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Seeking fit: employee proactive regulation of task-environment fit under location autonomy

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate regulation strategies used by employees in hybrid work (HW) environments in Swedish municipalities during 2020–2022. Utilizing person-environment fit theory, especially task-environment (T-E) fit, this study examines how employees adapt their work practices, focusing on the aspects of self-regulation and social coordination necessitated by the hybrid model.

Design/methodology/approach – Using photo-elicitation interviews, we interviewed 46 municipal white-collar workers and managers at two points in time, for a total of 82 interviews.

Findings – Our findings highlight the prospective nature and the resourcing practice at the heart of achieving T-E fit. Findings include a range of regulatory behaviours, from moment-to-moment self-regulatory actions to those bordering on work redesign and an evolution from more short-term and self-focused actions to include more collective solutions over time.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the evolving understanding of T-E fit as a core mechanism for successful HW, emphasizing the importance of adaptability and proactive self-regulation in flexible work environments.

Keywords Hybrid work, Remote work, Person-environment fit, Task-environment fit, Time-spatial crafting, Self-regulation, Work design, Job crafting

Paper type Research article

Theoretical background and previous research

The practical, daily organization of work has been shaken up in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially with regards to spatial flexibility or location autonomy, i.e. choosing where to work (Kossek *et al*., 2023; Wu *et al*., 2023). Hybrid work (HW) is a mode of work where both remote, information and communication technology (ICT)-enabled work and working from a common workplace are options used by employees in an organization. As hybrid is quickly becoming a new norm in most previously office-based work (Barrero *et al*., 2023), it is crucial to explore the new challenges and opportunities that HW with location autonomy brings to organizations and employees (Wu *et al*., 2023). The ability to rely on

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physical, environmental cues in a common office, where individual workers and managers can reliably be found when needed, has diminished considerably. For organizations relying on co-location for coordinating work, the adoption of HW has created organizational voids. It has been up to employees and managers themselves to fill in or compensate for these voids as best they can – a trend visible in weakening social connections and increased silo-working (Yang *et al*., 2022). Flexible forms of work pose demands on employees to self-manage and to continually coordinate with others, requiring the ability to organize one's own working week and working day (Bäcklander *et al*., 2021a; Müller and Niessen, 2019; Troll *et al*., 2022). HW and earlier forms of work with location autonomy, like activity-based working, benefit from prospective planning on the part of employees. This involves considering what tasks are to be done and to choose a suitable working location to create a task-environment (T-E) fit (Bäcklander and Richter, 2022; Wu *et al*., 2023). In this study, we examine what regulatory strategies are employed in HW with location autonomy to continuously accomplish T-E fit. Location autonomy has been offered as a flexibility policy for many years (Kossek *et al*., 2023; Ter Hoeven and Van Zoonen, 2015), but the prevalence of HW practices following the pandemic has made it an option for a larger range of employees than before. While many studies have examined job autonomy, few look specifically at location autonomy (Wu *et al*., 2023).

We believe it is important to re-examine location autonomy as it is practiced now, when the common office workplace is not necessarily the norm, HW is more widespread, and the consequences of the choice to go into the office or not has been altered since the pandemic. Further, we focus specifically on the mechanism of accomplishing T-E fit. A recent study by Wu *et al*. (2023) examining HW with location autonomy found that simply "having" location autonomy was not enough; rather, for it to have a positive effect on mental health, engagement, and proficiency, T-E fit had to be present. T-E fit has also been shown to correlate positively with performance (Soriano *et al*., 2020), team functioning (Bäcklander and Richter, 2022), and vitality (Wohlers *et al*., 2019), though these studies were all in the context of work with location autonomy pre-pandemic.

The aim of this study, involving two previously remote-work-naïve Swedish municipalities, is twofold: (1) to examine *what* is being brought up as being actively targeted for regulation by employees in relation to their organization's hybrid working situation, and (2) to describe *how*, in what way, employees are performing these strategies, examining the full range of regulatory strategies they employ to achieve T-E fit.

Location autonomy and task-environment fit

We argue that hybrid working with considerable location autonomy centres significantly on achieving a fit between the tasks of the day and the chosen working environment; that is, *selecting* or *creating* environmental *conditions which fit task performance*.

Person-environment fit theory posits that compatibility, i.e. *fit*, between multiple facets of an individual – such as abilities, values, needs, and skills – and their environment – often an organizational setting, job role, or vocation – plays a critical role in determining numerous outcomes (Cable and DeRue, 2002; Caplan, 1987; Edwards *et al.*, 2006; Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005), for example job satisfaction, performance, and psychological well-being (Edwards *et al.*, 2006).

In a work model with location autonomy, the theory can be extended to consider T-E fit (Wohlers *et al*., 2019): how well work environments support the type of task to be undertaken. HW extends the selection of workplaces to include the home and even other locations. Employees in such settings often have the autonomy to select their work location weekly, daily or intra-daily, based on, for example, the tasks they are involved in.

Empirical studies have found support for T-E fit being related to positive outcomes, including decreased distraction and increased workspace satisfaction (Gerdenitsch *et al*., 2017), performance (Soriano *et al*., 2020), team functioning (Bäcklander and Richter, 2022), vitality (Wohlers *et al*., 2019), and mental health (Wu *et al*., 2023). Most notably, Wu *et al*.

(2023) found that T-E fit moderated the relationship between location autonomy and the outcome variables, suggesting that the favourable effects of location autonomy depend on achieving T-E fit. "T-E fit making" thus seems central to the daily or even intra-daily matching process of work-to-be-done and work location, especially salient in HW. Recent developments in fit theory further emphasize that fit should be understood as a process of "becoming" rather than a static state of "being", requiring ongoing development, maintenance, and self-regulation (Bäcklander and Richter, 2022; Vleugels *et al*., 2023).

Proactive regulatory strategies

We build on the process model of self-control (Duckworth *et al*., 2014, 2016) to understand how employees might go about creating T-E fit relating to location autonomy in HW. The process model of self-control is a cognitive model describing how self-regulation of behaviour works, from the initial emergence of an impulse to do or respond to something, to its resolution as performing or inhibiting a response. The model describes several *types* of strategy for regulating behaviour. The most immediate strategies, usually in direct connection to some behaviour, are internal, cognitive, and involve inhibiting impulsive responses. In a HW setting, this might mean forcing oneself to stay focused during a video meeting through increased mental effort.

If we have more time before acting, the model describes how we also have *situational* strategies available to us: situation *modification* (altering the environment to make some behaviours or states easier and more likely), and situation *selection* (foregoing a situation altogether). In HW, this might involve an employee realizing they have difficulty concentrating in the office due to distractions, so proactively choosing to work from home the next day when they have demanding analytical tasks (situation selection). Alternatively, if they have trouble concentrating at home, they might modify their home workspace by creating a dedicated office area, or using noise-cancelling headphones (situation modification) rather than trying to force concentration through willpower alone (Bäcklander *et al*., 2021b).

We choose here to focus on the situational strategies for two reasons. First, by virtue of being more proactive, situational strategies have been shown to be more effective, with less cognitive cost for individuals (Davydenko and Peetz, 2024; Duckworth *et al*., 2016; Troll *et al*., 2022). Second, we believe HW practices aiming for T-E fit could clearly be interpreted as a matter of selecting and modifying situations, by selecting the location to work, or when to do which things. The ability to adaptively choose one's environment can be viewed as a form of proactive behaviour aimed at achieving fit (Allen *et al*., 2013). For instance, an employee might opt for a quiet place, often at home, when they require deep concentration for tasks like writing a report. This self-directed choice enhances the likelihood of achieving task demands, and can be conceptualized as a needs-supplies form of fit, where the choice of environment offers the requisite resources (Irving *et al*., 2020; Wohlers *et al*., 2019).

Fit can also be achieved by modifying the environment one is in – as many tried to do while forced to work from home with poor ergonomics equipment – or by modifying the state one is in, one's "internal environment" so to speak. A study of various self-control strategies adopted during working from home (WFH) found that the strategies referred to as modifying somatic conditions, for example drinking coffee or dressing as if going to the office, were the most related to employee performance (Troll *et al*., 2022).

To summarize, an improved fit is achieved either by attempting to modify the demands employees face – for example selecting tasks, modifying task requirements or conditions – or modifying the resources available through the environment used when dealing with demands (Tims *et al*., 2013).

Working toward improved fit is a regulatory process (Vleugels *et al*., 2023). However, not much is known so far about *which* self-regulatory strategies employees use in their work, particularly in HW (Troll *et al*., 2022). As T-E fit seems a key mechanism linking location autonomy to positive outcomes in HW, a more detailed examination of how employees bring T-E fit about is warranted.

Materials and methods

Design and method

We used a qualitative research design with *photo-elicitation interviews (PEIs)*, inspired by Wilhoit Larson (2020) and Alvariza *et al*. (2020). The method entailed interviewees presenting photographs they had taken themselves, and which they felt represented their experience of WFH. These were then explored further with the help of an interview guide informed by our research questions. Using qualitative methods not only gave us an insight into the respondents' daily and weekly decisions on where to work, but also allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of why and how.

Study timeline

Interviews were performed twice during the pandemic, see timeline in Figure 1. At the time of the first round of interviews, the Public Health Agency of Sweden had declared that those who were *able* to work from home *should* do so, which is how the WFH mandate was generally phrased. By the time of the second round of interviews, the restrictions were the same but had been very recently preceded by a period of easing of restrictions, and participants were asked to focus on this easing period in the interviews. Both municipalities had a return-to-work plan that eventually had to be postponed.

Context and respondents

This study encompasses two Swedish urban municipalities (M1 and M2) and entails a total of 46 white-collar workers, including managers, mandated to WFH to the extent possible during the pandemic. In practice, this never meant completely remote work for all employees (even those with office jobs), but a *hybrid version with mostly remote* work. Both municipalities had very limited prior experience of WFH.

In both municipalities, the interviewees ranged from those who enjoyed WFH and wanted to continue after the pandemic, to those who disliked WFH and did not want to continue after the pandemic. Most of the interviewees wanted to have the opportunity to work from home after the pandemic. In M1, respondents were recruited from across the entire municipality, including municipally-owned companies/public utility companies. Information was posted on the intranet, and employees could register their interest to participate in the study to human resource (HR). From HR, we got a list of 58 employees, with information on roles, gender, and age. In M2, respondents were recruited from administrative divisions only (no municipally-owned companies as in M1). In M2, a manager first talked about the project in one division, which resulted in five employees signing up to participate. To recruit more employees, the researchers organized an online information meeting that resulted in another 50 employees in M2 signing up.

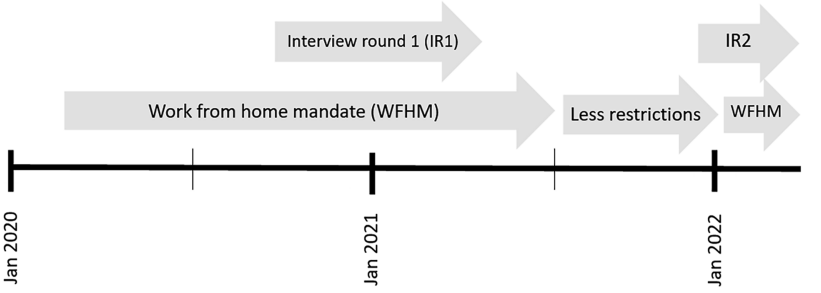

Figure 1. Timeline of data collection and work from home mandates in Sweden. Source: Authors' own creation

Separately for each municipality, we divided the employees suggested or who had expressed interest into those with and without managerial roles, into the gender categories men and women, and noted ages. We then used purposive sampling to select 23 participants from each municipality, ensuring representation across both genders, all age groups, and those with and without managerial roles, giving us a total of 46 participants.

For the second interview, the same respondents in both municipalities were contacted. No new sampling was conducted. A total of 36 respondents agreed to participate in round two. The remaining non-responders in the second round had either quit their jobs, were on sick leave, or for unknown reasons did not answer our emails. In total, 82 interviews were conducted. Table 1 shows the breakdown of all interviews by municipality, interview round, gender, and category.

Photo-elicitation interviews

PEIs (PEI) were used (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Harper, 2002; Murray and Nash, 2017). In PEI, photos can be taken either by the respondent (exploratory approach) or by the researcher (theory-driven approach) (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). As we wanted to explore experiences of WFH during and after the pandemic, we used an inductive approach and asked the participants to take photos, also called auto-driven PEI (Clark, 1999). We chose to let the respondents be the main interpreters of their own photos, and in the interviews, we created a shared understanding of the pictures and the stories they told. In summary, the principles used by Padgett *et al*. (2013, p. 1436) were followed: "(1) visual data to enhance and deepen (non-PEI) interviews, (2) participant control of the photography with minimal direction, (3) shared meaning making and reflection with the study interviewer, and (4) respect for privacy and sensitivity."

Procedure

Round 1. Before the interview, the respondent was asked to take and send to the researchers one to three photographs of their working environment that would help them to *describe their experiences* of WFH during the pandemic. The photographs were collected in a PowerPoint presentation to be presented in the interview. After general information about the project and the interview, gentle probing questions were asked, such as "why did you take this picture?" or "I am very curious about this picture; what do you want to say with it?" The participants were allowed to talk freely based on their pictures, after which follow-up questions were asked, using a combination of inductive and theory-driven questions. Theory-driven questions were based on the themes of leadership, governance, work environment, boundary drawing, recovery, relationships with colleagues, and technology use (see more in Appendix A).

Our interviews thus consisted of a combination of (1) using photographs as inputs (elicitors) for exploring the respondents' experiences of WFH, as well as (2) traditional interview questions. Interviews were 45–90 min long and were conducted over video link, audio-recorded, and then transcribed for thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is the

Table 1. Number of people who participated in the first and second rounds, divided into each municipality, and the categories managers/employees and women/men. Interview $N_{t1} = 46$, $N_{t2} = 36$, $N_{total} = 82$

	Managers	Employees
M1	1st: 9 (6 women, 3 men) 2nd: 7 (4 women, 3 men)	1st: 14 (11 women, 3 man) 2nd: 12 (9 women, 3 man)
M2	1st: 9 (6 women, 3 men) 2nd: 7 (5 women, 2 men)	1st: 14 (11 women, 3 men) 2nd: 11 (8 women, 2 men)
Interviews 1st = 46	1st: 18 (12 women, 6 men)	1st: 28 (22 women, 6 men)
Interviews 2nd = 36	2nd: 14 (9 women, 5 men)	2nd: 22 (17 women, 5 men)
Total = 82		

Source(s): Authors' own creation

resulting interviews, elicited from both photos and questions, that form the basis of the analysis in this article (from both interview rounds).

Round 2. The second interview had two aims: (1) following up the experiences from the first interview, and (2) capturing experiences of the changed Covid restrictions. As in interview round one, respondents were asked to take and send one to three pictures of their working environments that would describe their experience of returning (to some degree) from WFH. Before each interview, the researchers read interview one to enable relevant follow-up questions to be asked about how things had developed. The interviews started with probing questions and then proceeded to follow-up questions on the photos, and were based on themes pertaining to general feelings about the situation, discussions at work on being at work or home, experience of HW, and thoughts about the future (see Appendix B).

Analysis

Inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006), we conducted an iterative, reflexive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts to find common patterns. The interviews were read by all three authors and analysed thematically with an open and inductive approach to the data. Since the data set is extensive and our questions encompassed a broad variety of themes, we had different foci in our initial readings. Author one identified a consistent theme in the respondents' stories that included anticipating daily needs, and choosing where to work and other regulating behaviours. Linking to literature on P-E fit and self-regulation, an analytical frame was conceived wherein we began to look especially for instances of employees' proactive regulation in order for them to achieve T-E fit, operationalized as "favourable conditions", instances pertaining to managing, choosing, or arranging something, in order to achieve some goal. These instances were gathered, and further analysis was conducted on them based on a number of questions: What was being regulated? How was improved fit being considered and brought about? Which location is being spoken of? Did this strategy seem to work? Were there detrimental effects? The themes of "what" was being regulated were grouped in higher-order themes of "targeting self-states" and "targeting coordination". Our analysis was collaborative and reflexive, involving regular meetings to present and discuss ongoing analyses, interpretations, and coding decisions. This iterative, dialogic process served to achieve a nuanced reading of the data and ensure analytical rigour, rather than seeking formal consensus on meanings of each instance saved (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The groupings are presented in the results in Table 2, and are described further in the results text.

Quotes have been used to give voice to the interviewees. The quotes have been edited to render comprehensibility when taken out of context, and translated from Swedish to English. The investigation was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (No. 2020–03275).

Results

Our results show that exercise of location autonomy through the use of location selection is driven both by a desire to regulate self-states, such as mood, energy, and concentration, and to position the employee well for collaborative efforts, both planned and more impromptu. The modifying strategies more often worked through the "task" element of T-E fit, especially when targeting integration with colleagues and maintaining organizational cohesion. These strategies range from formalizing new collaboration methods, to leveraging digital tools for better communication and coordination. Results show that while strategies targeting self-states emerged early and remained relatively stable throughout the study period, coordination strategies evolved more significantly over time. This is because at Time 1 (T1), remote work was being more strictly mandated while at Time 2 (T2), HW was allowed, overall giving more options with regard to locations, and showing evidence of an evolution from individual workarounds to more sophisticated solutions over time, for example more formalized solutions, more collective solutions, and more developed use of technology.

Table 2. Matrix of overarching results pattern, categorization of strategies

	Select			Modify	
Self states	#Quote, Targeting	Selected	By what mechanism is the target affected?	#Quote, Targeting	By what mechanism is the target affected?
	#1 Mood	Outside	Going outside to take a break and connect with nature. Especially helpful during the dark months	#6 Concentration	Using task enrichment and increasing cognitive arousal level by activating body to stay engaged and focused [at home]
	#2 Energy	Outside	Regularly going for a walk outside gives energy and cognitive clarity which is needed for work	#7 Concentration	Modifying environment (no television) at home to promote focus
	#3–4 Motivation	Office	Physically being in the office, and meeting colleagues, strengthens a sense of motivation, connection and belonging within the organization	#8 (anti) Psychol. detachment	Tried to achieve psychological detachment simply by cognitive appraisal but was unsuccessful; computer was still on and interfered
	#5 Concentration	Home	Focus better at home because they are not disturbed by others as much – especially prominent reason for managers	#10 Social needs	The respondent actively coordinates with a friend who works in a different company. By doing so, they create a work schedule that accommodates personal needs and preferences
	#9 Social needs	Office	Went in to meet others but no one was there, which made it pointless. Social density affects the choice architecture, so you cannot independently choose to go into a vibrant office, it must be organized	#11 Ergonomics	Bringing or buying better furniture and tools for home work improves somatic conditions
				#12 Ergonomics	Big monitors were better for work, but worse for work/life conflict

(*continued*)

Table 2. Continued

	Select			Modify	
Coordination	#Quote, Targeting	Selected	By what mechanism is the target affected?	#Quote, Targeting	By what mechanism is the target affected?
	#15 Integration with colleagues	Office	The physical arrangement facilitates easier communication and helps employees contextualize their own work. Contributing to a more integrated and collaborative work experience	#13 Integration with colleagues	Modify situation by formalizing forms of collaboration due to new hybrid working. Rebuilds social support that was lost in remote work
				#14 Integration with colleagues	Modify situation by using technology to circumvent the low social density problem and stay informed; be "in the loop"
	#18 Organization of work	Office	Arranging to work co-located for better collaboration	#16 Coordination	New ways of working through new digital systems support ("digital binders")
	#19 Organization of work	Home (wrong selection)	Respondent realizes he should have been in the office more to help introduce and socialize new, junior consultants because now it is apparent that they often don't know what to do	#17 Coordination	Visualize interdependencies. As the office is no longer a predictable meeting place for informal information transmission, one must be more proactive about signalling to others on whom one's work is dependent
	#20 T-E fit	Tasks	Batching tasks so that it becomes suitable to spend a whole day in either location, for example at home		
	#21 Coordination with others. T-E fit	Office	Prospection about work week and then setting it up: batching tasks, booking meetings, and selecting the proper workplace		

Note(s): The # number refers to the illustrative quotes in Appendix C
Source(s): Authors' own creation

Our matrix in Table 2 presents the overarching pattern found, with strategies pertaining either to selection or modification of situations, as the Duckworth *et al*. (2016) model suggests, and strategies targeting either self-states (e.g. concentration) or collaboration (e.g. learning what my colleagues might need from me). Each quadrant gives a short summary of illustrative examples, based on quotes from the interviews; some of these are displayed in the more in-depth description of the results that follow, but the majority can be found in Appendix C. The # number used below and in Table 2 cross-references the quotes table in Appendix C.

Targeting self-states

Common reasons for exercising the opportunity to select a location for work, either the office, at home, or outside, was to manage: mood (e.g. #1); energy (e.g. #2); motivation (e.g. #3–4); or concentration (e.g. #5–7). These self-regulatory strategies for managing personal states appeared to stabilize quickly during the initial remote work period and remained consistent across both time points. Regulating mood was often connected to the ability to be outdoors, especially during the winter months when there are only a few hours of daylight in the parts of Sweden participating. Arranging the home environment in certain ways, or taking advantage of, for example, a beautiful view, were also actions that seemed to contribute to improving mood. Somewhat related to these are strategies to fulfil what we call "soft' social needs, that is, participants describing a wish to engage with others socially – not particularly due to work requirements, but rather because it gives them energy, inspiration, or joy (e.g. #9–10).

As shown, for example, by quote #9 (Table 2) with regard to meeting social needs, not every attempt to arrange a favourable situation (fit) is successful. With social needs especially, it is not just up to the employee to make specific choices – what others choose to do is just as important.

> Some days of the week I've been in for a couple of hours to print papers. And one Friday, I thought "now I'm going to go in, there must be people there so I can get a bit of . . ." that social aspect. But I was alone there, so it was really boring. . . . there's no reason to go when there's no one there, because I can perform my work tasks just as well from home.

In this quote, the employee says she went into the office hoping to meet colleagues to fulfil some of her social needs, but no one else was there, which made the whole endeavour feel pointless and boring. In this example, it was not the performance of specific tasks *per se* that required social proximity but rather the respondent's own social needs, to improve mood or motivation. In the respondent's opinion, she could have performed her tasks alone just as well from home, rendering it "pointless" to go into the office when no one else was there. A contrasting example is given by another employee (#10), telling how she is proactively arranging to have lunch with someone at least once a week, often with a friend in another company, at an outdoor location.

> I guess I do feel a greater need today to . . . for example, I try to schedule having lunch with someone at least once a week. And I have a friend who also works remotely, but at a different company. We can meet for lunch. And a colleague lives quite far from me but in the same direction. So we try to meet one day a week [at a "third location"].

While likely having a positive influence on this employee, choosing to have lunch with external friends is less likely to produce much benefit for the organization.

Regulating energy was often connected with staying at home: this saves time on transportation and "getting ready", thus conserving energy. For some, not having to interact so much with people was also energy-conserving, while for others, as described above, social engagement in real life would give energy. Saving time on transportation often meant more sleep for participants, further conserving energy. Also going for a walk (for example) while there was still some daylight was done to regulate energy, as well as to regulate mood.

Successfully regulating self-states is obviously beneficial for individuals and a part of healthy, normal functioning. It is also beneficial for work performance. Participants describe how selecting to go into the office helps them stay more motivated and "connected" to their employer and colleagues, as in quote #4:

> For me it's been good to be at work at least once a week or every two weeks. As soon as I get to work, I feel a sense of belonging within the company that becomes stronger.

A very important state of mind for work performance is concentration. Several regulation strategies were mentioned to accomplish concentration states. More often, the home environment was selected to enable more concentrated work to be done. For managers

especially, the specific reason of not being disturbed by others was the described mechanism for achieving concentration at home, suggesting that managers feel that they are seen and treated as available when they can be physically observed, and that people often need to speak to them. Some respondents, on the other hand, describe more difficulties in concentrating at home, especially when WFH was first mandated. These employees also describe being able to mitigate this by *modifying* their environment: getting a bigger computer monitor or working in a separate room rather than working on a laptop from the couch (e.g. #12). Some participants also describe regulating their alertness levels, for example by folding laundry, to be better able to concentrate while "listening to a conference".

Targeting coordination

The other class of strategies was geared more towards attempts to orient oneself or others, coordinate activities, and improve work organization; we have gathered these under the headline of "coordination". For example, selecting a location to be close to colleagues was not always motivated by fulfilling personal social needs; at least as common was choosing to co-locate because *performance of the work tasks* would benefit from such an arrangement. Quote #18 describes collaboration work as proceeding more effectively in person ("have more oomph"), in that one can more easily "read" others, and the quality of work is better. Unlike the self-targeted strategies, coordination strategies showed more evolution over time, progressing from individual workarounds and recognition of disrupted patterns at T1, to systematic organizational solutions at T2.

Several people mentioned integrating with colleagues as a reason to be proactive about how, and especially where, to work. As one participant put it:

> Communication is much easier when [me and my colleagues] are in the office, I think, to put one's own work in context (quote #15).

The participant observing this also describes that the way she and her colleagues physically sit together makes formal meetings superfluous, and that a "lot of things happen" when they sit like that.

In the quadrant of *modifying strategies to target coordination*, the strategies could perhaps be said to target the task component of a T-E fit equation more often, by changing demands or available resources more collectively or even structurally.

Quote #14 describes how co-locating is important for *informing* the participant about what is going on, since she has been moved to another office while still working a lot with colleagues at the old office; however, the implicated employees have also started to compensate for not being co-located by using social communication technology, both to coordinate when to be in the same office, and to communicate informally about goings on:

> R: It's not just that we're not meeting each other, now it's also that we're sitting with new bosses, and we are clustered together in a different way. So those who were naturally around me before, whom I heard and knew what was going on with, I might not be sitting with now.
>
> I: Have you made any kind of effort to try to, I don't know, get these . . . some kind of contact points? I mean, to hear in some way?
>
> R: One part is this team that we started, "We who hang out at [office street name]". There it was me and a colleague; I said "we should form a team where those of us who hang out here just throw in everything, high and low. Yeah, I'll fix it". So we created the team. Every time I go into the city, I write, "Now I'm going to go into the city today or tomorrow or that day. Are more people coming in?" And then you check in. Just to hear what's going on and what's happening and stuff like that. I think that works, too. (quote #14)

This solution emerged after a reorganization split up previously co-located colleagues (between T1 and T2), showing how employees developed new coordination mechanisms in response to structural changes.

Another form of compensating for reduced integration with colleagues due to HW is formalizing new types of collaboration. Quote #13 describes how social support that was lost during remote working is being rebuilt by formalizing what previously happened "naturally" when they were co-located. The role as legal counsel to an administration is now formally shared between two people so they have each other as social support, rather than getting social support informally based on who is around, as was the practice when office working was the norm for everyone.

Another method to bridge the increased need for active information sharing shows clear development over time and was brought up in quote #17: visualizing dependencies between departments. The participant describes how, when her group was planning their year, they also put coloured dots on the planning papers to indicate tasks or events that required collaboration with other departments. "Because there is not this natural interaction, you don't go over to Accounting and run into them. So entirely different things are required . . . you have to signal. We have to signal to other departments that we will be doing this, and we will need your help along the way. It doesn't happen naturally in some conversation or meeting; you have to proactively signal." Not only do the employees involved have to visualize the dependencies themselves – they must also proactively prepare and inform those other departments about what will happen and what is needed, something that to a greater extent happened "naturally" through conversation when employees from all departments were co-located. The same employee described at T1 how much work-critical information was lost when informal encounters disappeared: "There's so much information you miss because you don't meet . . . You get a lot of information about what's happening [when you meet informally]. And it's not just the social aspect, but work-related, too." This traces how employees moved from recognizing disrupted coordination patterns to creating compensatory solutions.

A third method described was implementing new digital systems to bypass the need for paper-based technologies that became too cumbersome in a HW situation. Quote #16 describes how in the past employees often had to look in each other's paper binders to obtain certain archival information. The workers themselves proposed that their system administrator procure a new digital system for this information, so they could look there instead of having to depend on paper binders in someone else's office, thereby altering the link of certain tasks to the physical environment.

The use of digital systems to replace paper-based (i.e. location-based) systems, and the formalization of new relationships to support employees and compensate for missing informal social support, are both types of strategies that were more pronounced at T2, a year after our initial interviews at T1 (at which time the pandemic was in full force and remote working was still new to participating organizations).

Discussion

The introduction of HW with location autonomy for oneself, one's colleagues, and managers was a new situation for all study participants, and for their organizations. This is important to keep in mind: the study has focused not on all demands in the current work situation, but on the consequences of adopting HW. Therefore, in our rich material capturing the evolution of HW during and at the tail end of the pandemic in two Swedish municipalities, we have centred our analysis on instances of proactive regulation related to the hybrid way of working. As we convey in the results above, HW has introduced both new demands and new resources for employees, affecting the need and opportunity for T-E fit.

Targeting coordination

Overall, a picture emerges in which fit-making behaviours targeted at coordination seem necessary to bridge organizational "disruptions" that appeared *due to* the introduction of HW. Established organizational routines, such as carrying out a particular work task, are not

automatic and effortless, even when well entrained (D'Adderio, 2010). Work routines that in pre-pandemic times were pinned on co-location – particular people reliably being found in a particular place, having access to certain tools, bumping into the right people, overhearing useful information, and so on – now have disruptive rifts in them. If important enough, these rifts must be bridged or filled in, compensated for, or worked around somehow – thus introducing new things that have to be actively regulated to achieve sufficient T-E fit.

The need to bridge disruptions echoes findings by Randel *et al*. (2024), showing how employees job craft to create "bridges" to or "barriers" against others, depending on their need for social connection or focus. This may also be seen as tactics of integration or segmentation to manage boundary control, though mainly "within" work rather than between work and free time (Kreiner *et al*., 2009; Peters *et al*., 2017). In our studied organizations, because of the location autonomy afforded by HW, decisions needed to be made with greater forethought about where to position oneself physically in space, who else needed to be there, what equipment was needed, what kind of social dynamic was suitable for the tasks, and so on. Depending on the autonomy of workers, these decisions are either mostly about *selecting a place* to be oneself and trying to coordinate others to also be there, or it can be about *selecting tasks*, moving them around in time so that one has suitable tasks to do while in the place one has chosen to be – perhaps for other reasons (e.g. choosing to work from home due to a dentist's appointment, and saving some administrative or otherwise independent tasks for that day).

Targeting self-states

Unlike the strategies to bridge disruptions, the regulatory behaviours targeting self-states all seem to be more short-term, and much less "due to" the HW mode, *per se*. Rather, here, increased location autonomy has made available a greater range of choices to enable achieving fit of location with personal needs related to mood, energy, motivation, concentration, and somatic sensation. Most instances of choosing to work from home fall into this category, though not all examples are about WFH. Previous studies on WFH have similarly found that it is used to meet personal needs (Stempel and Siestrup, 2022), and to be productive with respect to independent, focus-requiring tasks (Vartiainen and Hyrkkänen, 2010), and that the most effective strategy for productivity is *modifying* somatic conditions (Troll *et al*., 2022). Our findings add to these results by demonstrating that selecting to go into the office can similarly be in order to regulate one's own mood, motivation, and social relationships, and that going outdoors was often used to regulate mood, energy, and somatic sensation.

Our findings also highlight that social connection operates both as a resource to be mobilized and a target for regulation in employees' proactive T-E fit strategies. The self-targeted strategies frequently involved employees selecting locations to regulate their social interaction needs – choosing to work in the office for social energy, or WFH to avoid social drain. This extends beyond instrumental coordination to encompass fundamental human needs for energizing social connections. While task-focused interactions facilitate coordination, socio-emotional connections provide the energizing foundation for sustained performance (Carmeli, 2009; Spreitzer *et al*., 2005). The physiological basis for this distinction lies in research demonstrating that positive social interactions at work have immediate and enduring effects, strengthening cardiovascular, immune, and neuroendocrine systems through what Heaphy and Dutton (2008) term "physiological resourcefulness" – the body's enhanced ability to build, maintain, and repair itself. These positive connections also generate relational energy and contribute to thriving through vitality and learning (Owens *et al*., 2016; Spreitzer *et al*., 2005). Participants described seeking energy from colleagues and valuing spontaneous encounters, confirming research on high-quality connections and energizing relationships that leave individuals feeling more vital and motivated (Dutton, 2003; Spreitzer *et al*., 2005). The need for energizing social connections becomes particularly relevant in HW contexts, where virtual interactions are more demanding and less energizing than in-person encounters (Nesher Shoshan and Wehrt, 2022), helping to explain why participants developed strategies for

orchestrating in-person social density, not just for task coordination, but to access renewable energy sources that high-quality face-to-face connections provide.

Autonomy facilitates proactive resource configuration which can create T-E fit

Our study contributes to research on job resources by highlighting a "resourcing" practice at the heart of achieving T-E fit in HW. Resources are not necessarily readily available, but rather have to be considered, noticed, created, or brought to bear in transient situations. This insight is especially relevant to how employees align tasks, locations, colleagues, tools, and mental states – a process conceptualized by Wessels *et al*. (2019) as time-spatial job crafting. This resourcing practice evolved over time, from more individual efforts to configure available resources, to more collective and systematic approaches to resource creation and deployment. By our second time point (T2), we see the emergence of more sophisticated collective solutions that created new organizational resources.

Location flexibility and employee autonomy make available new resources, not least in the form of home locations and the outdoors – resources that individuals can use or enrol in their orchestration processes to fulfil needs and demands. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argue that almost anything can be a resource if it is used for coping with demands. A non-exhaustive list includes health and energy, positive beliefs, problem-solving, and social skills, as well as more environmental – such as social and material – resources. While autonomy or control is often described as a job resource in itself, it is key in a process of unlocking value in resources, and is indeed an enabling precondition for putting resources to use at all (Langfred and Moye, 2004). It is a kind of "catalyst" resource: activating the latent potential of other resources, allowing a worker increased opportunity to bring in any and all other resources at their disposal, to make use of resources in novel ways, create new resources, or adapting their work role to achieve a better fit and thus reduce strain. We propose that the reason that T-E fit moderates the association of location autonomy with good outcomes (Wu *et al*., 2023) is because of its "resourcing" potential in the hands of proactive employees.

Further, our study contributes to literature exploring T-E fit by studying it through the perspective of the process model of self-control (Duckworth *et al*., 2016). Most of the research on T-E fit, and conceptual work such as Wessels *et al*. (2019), highlight the selection of environment to create fit. We are balancing this perspective by highlighting how employees can also select tasks, and modify both environment and tasks, a type of strategy similar to job crafting or even work redesign.

The strategies present in our results include both smaller and larger efforts of orchestration of favourable conditions. Some of these examples are of a more lasting type, while others are more recurring, intra-daily, regulatory behaviours. These efforts reflect what Vleugels *et al*. (2023) identify as different temporal conceptualizations of fit – from situational (daily regulatory behaviours) to more developmental changes (lasting organizational solutions). We think it is useful to see all these behaviours as specific expressions of a more general fit-regulation process, a resourceful and proactive process of setting oneself up for success, both in the short and the long term. The process model of self-control (Duckworth *et al*., 2016) encompasses both very short-term and internal modes of regulation (for example, behavioural inhibition) and more proactive and external modes of regulation, such as situation selection. Empirical work has also shown that more proactive and externally focused strategies tend to be more effective (Bäcklander *et al*., 2021b; Davydenko and Peetz, 2024; Fujita, 2011; Williamson and Wilkowski, 2020). In their conceptualization of time-spatial crafting, Wessels *et al*. (2019) propose "being reflective" over demands and resources in order to choose a place of work as a key step in a daily fit-making process, which our study empirically confirms as being important. However, it would be more accurate to term this step *prospection*, since what is required is looking ahead, forethought, an anticipation of needs – whether one's own needs or social and organizational needs. Planning work ahead of time facilitates implementing desired and goal-directed behaviours (Gollwitzer, 1999). Planning, prospective thought, is

relevant to coordinating people, documents, access to technology, booking rooms, and other actions that may be needed in relation to tasks and environments, and also to cater to personal needs, for example if one is having a low energy-day or if one needs extra social stimulation. Previous studies on location autonomy in activity-based working have also found workday planning as relating to improved concentration, health, and engagement, and to decreased stress under such flexible location conditions (Bäcklander *et al*., 2021a).

At T2, we also find examples of strategies that go above and beyond the individual employee – for example, quotes #14 and #13. These describe the use of a new digital system and the formalizing of a social support system to enable decision-making, respectively. These example actions are more akin to top-down work redesign, though both were described as employee-initiated. Work design concerns the "study, creation, and modification of the composition, content, structure, and environment within which jobs and roles are enacted" (Morgeson and Humphrey, 2008). This definition implies that work design can be both modified by the incumbent (which we could call job crafting) and considered at the team level or at higher levels (Parker *et al*., 2017). Our findings suggest that over time, solutions to new organizational disruptions can grow out of short-term self-regulation, medium-term situation modifications, or long-term work redesign and implementation of new work technologies. Solutions to disruption can also vary from being focused on the self, to being focused on work boundaries and work conditions, to being projected upwards to rearrange the organization itself. In a recent study of job crafting when teleworking, the authors argue that while job and home crafting are typically beneficial, they are effortful and, therefore, cannot be done unlimitedly (Verelst *et al*., 2023). The authors also found that combining high levels of job and home crafting did relate to increased energy depletion. In relation to our findings, we would therefore propose that it is beneficial to find solutions to new organizational disruptions that do not rely on constant, short-term regulation, which likely taps expensive executive functions more, but that are instead of the more long-term work design type where possible.

Practical implications

The shift to HW necessitates a re-evaluation of traditional work practices and the adoption of strategies that bridge the resulting gaps in organizational routines. Our findings underscore the critical role of employees' proactive regulation in the exercise of location autonomy for achieving T-E fit, both for their own well-being and performance as well as for that of the organization more broadly. Individuals in our study recurringly demonstrate great ability to consider both the needs of the organization, in both the short and the long term, as well as their own needs, in their orchestration of a work week and workday that will mobilize and make good use of resources to accomplish work. This highlights the necessity for organizations to actively support these endeavours.

Empowering employees with autonomy over their work location, schedule, and task selection lets their resourcefulness be put to good use. Autonomy acts as a catalyst, unlocking the potential of resources that employees can leverage to meet both personal and organizational needs. Organizations should strive to create an environment where employees feel trusted to make decisions that align with their productivity and well-being.

By providing supportive technology (for example, for visualization of work, as our results show several examples of) and structured mechanisms for work redesign, organizations can help distribute the effort required for accomplishing collaborative T-E fit, ensuring that the process is sustainable and beneficial for both the employee and the organization as a whole. Managers need to be proactive in seeking out and listening to, and then supporting, employee initiatives that can be strengthened top-down with formal policy, technological systems, extra time, or other resources.

Recognizing the value of informal interactions, organizations should encourage social density at certain times. This could involve designating specific days or hours for team members to work on-site, especially fostering opportunities for spontaneous encounters and

collaboration. The type of time together that people need may not be what the employer anticipates. As one participant explicitly explained: the value added of going into the office was not, as she felt her leaders seem to think, to "do formal meetings", but the opportunity for spontaneity and serendipity, which critically depend on achieving a certain social density in the office at a certain time, and enough freedom to wander around the office and strike up conversations.

Limitations

Our study was performed during an extreme time: in the beginning and at the tail end of the pandemic. This is also a strength of the study, since this temporal focus generates a detailed view of a unique situation. While one may question the external generalizability of such findings, we believe that post-pandemic work has shown that the experiences of remote and then HW during and after the pandemic have had an impact on how employees like to and expect to work. We think that the prescient conceptual article on time-spatial crafting by Wessels *et al*. (2019) is largely empirically confirmed here as being a major consideration in contemporary HW.

Our studied organizations were in the public sector, and novices regarding remote work, and we can see that the ways of working develop over time, even during the period covered by the study. For large global corporations, the development trajectory may look very different, even if they also had practices in place for having people come into a common office. Having employees dispersed among different geographies and time zones, they may have had more practice with digital meeting tools, asynchronous working, or other practices easily translated into the remote work of the pandemic and, later, a HW mode.

There is a high probability that a selection effect is present in our material and that people who were really not doing well with remote and HW did not volunteer to participate in our study. It is also possible that those who enjoyed WFH wanted to participate to influence the possibility of continuing to work from home, even after the end of the pandemic. While most appreciated the opportunity, a minority were quite clear that they hoped never to have to work from home again.

Conclusion

With this study, we have contributed to research on flexible work practices. Our study captures a specific context for flexible work (Ter Hoeven and Van Zoonen, 2015), in which HW with broad location autonomy is commonplace rather than some type of idiosyncratic deal or something that only applies to a small group of employees. The study illuminates the nuanced practices of exercising location autonomy in HW environments, highlighting the strategic selection and modification of workspaces and the balancing of personal and organizational needs in a daily resourcing procedure. Our findings suggest that successful proactive regulation in such settings is not just about individual preferences or skill, nor about company policy, but involves a dynamic interplay of environmental factors, task demands, and social interactions, and that achieving T-E fit, a moderator between location autonomy and several good outcomes, is a process in which the employer can be helpful by supporting and lifting up employee initiatives to higher-level job redesign. This research enriches the understanding of employee proactive behaviours in HW, offering valuable insights for organizations aiming to support effective and sustainable HW models.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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