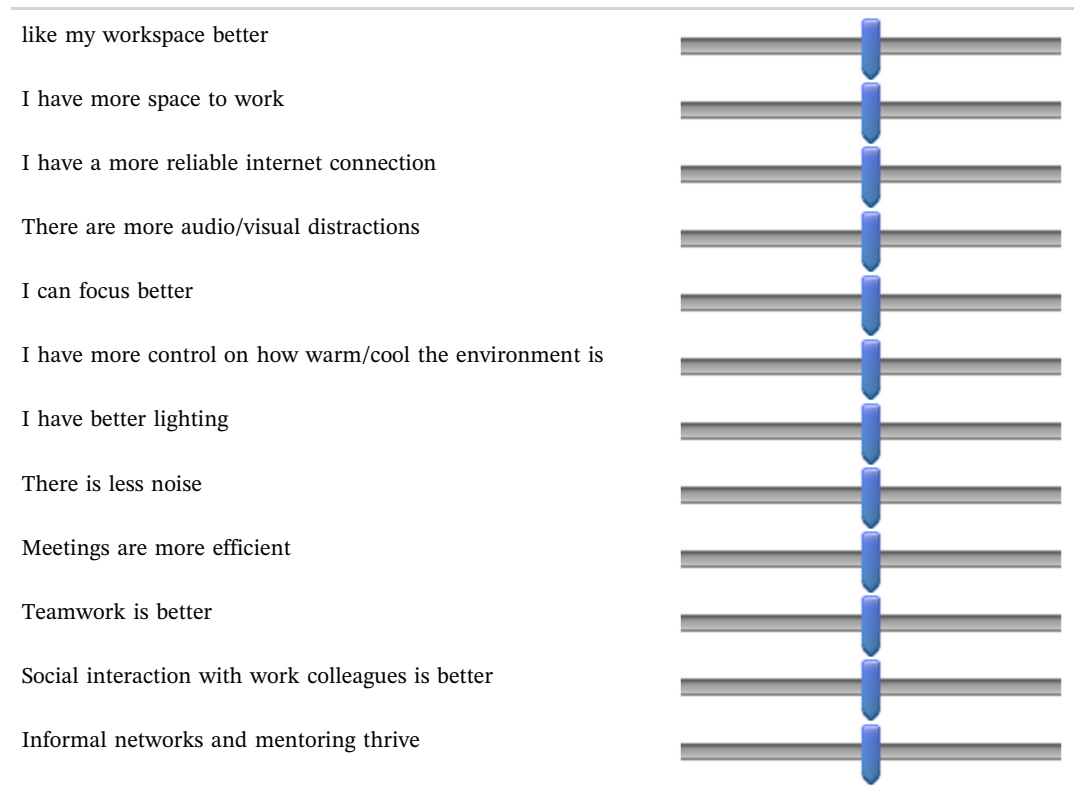
Yes, 5 days a week off-site (or 100% full-time equivalent)

Yes, 5 days a week off-site (or 100% full-time equivalent) and work in the office as and when required

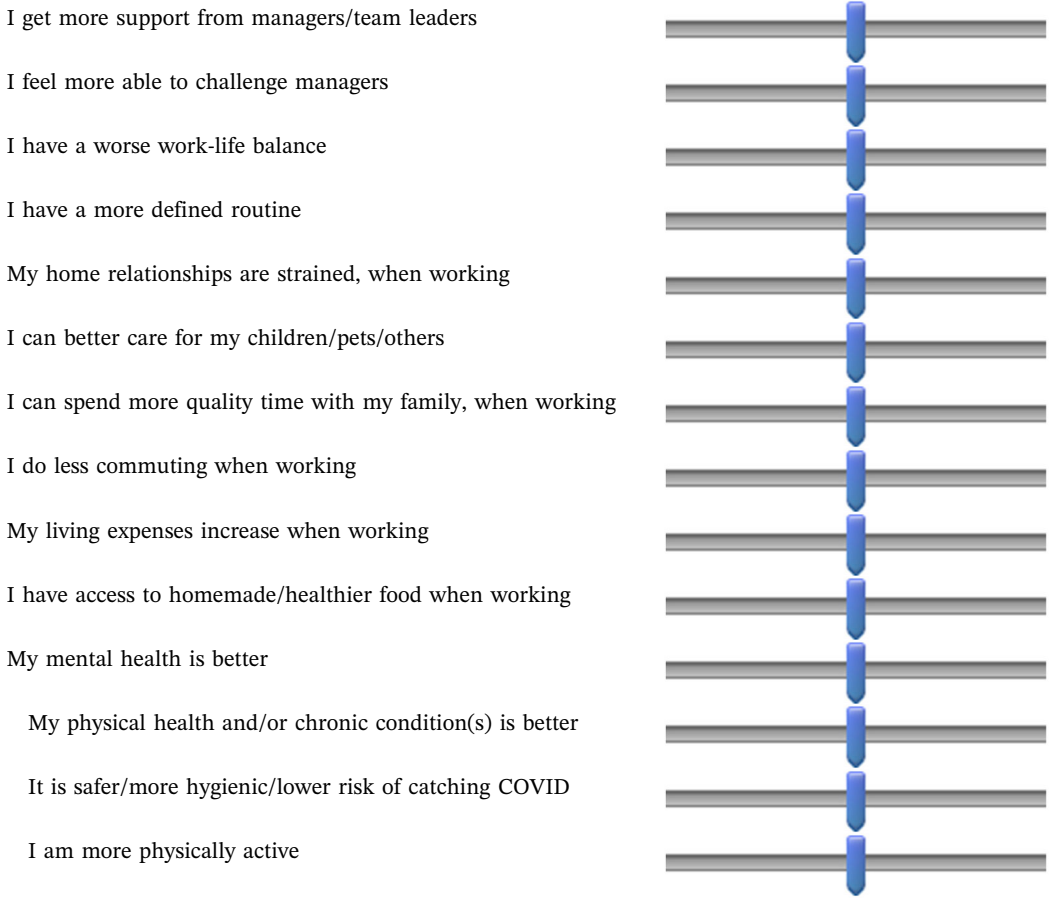
Working conditions at home/in the office

Using the slider below, please indicate where, at home (off-site) or on-site, you have the preferable condition. If you have similar conditions both at home and in the office, place the slider in the middle.

At home (off-site) Similar conditions On-site Not applicable



(Continues)



Office type (pre-COVID)

Pre-covid, I used to work in a...

Shared office

Open plan office space

Research lab

Hot-desk/shared desk space

Hot-desk/shared desk space with themes (quiet zone, collaboration spaces, private meeting rooms etc)

Another venue - library, cafes etc.

Other.