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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Affective commitment, home-based working and the blurring of work–home boundaries: Evidence from Germany

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Abstract

Analysis of data from the representative German Linked Personnel Panel revealed that, overall, the use of home-based working is associated with a higher affective organisational commitment on the part of employees. However, this is less often the case when the use of home-based working involves the blurring of work–home boundaries. Perceived trust and fairness on the part of supervisors mediates the association between employees' experiences with working from home and their affective commitment. These results show that experiences with home-based working shape employees' perceptions of trust and fairness in their exchange relations with supervisors and thus their affective commitment to the organisation. Employees' experiences with home-based working that reflect its supportive implementation by their employers and supervisors are critical for their commitment. Our results provide the first evidence that in exchange relations between employees and supervisors, perceived fairness is as important as perceived trust.

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KEYWORDS

affective organisational commitment, blurred boundaries, employee–supervisor relations, experiences with home-based working, fairness, home-based working, social exchange, trust, work–life balance

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digital connectivity with co-workers, supervisors and customers has increased (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016), leading to a growth in home-based working (Felstead, 2022; Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016). This trend has been reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, and will most likely persist post-pandemic in the form of hybrid working whereby employees and teams work partly at the workplace and partly from other locations (Felstead, 2022). While around 12% of employees in Germany worked regularly from home before the pandemic, a quarter of employees did so during the pandemic (Abendroth et al., 2022; Arntz et al., 2020).

This development is benefitting the growing number of employees calling for home-based working to achieve a better work–life balance. Empirical evidence from Sweden shows that among teleworkers, individuals with families and children are overrepresented and one of the fastest growing groups (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016). The European Union and national policymakers have formulated expectations that encourage organisations to offer the option of working from home as a resource to help their employees better integrate work and family life (Eurofound & the International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2017). Consequently, organisations are under increasing pressure to offer the option of working from home as a work–life balance arrangement.

The current business case arguments for the use of home-based working suggest that employers can benefit from implementing and expanding this arrangement if employees reciprocate by increasing their commitment to the organisation (Den Dulk et al., 2012; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). Organisational commitment refers to an employee's attachment to the work organisation (Chen & Fulmer, 2018; Choi, 2018; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Wang & Walumbwa, 2007). It is a crucial resource for employers who—especially in times of shortages of skilled labour—must retain and compete for skilled workers. Although reciprocation in the form of increased commitment would be a win–win situation for both employees and employers (Kossek, 2016), evidence showing that working from home does indeed increase employees' organisational commitment has been inconsistent (for a review, see Kelliher & de Menezes, 2019) in that it is unclear whether the actual use of home-based working rather than its mere availability contributes to commitment. In a meta-analysis, Martin and MacDonnell (2012) found positive associations between telework and commitment; Choi (2018) found higher turnover intentions for teleworkers compared with nonusers with access to telework, whereas those with no access to telework had the highest turnover rates. In line with Choi's (2018) finding regarding nonteleworkers by choice, Chen and Fulmer (2018) showed that flexible location was more positively related to organisational commitment for nonusers with access to telework than for users. One explanation for this might be related to the finding that the use of digital communication devices has contributed to '24/7 availability' (Täht & Mills, 2012), and that as a result, home-based workers often experience an increase in work–home conflict rather than an improvement in their work–life balance (for a review, see Chung & van der Lippe, 2020).

Thus, in the present paper, we ask whether and when the use of home-based working increases employees' organisational commitment. Following Sullivan's (2003, p. 158) call for 'project-specific definitions', we use the term 'home-based working' to refer to work performed by employees at home with or without the use of information and communication technologies. In addition, we apply the definition proposed by Eurofound and the ILO (2017) according to which home-based working is a substitute for or a supplement to regular work performed at the employer's premises and is performed on a regular or occasional basis. We differentiate between supportive implementation, where home-based working becomes a resource for improving employees' work-life balance (Abendroth & Reimann, 2018; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Kossek et al., 2006), and less supportive implementation, where home-based working leads to greater conflicts by blurring the boundaries that separate employees' work and personal lives (Abendroth & Reimann, 2018; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Only in the former case would we expect to find social exchange dynamics whereby workers reciprocate by increasing their commitment to the organisation, which would be in line with existing arguments concerning the implications of flexible work arrangements (Chen & Fulmer, 2018; Choi, 2018; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Wang & Walumbwa, 2007). Because employees' experiences with home-based working are likely to reflect whether working from home is implemented in a supportive way or not, we focus on experiences of blurred boundaries between work and personal life and on improved work-life balance when working from home. Previous research has shown that organisational culture moderates the implications of working from home for work-family conflicts (Abendroth & Reimann, 2018). Moreover, measuring employees' experiences of working from home has the advantage of accounting for individual differences in boundary preferences (Wessels et al., 2019), and thus for whether working from home and its implementation in the workplace meets workers' needs and preferences.

We further investigate whether the consequences for organisational commitment of blurred boundaries/improved work-life balance as a result of home-based working are mediated by perceived trust and fairness in employee-supervisor exchange relations. It has been argued that blurred boundaries through home-based working result from social exchange dynamics whereby employees reciprocate by investing more time and energy in their work to avoid being regarded as less productive and committed when working from home and to ward off possible career penalties (Abendroth & Diewald, 2019; Abendroth & Reimann, 2018; Chung, 2019; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Lott & Chung, 2016). This form of stigmatisation describes a lack of trust in employee-supervisor exchange relations and has been viewed as part of strong presenteeism cultures characterised by the norm of the ideal worker who is present and available for work whenever needed (Abendroth & Reimann, 2018; Acker, 1990; Chung, 2019; Kelly et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2013). Alternatively, it has also been suggested that the blurred boundaries associated with home-based working are intentional and are part of high-performance management strategies and high-demand work cultures in which home-based working is used mainly to serve the flexibility interests of the employer. This unbalanced exchange relationship violates the norms of reciprocity and thus of fairness (Abendroth & Reimann, 2018; Blau, 1964; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010), with potential negative consequences for organisational commitment. Because perceived trust and fairness are more on the emotional side of the exchange relationship between employees and supervisors, we follow Meyer and Allen (1991) and focus on 'affective commitment', which describes an employee's emotional attachment to the work organisation. If trust and fairness in work relationships are important mediators between home-based work experiences and engagement, this would further reinforce the argument that experiences with home-based working are shaped by organisational support for its implementation. Accordingly, we ask two research questions:

1. How are the experiences of blurred boundaries or improved work–life balance due to home-based working related to affective commitment?
2. Does perceived trust and fairness in the employee–supervisor exchange relationship mediate the associations between experiences of blurred boundaries or improved work–life balance when working from home and affective organisational commitment?

In attempting to answer these research questions, we contribute to the existing research in several ways. Although a number of studies to date have investigated the associations between the availability and use of home-based working and organisational commitment, the results have been mixed in that the availability of home-based working seems to be more beneficial for commitment than the actual use of this option (for a review, see Kelliher & de Menezes, 2019; see also Chen & Fulmer, 2018). Here, we investigate the importance of the *use* of home-based working by considering two different forms of implementation: implementation that is supportive of employees' work–life balance and implementation that blurs the boundaries between their work and personal lives. We know from previous research that most flexible working arrangements are implemented either in the interests of the employee or in the interests of the employer (Chung & Tijdens, 2013)—with different consequences for employees' work-related outcomes (e.g., Lott & Chung, 2016). However, home-based working is a somewhat ambiguous arrangement, as it can be implemented in the interests of the employees and/or the employers. Therefore, we focus on employees' experiences with home-based working, thereby extending recent studies on flexible working and commitment (e.g., Wang & Walumbwa, 2007). This is of special relevance in light of the rapid increase in home-based working during the COVID-19 pandemic, which will persist to some extent after the pandemic in many companies and countries (Abendroth et al., 2022; Felstead, 2022), and which makes it necessary to adapt human resource management practices to manage and support remotely working employees and teams.

In addition to trust, we also consider the role of perceived fairness on the part of supervisors, taking into account the issue of the reciprocity of social exchange relationships between employees and supervisors. Finally, in contrast to Felstead and Henseke (2017), who—as in the present study—used representative data to analyse work-related outcomes when working from home, we focus on the interplay between positive and negative effects of home-based working. To this end, we establish a link between three theories commonly used in organisational research to explain work-related outcomes associated with flexible work arrangements: social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), signalling theory (Casper & Harris, 2008) and border theory (Clark, 2000). This allows us to gain a better understanding of the impact of home-based working on affective commitment, and to explain, at least in part, why some studies have found that higher commitment is due more to the availability of the option to work from home than to its actual use (Chen & Fulmer, 2018; Choi, 2018).

STUDY HYPOTHESES

Affective commitment and home-based working from a social exchange perspective

In line with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which assumes that parties must adhere to the norm of reciprocity in social exchange relations, work organisations may offer home-based working

to increase the affective commitment of their employees (see also Chen & Fulmer, 2018; Choi, 2018; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Wang & Walumbwa, 2007). Home-based working is increasingly perceived as a family-friendly workplace arrangement because it provides flexibility not only in terms of the location but also the timing of work (Maruyama et al., 2009; Wheatley, 2012). Its availability can therefore function as a signal that ‘the organization cares about employee well-being’ (Casper & Harris, 2008, p. 96). In accordance with the norm of reciprocity, this signal that the employer is investing in the employment relationship would in turn elicit greater commitment on the part of the employees (Chen & Fulmer, 2018; Choi, 2018; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Wang & Walumbwa, 2007). On the basis of signalling theory, Casper and Harris (2008) posited that work–family policies increase commitment indirectly through perceived organisational support. They provided evidence for their argument by showing that the availability of family-friendly workplace arrangements was positively associated with commitment, irrespective of their use, and that this association was mediated by perceived organisational support.

In addition to the mediating role of perceived organisational support in the association between organisational commitment and the availability of the option to work from home, the actual use of home-based working can also increase commitment by serving as a resource for achieving a better work–life balance. From a resource perspective, which has a long tradition in work–home research, the use of home-based working can reduce work–home conflict because (a) the time saved on commuting can be used for private obligations, and (b) it involves greater work autonomy, which enables work to be rescheduled, thus allowing home-based workers to respond to predictable and unpredictable demands in the family domain (Abendroth & den Dulk, 2011; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Kossek et al., 2006; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). Following this, Casper and Harris (2008) compared the explanatory power of signalling theory with that of the self-interest model (Lind & Tyler, 1988), which suggests that family-friendly workplace arrangements increase commitment when employees find them personally useful. Although the findings of Casper and Harris (2008) were more consistent with signalling theory, the authors did find some evidence in support of the self-interest model for male employees’ reactions to work–life benefits. In line with the concept of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995; Schaufeli, 2006), workers expect the organisation’s resources to be proportional to their own investment in affective commitment. Therefore, we hypothesise:

Hypothesis 1. *Employees’ use of home-based working is on average related to higher affective commitment.*

However, border theory (Clark, 2000) suggests that working from home blurs the boundary between the work and life domains and may thus contribute to spillover effects from one domain to the other. Indeed, previous research has shown that individuals who work from home experience greater spillover effects between work and home, as well as time- and strain-related work–home conflict (Abendroth & Reimann, 2018; Chung & van der Lippe, 2020; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Wang & Walumbwa, 2007). In this case, the employee’s self-interest in a better work–life balance is not realised, and the perceived costs of using home-based working are not proportional to the benefits. Thus, we hypothesise:

Hypothesis 2. *Employees’ use of home-based working is less likely to be associated with increased affective commitment when it is accompanied by blurred boundaries between work and personal life rather than an improved work–life balance.*

Social exchange dynamics and different forms of implementation of home-based working

The blurred-boundaries aspect of home-based working can result from the employee's difficulty in separating work and personal life when these two domains share the same location (Clark, 2000; Kossek et al., 2006). However, in this section, we argue that experiences with home-based working and the related consequences for affective commitment are also likely to be mediated by the exchange dynamics within the employee-supervisor relationship, which is shaped by the form of implementation (i.e., supportive vs. less supportive) of home-based working by the employer or supervisor.

The importance of trust in the social exchange

Whereas economic exchange is a short-term relationship where, for example, a specific work task receives a specific remuneration, social exchange relations at work are long-term and rely on trust (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Zhao et al., 2020). This implies that employees are committed because they trust that the organisation and their supervisors will reciprocate that commitment, in particular with organisational resources that are of benefit to them (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Zhao et al., 2020). Indeed, previous research has shown that employees' trust in their supervisors is positively related to organisational commitment (Dedahanov & Rhee, 2015; Kidd & Smewing, 2001).

However, experiencing blurred boundaries when using home-based working violates the norm of reciprocity. In this case, working from home is not perceived as a resource that must be reciprocated with organisational commitment. Following signalling theory (Casper & Harris, 2008), blurred boundaries might signal to employees a violation of the social exchange relation that relies on trust in mutual exchange, with the likely consequence that they will adjust their level of organisational commitment accordingly. Thus, employees might be less committed to their organisation when they experience blurred boundaries when using home-based working because they trust their supervisor less. This aligns with the findings of a case study in the Dutch insurance sector showing that the implementation of new forms of working led to better performance, and that this association was completely explained by the mediating role of trust (between employees and their managers and among colleagues) as well as social cohesion (De Leede & Kraijenbrink, 2014). Choi (2018) further supported this argument, noting that managerial support decreased teleworkers' intentions to leave the organisation. In line with this, Choi (2018) noted with reference to Dahlstrom (2013) that 'leadership style that develops support, communication and trust in supervisor-subordinate relationships will be necessary for successful implementation of telework' (p. 31).

Accordingly, we would expect that trust in the exchange relationship between employee and supervisor serves as a mediator between experiences with home-based working and affective organisational commitment among home-based workers. Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. *Employees' experiences of blurred boundaries and nonimprovement of work-life balance when working from home reduce affective commitment due to a perceived lack of trust in the employee-supervisor exchange relationship.*

The importance of fairness in social exchange

An alternative explanation for the effect of blurred boundaries that occur when working from home working is a perceived lack of fairness in the social exchange between employee and supervisor. More specifically, studies have shown that some employers enforce and enable work intensification through the use of home-based working as part of high-performance management strategies or high-demand work cultures (Abendroth & Reimann, 2018; Appelbaum et al., 2000; Cha & Weeden, 2014; Chung, 2019; Godard, 2001; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; White et al., 2003). Evidence indicates that high-demand work cultures create a need for overtime work, and that home-based working is thus associated with greater work–home conflict (Abendroth & Reimann, 2018) and does not serve the interests of the employees. This reflects an unbalanced exchange that involves a greater blurring of boundaries and, as a consequence, the failure of home-based working to lead to higher affective commitment on the part of the employee. According to Schaufeli (2006), workers expect the resources offered by their organisation to be proportional to their own investments. If this ‘psychological contract’ is violated (p. 79), the social exchange becomes unbalanced, with negative consequences for employees’ affective commitment (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994). Thus, employees who experience blurred boundaries between work and personal life, and whose work–life balance does not improve when working from home, are likely to be less committed to the organisation because they do not perceive a fair exchange with their supervisor. By contrast, perceived fairness in the exchange relationship indicates that the flexibility interests of both the employer and the employee are considered. Thus, we hypothesise:

Hypothesis 4. *Employees’ experiences of blurred boundaries and nonimprovement of their work–life balance when working from home reduce their affective commitment due to a perceived lack of fairness in the employee–supervisor exchange relationship.*

EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

Data and sample

The data for the present study were drawn from the second wave of the Linked Personnel Panel (LPP; see Broszeit et al., 2016) conducted in 2014/2015. The LPP is a representative panel study of German establishments with 50 or more employees in the manufacturing and service sectors. The main focus of the LPP is on human resource management, workplace culture and management instruments. Data on both employees and establishments are randomly collected, that is, all establishments and all employees within these establishments have an equal chance of selection. We were able to access the data during a guest stay at the Research Data Centre (FDZ) of the Federal Employment Agency at the German Institute for Employment Research (IAB) and subsequently via remote data processing at the FDZ. In the second wave of the LPP (2014/15), the use of home-based working, as well as the experiences with home-based working, were observed. The analyses of the present study are therefore based on data from that wave. One advantage of these data is that they represent the period before the COVID-19 pandemic. We can therefore draw conclusions about the impact of home-based working on an affective commitment without risking bias from workers who did not work from home by choice, as was the case during the pandemic. The dependent variable, explanatory variables and control variables used in the analysis were observed for 2460 persons. The

age range was set at 18–65 years so that all employees below the statutory retirement age (65 years) were included.

Measurement of affective commitment

In line with Meyer and Allen (1991), affective commitment (i.e., the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organisation) was measured by means of a sum index based on the following three LPP variables (see Broszeit et al., 2016):

- 'Commitment: rest of my life', measured with the item: 'I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization'.
- 'Commitment: personal meaning', measured with the item: 'This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me'.
- 'Commitment: problems are my own', measured with the item: 'I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own'.

Respondents could choose one of the following options (reversed values in parentheses) for each of the three variables: does not apply at all (1), does rather not apply (2), neutral (3), largely applies (4) or fully applies (5). Cronbach's α was used to estimate the reliability of the composite score; it was 0.83. The responses to the items were added up to yield a single sum value that ranged from 3 to 15. The sum index was generated as follows: the minimum sum value (3) was subtracted from the sum of the responses, and the result was divided by the remaining maximum value (12).

Measurement of home-based working and employees' experiences with home-based working

Because the experience of improved work–life balance and the experience of blurred boundaries when working from home are distinct but not mutually exclusive experiences, we combined them into one index variable to measure the experiences as a continuum. Home-based working was measured based on employees' answers to the question: 'Do you work from home for your employer—even if only occasionally?' The respondents could answer either 'yes' (1) or 'no' (0). In the second wave of the LPP (2014/15; Broszeit et al., 2016), those employees who answered 'yes' to this question were asked about their experiences with home-based working. For the present study, an index variable based on two items related to employees' work–life balance was chosen: 'Working from home allows me to reconcile my job with family and private activities' and 'Working from home blurs the boundary between work and free time'. Employees could choose one of five responses to each of these statements (reversed values in parentheses): does not apply at all (1), does rather not apply (2), neutral (3), largely applies (4) or fully applies (5). The scale values for the item 'Working from home allows me to reconcile my job with family and private activities' were not reversed, so the strongest agreement with this statement had the value 1. For the index variable, person-specific mean values across both items were generated. The index is a continuous variable with 1 as the minimum value and 5 as the maximum value. The higher the value of the index, the higher the experience of blurred boundaries and the lower the experience of improved work–life balance was when working from home.

Measurement of perceived managerial trust and fairness

According to Den Dulk et al. (2011), perceived managerial trust influences employees' use of flexible work arrangements. In our study, this effect was measured with a sum index of two LPP items (see Broszeit et al., 2016)—‘Supervisors show an understanding of the people who work for them’ and ‘Supervisors show that they have confidence in those they manage’—with the five response options (reversed values in parentheses): does not apply at all (1), does rather not apply (2), neutral (3), largely applies (4) or fully applies (5). The values of the responses to the items were added up to yield a single sum value that ranged from 2 to 10. Perceived managerial fairness was measured using the LPP item, ‘The way my supervisor treats me is fair’ with the same five response options. Both variables were treated as continuous variables in the analyses.

Control variables

To estimate effects that would not be biased by employees' workplace and sociodemographic and household characteristics, control variables had to be included in the model. At the workplace level, we controlled for the employee's contractual working time, whether the employee received wages above the collectively agreed pay scale and whether the employee had a permanent contract. Because the status position (blue-collar vs. white-collar worker) varies between users and nonusers of home-based working (see Supporting Information: Table A1 in the Online Appendix), we controlled for the vertical segregation of the workplace by means of three proxy variables: leadership position (0 = no, 1 = yes), status position (0 = blue-collar worker, 1 = white-collar worker) and monthly wages before tax (continuous variable). We also controlled for whether the employee worked in production (1), sales/marketing (2), cross-divisional function/administration (3) or services (4). At the company level, we controlled for the occupational sector based on the 1993 edition of the German Classification of Economic Activities (WZ93): manufacturing industries (1), metal/electronics/automotive industries (2), retail/transport/media sectors (3), business services/financial services (4), and information, communications, other services (5). In addition, we controlled for the size of the establishment: 0–99 employees (1), 100–249 employees (2), 250–499 employees (3), and 500 or more employees (4); and for the region: north (1), east (2), south (3) and west (4). As household context can influence workers' affective commitment and their experiences with home-based working, we controlled for whether the employee lived with a partner (0 = no, 1 = yes) and had children (0 = no children, 1 = one child, 2 = two children and 3 = three or more children). The age of the youngest child was controlled for using two dummy variables (ages 0–3 and 4–5 years). At the individual characteristics level, we controlled for the employee's gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age (continuous variable) and migration background (0 = no, 1 = yes). And finally, as the implications of flexible work arrangements differ depending on an employee's educational background (Fuller & Hirsh, 2019), we also controlled for level of educational attainment: primary school (1), secondary education (2), and university or university of applied sciences (3). Table 1 provides an overview of all the variables used in the analyses.

Econometric strategy

To analyse how the use of home-based working and experiences with using home-based working (i.e., blurred boundaries or improved work–life balance) affect affective commitment

TABLE 1 Variables used in the analysis of affective commitment

Variable	Percent	SD	Min.	Max.
Home-based working	19.27		0	1
Affective commitment (index)	0.63 ^a	0.24	0	1
Blurred-boundaries through home-based working (index)	0.57	1.26	0	5
Perceived managerial trust	7.59 ^a	1.76	2	10
Perceived managerial fairness	3.91 ^a	0.93	1	5
Female employees	24.18		0	1
White-collar employees	61.26		0	1
Leadership position	31.17		0	1
Contractual working time (hours per week)	36.33 ^a	6.08	4	90
Wages above the collectively agreed pay scale	23.00		1	0
Monthly wages before tax (EUR)	3823.22 ^a	10,371.40	399	500,000
Fixed-term contracts	3.04		0	1
Functional areas				
Production	46.02			
Sales/marketing	10.81		0	1
Cross-divisional function/administration	14.19		0	1
Services	30.38		0	1
Sector			0	1
Manufacturing industries	32.89			
Metal/electronics/automotive industries	38.54		0	1
Retail/transport/media sectors	10.69		0	1
Business services/financial services	11.42		0	1
Information, communications, other services	6.46		0	1
Region			0	1
North	15.77			
East	20.61		0	1
South	29.19		0	1
West	34.43		0	1
Establishment size			0	1
0–99 employees	10.57			
100–249 employees	24.72		0	1
250–499 employees	25.37		0	1
≥500 employees	39.35		0	1
Living with a partner in one household	82.76		0	1

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Variable	Percent	SD	Min.	Max.
Number of children			0	1
No children	57.11			
One child	23.82		0	1
Two children	16.18		0	1
Three and more children	2.89		0	1
Age of youngest child (0–3 years)	11.21		0	1
Age of youngest child (4–5 years)	16.91		0	1
Educational attainment			0	1
Primary	25.00			
Secondary	43.78			
University/university of applied sciences	31.22		0	1
Age (years)	44.93 ^a	9.36	18	65
Migration background	18.57		0	1

Note: The analyses are based on data from Wave 2 of the Linked Personnel Panel (LPP) 2014/15. *N* = 2460. Numbers are percentages unless otherwise stated.

^aEquals to *M*.

TABLE 2 Correlation matrix

	1	2	3
1 Affective commitment			
2 Blurred-boundaries through home-based working	−0.077****		
3 Perceived managerial trust	0.271***	−0.139*	
4 Perceived managerial fairness	0.218***	−0.211**	0.435***

Note: The analyses are based on data from Wave 2 of the Linked Personnel Panel (LPP) 2014/15. *N* = 473 (home-based workers).

p* < 0.05; *p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001; *****p* < 0.10.

(Table 3, Models 1 and 2), we chose a multilevel mixed-effects linear regression model (see Hox, 2017) with robust standard errors using the Huber/White sandwich estimator. We fit the model

$$y_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{ij} + u_j + \epsilon_{ij},$$

where *i* is companies and *j* is employees. Finally, trust and fairness were introduced as mediator variables for the association between experiences with home-based working and affective commitment in the multilevel mixed-effects linear regression model (Table 3, Models 3 and 4). The analyses are based on the sample including users and nonusers of home-based working. To assess the correlation between the blurred-boundaries index and affective commitment unbiased by the positive and statistically significant correlation between working from home and affective commitment (*r* = 0.08, *p* < 0.01), the correlation matrix (Table 2) is based only on employees who worked from home.

TABLE 3 Multilevel mixed-effects linear regression models for commitment, with interaction terms between experiences with home-based working and perceived managerial trust/fairness

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Home-based working	0.034*	0.111**	0.075**	0.086*	0.063*
	(0.013)	(0.033)	(0.030)	(0.036)	(0.031)
Blurred boundaries through home-based working		−0.025*	−0.016	−0.014	−0.012
		(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.009)
Perceived managerial trust			0.051***		0.049***
			(0.002)		(0.003)
Perceived managerial fairness				0.070***	0.030***
				(0.005)	(0.006)
Controls					
Workplace characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Company characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Household characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Individual characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.329**	0.331**	−0.112	0.031	−0.170
	(0.098)	(0.098)	(0.090)	(0.096)	(0.090)
Random-effects parameter					
SD (constant)	0.053	0.054	0.036	0.045	0.035
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)
N	2460	2460	2460	2460	2460

Note: Multilevel mixed-effects linear regression models with robust standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable was affective commitment. The analyses are based on data from the second wave of the Linked Personnel Panel (LPP) 2014/15.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

RESULTS

Almost 20% of the employees in the sample worked from home (Table 1). Table 2 shows the correlations for the dependent and explanatory variables used in the study. Among home-based workers, the correlation between blurred boundaries experienced when working from home and affective commitment was negative and significant ($r = -0.10$, $p < 0.10$). The correlations between perceived managerial trust and fairness and the blurred-boundaries index were also negative and statistically significant (trust: $r = -0.14$, $p < 0.05$; fairness: $r = -0.21$, $p < 0.01$).

Home-based workers more often had leadership positions, earned higher incomes and more often received wages above the collectively agreed pay scale compared with workers who did not work from home (see Table A1 in the Online Appendix). This is in line with previous studies showing that home-based working is more often available to higher-status employees (Felstead et al., 2002; Lott & Abendroth, 2020).

Table 3 shows the regression results. Employees who worked from home had significantly higher affective commitment ($p < 0.01$, Model 2). The effect size is considerable (0.111). This

result provides evidence in support of Hypothesis 1. However, we predicted that the effect of home-based working on affective commitment would depend on whether users experienced blurred boundaries rather than an improved work–life balance (see Hypothesis 2). Home-based workers who experienced blurred boundaries were significantly less likely to report high affective commitment ($p < 0.05$, Model 2, Table 3). The effect size of experiencing blurred boundaries was modest (-0.025). Moreover, when controlling for boundary blurring, the effect of working from home on affective commitment increases from 0.034 (Model 1, Table 3) to 0.111 (Model 2, Table 3) and is more significant ($p < 0.05$ in Model 1 compared to $p < 0.01$ in Model 2). This finding confirms Hypothesis 2: Employees' use of home-based working was less likely to be related to affective commitment when it was accompanied by blurred boundaries between work and personal life.

We further expected that perceived managerial trust and fairness would mediate the associations between blurred boundaries experienced by home-based workers and affective commitment. The results show that perceived trust in the supervisor–employee exchange relationship was positively associated with affective commitment, and that the effect was highly significant ($p < 0.001$, Model 3, Table 3). Again, the effect size was modest (0.051). The negative effect of blurred boundaries on commitment became insignificant when the trust was integrated into the model. This provides evidence to support Hypothesis 3, which postulated that employees' experiences of blurred boundaries and nonimprovement of work–life balance when working from home would reduce affective commitment due to a perceived lack of trust in the employee–supervisor exchange relationship.

Perceived managerial fairness was also found to have a positive and highly significant effect ($p < 0.001$, Model 4, Table 3) on affective commitment. The effect size of fairness was 0.070, and the effect of blurred boundaries was no longer significant. The effect of blurred boundaries was insignificant when fairness was used as a mediator variable in the model. Including both variables in the model (Model 5, Table 3) did not change the results. The analysis supports Hypothesis 4, which postulated that employees' experiences of blurred boundaries and nonimprovement of work–life balance when working from home would lead to lower affective commitment due to a perceived lack of fairness in the exchange relationship between employee and supervisor.

DISCUSSION

Work organisations are increasingly under pressure to offer home-based working as an arrangement that can facilitate the integration of employees' work and personal lives. However, studies have provided mixed evidence as to whether a business case can be made for investing in home-based working on the grounds that workers will reciprocate with greater organisational commitment (for a review, see Kelliher & de Menezes, 2019). Some studies (Chen & Fulmer, 2018; Choi, 2018) have indicated that the availability of home-based working rather than its actual use benefits organisational commitment. The aim of our research was to investigate different experiences with home-based working reflecting different forms of its implementation and their different implications for affective commitment.

From our results, we conclude first that, overall, the use of home-based working is associated with greater affective commitment. This finding is in line with social exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964). It is also consistent with the concept of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995; Schaufeli, 2006), which suggests that employees will

increase their affective commitment in return for supportive resources provided by the work organisation.

Taking a closer look at these theoretical assumptions, we also conclude from our results that home-based working is less likely to lead to greater affective commitment when users experience blurred boundaries and no improvement in their work–home balance. This finding extends Felstead and Gschwind (2017), who also used representative data to analyse the relationship between home-based working and affective commitment, but did not consider the implementation of home-based working—that is, workers' experiences with this arrangement. Employees reciprocate home-based working with greater affective commitment only if they interpret this arrangement as a signal that the organisation cares about their well-being—that is, only if they do not experience blurred boundaries between their work and personal life when working from home, and only if their self-interest in having a good work–life balance is met. It appears that the experience of having difficulties drawing boundaries between the domains of work and personal life is not due only to working and living at the same location (Clark, 2000; Kossek et al., 2006). Rather, blurred boundaries also seem to be a result of exchange dynamics whereby employees respond to the option of working from home by increasing their work effort in terms of time and energy as a way of proving that they are productive in the home setting (Abendroth & Reimann, 2018; Chung, 2019; Lott & Chung, 2016). In this case, employees reciprocate home-based working with greater work effort, but at the expense of affective commitment.

Our findings further align with evidence of the mediating role of managerial support in the association between home-based working and affective commitment (Choi, 2018). We found that perceived trust and perceived fairness in the exchange relationship between employee and supervisor mediated the negative implications of home-based working for affective commitment—that is, blurred boundaries between work and private life and a nonimproved work–life balance. Blurred boundaries when working from home make a perceived lack of fairness more likely because they imply that the flexibility interests of the employer outweigh those of the employee. Moreover, blurred boundaries when working from home impair trust in the supervisor, which is a crucial resource in the exchange relationship between employees and supervisors. Indeed, previous research indicates that employers use home-based working to render workers more available within highly demanding work cultures and to satisfy high-performance work strategies, reflecting an exaggerated ideal worker norm (Abendroth & Reimann, 2018; Appelbaum et al., 2000; Cha & Weeden, 2014; Chung, 2019; Godard, 2001; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; White et al., 2003).

The limitations of the present study should be mentioned. First, we focused on employees' experiences with home-based working and did not directly measure why and how home-based working was actually implemented. The results on the importance of trust and fairness in the exchange relationship between supervisor and employee provide the first evidence that experiences are dependent on the implementation in organisations. Future research is needed to investigate different types of and reasons for the implementation of home-based working and their association with experiences with working from home and with commitment. To align employees' experiences with the implementation of home-based working and thus gain further insights into social exchange dynamics at the workplace, future research will be needed to obtain more detailed information in this regard.

Second, the present study focused only on the exchange relationship between employees and supervisors and did not consider relationships with other relevant parties such as co-workers. Quantitative and qualitative data are therefore needed that can reveal in more detail

the mechanisms of social exchange not only between employees and supervisors but also between employees and their co-workers, whose work may be affected by others' use of flexible working arrangements (Golden, 2007; Van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2019). Due to the rapid increase in home-based working during the COVID-19 pandemic, remote working teams may have become more aware of the intricacies of each others' flexible working arrangements and individual needs for flexibility. Future research is needed to reveal whether the pandemic has fostered mutual understanding and acceptance among team members, thereby supporting exchange dynamics and work-life balance outcomes with flexible working.

In addition, with the data at hand, we were not able to investigate whether the frequency of home-based working is of additional importance for commitment. However, measuring experiences rather than the frequency of working from home has the advantage that it is not confounded by boundary preferences, which, besides the work-family supportiveness of the organisation, are likely to be an additional predictor of the frequency of working from home. For example, some individuals may experience blurred boundaries only if they work from home frequently, whereas others may experience blurred boundaries even if they work from home only occasionally (Wessels et al., 2019). Moreover, as a high frequency of home-based working might indicate high demandingness rather than support, it is unclear what the frequency of home-based working actually means for workers' work-life balance and the blurring of boundaries.

The third limitation is that the present study could not apply longitudinal analyses due to data limitations, and thus could not account for time-constant unobserved heterogeneity and individuals' self-selection into jobs with home-based working. More extensive longitudinal data are therefore needed for future research to investigate changes in employees' flexible working arrangements and the effects of these changes on affective commitment and work-life balance. Moreover, fourth, personality traits could not be included in the analyses. They should be measured in future research to account for different segmentation/integration preferences (Ashforth et al., 2000) as well as the various types of 'heavy work investors' (Snir & Harpaz, 2012). Fifth, due to data limitations, gender differences in the exchange dynamics could not be taken into account in the present study. Not only do women and men often use flexible working arrangements for different purposes (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020), but women are also expected to use these arrangements more for work or family obligations (Leslie et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2013). Casper and Harris (2008) found that family-friendly workplace arrangements increased the commitment of male employees by allowing them to realise their self-interests. Further research is needed to explain why Casper and Harris's (2008) finding that the self-interest model was supported only for men and to identify social exchange dynamics between female and male workers and their supervisors and co-workers.

And finally, in the present study, as in other studies (Felstead et al., 2002; Lott & Abendroth, 2020), users of home-based working more often had higher status positions than nonusers. However, due to the increase in home-based working during the COVID-19 pandemic (Felstead, 2022), nonprofessional employees and employees without high-status positions have gained greater access to home-based working. Because lower-status employees may have less power resources in the exchange with supervisors, exchange dynamics might be different for them. Future research is therefore needed that takes the variation in exchange dynamics across different status groups into account.

These limitations notwithstanding, the present study contributes to our understanding of the social exchange dynamics of flexible working arrangements and affective commitment, thereby extending the theoretical concept of the 'gift exchange dynamic' (Chung, 2019, p. 25;

see also Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). This concept assumes that employees increase their work investments in terms of time and energy in return for the privilege of home-based working granted to them by their supervisors. However, the present study shows the importance of linking social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), signalling theory and border theory (Clark, 2000), and considering the interplay between positive and negative work-related outcomes. This is because the dynamics of exchange depend on whether home-based working is implemented in a supportive or a less supportive way, and thus on workers' experiences of working from home. This might be one explanation for the sometimes contradictory results of previous research indicating that the availability of home-based working is more beneficial for commitment than its actual use (Chen & Fulmer, 2018; Choi, 2018). Negative experiences and a lack of positive experiences decrease perceived trust and fairness in the supervisor–employee relationship, and thus reduce affective commitment. Employees who feel that they have to reciprocate the 'gift' of home-based working by working more intensively feel that they are not trusted to be productive at home or perceive the relationship with their supervisor to be unfair. This happens when flexible working arrangements are implemented to satisfy only the flexibility interests of the employer. This unbalanced exchange relation has two consequences: first, when employees adopt the flexible working arrangement, they experience blurred boundaries and no improvement in their work–life balance; second, employees who experience blurred boundaries associated with flexible working arrangements show lower affective commitment. Thus, employees who respond to home-based working by intensifying their work do not increase their affective commitment, because the supervisor–employee exchange dynamics are unbalanced (i.e., characterised by a perceived lack of trust and fairness). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees who worked from home—often without a suitable home office—and who had to care for children at the same time experienced blurred boundaries (Felstead, 2022). Especially women, who often did not have access to home-based working or who perceived cultural barriers to its use before the pandemic (Lott & Abendroth, 2020), gained access to home-based working during the pandemic (Abendroth et al., 2022) but continued to take on the lion share of childcare and housework with negative consequences for their work–life balance (Chung et al., 2021). This may have shaken their trust in their supervisors, especially if those supervisors failed to adjust their management practices to the rapid increase in home-based working—for example, by creating a supportive work environment for remote workers where supervisors share information with employees rather than controlling their work schedules (Lautsch et al., 2009).

Another theoretical implication of this study is that it highlights the crucial role of perceived fairness in social exchange relations at the workplace. Most studies to date (e.g., Choi, 2018; Kossek et al., 2006; Thompson et al., 1999) have shown that supervisory support shapes the outcomes of flexible working arrangements. Choi (2018) further emphasised the importance of trust for the successful implementation of flexible working arrangements. Perceived fairness seems to be another important resource for social exchange relationships in addition to perceived trust. In a fair social exchange relationship, employees provide their labour (performance) and receive in return compensation such as income, job security, opportunities for promotion and prestige (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007; Diewald, 2007; Rousseau, 1995; Siegrist & Theorell, 2006), which is in line with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). The present study suggests that a fair return also includes flexibility that will satisfy the self-interest of the employees. Such employee-oriented flexibility is part of the support that supervisors or employers should offer to employees and that—besides money and status—are crucial resources in social exchange relationships (Foa & Foa, 1980).

In addition to these theoretical implications, we can also derive policy implications from our results. First, to establish the business case for flexible work arrangements on the grounds that they are of benefit to employers in terms of employees' affective commitment (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011; Den Dulk et al., 2012), their implementation must take into consideration employees' interests. They must avoid blurring the boundaries between employees' work and personal lives and must foster their work–life balance. Second, trusting and fair relationships between supervisors and employees must be developed, for example, by training supervisors in handling employees' requests for flexibility and the challenges they face in balancing work and personal life. This is of special importance in light of the prevalence of home-based working during the COVID-19 pandemic and the greater variety of home-based workers, which will probably persist in many companies after the pandemic in the form of hybrid working arrangements, where employees and teams work partly at the workplace and partly from other locations (Felstead, 2022). Human resource management practices have to be adapted accordingly to manage the wide range of workers in terms of tasks, skills and job requirements remotely and to create a supportive work environment. A supportive work environment is essential given the larger number of employees—and especially women with caregiving responsibilities (Abendroth et al., 2022)—who have gained access to home-based working and have to balance their jobs with caregiving and housework. This is also essential to avoid high turnover rates because employees who experience blurred boundaries are more likely to quit their jobs (Blomme et al., 2010; Haar, 2004). And third, in addition to income, job security, opportunities for promotion and prestige, employees' interests include flexible working arrangements as an integral part of fairness in employee–supervisor exchange relations. In light of workers' increasing demands for work–life balance in many countries (Delina & Prabhakara Raya, 2013; Kinman & Jones, 2008), employers can expect that employee-oriented flexibility will play an even more important role in the future. To enhance employees' work–life balance and companies' competitiveness, employers and supervisors must adapt to this growing need and demand for flexible working arrangements.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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