Surviving remotely: How job control and loneliness during a forced shift to remote work impacted employee work behaviors and well-being

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Abstract
This paper investigates the impact of job control and work-related loneliness on employee work behaviors and well-being during the massive and abrupt move to remote work amid the COVID-19 pandemic. We draw on job-demands control and social baseline theory to link employee perceived job control and work-related loneliness to emotional exhaustion and work-life balance and posit direct and indirect effects on employee minor counterproductive work behaviors, depression, and insomnia. Using a two-wave data collection with a sample of U.S. working adults to test our predictions, we find that high job control was beneficially related to emotional exhaustion and work-life balance, while high work-related loneliness showed detrimental relationships with our variables of interest. Moreover, we find that the beneficial impact of high perceived job control was conditional on individual segmentation preferences such that the effects were stronger when segmentation preference was low. Our research extends the literature on remote work, job control, and workplace loneliness. It also provides insights for human resource professionals to manage widespread remote work that is likely to persist long after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords
COVID-19, depression, job control, remote work, work loneliness

1 | INTRODUCTION

As COVID-19 spread across the globe, the world of work rapidly evolved. In the United States and across the world, an overwhelming majority of white-collar jobs transitioned to remote work practically overnight (Gallup poll, 2020). This unanticipated and forced shift to remote work created unprecedented challenges for organisations and their employees. For instance, recent studies indicate that pervasive feelings of loneliness, anxiety and reduced well-being, which already afflicted many employees with traditional work arrangements (Becker et al., 2021; Belkin et al., 2020; Morganson et al., 2010), were amplified during the first several months of the pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020; Afonso et al., 2021; Smith, 2020; Waters et al., 2021). Moreover, emerging research shows that during the onset of the pandemic, many employees forced to work remotely experienced higher job insecurity and loss of work meaning (Ouwerkerk & Bartels, 2020).
However, there might be a silver lining to this crisis for people working remotely, as reports in polls a year into the pandemic claim that at least half of workers would like to continue some level of remote work permanently (Maurer, 2021; McKinsey, 2020). Additionally, it appears that the crisis context and forced shift to remote work have alleviated some of the pre-COVID stigma around remote work arrangements (Golden, 2012; Rockmann & Pratt, 2015). While it is apparent that increased remote work is not going away anytime soon, if ever, the impact of this mandatory shift to remote work on employee perceptions, well-being and work-related behaviors remains underexplored. Thus, the goal of the current research is to empirically examine the potential benefits and drawbacks of the forced shift to remote work on employee behaviors and well-being.

Even though prior research on flexible work arrangements or voluntary remote work has shown relatively consistent beneficial findings for a number of individual work and well-being outcomes (Hartig et al., 2007; Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Ryan & Kossek, 2008), we lack an understanding of the unique benefits and costs of widespread, non-voluntary transitions to remote work for employees and organisations. Using the onset of the pandemic as a context to examine the effects of the systemic remote work arrangements on minor production-related deviant behaviors (CWBs) and well-being (depression and insomnia), this paper takes a step in exploring this shift’s short- and long-term consequences for individuals and organisations.

We believe our paper’s focus on forced remote work is important for human resource scholars and practitioners for several reasons. First, at the time of writing this article, the COVID-19 pandemic is far from being under control in the United States and around the globe and to some extent, the virus may be with us permanently (Audi et al., 2020). Second, there is compounding research to suggest that the likelihood of experiencing another pandemic similar to COVID-19 will continue in the coming decades (Marani et al., 2021). Third, forced changes may result from other cataclysmic events such as climate change, social justice movements, or political upheavals (Corak, 2020; Nebenhay, 2020). All these situations may require that organisations, possibly mandated at the country level, abruptly switch to remote work mode or alternate between remote and in-person modes. Therefore, it is increasingly important for organisations to develop human resource policies and procedures to facilitate effective voluntary and involuntary remote work (Ryan & Kossek, 2008) to navigate future crises more efficiently (Bapuji et al., 2020; Caligiuri et al., 2020; Collings et al., 2021). Our hope is that the findings from the current research will provide insights on how to effectively manage this semi-permanent transition to remote work, as well as yield some general advice on how to manage planned or unplanned forced changes to employee work conditions.

In the past, organisations and employees voluntarily chose to adopt remote work based on their individual circumstances, often with well-thought-out procedures (Mayo et al., 2009), but in general, remote work was not a widespread practice across industries. Since the COVID-19-induced shift to remote work occurred abruptly and was generally mandatory and widespread, many HR departments did not have well-developed policies or procedures to govern remote work or prior experience with managing remote employees. This contributed to two distinct features that characterized the early stage of COVID-19-induced shift to remote work: 1) a high degree of uncertainty surrounding the crisis’ severity, reach, duration and economic outcomes and 2) a degree of isolation due to social distancing and remote work. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic directly impacted two basic human needs, the need for control/autonomy and the need for belongingness (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Since individuals vary in the degree to which they prioritize these needs, employees are likely to perceive and cope differently with the challenges to needing fulfilment brought on by the forced shift to remote work. We draw on the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; for a review, see Deci et al., 2017) and integrate it with two resource-based theories of stress—the job demands-control model (JDC, Karasek, 1979) and Social Baseline Theory (SBT, Beckes & Coan, 2011), to explain individual differences in the way the forced shift to remote work brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic affected employees. We also examine individual preferences for work and non-work boundaries as potential moderators of these effects.

Our study makes several contributions to management research. From a broad perspective, we add to the human resource management literature by simultaneously exploring the effects of employee perceptions of job control and work-related loneliness during the forced shift to widespread remote work. Extant research has predominantly taken a resource-based perspective (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) to study employee stress-related response to remote work and job demands (e.g., Belkin et al., 2020; Chong et al., 2020; Gajendran et al., 2015; Golden, 2006; Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004; Windeler et al., 2017), viewing job autonomy as an important resource at work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). We extend this perspective in two ways. First, we add social baseline theory (SBT) to this body of literature, which explains how individuals save energy and resources through their social relationship network (Beckes & Coan, 2011; Coan & Sbarra, 2015). In this way, we extend the SBT perspective to the work context and highlight the important role work relationships play in conserving one’s energy and resources and the detrimental effects on employee well-being and behaviors when those relationships are interrupted. Second, we integrate a need fulfillment approach (SDT) with the theory of stress (JDC) and SBT to explain how different needs relate to employee well-being in the context of forced remote work and explore mechanisms of these effects. This more nuanced approach enriches human resource scholars’ understanding of how this shift may affect employee perceptions and behaviors depending on the individual employee and their work-life segmentation preferences.

We also add to the literature on job control to show that increased job autonomy is not always beneficial for all employees, as the predominant view in extant research suggests (e.g., most research links job autonomy directly to positive states and outcomes, Humphrey et al., 2007; Kuvaa et al., 2016). Instead, we take a more measured approach and argue that employees who prefer to segment their lives will struggle with the unexpected and forced shift to remote work despite the potential for increased job control. Our research suggests that employee segmentation preferences can moderate the relationship between individual...
job control perceptions with emotional exhaustion and work-life balance and subsequent well-being and work outcomes. In this way, our study calls attention to important individual influences on employee well-being and motivation in the study of remote work.

In addition, our results provide important practical insights for human resource professionals on managing the increased prevalence of remote work and unexpected disruptions that will likely remain a feature of the future workplace. From this standpoint, our findings suggest that individual employees will perceive and respond to these changes in working conditions differently. Because these differences directly affect employee productivity and well-being, organisations that understand these differences will be able to support and manage their employees in ways that capitalize on the beneficial impacts while helping them cope with the challenges.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a meta-theory of human motivation, posits that individual psychological growth and well-being are dependent on successful satisfaction of basic psychological needs—namely, the need for autonomy (having a choice and volition in one’s actions), the need for competence (one being responsible for competent performance) and the need for belongingness (one’s need for connection to others) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Prior research has shown that challenges to these basic needs create negative outcomes while enhancing them does the opposite (Deci et al., 2017; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Here we use SDT as a theoretical foundation to posit that the rapid and forced shift to remote work likely upset the balance of need fulfillment that individual employees perceived before the change. We focus on autonomy and belongingness as the two basic needs that were most impacted by COVID-19-induced change to remote work because they are relational in nature (Kluwer et al., 2020) and are particularly central to intrinsic motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Competence, however, is a more self-focused and general need in that it is related to any type of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

We propose that autonomy and belongingness have the greatest potential for individual differences in perceptions of how the forced change impacted need fulfillment. While employees have different preferences for relatedness, it is safe to assume that individual patterns of belonging were almost uniformly altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, COVID-19’s effects on the need for autonomy could be more nuanced. That is, some employees may have perceived greater autonomy need satisfaction due to the greater sense of control of their schedule and time afforded by remote work, while others’ need for autonomy was hindered due to the forced and rapid nature of the change or a sense of work being omnipresent.

Even though SDT is a useful framework to situate our arguments because it explains the general importance of these basic needs, it does not provide specific logic for explaining how the forced shift to remote work may shape the individual interpretation of contextual changes in working conditions. Therefore, we integrate the job demands-control (JDC) theory of stress (Karasek, 1979) with social baseline theory (SBT, Beckes & Coan, 2011) to examine our variables of interest. Specifically, JDC helps explain how individual employees might perceive job control (autonomy) differently during the change, providing a framework for connecting job control to employee well-being and behavior. Specifically, the basic premise of the JDC model posits that when employees are subjected to a high level of job demands at work it increases strain on employees, but job control can buffer the relationship between job demands and strain. That is, even when job demands are challenging (e.g., in the COVID-19 context), high control over one’s job reduces strain and can diminish the negative outcomes of high job demands (Karasek, 1979). Therefore, we examine employee perceptions of job control (the proxy for the extent to which employee basic need for autonomy is satisfied or hindered by the forced shift to remote work) as a primary determinant of employee stress (e.g., emotional exhaustion and ability to balance work and nonwork demands) and subsequent negative work and well-being outcomes.

We also draw on SBT (Beckes & Coan, 2011) to explore how individual employees responded to the forced change to remote work with regard to challenges to their need for belongingness in the work context (e.g., perceptions of work-related loneliness). SBT proposes that “close proximity to social resources is the baseline assumption of the human brain” (Beckes & Coan, 2011: 976). That is, the brain’s default mode presumes a certain social network “characterized by familiarity, joint attention, shared goals, and interdependence” (Beckes & Coan, 2011: 977). A disruption to a valued relationship upsets one’s social baseline and creates a loss of self and shift toward a condition of being alone (Coan & Sbarra, 2015). The forced and abrupt change to remote work disrupted habituated social relationships at work and therefore upset employee social baselines ultimately, contributing to feelings of loneliness (Henriksen et al., 2014). Accordingly, we examine feelings of loneliness (a proxy for the extent to which employee basic need for belongingness is satisfied or hindered by the forced shift to remote work) as another important determinant of employee stress and subsequent well-being and work outcomes.

In the sections that follow we integrate arguments from these theoretical perspectives to connect job control and work-related loneliness to employee emotional exhaustion and work-life balance during the shift to remote work forced by the COVID-19 pandemic. We also take a more nuanced perspective by looking at individual segmentations of perceived loneliness as an important boundary condition for increased job control. Finally, we explore the relationship between emotional exhaustion and work-life balance with work and well-being outcomes. Refer to Figure 1 for our proposed model.

2.1 | Hypotheses

2.1.1 | Job control and forced change to remote work

In the last decades, organisations have increasingly allowed limited use of remote work arrangements (Lister & Harnish, 2019). The extant
research on remote work has yielded mixed findings. On the one hand, studies have shown that remote work affords greater flexibility and thus better work-life balance and less emotional exhaustion (Lister & Hamish, 2019; Maruyama et al., 2009; Sardeshmukh, Sharma, & Golden, 2012), especially if employees perceive greater autonomy (Gajendran et al., 2015). On the other hand, the negative impact of remote work on both individual and organizational outcomes, such as lower organizational identification, increased feelings of professional isolation, and counterproductive work behaviors have also been demonstrated (e.g., Bartel et al., 2012; Golden et al., 2008; O’Neill et al., 2014). One recent large-scale study showed that flexible work arrangements were generally associated with lower work effort (Avgoustaki & Bessa, 2019). Furthermore, increasing organizational expectations for employees to be constantly connected have been linked to employee emotional exhaustion, decreased work-life balance, increased turnover intentions and poor health outcomes (Becker et al., 2021; Belkin et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2016).

Summarizing these conflicting findings, it seems that remote work in “normal” times can afford employees greater job control, which has been associated with decreased emotional exhaustion and increased work-life balance, but this benefit may also depend on organizational expectations for email monitoring (e.g., Becker et al., 2021; Belkin et al., 2020). However, the context of the COVID-19-induced change to remote work is different, as this shift was forced, widespread, and abrupt. In many organisations, there was a lack of well-developed policies for remote work or insufficient managerial experience with supervising remote employees. According to JDC (Karasek, 1979), employees may experience a range of job control perceptions due to their individual circumstances and preferences. In the case of the COVID-19-induced shift to remote work, some may have perceived greater job control over their work environment and schedule, enhancing their sense of autonomy. Moreover, the generally increased uncertainty during the pandemic in all life domains (social, family, community, work) reduced employee control over other aspects of their lives and may have strengthened the saliency of remote work’s perceived high job control (e.g., one of the few things employees could control was the way they performed their jobs).

In contrast, some employees may have reacted more to the forced nature of the change itself, as well as to the lack of structure and physical separation between work and nonwork, leading to lower perceptions of job control. Furthermore, during this time, many working adults were forced to adapt to doing their jobs in the constant presence of other household members. This was especially true for those workers living with children because schools were also closed during the pandemic. With such blurring of domain boundaries in a fully remote environment (Allen et al., 2013; Fonner & Roloff, 2010; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), employees were suddenly faced with frequent competing demands from their work and nonwork roles, creating a challenge for employee work-life balance maintenance, which is important for individual well-being (e.g., Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). JDC predicts that a higher level of perceived job control can help employees to better meet the demands of both work and nonwork domains. Therefore, employees who perceived high job control likely experienced less emotional exhaustion and greater work-life balance. In contrast, those who perceived low job control likely struggled with the forced change and experienced lower well-being.

2.1.2 | The moderating effect of segmentation preferences

Even though SDT and JDC suggest that a greater sense of job control is generally beneficial to employees, there is also reason to believe that this is not always the case. Past research indicates that a voluntary shift to remote work, even though it tends to increase job control, also creates a range of time- and strain-based conflicts that can contribute to emotional exhaustion and work-family conflict in some employees (Messersmith, 2007). We believe this conflict can be exacerbated in the context of a forced shift. The theoretical arguments put forth by boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) illuminated an
important boundary condition, namely — employee segmentation preferences, for understanding which employees are likely to struggle the most with these new conflicts. In fact, prior empirical research used segmentation preferences as one of the most common moderators of stress and successful maintenance of work-life balance in the study of both remote and in-person work contexts (Lapierre et al., 2016; Methot & LePine, 2016; Michel & Clark, 2013; Smith et al., 2021).

According to boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000), individuals vary in their preferences for segmenting the work and non-work domains, referred to here as “segmentation preference” (Powell & Greenhaus, 2010). Those with a high segmentation preference prefer to keep their work domain separate from their non-work domain, and those with a low segmentation preference prefer to integrate or blend the two domains. To date, empirical research has consistently painted a bleak picture for those who prefer to integrate work and nonwork, as opposed to those who prefer to segment, demonstrating that segmenting is negatively related to work-to-nonwork conflict and stress (Kreiner, 2006) and positively related to psychological detachment from work and life satisfaction (Hahn & Dormann, 2013).

Consistent with past work, we expect that in the rapid and abrupt shift to remote work context of COVID-19, employees with low segmentation preference will be more comfortable when they perceive high job control than those with high segmentation preference (Lapierre et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2021). That is, for people who prefer to segment their work and nonwork lives (i.e., high segmentation preferences), we expect this “new normal” of remote work without clear boundaries to be especially stressful; thus, increased job control perceptions may not be as beneficial for their emotional well-being (leading to higher exhaustion) and balancing the work and non-work domains. On the other hand, those employees who prefer to integrate their work and nonwork lives (i.e., low segmentation preferences) should be more sensitive to job control perceptions and thus, thrive with greater control, experiencing reduced stress and greater work-life balance. Therefore, we predict the following:

**Hypothesis H1.** The negative relationship between job control and emotional exhaustion will be moderated by segmentation preference such that the relationship will be stronger when segmentation preference is low.

**Hypothesis H2.** The positive relationship between job control and work-life balance will be moderated by segmentation preference such that the relationship will be stronger when segmentation preference is low.

### 2.1.3 Outcomes of emotional exhaustion and work-life balance

Emotional exhaustion reflects the level of depletion of an employee’s physical and psychological energy and resources (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Exhausted employees tend to withdraw from their work behaviorally and emotionally. In addition, exhaustion leads to reduced organizational commitment, increased turnover intentions, less extra-role behaviors (Belkin et al., 2020; Cropanzano et al., 2003), a greater likelihood of counterproductive and deviant workplace behaviors, anxiety, and reduced employee well-being (Koutsimani et al., 2019; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Maslach et al., 2001). Specifically, employees who are emotionally exhausted are more likely to engage in CWBs and withhold extra-role behaviors due to depletion of resources (Bolton et al., 2012; Krischer et al., 2010). Moreover, emotionally exhausted employees may engage in counterproductive behaviors to gain control (Banks et al., 2012), especially during a crisis like COVID-19 (Chong et al., 2020).

Scholars have distinguished serious counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., fraud) from more minor behaviors, such as tardiness and slow working pace, finding that such behaviors may be triggered by a different set of predictors (Fine & Edward, 2017; Jensen et al., 2010), even in a remote work environment (Holland et al., 2016). Because emotional exhaustion represents depletion and withdrawal due to low energy and resources, rather than a high arousal proactive emotional state (e.g., anger toward the organization), we anticipate it increases the likelihood of employees engaging in minor counterproductive work behaviors that are directed at conserving one’s physical and mental resources. This is also consistent with a recent study that found remote work to be associated with lower job effort (Avgoustaki & Bessa, 2019). Furthermore, since the state of emotional exhaustion signals depletion of emotional resources, and thus is often accompanied by increased negative moods and stress, we also expect it to contribute to depression and poor sleep (Denollet & De Vries, 2006) during the COVID-19-induced remote work context. Depression and insomnia have been also linked to basic need frustration in psychology research on adults and adolescents (Uysal et al., 2020; Wei et al., 2005) and thus, we expect that emotional exhaustion should mediate the effects of perceived job control on employee outcomes discussed in this section. Therefore, we make the following predictions:

**Hypothesis H3.** There will be indirect effects of job control through emotional exhaustion on (a) minor counterproductive work behaviors, (b) depression, and (c) insomnia. These effects will be stronger when segmentation preference is low.

Building on past research, we also propose that job control will have indirect effects on work and well-being outcomes through unfavorable work-life balance perceptions. Specifically, low perceived work-life balance reflects a belief that the work domain is impeding the employee’s ability to fulfill the needs of their non-work domain. As a result, employees may attempt to restore balance through minor counterproductive work behaviors (Akanni et al., 2018; Beaugerard, 2014), which, in some cases, can directly provide more non-work domain time (Avgoustaki & Bessa, 2019). In addition, the inability to balance work and nonwork demands can lead to negative affect and feelings of anxiety which can contribute to depression and sleep problems (Frone, 2003), lower work engagement (Wayne et al., 2017), decreased organizational commitment (Allen et al., 2010) and increased turnover intentions (Belkin et al., 2020). Consistent with this body of past research, we make the following predictions:
Hypothesis H4. There will be indirect effects of job control through work-life balance on (a) minor counterproductive work behaviors, (b) depression, and (c) insomnia. These effects will be stronger when segmentation preference is low.

2.1.4 Work-related loneliness and forced change to remote work

Prior research has established that workplace relationships provide an important source of belonging needs satisfaction for working adults (for a review, see Deci et al., 2017). Loneliness is a feeling that arises when an individual need for belonging is not being met (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Work-related loneliness can be defined as a negative feeling that arises when an employee perceives that there is a discrepancy between their desired and actual social connection with others from their workplace (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Research has shown that loneliness in general, is a growing issue in the United States and internationally, due to societal changes, technological progress, and the nature of work (Gabriel et al., 2021; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017; Murthy, 2017). Feelings of work-related loneliness signal that important needs are not being met and thus trigger anxiety and negative affect (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Twenge et al., 2001). Loneliness can also increase insecurity and reactivity to threats in the environment (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Fromm-Reichman, 1959).

The move to remote work caused by the COVID-19 outbreak swiftly cut-off in-person contact between coworkers, thus isolating employees from important workplace relationships. One of the key tenants of SBT is that individuals have unique baselines for their social relationship networks and will react differently to disruptions of, or threats to, their personal baseline (Coan & Sbarra, 2015). Therefore, we also expect the forced change to remote work impacts individual employees in different ways depending on how disruptive the change to remote work was for their social baseline network and their individual preferences for communication. SBT arguments lead to the prediction that disruptions to one’s social baseline increase should increase feelings of work-related loneliness and isolation, which increase stress. Further, lack of access to their work social network would increase employees’ perceived and real cost of responding to environmental demands, requiring greater emotional regulation and greater expenditure of emotional and cognitive resources (Beckes & Coan, 2011). In addition to increased emotional strain, loneliness and isolation cut remote workers off from workplace relationships that could help to restore their emotional resources (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). It is important to note that the loss of valuable relationship partners from one domain can cause feelings of loneliness even when surrounded by others from the non-work domain, such as family members (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Rockmann & Pratt, 2015). Therefore, feelings of work-related loneliness should be positively related to emotional exhaustion.

Employee work relationships represent an important part of their successful work-life balance maintenance since work-life balance involves one’s perception that all aspects of their work and nonwork lives are generally being satisfactorily balanced and maintained (Kellieher et al., 2019). Workplace relationships are an important part of that balance for many employees. As we discussed above, a forced change to remote work can cause a disruption to an individual’s social baseline, particularly if they prefer in-person connections to workplace relationship partners. This disruption can in turn contribute to feelings of work-related loneliness. Experiencing feelings of work-related loneliness also signals that relational needs with coworkers are not being satisfied and hence employee work and nonwork relationships are out of balance. Because work-life balance reflects the overall balance between work and nonwork factors, work-related loneliness can contribute to decreased perceptions of balance irrespective of other factors such as more time with family members. Thus, work-related loneliness should be negatively related to work-life balance perceptions.

Much of the research on segmentation preferences has focused on the structural separation between work and nonwork (Bulger et al., 2007) and not the impact on one’s social baseline or loneliness, particularly in the remote work context (Lapierre et al., 2016). However, some research has examined segmentation in the context of interpersonal boundaries (Liao et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2013). Overall, we do not believe that there is strong evidence to predict that segmentation preference will moderate the effects of work-related loneliness in this context. It would seem that one could prefer to keep work and nonwork separate, but still have important work relationships in their social baseline. Nevertheless, we pose it as a research question and explore this potential relationship. Similar to our prior logic regarding emotional exhaustion and work-life balance, we also expect indirect effects of loneliness on our outcomes. Thus, we make the following predictions:

Research Question 1: Do segmentation preference moderate the relationships between loneliness and emotional exhaustion and between loneliness and work-life balance?

Hypothesis H5. There will be indirect effects of work-related loneliness through emotional exhaustion on (a) minor counterproductive work behaviors, (b) depression, and (c) insomnia.

Hypothesis H6. There will be indirect effects of work-related loneliness through work-life balance on (a) minor counterproductive work behaviors, (b) depression, and (c) insomnia.

3 Methods

3.1 Participants and procedure

In order to examine a variety of organisations, we recruited working adults from the authors’ networks and from the MBA students and alumni networks of three U.S. universities in different parts of the country during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic in the United States (Hills, 2020; Wilson, 2020) when many states across
the country issued stay at home orders. We received 334 complete responses to our initial survey in the weeks immediately after stay-at-home orders became widespread (data for the initial survey was collected from April 1–12, 2020). These participants (22 did not provide an email for follow-up) were asked to complete a second survey approximately 2 weeks later. We received 249 complete follow-up surveys. We dropped 10 respondents who were not working remotely at the time of the surveys. Only 8% of our respondents reported some remote work prior to the pandemic. The participants represented a large variety of industry groups. The largest percentage of these included finance (16%), information technology (16%), and consumer products (13%). One-third of the sample reported being in a role where they managed other employees. The sample was 57% male and the median age range was 41–45 years (SD = 2.42). Participants came from 37 different states with the largest groups from Virginia (23%), Pennsylvania (15%), and New Jersey (8%).

3.2 Measures

Because we were interested in individual’s perceptions of autonomy and belonging at work, we used validated work measures rather than the more generic SDT needs measure. In the initial survey, Job Control was measured using the three-item subscale introduced by Butler (2007). A sample item was “I have the freedom to decide how to organize my work.” We assessed Work-related Loneliness using five items adapted to the work context from the UCLA Loneliness scale (Russell, 1996) that were most applicable to the remote work context. The items were “I feel isolated from coworkers,” “I feel left out at work,” “I feel in tune with my co-workers (reverse coded),” “I lack work companionship,” and “I have people from work I can turn to” We assessed Segmentation Preferences with Kreiner’s (2006) four-item scale. A sample item is “I don’t like work issues creeping into my home life;” higher scores indicated a stronger preference for segmentation. Emotional Exhaustion was measured using eight items from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). A sample item was “I feel emotionally drained from my work.” We measured Work-Life Balance using the six-item scale from Carlson et al. (2009). A sample item was “I am able to accomplish the expectations that my supervisors and my family have for me.” The stem for all these items (except for Segmentation Preferences) was “Since your work was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.” Responses to each of these measures were reported on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

In the follow-up survey, we measured Minor Counterproductive Work Behaviors using five items from the production deviance and work withdrawal subscales from Spector et al. (2006). We chose five items that pertained best to the remote work setting. The items included “purposefully worked slowly when things needed to get done,” “purposely failed to follow instructions,” “started working late without permission,” “took a longer break than you are allowed to take,” “ended work earlier than you are supposed to.” Insomnia was assessed using a four-item measure (Jenkins et al., 1988). A sample item was “I have difficulty falling asleep.” Depression was assessed using the eight-item PHQ-8 frequency scale (Kroenke et al., 2009). A sample item was “felt down, depressed, hopeless.” The stem for these measures was “Since your work was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, how often have you?” Responses ranged from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“nearly every day”).

Controls. We used the Bernerth and Aguinis (2016) approach for control variable usage in our analyses. Since forced remote work challenges the boundaries between work and nonwork, we controlled for gender and age (Chesley, 2005; Turel et al., 2011), which have also been associated with loneliness (Schmitt & Kurdek, 1985) and the outcome variables of interest (Farrell & Finkelstein, 2007). In addition, with schools closed, employees with young children experienced greater time allocation challenges and work–family conflict (Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 1999; Dahm et al., 2015). Therefore, we controlled for the presence of children. Gender was coded as one for men and zero for women. Participant age was reported using 5-year windows where 1 was less than 25. The children variable was coded as zero if there were no children under 18 in the household and one if there were. Finally, we controlled for how many weeks it had been since the participants began full-time remote work. We ran all analyses without controls and found no substantive differences in our findings. The descriptive statistics for the study variables are displayed in Table 1.

4 RESULTS

All study variables had coefficient alpha reliabilities over 0.70. We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of the employee responses to ensure a good fitting measurement model. The eight-factor measurement model fit the data well, RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.88, χ²(791) = 1650. The best-fitting seven-factor model (collapsing depression and insomnia) did not fit as well Δχ²(7) = 115, p < 0.01. A single-factor model did not fit the data well, RMSEA = 0.12, CFI = 0.45, Δχ²(28) = 3129, p < 0.01. The eight-factor measurement model showed that one of the reverse-coded loneliness items and two of the CWB items had relatively low loadings. They did not show high cross-loadings and the reliabilities were acceptable, so we retained the item structure. Next, we aggregated the measures and simultaneously tested the predictions of our model using path modeling in Mplus Version 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017). We grand mean centered job control, loneliness, and segmentation preferences to make the direct effects and interactions easier to interpret and discuss.

Hypothesis H1 predicted that job control would be negatively related to emotional exhaustion, conditional on segmentation preferences. Hypothesis H2 predicted a positive conditional relationship with work-life balance. Table 2 shows that job control’s relationship with emotional exhaustion (β = −0.30, p = 0.01) and work-life balance (β = 0.22, p = 0.01) was significant and in the expected directions. Table 2 also shows significant interactions between job control and segmentation preferences for emotional exhaustion (β = 0.12, p
## Table 1: Means, SDs, and correlations for study variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Job Control</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>(0.81)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Work Loneliness</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>-0.27**</td>
<td>(0.73)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Emotional Exhaustion</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>-0.42**</td>
<td>0.41**</td>
<td>(0.91)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Work-Life Balance</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>-0.29**</td>
<td>-0.54**</td>
<td>(0.94)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CWB</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>-0.37**</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
<td>-0.22**</td>
<td>(0.73)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Depression</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>-0.21**</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
<td>-0.39**</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>(0.88)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Insomnia</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>-0.16*</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>-0.35**</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>0.71**</td>
<td>(0.90)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Segmentation</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>-0.32**</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>-0.13*</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Age</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>-0.18**</td>
<td>-0.26**</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>-0.45**</td>
<td>-0.32**</td>
<td>-0.13*</td>
<td>-0.34**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Gender</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.16**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.24**</td>
<td>-0.26**</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Children</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.13*</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Weeks since Change</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.11*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.11*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 324 for Survey 1 variables. N = 239 for Survey 2 variables. Coefficient alpha is provided along the diagonal. CWB, minor counterproductive work behaviors. **p < 0.01. *p < 0.05.
shows that we found work loneliness to have significant relationships with emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.28$, $p = 0.01$) and work-life balance ($\beta = -0.24$, $p = 0.01$). Hypothesis H5 and Hypothesis H6 predicted that loneliness would have indirect effects on the outcome variables through emotional exhaustion and work-life balance, respectively. As discussed previously, emotional exhaustion was significantly related to depression, but not CWB or insomnia. Bootstrapped tests showed that the indirect effect of loneliness on depression through exhaustion ($\beta = 0.06$, 95% CI = 0.03, 0.11) was significant. Therefore, Hypothesis H5b was supported, but H5a and H5c were not. Regarding Hypothesis H6, as discussed previously, work-life balance was significantly related to depression and insomnia, but not CWB. The bootstrap tests showed that indirect effects of loneliness on depression ($\beta = 0.04$, 95% CI = 0.01, 0.07) and insomnia ($\beta = 0.07$, 95% CI = 0.03, 0.12) through work-life balance were significant. Thus, Hypothesis H6b and Hypothesis H6c were supported, but H6a was not. The total indirect effect of loneliness on depression was significant ($\beta = 0.10$, 95% CI = 0.06, 0.15). Table 3 provides a summary of all findings.

4.1 Supplemental findings

Our data also provided us the opportunity to explore a number of interesting relationships between variables that were not directly related to our theoretical predictions, but we believe yield valuable insights into the forced shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. We discuss them briefly here in order to inform HR practitioners and invite future theoretical research. First, it is interesting to note that 80% of organisations in our sample did have some remote work policy in place at the beginning of the change to remote work. Further, the employee’s perception of the clarity of the remote work policy also showed significant relationships with emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.30$, $p = 0.01$) and work-life balance ($\beta = -0.18$, $p = 0.01$). Hypothesis H5 and Hypothesis H6 predicted that clarity would have indirect effects on the outcome variables through emotional exhaustion and work-life balance, respectively. As discussed previously, emotional exhaustion was significantly related to depression, but not CWB or insomnia. Bootstrapped tests showed that the indirect effect of clarity on depression through exhaustion ($\beta = 0.06$, 95% CI = 0.03, 0.11) was significant. Therefore, Hypothesis H5b was supported, but H5a and H5c were not. Regarding Hypothesis H6, as discussed previously, work-life balance was significantly related to depression and insomnia, but not CWB. The bootstrap tests showed that indirect effects of clarity on depression ($\beta = 0.04$, 95% CI = 0.01, 0.07) and insomnia ($\beta = 0.07$, 95% CI = 0.03, 0.12) through work-life balance were significant. Thus, Hypothesis H6b and Hypothesis H6c were supported, but H6a was not. The total indirect effect of clarity on depression was significant ($\beta = 0.10$, 95% CI = 0.06, 0.15). Table 3 provides a summary of all findings.

### Table 2: Model results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>EE</th>
<th>WLB</th>
<th>CWB</th>
<th>DEPR</th>
<th>INS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job control</td>
<td>-0.30**</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>-0.18**</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work loneliness</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>-0.24**</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segmentation</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job control $\times$ Segmentation</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
<td>-0.14***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness $\times$ Segmentation</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-life balance</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.22**</td>
<td>-0.28**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.33**</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.12*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.13*</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote work weeks</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.20*</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $N = 324$ for Survey 1, $N = 239$ for Survey 2. CWB, minor counterproductive work behaviors; DEPR, depression; EE, emotional exhaustion; INS, insomnia; WLB, work-life balance. **$p < 0.01$. *$p < 0.05$.**
TABLE 3 Summary of findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Supported?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1 JC X SEG → EE</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2 JC X SEG → WLB</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3a JC X SEG → EE → CWB</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3b JC X SEG → EE → DEPR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3c JC X SEG → EE → INS</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4a JC X SEG → WLB → CWB</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4b JC X SEG → WLB → DPR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4c JC X SEG → WLB → INS</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ1 LON X SEG → EE or WLB</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5a LON → EE → CWB</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5b LON → EE → DEPR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5c LON → EE → INS</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6a LON → WLB → CWB</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6b LON → WLB → DEPR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6c LON → WLB → INS</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: CWB, minor counterproductive work behaviors; DEPR, depression; EE, emotional exhaustion; INS, insomnia; JC, job control; LON, work-related loneliness; SEG, segmentation preference; WLB, work-life balance.

policy was positively related ($r = 0.13, p < 0.05$) to perceptions of job control. In addition, work loneliness was not related to having children at the home or living with a significant other. Loneliness was, however, related to marital satisfaction ($r = -0.14, p < 0.05$). This is consistent with SBT logic and suggests that workplace relationships can be important to employees even when they have families, but may be of particular importance when they have low-quality personal relationships. We also explored depression more broadly and found that feelings of depression were related to perceptions of the severity of COVID-19 threat ($r = 0.12, p < 0.05$) and square footage of home the participants were residing in during the pandemic ($r = -0.20, p < 0.01$).

We also asked participants about their preferences for remote work after the COVID-19 outbreak is resolved. Ninety-four percent indicated that they would like to work at least 1 day from home, 10% indicated that they would like to work completely remotely, and 55% of respondents indicated that they would like to work remotely 1 or 2 days a week. These preferences were related to work loneliness ($r = -0.19, p < 0.01$) and segmentation preferences ($r = -0.19, p < 0.01$). These findings provide a first glimpse of how a workplace of the future might change after COVID-19 due to experiences, and expectations of workers in “all-remote” mode.

5 | DISCUSSION

As the world continues to wrestle with unprecedented health and financial challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important for human resource scholars and practitioners to understand how employees, who were forced to quickly adapt to a remote work environment, perceived and responded to this change. Understanding these differences will be important because it appears that some level of remote work will be here to stay for many jobs (McKinsey, 2020). Our study also provides insights on the importance of work-related factors for successfully managing a forced change. Consistent with our theoretical framework, the results show that the sudden shift to remote work affected different employees in different ways. Employees who perceived greater job control reported lower exhaustion and higher work-life balance, but this was conditional on their segmentation preferences. This was particularly important for work-life balance, where employees with high segmentation preferences did not show a beneficial effect for job control. We also found that employees who experienced greater work loneliness reported greater exhaustion and lower work-life balance. We also found that these effects were modestly negatively correlated and so tended to exacerbate each other.

With regard to well-being and productivity outcomes, our predictions had mixed support as shown in Table 3. While many predictions were supported, we did not find a significant relationship between emotional exhaustion and insomnia in our full model, despite them being positively correlated ($r = 0.30, p < 0.01$). This may be attributable to the complex and bidirectional relationship between exhaustion and sleep. On one hand, exhaustion has been shown to contribute to sleep problems (Denollet & De Vries, 2006). On the other hand, lack of sleep exacerbates emotional exhaustion (Lanaj et al., 2014), while restorative sleep is a way to recover from emotional depletion (Barber et al., 2013; Nägel & Sonnentag, 2013). Therefore, longitudinal studies are likely needed to explore these mutual effects.

Further, emotional exhaustion and work-life balance were not related to minor productivity-related CWBs. Rather, Table 2 shows that these behaviors were directly related to perceived job control ($β = -0.18, p < 0.01$) and work loneliness ($β = 0.18, p < 0.01$). On one hand, it is possible that high job control may have reduced the likelihood that an employee would feel constrained by permissions or expectations found in some of the items. On the other hand, during this forced change and transition period, employees were still likely accustomed to and aware of their supervisor’s expectations (e.g., to maintain a typical 9 to 5 workday schedule). Thus, they could perceive exercising their new control in ways that would have violated these expectations as acts of deviance. We also note that loneliness had a similar relationship with our CWB measure even though it wasn’t subject to the same concerns. This suggests that employee perceptions of job control and loneliness following the change to remote work was related to minor deviance directly and did not rely on burnout or feelings of low work-life balance as predicted, even though these variables were correlated with CWBs ($r = 0.25, p < 0.01$ and $r = -0.22, p < 0.01$, respectively). This direct effect is consistent with prior research findings of counterproductive work behaviors during organizational change (Huang et al., 2017), potentially indicating that when employees are situated in the macro-environment that is threatening and unpredictable, it is a more impactful trigger of CWBs than micro-level (individual) drivers. It also demonstrates the importance of promoting job control and
helping employees stay connected when working remotely, especially amid crisis and uncertainty.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

Our findings make several contributions to the literature. For one, this is the first study to our knowledge to simultaneously investigate how a sudden shift to remote work impacts perceptions related to the basic needs of autonomy and belongingness (Lister & Harnish, 2019). Extending prior research on remote work (e.g., Gajendran et al., 2015; Golden, 2006; Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004; Windeler et al., 2017), we look at remote work through the lens of SDT, while integrating it with the two resource-based theories of stress, JDC (Karasek, 1979) and SBT (Beckes & Coan, 2011), to explain how this mode of work may shape individual perceptions and thus, differentially affect employee well-being and work-related behavior. Notably, by bringing SBT from social psychology to managerial research, we help to illuminate the role of social relationships in conserving one's energies and resources, in addition to the typical job demands-resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) or conservation of resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989) approaches, as this work has focused on individual emotional, cognitive and physical resources (e.g., Halbesleben et al., 2014). Informed by SBT, we bring another type of resource to management scholars’ radar—social resources, that can significantly shape employee emotional states (i.e., emotional exhaustion) and affect their productivity (by reducing minor CWB) and well-being. Together, our findings reinforce and extend the importance of managing job control perceptions and work-related loneliness in order to help employees cope with a forced change in working conditions.

Second, we demonstrate that segmentation preferences represent an important boundary condition for understanding how employees may respond differently to remote work (e.g., Humphrey et al., 2007; Kuvaas et al., 2016). While high perceived job control is generally considered to be beneficial, our findings suggest that the benefits are attenuated for employees with high segmentation preferences. This speaks to the idea that employee individual differences must always be considered during crises or organizational changes. A few comments from respondents drive this point home. One said, “Working from home has allowed me to balance work and life better...I never want to go back.” In contrast, another said, “Work has been understanding, but as a high performer, I lack the routine/motivation to perform like I used to.”

Finally, and speaking broadly, our study provides insights for crisis management scholars by highlighting important employee work and well-being outcomes resulting from a large-scale, involuntary shift to remote work during the acute stage of the crisis. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States provided us with a unique opportunity to study the shift to widespread remote work arrangements during lockdowns and social distancing measures when uncertainty with regards to the duration and outcomes of this crisis was at its peak. This high uncertainty context also gives us hope that our findings might be of use in understanding how other large-scale (or more localized organizational) crises may shape employee well-being and behaviors in the remote work mode.

5.2 | Practical implications

Our results provide a number of implications for how human resource professionals can manage the “new normal” of remote work. The pandemic has shown that many employees can continue to perform effectively with widespread remote work. Our findings reinforce that greater perceptions of job control are generally beneficial for employee well-being and productivity. However, not all employees perceived high job control during the forced change to remote work, which could be due either to the fact that the change was forced by the COVID-19 pandemic or to the way organisations handled this shift. Even though organisations and their leaders cannot control environmental changes or crises, they do have an opportunity to shape employee perceptions regarding job control. More specifically, organisations can positively impact employee well-being and productivity by emphasising the aspects of remote work that afford greater employee job control, particularly during times of forced change or high uncertainty.

In addition, our results show that a one size fits all approach to remote work is not optimal, as not all employees benefit uniformly from perceptions of high job control. Specifically, employees who prefer to segment their lives experience fewer benefits, particularly in the realm of work-life balance. This suggests that human resource departments should work with their employees to adopt policies and procedures for remote work that balance organizational outcomes and employee well-being (Becker et al., 2021; Belkin et al., 2020; Lister & Harnish, 2019). Furthermore, our supplemental analysis suggests that perceived clarity of remote work policies was associated with greater feelings of job control, suggesting an opportunity for organisations in this realm – by adopting comprehensive and clear remote work-related policies and communicating them effectively to employees. In addition, training on time management and setting boundaries can help employees to better manage the remote work environment, especially those with lower segmentation preferences (Liu et al., 2013).

Additionally, our findings suggest that some employees struggle with feelings of work-related loneliness during remote work, which can have detrimental effects on their well-being and beyond. Thus, organisations should make a concerted effort to maintain feelings of belongingness among remotely working employees, especially if face-to-face encounters are not feasible. For example, this could be done by creating virtual spaces for more personal connections rather than only gathering employees for required work activities, as well as through maintenance of face-to-face routines that are adaptable to a remote realm (e.g., casual dressing Fridays, lunch or coffee breaks at approximately the same time, where employees and their managers bring their own lunch on e-meetings and just eat together and chat about nonwork-related matters, etc.). However, recent anecdotal
5.3  Limitations and suggestions for future research

Like all studies, this research has limitations. For one, because the pandemic was unforeseen, we were unable to measure perceptions of job control and loneliness before the shift to remote work. Therefore, we cannot determine whether these increased or decreased after the change. At the same time, our general findings with respect to job control are largely consistent with extant research on remote work and the fact that most of our sample did not have prior experience of working remotely, gives us further confidence in our conclusions. Our findings are also somewhat limited by their self-reported nature and cross-sectional design, but at the same time, the two-wave design and timely data collection during the crisis peak mitigate some of the concerns for common method/source bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Self-ratings were appropriate because we were interested in employee perceptions following the change to remote work (Conway & Lace, 2010). We also selected validated scales for each of our measures and fitting a common method factor onto our data and post-hoc analyses did not affect the factor loadings of the items. That said, our results should be interpreted with some caution and we encourage future research to replicate and extend our findings using experimental and longitudinal study designs to provide causal evidence for our observed relationships. Of course, as the pandemic continues to unfold, additional factors may become relevant in its later stages. As people acclimate to the “new normal,” individuals may become comfortable with remote work and establish new social baselines. Future research should investigate whether other needs, such as creating meaning (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010), may become more important as people become accustomed to remote work.

6  CONCLUSION

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a lot of changes to the world of work. Many of these changes, remote work in particular, will likely become permanent aspects of the workplace of the future. This will require organisations and their human resources professionals to adapt to the new dynamics of work. This study provides insight into how job control and loneliness experienced during a forced shift to remote work affected employees. Those organisations and leaders that take these lessons to heart will improve the well-being of their employees and their families, and ultimately, benefit their companies through decreased deviance and increased employee productivity.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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REFERENCES


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