

“Am I supposed to call them?” Relearning interactions in the digital workplace

Karin Högberg and Sara Willermark

School of Business Economics and IT, University West, Trollhattan, Sweden

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to develop the understanding of learning processes related to the new ways of interacting in the enforced digital workplace over time.

Design/methodology/approach – A multiple, longitudinal case study of knowledge-based workers in three firms located in Sweden has been conducted from March 2020 to March 2023. In total, 89 interviews with 32 employees in three knowledge-based firms have been collected.

Findings – The study shows how the intricate interaction between rules and norms for interaction and work must be renegotiated as well as un- and relearned when the physical work environment no longer frames the work context. Furthermore, technology can be viewed as both an enable and a barrier, that is, technology has enhanced collaboration between organizational members yet also created social difficulties, for example, related to communication and interaction. The study emphasizes that individuals learned through trial and error. That is, they tried behaviors such as translating social interactions" to a digital arena, appraised the outcomes and modified the practices if the outcomes were poor.

Research limitations/implications – The present study does have several limitations. First, it is based on interviews with respondents within three organizations in Sweden. To broaden and deepen the understanding of both organizational and learning, future studies can contribute by studying other contexts as well as using a mixed method approach in other countries.

Practical implications – Results from the study can provide a practical understanding of how the rapid change from working at the office to working from home using digital technologies can be understood and managed.

Originality/value – Contributions include combining interaction order and un- and relearning among organizational employees. This insight is important given that the rapid digital transformation of our society has changed how work is performed and how the future workplace will be both structured and organized.

Keywords Digital workplace, Interaction, Unlearning, Relearning, Digital transformation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The rapid development of digital technologies has changed how and where we work. For decades, people have been able to work from home (WFH) using technology (Espitia *et al.*, 2022). However, during the pandemic, organizations that had no desire, nor the experience of

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working from home, were forced to adapt their business to working from home mode almost overnight (Penado Abilleira *et al.*, 2021; Högberg, 2022). It is safe to say that the pandemic caused a rapid, unforeseen digital transformation of the workplace which has caused many challenges for both individual employees as well as organizations (Dey *et al.*, 2020). As many people were forced – or should one say privileged – to WFH, they have faced many challenges in using and interacting with digital technologies they were unprepared for (Tønnessen *et al.*, 2021). Employees have therefore been forced to use new technologies in new ways to do their work (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020). This includes engaging with their coworkers and performing work tasks that may not be suitable in a WFH environment (Tønnessen *et al.*, 2021). That is, both their workplace and their work practices have been heavily disrupted by the pandemic and the use of digital technology. Arguably, existing research on the digital workplace and WFH does not, for natural reasons, provide an explanation of the forced virtual organization and working from home induced by the pandemic (Debrowski *et al.*, 2022; Standaert *et al.*, 2021). Even before the pandemic, the digital workplace was rapidly evolving and getting significant attention. It includes, but is not limited to, context such as education (Willermark and Pareto, 2020) health care (Islind *et al.*, 2019) and bank organizations (Hoornweg *et al.*, 2016). It has been argued that the digital workplace offers flexibility, allowing individuals to choose the most productive periods for focused work and reducing commuting time and fatigue associated with travel (Yang *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, Maruyama *et al.* (2009) argue that digital work contributes to an improved work-life balance by offering flexible working hours allowing individuals to have greater autonomy over their work schedule, leading to increased satisfaction with work-life balance.

As the use of digital technologies and WFH has increased, it is vital to explore how employees navigate through the disrupted working environments and how they adapt their work practices and learn to maintain the organization's common purposes.

In the present study, the term WFH is understood as a work practice in which an employee performs work-related practices from their home instead of being physically present at a workplace, e.g. an office space (Tønnessen *et al.*, 2021). The term “enforced digital workplace” refers to when employees due to social restrictions are obliged to use digital technology such as Zoom to perform their work tasks. This also involves the lack of no face-to-face interactions and a lack of co-located interactivity (*et al.*, 2020).

As expected, the pandemic has caused a wide range of research in different fields to study how work is disrupted and changed. For example, scholars have focused on the work-life balance when working from home (Xu *et al.*, 2021), and on technostress induced by the digital workplace (Taser *et al.*, 2022; Willermark *et al.*, 2023). Also, leadership challenges (Stoker *et al.*, 2022), collaboration (Yang *et al.*, 2022) and learning (Barabaschi *et al.*, 2022) have been studied. Notably, many studies were conducted at the beginning of the pandemic and hence do not follow the development of the disrupted workplaces and practices (cf. Kohont and Ignjatović, 2022; Meher *et al.*, 2022). It is therefore relevant to move beyond snapshots of pandemic work and study the challenges over time.

This paper aims to develop our understanding of learning processes related to the new ways of interacting in the enforced digital workplace. The following research question is asked:

RQ1. How do organizational members relearn interactions in the digital workplace over time?

To answer this question, a multiple, longitudinal case study of knowledge-based workers in three firms located in Sweden has been conducted.

In the present study, we use [Goffman's \(1959\)](#) concepts of impression management, self-presentation and interaction orders as an analytical lens to provide insights into how individuals actively engage in shaping their social interactions, managing the impressions they make on others and adhering to the unwritten rules and expectations that guide social behavior in different contexts. To shed light on the learning processes related to the new ways of interacting in the enforced digital workplace, we combine Goffman's theoretical framework ([Goffman, 1959](#)) with the theoretical concepts of “unlearning” and “relearning” (cf. [Hedberg, 1981](#); [Fiol and O'Connor, 2017](#); [Prahalad and Bettis, 1986](#); [Sharma and Lenka, 2019](#)), to describe different aspects of how individuals reevaluate and adapt their previous beliefs and knowledge in the context of work, as used in the context of work. In the present study, we join the stream of research that considers that unlearning occurs at the individual level and that the organizational reactions, e.g. changes can be considered a consequence of individuals unlearning and letting go of old knowledge and behaviors which result in organizational relearning. By doing so, we also take a processual stance on learning to interact in the enforced digital workplace.

2. Theoretical framework

The present study makes a theoretical contribution by approaching a combination of interaction and learning among organizational employees. By doing so, we shed light on how individuals' adaptation and relearning to the enforced digital workplace affects how organizations learn to respond to changes. This insight is important given that the rapid digital transformation of our society, in general, and the pandemic, in particular, has changed how work is performed and how the future workplace will be both structured and organized ([Giakannos *et al.*, 2021](#); [Kohont and Ignjatović, 2022](#)).

2.1 *Impression management and interaction orders*

According to [Goffman \(1959\)](#), impression management refers to the conscious and unconscious efforts individuals make to shape the impressions they convey to others. Impression management can be likened to a theatrical performance, where individuals assume specific roles to shape the perceptions of others about themselves. Goffman uses the concept of “self-presentation” to describe the conscious efforts individuals make to present a specific image of themselves to others. It involves actively controlling the information they reveal about themselves and how they portray themselves to elicit particular responses from others. Based on the assumption that individuals can apply impression management and self-presentation to control the public perception of others like groups or organizations, the concepts can be applied at the organizational level ([Desai, 2014](#)). Furthermore, [Goffman \(1959\)](#) introduces the concept of “interaction order” to shed light on how each situation has its own order, and as individuals interact in social settings, they try to ensure that all parties have the same “definition of the situation.” That is, we have shared rules and expectations so that everyone understands what is meant to happen in a certain context. The expected activity of a particular situation constitutes the “dominant involvement.” The dominant involvement is the activity that people within the situation are expected to relate to. Usually, the situation's “dominant involvement” is equal to the individual's “main involvement” ([Wasson, 2006](#)). The main involvement is the involvement on which the individual focuses most of her attention, which typically is the dominant involvement of the situation. Still, individuals engage in “subordinate involvements.” For example, while waiting for the bus we start checking social media feeds on our smartphones. In this case, a smartphone becomes the subordinate involvement to which the person can direct her attention while waiting. A subordinate involvement can take the form of a main involvement for that person

and will compete with the dominant involvement of the situation. While Goffman developed the interaction order framework for analyzing face-to-face interactions among members of a group, the framework has been used to explore mediated situations as well. For example, it has been applied to explore the interaction among virtual teams in a workplace (Wasson, 2006), children's engagement in virtual worlds (Marsh, 2011) and student interaction in the educational context (Lindroth, 2015; Willermark, 2020, 2021). When we apply Goffman in technology-mediated situations, we discover how technology can operate both as "involvement shields" that hinder others from noticing what's going on (Lindroth, 2015) as well as an "interaction disclosure" that brings transparency to a situation and inhibits the possibility of subordinating (Willermark, 2021).

2.2 Unlearning and relearning

To shed light on the learning processes related to the new ways of interacting in the enforced digital workplace, we combine Goffman's theoretical framework with the theoretical concepts of "unlearning" and "relearning" (cf. Hedberg, 1981; Sharma and Lenka, 2019), in the context of work. The concept of learning is in organizational studies often viewed as a functional aspect as it can help organizations to maintain order and stability (Argote and Argote, 2013, Sharma and Lenka, 2019). Individuals' behaviors in organizations are connected to the collective knowledge in an organization (Desai, 2014). Therefore, organizations need to adapt to changes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which is linked to individual learning that can create organizational learning (Desai, 2014; Levitt and March, 1988). Notably, to learn, organizations and the individuals working within them need to reinforce effective practices that are redundant due to external changes (Levitt and March, 1988). The COVID-19 pandemic and the following rapid social distancing regulations can surely be viewed as an extreme external change. When organizations are forced to react to external changes and disruptions, it involves a process of learning. Researchers within the field of organizational learning emphasize that obsolete knowledge needs to be questioned and cast off from the organizational memory (Hedberg, 1981; Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2011; Mariano *et al.*, 2020). This involves individual learning and individual ways of doing work (Elkjaer and Wahlgren, 2006). The process of letting go and learning new habits or practices is often referred to as "relearning." Akgün *et al.* (2007) define this process as an adaptation process in which the organizations "abandon old beliefs and knowledge as part of a major process" (Navarro *et al.*, 2010). In recent research on organizational learning, two streams of "unlearning" and "relearning" can be found. The first stream emphasizes that forgetting, letting go, or unlearning occurs on an individual level. This perspective empathizes with the argument that organizations cannot forget themselves (Cegarra-Navarro and Sánchez-Polo, 2008). Many researchers in this stream emphasized that the process of forgetting is challenging for individuals as it is related to their lifeworld and how they interpret their reality (Akgün *et al.*, 2007; Cegarra-Navarro *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, it is the loss of assumptions and conventions that are most difficult to handle, due to that this can be viewed as a source of certainty and security (Akgün *et al.*, 2007). This process is therefore related to the individuals' reflections and awareness of the changes in their lifeworld (Cegarra-Navarro *et al.*, 2021). The other research stream focuses on the organizational level of relearning and highlights that organizational relearning is operationalized as changed organizational routines (Navarro *et al.*, 2010; Navarro *et al.*, 2010) and is often viewed as the removal of beliefs, norms, values and routines (Nonaka *et al.*, 2001). Hence, a change in organizational routines or procedures may force individuals to reflect upon and reevaluate their existing knowledge and understanding of a certain phenomenon (Navarro *et al.*, 2010).

3. Methodology

The present study is a multiple, longitudinal case study of knowledge-based workers in three firms located in Sweden. All firms are manufacturing firms and are working with technology innovation and hence the core competence of these firms is engineering. The study was conducted from March 2020 to March 2023 and hence started simultaneously with the COVID-19 pandemic and followed the social restrictions over time, but also after the social restrictions were removed. This study employed a qualitative research method with an interpretative stance that emphasizes individuals' roles as social actors in a context (Klein and Myers, 1999) and can be appropriate when examining individuals' life experiences, such as crisis and change, and the meanings they attribute to such stories (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Yin, 2003). Hence, this choice of method was appreciated and appropriate, as it contemplates both social factors and the context which can be useful when trying to understand and uncover how individuals experience changes in their work practices and workplace (Klein and Myers, 1999).

3.1 Data collection

The empirical data was collected by semi-structured interviews with 32 employees in the three case firms. We used a semi-structured interview guide to ensure all interviews were similarly focused, while at the same time allowing our respondents to introduce different topics of importance to them. In total, 89 interviews were conducted that were recorded and transcribed. Follow-up interviews were made on two to four occasions with 22 of the respondents, approximately four months apart (Appendix 2, Table A1). The initiative for the study began with the outbreak of COVID-19 and the rapid and worldwide social restrictions that affected people's private and work life. Little did we know that the restriction and the pandemic would last over two years. We began the study with a general interest in the development of the enforced digital workplace and how organizations and employees would manage these challenges. Over time, and as we collected more data, the study came to focus on interactions and learning in the digital workplace. In the present study, a range of employees in different positions, such as engineers, project managers, department managers, HR managers and financial managers were chosen. By selecting a broad range of employees in different positions, we got an insight into how the enforced digital workplace evolved over time in the organization and how the employees' learning processes evolved related to interactions.

The interviews were conducted by the first author on Zoom and over the telephone and lasted from 45 to 90 min and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviewer used a semi-structured interview method and hence focused on the respondents' own experiences of WFH using digital technologies (Clandinin, 2006). By doing so, the respondents were given a lot of space to tell their "stories" and experiences, which resulted in rich and detailed descriptions of their work and private life over time (Clandinin, 2006; Estefan *et al.*, 2016). The interviewer also used an interview protocol with themes related to the enforced digital workplaces such as experiences of using digital tools, communicating and interacting when working from home, stress and professional and private boundaries. These themes were focused on allowing the respondents to describe, or tell, their experiences and interpretation of the new situation (Bruner, 2004). For a complete overview of the interview questions, see Appendix 1. The initial interviews focused on the respondents' experiences of transitioning to WFH and the interviewer encouraged the respondents to give examples. The follow-up interview protocol focused on changes and developments since the last interviews. Hence, they involved questions are as follows:

Q1. Have there been any changes in your way of working?

Q2. Have you experienced any new challenges?

Over time, the interviewer found it necessary to ask more detailed questions on the interactions in the digital workplace, and hence, the respondents were asked to more in detail describe for example how a meeting in Zoom could develop and be managed. For example, they were asked to describe how people acted in the meetings, how they talked, who was allowed to talk and if they did other tasks during the meetings or communicated with the participants in the meeting in other communication channels during the meeting. By asking more detailed questions about the interactions in the digital workplace, the interviewer gained more insight into interactions between employees and between the management and the different departments and teams.

3.2 Data analysis

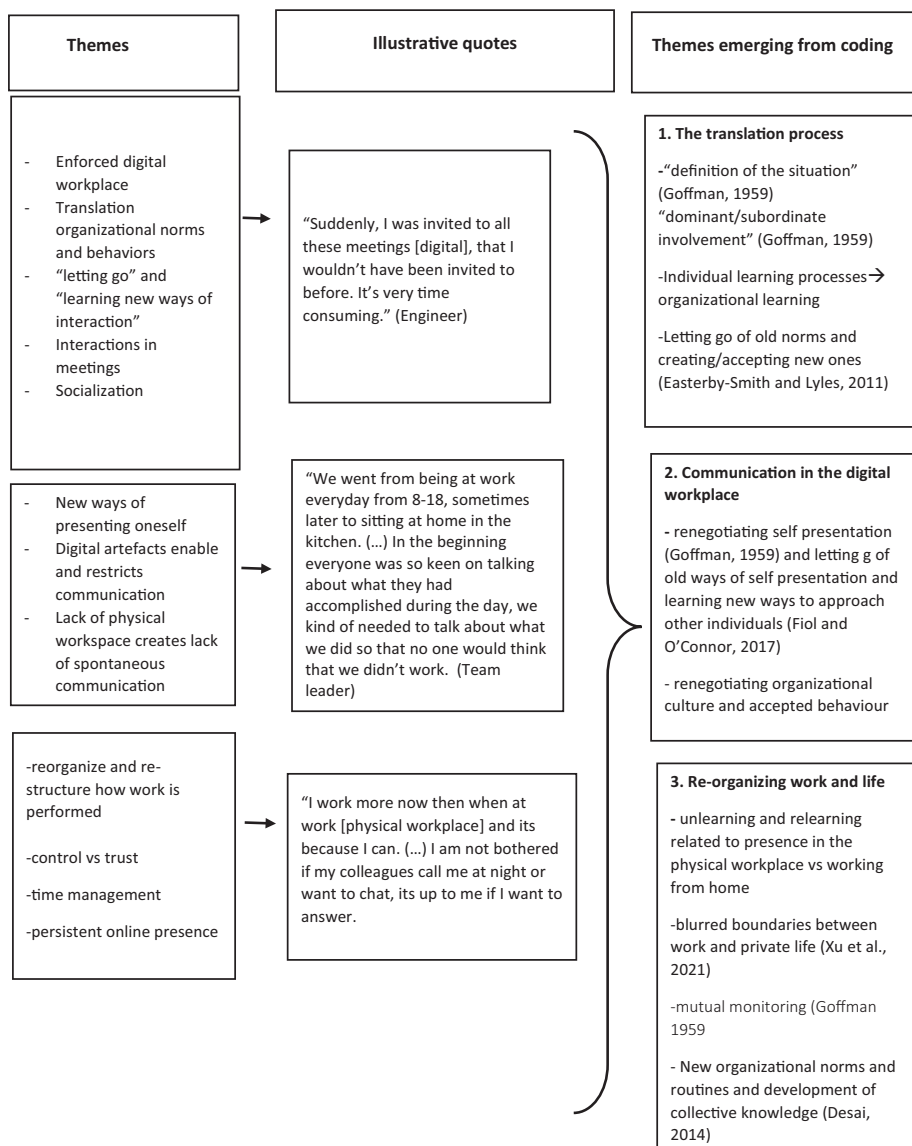
The data was analyzed based on an interpretive method. In this case, this involved a spiral process that was developed over time where the aim was to understand the meanings of the respondents' experiences of the interactions in the enforced digital workplace (Cole and Avison, 2007). The analytical process followed three steps. First, the transcripts were read repeatedly to create an understanding of the respondent's experiences. This was followed by giving the interview data and themes initial codes that were frequent in the interviews. For example, themes such as "multitasking," "work overload," "insecurities" and "interaction overload" was used. In the next part of the process, we identified interactions in the digital workplace and related challenges. By doing so, we also identify common norms and organizational culture concerning interactions. This also involved understanding what norms and behavior needed to be changed to function in the digital workplace. Hence, the unlearning and relearning could be identified and illustrated in the interview data. Due to that, the data was collected over time, and the interviews also revealed how the organizational behavior changed, that is, the negotiated norms, which were strengthened by the individual's experiences. In the final phase of the analysis, concepts such as "mutual monitoring," "definition of the situation" and "dominant involvement" from theory (Goffman, 1959) illustrate the interactions and unlearning and relearning processes (Figure 1).

4. Results

In the following section, we present how organizational members relearn interactions in the digital workplace over time are presented based on three overall aspects including the translation process, communication in the digital workplace and re-organizing work and life.

4.1 The translation process

The COVID-19 pandemic struck societies almost overnight, which the respondent's statements emphasize. All respondents describe that their work situation during the first six to nine months of the pandemic was focused on "translating" the physical workplace and the routines and interactions into a digital workplace. That is, to create structure in the digital workplace, the physical presence at the office was translated into a digital one. The unlearning and relearning aspects (cf. Fiol and O'Connor, 2017) involved letting go of the "normal" ways of socializing in the workplace and relearning how to interact in a digital environment. In practice, this meant that daily digital coffee breaks were implemented as well as daily "check-in" conversations where departments or teams met online to interact



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 1.
Data structure and
coding process

and get information about each other's workday. However, many respondents described the challenge of trying to interact socially online. Instead of talking about "ordinary stuff" that they usually talk about on the coffee breaks in the office, they mainly reported what they had achieved. Hence, the "breaks" focused on work and achievement rather than involving social conversation and interaction. One of the project leaders says:

So, what I did entirely on my own initiative was that I said to the project managers 'Okay, you should have daily check-ins and these should be in your groups and there you should but have a little fun, talk a little about this, and that'. I can see that it works better in some groups than it does in others and then I have concluded that the groups usually go back to talk about work quickly.

Furthermore, the interviews reveal that the organization of work during the beginning of the pandemic quickly centered around meetings and that as many employees as possible were connected in the same digital platform or chatroom as possible. During these "meetings," managers, project leaders, etc., mainly gave information and status about the company and the projects. This is also an example of the difficulties of letting go of the "normal" way of managing meetings and adapting, or re-learn, the new conditions. The interview describes that there was little interaction during these meetings. One of the engineers says:

At the beginning [...] oh my God [...] all the meetings we had. I think I was in meetings eight hours per day. There was so much information we needed to get, or not needed [...] Most people turn off their cameras and work at the same time, I mean when are you supposed to work?

Interestingly, the respondents reveal that it was physically possible for many employees to be connected to digital meetings more people were invited to meetings. One of the HR-managers reflects:

When we started to have the meetings in Teams, we were so many people, so many more than would have fitted into a room. So, people that usually did not have access to certain meetings were all of a sudden invited to new contexts (...).

The respondents also describe that they were constantly connected and worked together with colleagues in chatrooms due to that it was "the easiest way of working" and "saved lots of time." The quotes above shed light on Goffman's idea of how each situation has its own order, and that the socially negotiated orders in the physical workplace were disrupted when translated into a digital workplace. Due to the number of meetings, the employees were supposed to attend, a new "definition of the situation" (Goffman, 1959) occurred. For example, employees started to work during the meetings to have time for their tasks, something they say they would not have done in the physical meeting room. That is, we have shared rules and expectations so that everyone understands what is meant to happen in a certain context. Therefore, the "dominant involvement" (Goffman, 1959) was disrupted and individuals' "main involvement" (Wasson, 2006) shifted, due to the lack of attention to the actual meeting they were attending. In contrast to meetings in the physical office, interacting and listening to information given in meetings became subordinated involvements (Goffman, 1959). The new technology-mediated situation offered an "involvement shield" (Lindroth, 2015) hindering others from noticing what was going on when the individuals did not share the physical location. As this behavior was accepted by the organizational members, it also illustrated an organizational learning process where the consequence of individuals unlearning and relearning results in new organizational routines (Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2011).

4.2 Communication in a digital workplace

The data illustrates that the lack of physical offices created a need to letting go of "old" ways of communicating and presenting oneself and that it was not obvious to the respondents how to interact and communicate in the digital workplace. The lack of common physical space removed the possibility of "dropping by" each other's offices or communicating informally during the coffee break. That is, the re-structuring of the workplace created a

need to let go of old ways of communicating and re-structuring and relearning new ways of effective communication using digital tools. The data also describe different views on how to approach each other. One of the HR-managers says:

They [the managers] obviously had some issues when it comes to approaching their team members. It became really clear to me because many of them asked for help. One of them, an older man, asked me “Am I supposed to call them?” and at first I thought it was a quite strange question. I mean of course, you can call them, but when I thought about it, I realized that we are not that kind of company, we go to each other’s office, or email, or talk during meetings, but we never call.

The data illustrates that several communication channels were used to interact. The organization quickly prohibited interactions in social media channels and chose Teams to be their official digital platforms for workplace interactions. The employees describe how this created many new ways of interaction. One of the team leaders says:

It took me some time to learn how to structure my workday and all the information I got during the day. I got emails, obviously, and then we had the group chat, the individual chat, and the meetings [in Teams] and shared files, etc. So, lots and lots of information on many channels, and I’m not really comfortable with that.

The data illustrates that the employees started to block time in their calendars to get time to work. Also, the interviews describe that the features in the digital platforms such as the “green or red light” representing whether you are available or not, created challenges for the employees. Hence the digital artifacts and their functions became a tool for renegotiating how to act toward each other in the digital workplace (Goffman, 1959). One of the team members says:

[. . .] when you’re at the office it is so easy to just drop by someone’s office, and you can see if you’re available or not, or I can close the door and they can see that I am busy and want to be left alone. But now, people see my green light and start to chat with me and if I’m busy I still answer because I don’t want to keep them waiting but it really makes it hard to concentrate. I’m always interrupted.

The results reveal that the organizational culture and negotiated norms were challenged and re-negotiated between organizational members, which also is an example of the relearning process (Fiol and O’Connor, 2017). Furthermore, technology can be viewed as both an enable and a barrier, that is, the technology has both enhanced collaboration between organizational members but also created social difficulties for example related to communication and interaction.

4.3 Re-organizing work and life

Over time, the interviews reveal that it was necessary, both on an organizational level, as well as on an individual level, to re-organize and re-structure how work was performed and during what circumstances. During the two years of the study, the respondents experienced an even heavier workload than during the “normal”, pre-pandemic circumstances. The workload was related to the possibility of being present online anytime and anywhere and hence it was necessary for the respondents to relearn how to time-manage their workday. This was not necessary to the same extent in the physical workplace and the socially constructed working hours. The data illustrates the need for reflection as well as actions concerning the work-life balance. One of the managers says:

Many of my friends say that they love working from home because it is more flexible. I have not really experienced that. I mean I sit in front of the computer all day, and most nights. I totally get

it that I have myself to blame. Nobody forces me to work after 18 but I do it anyway, because I can.

The data reveals that there were big concerns for the employee's well-being and that many managers tried to act to create a better work structure and work-life balance. The lack of a common physical workplace, working hours and scheduled meetings created blurred boundaries between the employees' work and personal life. One of the team leaders explains:

I'm trying to teach them [work-life balance] because we have so much to do and I've worked in the same position they've done so I know exactly how it is that you have to use your calendar for every single thing you do and if you have not structured your time, you will be lost, you will be stressed and you will feel like you are running uphill all the time. So, try to stick to your calendar at all times, be disciplined, and close the computer when the day is done. And then you devote yourself to the family because if you don't, it won't work in the long run.

Interestingly, the interviews also reveal paradoxes concerning the flexibility of working in a digital workplace. Although the managers encourage flexibility and "trust the employees to do their work" and "do not care when they work," the many meetings were a part of the employees' work life during the entire pandemic. Many managers encouraged their employees to "turn off the camera" because "research says that you get tired of looking at yourself" and that "people can get stressed of looking at the screen all the time." Still, the form of the meetings was not changed. That is, the owner of the meetings still had monologues which gave little interaction and dialogue during the meetings. One of the managers reflects on how to manage meetings:

Manager 3: I think the way we do it is totally wrong. I mean, all these people sitting listening for an hour. Some of them don't really need the information. (...) I think we should have more structured meetings, tell for example Anders, you have the slot from 10.00 to 10.20, do your thing and then go. It's not about emotions, it is not about that he's not allowed to be there but if he can do his thing in 20 minutes instead of being there for 90 minutes he has the time to do other stuff.

Interviewer: So why don't you have that kind of meeting?

Manager 3: [Sighs] [...] difficult questions [...] I don't know [...] I guess it's a lot about culture. We don't do it like this in Sweden. The Americans are much better at it. It's not personal, it's just more effective. But Swedes are more worried about these things, about hurting people you know.

Yet, another paradox is the question of control. The data reveals that the physical workplace functions as a natural "control-mechanism" and creates structures in the work practices. This is illustrated by the data in several ways. For example, the office landscape indicates rank and hierarchy where different employees have their offices in the physical buildings. The employees often refer to the leaders and managers as "the ones upstairs" and the employees working in the production as "the ones on the floor" or "downstairs." Also, being physically present in the workplace is related to control. The data illustrate an organizational culture where physical presence at the office has been standard and that it has been "very unusual" for employees to WFH. Hence, physical presence has been a way of both controlling employees and also a way of showing loyalty and engagement at work. This is one example of [Goffman \(1959\)](#) discussion concerning mutual monitoring, in this case illustrated by how digital technologies create control over employee's behavior and presence ([Willermark, 2021](#)). One of the project leaders says:

I usually go home around 18, I think it is kind of usual for many of us.

Interviewer: Isn't that quite late?

Project leader: Maybe? But I would never leave before 17, you don't want people to think that you sneak off early.

Furthermore, the physical workplace offers boundaries in the form of meeting rooms where a certain number of people have physical space to participate, which creates a natural selection of who's having to be in the meeting. With the introduction of the enforced digital workplace, all these "build-in" structures and control mechanisms disappeared and needed to be re-shaped and re-negotiated. The data illustrates that the two years of working from home using digital tools during the pandemic changed the employees' mindset about their physical workplace and where and how they work. The respondents describe that they do not want to go back to the way things were before the pandemic; however, they have difficulties describing how they believe that their work should be structured in the future. One of the HR-managers says:

It's difficult to know how we should organize everything. I mean I love to work from home in my leggings and to be flexible with the kids. But we need to meet each other, and we need to interact and to be spontaneous.

One of the project managers has similar thoughts:

The tricky bit is to create an organization where people meet. I asked my team members, and they all want to be flexible, but they do not want to go to work if there is no one here. So, that means that we need to have fixed days that we are supposed to be here and then the whole idea of flexibility disappears, you know what I mean? (. . .)

Overall, we see how various new habits and procedures that affect both work and life emerge and create new expectations about how work can and should be done (Desai, 2014).

5. Discussion

The results indicated that the translation from working in a physical office space to the enforced digital workplace involved processes of unlearning and relearning related to how individuals interact with each other (Fiol and O'Connor, 2017). We found three themes in the data that describe how individuals unlearn and relearn interactions in the workplace and how this also developed organizational learning processes over time. The longitudinal nature of the study gives insights into that that the sudden social distancing that forced the organizations to allow their employees to WFH was first interpreted by the individual employees as a temporary solution to a situation that would soon pass. We have referred to this phase as a *translation process*. This may also explain why the process of letting go, or unlearning (Navarro *et al.*, 2010, Akgün *et al.*, 2007), did not appear before the first year of the social distancing. Interestingly, compared to planned organizational changes (cf. Mariano *et al.*, 2020), the lack of an "answer", goal, or knowledge of when the pandemic would be "over," apparently had effects on the individuals unlearning process. Before that, most employees interpreted that they would soon go back to their "normal" workplace, that is, the physical office. One of the most obvious changes in the working-from-home situation was the use of digital tools for interactions. The results reveal that the organizational response to the rapid disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was to translate existing routines into a digital context. On a management level, the data illustrates a need for control as the lack of shared physical space created a lack of control of what the employees were doing. The many meetings with way more participants than usual are an example of this.

Another example is the digital coffee breaks where the participants were encouraged to “be social.” Viewed from an impression management perspective (Goffman, 1959), these situations can be viewed as a way of creating control and a common perception of the new situation. Interestingly, these situations in the digital context lacked their own order, and therefore, the participants did not interpret or (inter)acted in the same ways as they would have done if they participated in a common physical space. In other words, the coffee breaks and organizational meetings lacked the same “definition of the situation” (Goffman, 1959), which needed to be relearned over time by the individuals participating. Interestingly, the use of digital tools created an unlearning process related to what Goffman refers to as “dominant involvement.” That is, in the meetings taking place on the digital platforms, the respondents’ statements illustrate that they had difficulties, or chose not to be involved or interact. Often this was related to information overload (Edmunds and Morris, 2000), or stress from not having the time to do other work tasks. The results reveal that to manage to do one work task, most employees worked simultaneously as they attended the digital meetings and turned off their cameras to not be exposed during the meetings. This behavior sprung out of that the technology allows individuals to do so. The same thing would be impossible to do in a physical workplace when attending a meeting. This behavior is, therefore, an example of how individuals changed their interpretation of what is acceptable behavior in the context of the digital meeting, and over time, the organizational routines and norms were changed and relearned, (Cegarra-Navarro *et al.*, 2010); therefore, most employees followed the same pattern of behavior and were not questioned, e.g. when turning off the camera. This can also be viewed as interaction regulation that individuals were forced to learn by themselves as there were no existing organizational norms or rules in the digital workplace. However, as time went by, the data illustrates that the closer the employees came to seeing an end to the pandemic and imagined how it would be to go back to their physical workplace, they started to question and reevaluate working in a digital workplace, that is, their awareness of their lifeworld changed (Cegarra-Navarro *et al.*, 2021). The data illustrate how interactions and communications between individuals changed over time. The lack of common physical space created the need to let go of old habits such as spontaneous conversations. Instead, individuals needed to try to communicate in a newly accepted manner, e.g. over the phone, email or Zoom. Therefore, individuals learned through trial and error. That is, they needed to try new ways of interactions and self-presentations based on their assumptions and values rather than existing routines and manuals. They tried behaviors such as translating social interactions to a digital arena, appraised the outcomes and modified the practices if the outcomes were poor. This resulted in organizational learning processes where old norms were let go of and new ones emerged as a response to the new situation. The long period of social distancing and working in a digital workplace set a long, individual process of reflection in motion reflection where individuals finally began to let go of previous ways of working, i.e. common conventions began to be questioned and reformulated. When a shared physical space no longer frames the work situation, the activities and interactions linked to work are being renegotiated, as it is not possible to transfer either the work activities or established social norms and actions straight off (Willermark, 2021). This also involved reflecting upon the relationship between work and life and how the boundaries were affected (Xu *et al.*, 2021). The data reveals a paradox, that is working from home created both freedom but also more control. The new situation raises questions about inclusion versus exclusion, and trust versus surveillance, and has difficulty finding approaches that are reasonable in the new context. Being constantly

connected enables a type of mutual monitoring (Goffman, 1959) where individuals can monitor each other's activities through a set of digital traces (Willermark, 2021). At the same time, the connected situation of WFH also functions as an interaction shield, that hinders others from noticing what's going on (Lindroth, 2015). It offers the opportunity to ostensibly participate in a meeting while at the same time engaging in other (work) activities, i.e. where the individual's main involvement deviates from the main involvement of the situation (Wasson, 2006).

6. Conclusion

This study shows how the intricate interaction between rules and norms for interaction and work must be renegotiated as well as un- and relearned (Fiol and O'Connor, 2017) when the physical work environment no longer frames the work context. It shed light on how individuals try new ways of interacting, accept them or let go of them (trial and error), and that when negotiated in the group, can create organizational learning. The present study emphasizes that individuals tested ways of interactions and behaviors over time such as digital coffee breaks, that were abandoned, and multitasking with the camera turned off, during meetings which became accepted as a new organizational behavior sprung out of the use of digital technologies. The present study contributes to our theoretical understanding of the development of learning processes related to interactions in the digital workplace. The new situation assumes that the employees apply (and perhaps learn to master) certain technology in terms of programs and platforms. However, it is only a small part of what the new situation requires. Thus, as illustrated in this paper, employees are engaging in the larger process of unlearning where they are letting go of old norms and conventions established by groups of individuals in the organization. It is a process that takes place over time and that starts with reflection and questioning of the status quo by individuals to create a common "letting go" by the organization and the development of new organizational behaviors. Contributions include combining interaction order framework and learning among organizational employees and providing insights into how the enforced digital workplace has changed how work is performed and how the future workplace will be both structured and organized. Due to the rapid development of the hybrid workplace, these insights can be valuable for practitioners on different levels in organizations. The present study does have several limitations. First, it is based on interviews with respondents within three organizations in Sweden. To broaden and deepen our understanding of both organizational and learning, future studies can contribute by studying other contexts as well as using a mixed-method approach in other countries.

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Appendix 1. Interview guide – working from home in digital organizations

Date of interview:

Basic information

- Host organization, country:
- Age range:
- Years in the company:
- Years of experience:
- Role in the company, i.e. department, team, subgroup do you belong to?

1. Can you describe what happened when the pandemic broke out and you started to work from home?
2. Can you describe an ordinary working day when you are working from home? E.g what activities you spend time on?
3. Have there been any changes in your way of working?
4. Have you experienced any new challenges?
5. What digital tools did your organization use?
6. Can you describe the instructions or help you received concerning using digital tools at work?
7. Can you describe challenges in interacting and communicating when working from home?
8. Can you observe changes in your own experience of working from home over the years?
9. What are the benefits and challenges of working online versus physically?
10. Can you describe your regular and daily working hours (8am-5pm) when working from home?
11. Has your interaction with internal colleagues and with customers changed? Challenges and benefits?
12. Can you describe how you have learned to interact when working from home? Challenges? Difficulties?
13. Can you describe what routines have changed due to that you work from home?
14. Has your role as a leader been affected by working from home? Can you please describe how?
15. Can you describe how you feel that the interaction between you as a leader and your employees has been affected by working from home?

To engineers:

16. Have your tasks and/or how you perform your tasks been affected by working from home? How?

Follow-up themes:

- Can you describe if there has been any changes in you way of working from home?
- What has worked/not worked well?
- What have made you change/adjust how you work and interact?
- Have you gotten any more instructions from you managers on how you should work/interact when working from home?
- Have there been any changes in routines?
- Can you describe an “ordinary” meeting in Zoom?
 - o How is it managed?
 - o How do you experience that people act during these meetings?
 - o Is it any difference between meetings in the physical office and meetings in the digital workplace?

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No.	Case organization	Position	No. of interviews
1	1	HR manager	1
2	1	Engineer – team leader	1
3	1	Engineer	1
4	1	HR Assistant	4
5	1	Engineer	4
6	1	Engineer	1
7	1	Regional Manager	4
8	1	Engineer	1
9	1	Finance manager	1
10	2	Engineer	1
11	2	Engineer – team leader	1
12	2	Engineer – team leader	2
13	2	Engineer	4
14	2	Manager Project management	4
15	2	Engineer	4
16	2	HR Assistant	4
17	2	Engineer	1
18	2	Finance director	4
19	2	HR Manager	4
20	3	Engineer	2
21	3	Engineer	4
22	3	Financial analyst	4
23	3	Regional solutions manager	1
24	3	Cost analyst	4
25	3	Engineer	4
26	3	Accounting manager	1
27	3	Engineer	4
28	3	Managing director	2
29	3	Engineer – team manager	4
30	3	Engineer	4
31	3	Engineer	4
32	3	HR manager	4

Table A1.

List of respondents Source: Authors' own work

Corresponding author

Karin Högberg can be contacted at: karin.hogberg@hv.se

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