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## Article

# The resources to balance – Exploring remote employees' work-life balance through the lens of conservation of resources

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## MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The resources to balance – Exploring remote employees' work-life balance through the lens of conservation of resources

Heini Pensar<sup>1\*</sup> and Rebekah Rousi<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to investigate how employees' work-life balance (WLB) can be supported by various resources, and what mechanisms steer the use of these resources to achieve WLB. The research is based on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and a multidimensional balance construct by Casper et al. (2018). Through thematic analysis of 89 semi-structured interviews with remote workers, the study identified three key resources that support employees' ability to maintain WLB: flexible work arrangements, autonomous work, and time saving. More importantly, the results revealed that employees' use of these resources is steered by their self-efficacy, as well as experiences of trust from their supervisors. The study contributes to work-family research by providing a comprehensive understanding of the balance construct and how it can be supported in the remote working context. The findings emphasize the importance of promoting employees' agency in building WLB with enhancement of individuals' self-efficacy. It is suggested that employers should ensure that supervisors facilitate rather than hinder this process. Therefore, it is important to establish common principles for work-life support to avoid discrepancies in support based on individual supervisors' judgments and personal preferences.

**Subjects:** Work and Leisure; Organisational Behaviour; Management & Organization



Heini Pensar

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Heini Pensar is a university teacher and Ph.D candidate in Human Resource Management at the University of Vaasa, School of Management. Her research relates to work well-being, work-life balance and recovery from work, and more specifically how those are constructed in remote and hybrid working models. Pensar has a wide practical experience in leadership of remote organizations. Rebekah Rousi is an Associate Professor of Communication and Digital Economy at the University of Vaasa, Finland. Rousi is a human-centered specialist who focuses on examining the relationship between human experience and technology design. Rousi's research interests include embodied experience in human-robot interaction, human-AI interaction, posthumanism, trust, and ethics in data-driven systems.

## PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This study explores the importance of resources, such as flexible work arrangements, autonomous work, and time-saving in supporting employees' work-life balance, particularly in remote working contexts. The findings highlight the significance of individuals' self-efficacy and their supervisors' trust in steering the use of these resources. The study offers valuable insights for employers to promote work-life balance by enhancing employees' self-efficacy and ensuring supervisors facilitate rather than hinder this process.

**Keywords:** remote worker; Work-Life Balance (WLB); employee self-efficacy; Conservation of Resources (COR); well-being

## 1. Introduction

For many, work-life balance (WLB) poses a challenge throughout their career (Babin Dhas & Karthikeyan, 2015; Chittenden & Ritchie, 2011). There are numerous reasons for this. Reasons include excessive workload, responsibility, demand (physical, cognitive, emotional), and/or even passion for progress (Brough et al., 2020; Fleetwood, 2007; Sørensen, 2017). Many also face constant negotiation of expectations, both personal and interpersonal, during various stages of their working life (Karkoulia et al., 2016). This is coupled with the need to match resources to expectations, in order to fulfill them, which demands time and prioritization. The dynamics of work-life balance morph according to changes in conditions, expectations and the resources required to address these altering factors (Kalliath & Brough, 2008).

Work-life balance (WLB) is a state of well-being in which individuals evaluate their own ability to combine or alternate work and home roles in alignment with the values that they attribute to those roles (Casper et al., 2018). For instance, if individuals value the role of parenting and spending time with their children, i.e., through hobbies, leisure and assisting them with their homework, and managing to achieve this without work-related interruption, this may be considered a product of balance. Equally, the ability to concentrate on work-related tasks without the necessity to engage in housework activities or childcare is another product of WLB. From a combined perspective, the will and ability to engage in both work-related and household tasks in a seamless way with the intent of freeing extra time around working hours (i.e., doing the washing or cooking during meetings) can also be viewed as a positive by-product of remote work. Thus, more resources are enabled for purely nonwork-related activities (workplace or domestic).

In recent years, WLB as a measure of well-being, has attracted increasing attention among employers. It is generally known that high WLB supports employees' work engagement (Wood et al., 2020), performance and commitment to work (Raza et al., 2018; Vaziri et al., 2020), while experienced conflicts between work and family roles have been associated with a higher number of absences (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011) and various negative health outcomes (Gisler et al., 2018). Past research has shown the effectiveness of employer-initiated benefits and work-life practices (Beauregard & Henry, 2009; Casper et al., 2007; Chung & van der Lippe, 2020). Among them, flexible working arrangements (FWA), such as flexitime and remote working, have been seen as a key way to support the reconciliation of work and nonwork demands encountered in everyday life. However, until very recently the convenience of remote work has remained underutilized (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018).

Undeniably, the COVID-19 pandemic served to change discourse from that of remote work being a "privilege", to remote work being a "necessary", or at least recommended form of work to reduce the spread of the virus (Eurofound, 2022). The many benefits of remote working were unlocked to a much larger population of professionals than before. This in turn, triggered an expectation for such flexibility to continue even after the pandemic conditions subsided (ILO, 2022; Teevan et al., 2022). In response, organizations have established new hybrid working methods, which entail a combination of remote and onsite work (Vyas, 2022). However, there is an increasing worry among employers that prolonged remote working may bring about negative effects on employees' well-being (Charalampous et al., 2022).

Although remote working positively affects people's WLB, e.g., increasing many working parents' life quality (Sullivan, 2012), recent research has also revealed hazards in prolonged periods of remote work. Not only does the work intrude into one's home life, turning homes into daytime offices, but people seem to experience increased work burden, loneliness and lack of access to sufficient support (Como et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). In the long-run, these combined factors

may deteriorate the individual's ability to maintain WLB. At the same time, recent trends seem to favor work models that include remote working (George et al., 2022; Vyas, 2022). These contradictory discoveries encourage a more thorough investigation of the factors impacting remote workers' WLB, especially when full remote work mode is in question. A key question behind the present study pertains to why remote work is experienced positively by some and not for others.

The answer may be found by looking at the underlying mechanisms contributing to these experiences. Namely, WLB relies on resources, such as time and energy, which individuals utilize to be able to perform their everyday roles (Tejero et al., 2021). Work-family research in WLB (Rashmi & Kataria, 2021) also commonly refers to the Conservation of Resources (COR) which argues that people strive to preserve and protect their resources in order to apply them to activities of importance or priority (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Literature to date has examined the associations of various work-life programs (as a resource offered by employers) with employees' WLB, and positive influences have been observed (see, e.g. Putri & Amran, 2021). Also, it is known that high workload and number of worked hours negatively impact WLB, while job autonomy, work flexibility and support at work predict higher WLB (George et al., 2022; McCreath et al., 2011; Skinner & Pocock, 2008).

Most research has focused on studying the level of conflict between responsibilities and roles, and individual's ability to reconcile work and home duties (Adisa et al., 2021; Casper et al., 2018; Rashmi & Kataria, 2021). This is furthered by research focusing on how the conflict of work and home duties can be reduced (Allen et al., 2015). In their recent work, Casper et al. (2018) propose that an individual's WLB builds on affective and cognitive experiences, that involve a satisfaction measure (affective), time resource (involvement) and performance measure (effectiveness), which together form global balance, i.e., experienced harmony between work and nonwork roles. Research to date has mostly focused on measuring the effect of time and various performance-related demands on WLB. Yet, there seems to be less focus on the affective experiences and their role in WLB. Although, there are indications that affective balance could be the most consequent predictor for positive outcomes of WLB, such as health and organization commitment (Wayne et al., 2021).

Overall, the WLB construct is suggested to be a complex system of resources and interrelations. There is still much to be unraveled about its mechanisms. Further exploration of the antecedents of WLB and their interrelations, especially in flexible working conditions, is needed (Haar et al., 2019; Rashmi & Kataria, 2021; Sirgy & Lee, 2018). Moreover, researchers have suggested that individuals' ability, along WLB policies and practices plays a role in achievement of WLB, but further investigation of this ability is more important than actual work-life practices (Thilagavathy & Geetha, 2022).

To attain a deeper understanding of the complexity behind WLB, and especially the emotional experiences tied to it, the current study explores the work-life experiences of employees, who were suddenly forced to work from home. These employees lost access to vital resources needed for their everyday work. In particular, the study focuses on exploring remote working in its mandatory context, since people who do not work remotely by choice, may lack sufficient resources to maintain a positive WLB (Wang et al., 2021).

The present study contributes to work-family literature by being the first to use the framework of Casper et al. (2018) to qualitatively explore WLB and extend this framework into the remote work context. Using the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory as a basis, the study aims to understand how employees' affective and cognitive balance is supported or hindered in light of the availability or lack of resources. This research provides valuable insights into the mechanisms that support individuals' WLB. The paper addresses two research questions: 1) What factors influence employees' perceptions of their work-life balance in remote working?; and 2) How can employees' work-life balance be supported via resources?

In the following chapter, the concept of WLB will be presented, and the principles of the COR theory relevant to the current study will be discussed. This will be followed by a discussion of the existing knowledge on factors that influence employees' WLB in the remote context.

## 2. The concept of Work-Life Balance (WLB)

WLB (even called work-nonwork or work-family balance) means employees' subjective perception of how successfully work and nonwork roles are managed in accordance with their life values and priorities (Casper et al., 2018; Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Haar, 2013; Wayne et al., 2021). The concept originally evolved from role theories, and the idea of work and family inter-role conflicts (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77), which later came to include the idea of positive synergies and enrichment between roles in the various domains (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). A role conflict on its own is defined as, the "simultaneous occurrence of two (or more) sets of pressures such that compliance with one would make more difficult compliance with the other" (Kahn et al., 1964, p. 19). An inter-role conflict describes how pressures from one organizational membership (work, family or otherwise) conflict with a membership of another. This can be understood in cases where time spent with family shortens or impedes time spent at work and vice versa (Kopelman et al., 1983).

The idea of a balance was drawn from role balance theories and first defined as work-family balance (Greenhaus et al., 2003), which evaluated the compatibility of home and family roles to an individual's life priorities. Understood from the perspective of person-environment fit (Voydanoff, 2005), work-family balance can be considered an assessment of the compatibility of an individual's home and family resources to the demands of different roles. Considering that a great portion of peoples' lives outside work revolves around family and family-related issues, the concept has been further broadened to apply the family component to everything outside work (Brough et al., 2014; Haar et al., 2014). A recent meta-analysis by Casper et al. (2018) introduced a new perspective on WLB. This perspective includes a concept known as global balance, which refers to the experience of harmony between work and non-work roles. Global balance also includes a multi-dimensional view, consisting of two cognitive experiences: people's evaluation of their effectiveness and involvement; and their affective experiences in the roles they value. Casper et al. (2018) define WLB as:

Employees' evaluation of the favorability of their combination of work and nonwork roles, arising from the degree to which their affective experiences and their perceived involvement and effectiveness in work and nonwork roles are commensurate with the value they attach to these roles.

Wayne et al. (2021) later developed measures for the three dimensions of the balance construct, and validated their items. Based on this validation, the dimensions can be described as follows. The *effectiveness balance* alludes to perceived performance and success in the valued roles. For example, this may be the level of quality that an individual feels they are performing at, or how effectively they have been able to combine their most important work and nonwork roles. *Involvement balance* indicates the level of devotion to the roles that people consider to be the most important. This refers to, for example, the extent to which individuals feel they can allocate time and attention to roles that they value. *Affective balance* refers to the emotions connected to roles that are most important to people, for example, how happy, contented, and satisfied they are in these roles.

By adopting the framework of Casper et al. (2018), this study investigates remote workers' subjective work-life experiences, considering both cognitive (e.g. time allocation in roles, role performance) and affective aspects (e.g. contentment in roles). This approach allows for an understanding of the resources that enhance specific experiences. It is assumed that different resources will have varying effects on different dimensions of WLB. In addition, Casper et al. (2018) balance construct recognizes individuals' priorities as the basis for balance, thus considering their life priorities as well.



### 3. Work-life balance and Conservation of Resources (COR) model

The COR model (Hobfoll, 1989) is commonly used to explain work and family life dynamics (Casper et al., 2018; Rashmi & Kataria, 2021). COR has also been used in more recent studies that have studied the wellbeing of remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic context (Chong et al., 2020; Fukumura et al., 2021). The concept of resource can be defined as a supply, means or support to enable actions in knowledge and enhance the quality of human life (MerriamWebster, 2023). In other words, resources are enablers that maintain the equilibrium of process flow and quality (standard or degree of satisfaction) within the course of daily life and operations. Thus, COR provides an adequate basis for understanding the types of resources individuals utilize, for example in their work and family lives (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012).

According to the COR model (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018) resources can take many forms, including personal resources such as skills and traits, objects such as houses and tools for work, conditions like employment and marriage, energy resources like money and time, as well as social resources (Hobfoll et al., 1990; Wayne et al., 2007) such as loyalty and intimacy. As the theory suggests, resources are typically interconnected and rarely exist in isolation. This is why the theory refers to these clusters of resources as “*resource caravans*”. Within these caravans, resources are often interconnected. Gaining one resource can lead to the acquisition of other resources, while losing one resource can lead to the loss of others. This concept is known in the theory as “*gain and loss spirals*”. Resource caravans are also influenced by their external circumstances, which in turn, impact individuals’ ability to acquire and maintain resources. These circumstances, referred to as “*caravan passageways*”, are maintained by other people, and in a work-life context they could be shaped by work culture or family circumstances. At their best, the passageways contribute to the individual’s conservation of resources. However, passageways may also be harmful, and may serve as a source of resource loss.

When examining resources, it is important to understand these structures. In particular, in stressful situations, such as changes or unforeseen events, available resources become important. This is because they help people adapt to new circumstances by creating space, support, flexibility, and safety (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Wayne et al., 2007). According to the COR-principles, individuals with sufficient personal resources and work-life support are more likely to achieve positive work and life outcomes (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Hobfoll et al. (1990) also posit that an individual’s social resources, such as the work-life support, and personal resources are intertwined, and that both of these resources are influenced by the environment in which the individual operates.

In the current study, the COR-model is not only utilized as a basis for identifying resources that enhance WLB, but more importantly, for understanding those pathways that lead to these resources. Therefore, this study seeks to explain the circumstances that strengthen or weaken access and utilization of the resources that remote workers need for maintenance of WLB.

### 4. Work-life balance and remote working

Much of the work-family literature has focused on examining the impact of various work-life policies, including flexible work arrangements such as remote working, flexitime, and reduced work hours, on WLB or work-family balance (Kalliath & Brough, 2008; Singh et al., 2022; Sirgy & Lee, 2018). Remote working, in turn, has been considered a resource that can improve employees’ ability to reconcile their work and nonwork duties, and thus WLB (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018; Maruyama & Tietze, 2012; Maruyama et al., 2009). In addition, remote working has been seen as beneficial because it increases job autonomy (Nakrošienė et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2021), creating time savings from reduced work commuting (Bai et al., 2021). However, with the increase in the amount of research on remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a growing understanding of WLB in the context of extensive and prolonged remote work. Recent studies indicate that employees may experience negative consequences and potential decline in their WLB when engaged in excessive remote work (Galanti et al., 2021).

Findings from recently published research have reinforced some of these indications of the disadvantageous consequences of remote working (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). Some reasons why remote working may jeopardize one's WLB can be inferred based on earlier findings related to changes in resources that influence the construct of WLB. One obvious observation is the loss of office-based support (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). Proficiency in technology and its usage are essential for remote workers. Those who lack these skills may experience isolation (Prasad et al., 2020), which can further reduce their access to peer support. During the pandemic, organizational workers were observed to lose access to co-worker support, exacerbating the issue (Kniffin et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). In addition to support, remote workers may also miss out on enjoyable moments with colleagues, which can further contribute to negative experiences (Prasad et al., 2023).

Resource constraints are not limited to work, but can also accumulate in the home sphere. Remote workers who are present in the home may face greater expectations from household members to engage in household chores and childcare (Allen et al., 2015). This was specifically the case in the COVID-19 context, when many families experienced reduced external childcare support as schools and daycare centers were occasionally closed down. Thus, families reported an increased burden (Lonska et al., 2021). Such resource losses can force individuals to prioritize differently between the two life spheres, impacting WLB (Cho et al., 2022; Syrek et al., 2022).

Recently published literature in the context of intensive remote working, equally demonstrates the important benefits of this mode of working. A large study of European remote workers ( $n = 5748$ ) by Ipsen et al. (2021) observed significant improvements in WLB, control over work, and perceived efficiency. However, the study did not reveal the specific mechanisms that had led to such improvements. Fukumura et al. (2021), in turn, conducted two open-ended surveys ( $N = 648$ ,  $N = 366$ ), showing that remote workers gain resources from increasing flexibility in scheduling work and from the time saved through reduced commuting. These factors seemed to contribute to productivity, work satisfaction, and WLB. Similarly, it was demonstrated that remote workers experienced challenges within their intersections of work and home life. Due to blurred boundaries and difficulties in switching off from work, participants reported having spent increasing amounts of time on work-related tasks. In contrast, in a multiwave study Allen et al. (2021) showed that home-working employees ( $N = 155$ ) achieve a better WLB through a sufficient segmentation of work and home domains, including a dedicated office space within the home. In a mixed-method study, Wang et al. (2021) further indicated that with the help of social support, job autonomy, and self-discipline, employees are more likely to achieve both a sense of effectiveness in remote working, and better WLB. Another study by Cho et al. (2022), involved a sample of voluntary caregivers of elderly adults, who volunteered outside of paid working hours during the COVID-19 emergency—a context slightly different to the current study. However, they introduce a concept of work-family balance self-efficacy (i.e. the belief in our skills to balance work and nonwork roles). In their study, Cho et al. demonstrated volunteer work's positive connection with WLB. These findings emphasized the individual's own ability to allocate time in their chosen way and its contribution to achieving desired balance. Furthermore, Chu et al. (2021) found that working from home increases time spent with family, which thus enhances the bonds experienced between parents and children. Moreover, there is research published during the time of the pandemic, showing that during this period more attention was placed on family support due to pressures induced by the state of emergency. This was compounded by increased attention placed on mental health matters (Al Dhaheer et al., 2021).

Acknowledging the complexity of employees' work-life experiences, the current study aims to explore the structure of resource caravans that contribute to WLB among remote workers. Here, the authors identify the mechanisms that are significant in the formation of WLB in the specific context of forced remote work, in which employees are recommended to work from home, rather than using remote work as a way to enhance their own life quality (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018). Once again, this approach emphasizes the heterogeneity and inequality of employees who are obliged to work from home, rather than choose to work from home.



## 5. Antecedents of work-life balance

While work-life research has focused on understanding the effect of various work-life policies and work arrangements on WLB (Rashmi & Kataria, 2021), there is still limited knowledge about the resources and their interrelations that support people's perceptions of WLB (Haar & Brougham, 2020; Haar et al., 2019). When looking at the hindrances of WLB, it is currently known that WLB is negatively influenced by job and family stressors, quantitative workload, long working hours, work overload, and role ambiguity (Karani et al., 2022; Mäkelä et al., 2023). An increase in demand on one life domain may be patched with resources from the other domain, causing a sense of imbalance (Khateeb, 2021). For instance, Haar and Brougham (2020) used the COR model to examine the resource losses caused by work demands. Their study found that higher work demands, specifically in terms of working hours, resulted in a loss of energy, which had a negative effect on WLB.

The available literature has found several job resources to have positive effect on WLB, such as job flexibility in terms of timing and work location (Hill et al., 2001; Irawanto et al., 2021). In addition, some studies have found job autonomy to predict WLB (Haar & Brougham, 2020; Haar et al., 2019), there is also evidence that autonomous work may not predict WLB in the remote work context, and in fact, remote working can reduce autonomy (Mäkelä et al., 2023). Similarly, social support from co-workers (Ferguson et al., 2012; Uddin et al., 2021) improves the facilitation of WLB. Supervisor support regarding employee family demands has also been positively related to WLB (Allen, 2012; Brough & O'Driscoll, 2005). When supervisors care about employees' family needs, employees can better manage their work-home interface (Rondi et al., 2022), and the supervisor may also encourage (or discourage) the usage of various work-life practices (Fiksenbaum, 2014). In the home domain, it is the various family resources, such as family support (Russo et al., 2016) and spouse support (Ferguson et al., 2012), that enhance WLB (Haar et al., 2019; Russo et al., 2016; Wan et al., 2022).

Research has also highlighted the importance of personal resources in the development of WLB. Proactive personality (Aryee et al., 2005), psychological capital, such as work-family self-efficacy (Chan et al., 2016; Siu, 2013), and the individual's ability to establish sufficient role boundaries (Allen & Armstrong, 2006; Kossek & Lautsch, 2012; Matthews et al., 2010) have been identified as factors that can help sustain WLB. Self-efficacy, which as a personal resource, refers to one's beliefs in their ability to achieve specific goals or outcomes (Bandura, 1977), has been found to moderate the positive impact of autonomy on WLB (Badri & Panatik, 2020). It is further suggested that the relationship between WLB and its antecedents is not straight forward. Rather, there are complex mechanisms at play and the resources that influence WLB are likely to be interconnected (Haar & Brougham, 2020; Haar et al., 2019).

Despite findings of previous studies, only limited research has examined the antecedents of WLB and their interrelations (Fan et al., 2021; Haar & Brougham, 2020; Wan et al., 2022). As a result, there is a lack of knowledge regarding how people shape their decisions on utilization of available support (Fan et al., 2021). The current study utilizes a qualitative approach to study employee experiences of resource availability and usage during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this approach was to identify the possible connections between different resources, enabling deeper insight into antecedents and how they operate and exist according to context and other related factors. From the perspective of COR-model, the current study not only investigates the structure of the resource caravan, i.e., what resources are required for achieving work-life balance in remote work, but also examines the links between these resources and the social environment, or the passageway, that catalyzes their use. The rationale of this approach in light of a relatively large qualitative sample size is to generate a scientific contribution that builds on earlier work via prevailing societal conditions. Through observing patterns within the qualitative sample, there are more certainties for developing an advanced COR-related model that can be validated in future studies.

## 6. Methodology

A qualitative research design was deployed to conceptualize the subjective experiences of remote workers (Silverman, 2013). As we base our work on the previously described theoretical framework of WLB and COR-theory, we take a deductive approach (pp. 226) to interpret the collected data. A thematic analysis was carried out in six stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which are described below. Empirical reporting begins with a description of the study's participants.

### 6.1. Participants

A total of 89 remote working employees participated in the interviews conducted with six Finnish employers. These employers belonged to large-sized corporations, including the Telecommunications, Industrial Technology, Information Technology, Insurance, and Services sectors, with over 1000 employees. Participants were recruited using random purposive sampling (Etikan, 2016). Only employees who worked remotely were invited to participate in the interviews. The large sample was gathered to ensure that there was a sufficient number of remote workers from different professions, industries, and life situations. Companies designated a single point of contact who internally communicated the opportunity to participate in the interviews. Team leaders provided a list of team members, and invitations to participate in the interviews were sent randomly until at least three people from each team had agreed to participate. The participants typically worked in sales and marketing, product development, service delivery and customer support, as well as internal service organizations.

The national recommendation for remote working took place in March 2020, and thus, mandatory remote working had been undertaken for some months by the time of the interviews. All of the participants were primarily working from home. The average age of the participants was 41.64 (range 23–60). Over half of the participants (62.9%) were women, and nearly half (48.9%) had children under 18 years of age living in the same household. Approximately one-third of them (34.8%) represented supervisors in this study. The majority (73.0%) had some previous experience of remote working, but only a small portion (5.6%) were principally working remotely before the pandemic. Nearly one-fifth of the participants (18.0%) had not worked remotely before the pandemic. A summary of the participants' demographics is provided in Table 1, and the detailed data is provided in appendix 1.

### 6.2. Data collection

A team of six researchers conducted 89 one-to-one interviews via audio or video conferencing, from October to December 2020. The duration of the interviews varied between 40 and 90 minutes. All interviews were semi-structured based on pre-formulated interview guides (Kallio et al., 2016). This helped the interviewers to consistently ask the same questions in the same manner, while providing room for spontaneous dialogue adjusted to the situation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The interview questions were formed based on Casper et al. (2018) dimensions of the WLB construct. Following this framework, the questions were designed to take into account the individual's life priorities and create an understanding of what is important to the respective interviewees. As the guide was prepared, each of its questions was reviewed and validated by the research team and selected in the interview guide according to its purpose and contribution (Galletta et al., 2019). The formation of the questions aimed towards openness. The questions were designed to prompt the respondents to describe or list things, to encourage interactiveness. For instance, instead of directly asking about performance, dedication, and satisfaction in their important roles (as per Caspers' dimensions), the interviewees were asked to describe their experiences of WLB and how they maintained it in the context of remote work. The interview guide was tested in advance through three pilot interviews (Kallio et al., 2016). As a result, some questions and their order were adjusted. It was noticed that by asking participants to describe their work and working environment in general within a typical remote workday, richer data was produced.

At the beginning of the interview, the participants were asked to tell their age, role, and living situation. The interviews were initiated with generic questions about the employee's remote

**Table 1. Demographics according to gender, age, family situation & remote work experience**

	All	Men	Women
Number of participants	89	33	56
Lowest age	23	25	23
Highest age	60	60	60
Mean age	41,89	42,75	41,34
Live with minor children	44	18	26
Live alone	18	3	15
Represents supervisor in the interview	31	9	22
Previously working primarily remotely	5	3	2
Previously working partly/occasionally remotely	65	21	44
No previous experience in working remotely	16	8	8

working environment and equipment. Thereafter, participants were asked to describe what life domains they most valued, and what a good balance between the work and home domains meant to them. They were then requested to evaluate how satisfied they were with their own WLB, and to describe what aspects had supported and hindered their balance in remote working in particular. Participants were also asked an aspirational question regarding the kinds of additional support they would have needed in order to maintain balance while working from home.

The interviews were recorded with the participant's consent and pseudonymized when transcribed verbatim. The data was stored on an encrypted shared drive only accessible to three members of the research team.

### 6.3. Data analysis

The thematic data analysis was carried out in six stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, familiarization took place. To build a generic understanding of remote workers' work-life experiences, the main author together with a research assistant studied 25 of the transcribed narratives. The findings were then compared. As a result, initial research findings were documented in the form of a report. Second, coding was carried out. As the early findings were discussed, initial code labels emerged, and coding instructions were constructed. All 89 transcripts were reviewed equally and coded in NVivo by the first author. Third, the themes were searched. The codes were assembled within predetermined categories, drawn from the WLB definition by Casper et al. (2018) and for resources according to COR. Fourth, the themes were reviewed. The coded data in each of the themes was iteratively reviewed by the authors. The second author independently coded three interviews, and the findings of the two authors were compared. The coded data was tested by a logic of exclusion from other themes and categories, and to eliminate any double-entries of data in several themes. A final review was conducted to confirm that no additional themes were found. Fifth, defining and naming the themes took place. Once the codes in each category were reviewed, the naming of themes could be finalized. In the final phase of the analysis, a report was assembled. The authors discussed the results and considered how those corresponded with the literature (Burnard, 1991; Morse & Richards, 2002). The findings were assembled in a report, which is presented in the next chapter.

## 7. Findings

The current study investigated the factors contributing to remote workers' WLB and how the balance may be supported with access to and protection of resources. With the help of the WLB construct by Casper et al. (2018) we analyzed the remote worker's balance experiences in

affective, effective, and involvement perspectives. Additionally, basing the work on the COR-principles, we identified the key resources that contribute to the remote worker's balance experience, and the resources that steer utilization of the key resources, which may trigger spirals of losses or gains of resources.

### **7.1. Remote worker's work-life balance**

The extensive remote working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way employees view and value their WLB. Most participants felt that the possibility of working remotely had increased their own influence over WLB. Yet, working from home also challenged their ability to maintain WLB because of the constant spill-over of work into the home domain. Unlike previously, many employees found themselves working late hours, even at weekends, and skipping necessary breaks during the daytime. Although theoretically there was a possibility to take longer breaks during the day, some participants did not utilize it. On the other hand, there were participants for whom remote working had only caused positive consequences on their well-being and WLB. These participants had benefited from the remote working arrangements compared to earlier onsite work modes.

#### **7.1.1. Experiences of involvement and effectiveness in important roles**

The perceptions of involvement in the work domain divided the participants. Some expressed negative experiences from losing control over the working hours due to the constant technological presence at home. This resulted in spending an increased amount of time and effort on work, at the cost of nonwork time. This was exacerbated by an emerging work culture characterized by excessive amounts of meetings and exhaustive working styles. It was also accompanied by a reduction in spontaneous social interactions between co-workers, which led to a sense of imbalance in being sufficiently involved at work on a social level. On the other hand, some participants felt that remote working allowed them to regulate their involvement in work because they could decide when to respond to digital correspondence, and when not to be interrupted. This led to a positive experience of effectiveness at work, as uninterrupted remote workers could use their working time more efficiently and increase their productivity. For some, this freed up time and space for involvement in the nonwork domain, while others took on more work.

In the nonwork domain, remote working has contributed to highly positive experiences of involvement. Working from home meant increasing involvement and success in the nonwork related roles: *"I can follow my sons' teenage life, and I can have control over things when I am at home"* (Erin, 47, Group Manager, 30.10.2020 9:00 EET), and *"...I am a much more present mother now..."* (Tina, 41, Service Manager, 10.11.2020 13:00 EET). Thus, working from home offered parents the possibility to dedicate more time to children, and even non-parents to spend more time with their close ones. For instance, a father describes that *"...when there is not a meeting going on, I can at times briefly discuss with my spouse or pamper my kids ... I really enjoy being with my spouse and children"* (Tom, 31, Development Manager, 11.11.2020 15:00 EET). Remote work has enabled ways of spending time with family, which have previously been impossible or unheard of for many of the participants: *"I have now twice spent a week in my 86-year old mother's company, and could work from there...She knows there is someone present with her"* (Ellen, 36, Service Specialist, 6.11.2020 9:00 EET).

Although working from home did not necessarily mean shorter working days. For some it meant spending the time saved from commuting on being present at home. This increased proximity to family members. This context is at least partly specific to COVID-19 as some families were forced to increase their involvement in family activities, such as school help and cooking, while schools and daycare centers were closed. There seemed however, to be an attitude of *"just pulling through"* due to the temporary nature of the situation. However, the situation had an interesting effect. Some participants described that the pandemic had forced them to rethink their own values. Being forced to spend increasing amounts of time with family while being prevented from work travel, and having to reduce normal work pace had made some participants value nonwork time more than before. Their life

priorities had changed. Thus, the perceptions of involvement in the nonwork domain had improved in two ways. On the one hand, remote working released resources that helped participants control their time and dedicate it towards activities they valued. On the other hand, a higher level of dedication to the nonwork domain also potentially triggered a higher valuation of this domain. Thus, the nonwork domain increased in perceived value alongside extra investment of time by the participants. In this instance, a participant describes a personal re-evaluation which may have not taken place without the extraordinary circumstances: *“First with the Corona, I noticed how tired I was, it stopped me and got me to think more of the values”* (Demi, 58, Service Director, 30.10.2020 13:00 EET). Another participant describes the result of such re-evaluation: *“My work plays a smaller role—in a good way—compared to my other life, it used to be the other way around”* (Mary, 43, Service Specialist, 28.10.2020 09:00 EET). This kind of re-evaluation has led to re-allocation of time:

Somehow, because of the Corona-time, and this remote working, I have understood, and remembered, to invest in the free time, friends, family and my private time ... you realize that the busy everyday life is really stressful. (Amy, 30, Service Specialist, 13.10.2020 10:00 EET)

Apart from the involvement experiences, the participants also expressed an enhanced sense of effectiveness. They described multitasking during the workday, doing household chores in breaks or while attending an audio meeting, meant that tasks did not pile up for the evening: *“Straight away when I finish work, I can drive kids, I can prepare the evening meal at lunchtime and it’s ready to eat after work. Things run smoother”* (Hannah, 45, Group Manager, 23.10.2020 15:00 EET). Although stopping work at the end of the day proved a challenge for many, the participants seemed to accept it in exchange for spending the work breaks on nonwork chores, and thus, perceived their work and life were in balance.

#### 7.1.2. Affective experiences in important roles

On the affective note, the participants consistently described that a sense of balance for them meant a positive feeling or mood at the start of the workday. This entailed that they did not feel bad about returning to work on Mondays. It also meant that they could complete a work day with an energized feeling and good conscience. As one participant describes, they have achieved a balance when *“... I don’t feel that I have to use all of my resources within the eight hours that I work, but I feel glad and have energy even for life outside of work”* (Vera, 48, Service Manager, 9.11.2020 11:00 EET).

In turn, a sense of imbalance meant that work-related issues would keep bothering one’s mind during nonworking hours. It even imposed on sleep. The idea of a beneficial balance seemed to be connected to the absence of guilt and emotional burden. The participants could feel guilty about being away from their work stations, and having colleagues or the manager wonder if they were working at all. They also worried that co-workers believed that they were taking care of home duties during traditional working hours. Emotional burden would keep spilling over to the home domain if conflicts and stress were not sufficiently solved at work. Some participants admitted that unlike before, in remote working without the support of colleagues around, they would be ruminating about work to their spouses.

Positive affect linked to work was generated through a sense of security, and not having to worry if a nonwork issue (usually family issue) would interrupt their day, meaning a temporary break from work. Some participants explained that having a support network at work meant that they would be defended if such a situation would happen. *“We are like one big family, if I drop the ball I can trust my colleagues will pick it up.”* (Anette, 36, Service Specialist, 10.10.2020 10:00 EET). Again, the employee could shift their attention to nonwork issues without additional stress and guilt. The positive affect connected to WLB seemed to depend on the employee’s ability to decide how they wanted to deliver their own work. For some of the participants, remote working had not

been a possibility before the pandemic. This was due to corporate principles, and lack of trust for instance, from leadership.

The participants also discussed the effect of sleep, rest and recovery from work on their sense of balance. The balance experience was often described as being sufficiently recovered from work. There were notions that work had not consumed all their resources, leaving more for the spare time activities.

For me, a good work-life balance means I can recover well after a busy day and enjoy activities that help me relax. Next morning, I feel it's pleasant to start the workday, I have energy and feel rested. That's when I feel I've succeeded in leading myself in both spheres of life. (Laura, 53 years, Group Manager, 27.10.2020 15:00 EET)

Small things enhancing this recovery (e.g., sitting by the window, or more time for sleep) were also reported to have enhanced the overall positive affect in both life domains, including the overall well-being of employees: *"I've noticed that [remote working] has reduced my pulse and taken away my stress reactions. I feel much healthier."* (Britney, 49, Service Specialist, 18.11.2020 13:00 EET).

These positive affective experiences connected to remote working were enforced by feedback from family members who showed satisfaction with the participants' increased presence and involvement at home: *"Being at home more often can be really beneficial. My wife, who works in a shop and has several weekdays off, likes it when I'm home, even if I'm working"* (Gary, 52, Sales Manager). This also appeared to be a positive factor that evoked pleasant emotions in the individuals themselves: *"A big motivator for me is the fact that I can be present for my family during my work days. I enjoy being with my spouse and children"* (Tom, 31, Development Manager, 11.11.2020 15:00 EET).

## **7.2. Resource changes connected to remote worker's work-life balance**

In order to understand the distinct work-life experiences of remote workers, it seemed necessary to thoroughly identify and examine the resources that potentially could determine these experiences. Three key resources: flexible working, job autonomy, and time saving from commute travel, emerged as important for WLB. Two more resources: work space, and social support, had been fundamentally changed in the remote context. Yet, these changes were not considered as meaningful for the WLB experiences. The changes in resources and their connection to WLB is briefly explained below.

### **7.2.1. Flexible working (condition resource)**

The transfer to remote working itself had caused a major change in the participants' working conditions. The recommendations from the government had forced employers to change their policies for remote working, which in many cases had been limited earlier to special roles and exceptional situations only. Consequently, remote working introduced a culture that allowed employees to work regardless of place, and in many cases the flexibility had been extended to the time dimension as well. These changes were considered fundamental to the employee's ability to combine home and work priorities, and had improved their experiences of effectiveness. The participants discussed that the conditional changes were particularly helpful for families who could more successfully handle their childcare responsibilities. The new conditions enabled employees to not only work from home but also from other places, and invest more time on leisure and recovery. As explained by a participant, such flexibility contributed to *"... freedom! You can work anywhere. If you have a weekend trip planned, or you are going to the summer cottage, you can leave two days earlier if only the communication works there"* (John, 31, Group Manager, 22.10.2020 13:00 EET). Not only the nonwork sphere was enhanced by the flexibility, but some of the participants explained that by not being bound to time, they could choose to work at times that best suited them. This was seen to enhance their performance: *"I've been able to adjust working to my own*



*rhythms. I am a morning person, and I've always been most productive in the morning*" (Mary, 43, Service Specialist, 28.10.2020 09:00 EET).

#### 7.2.2. Autonomous work (energy resource)

Remote working physically separates the employee from the workplace and the work society connected to it. This limited supervisor control in relation to the work and conditions of employees, which in turn, imposed job autonomy. The participants explained that their work had become much more autonomous because of this separation: *"I was able to do it in a totally different way, like building the day, I now can take much longer breaks at work."* (Susanna, 49, Service Director, 10.12.2020 13:00 EET). The increased autonomy also extended into task prioritization, *"I can decide for myself whether I will participate in something [meetings etc.] and it feels important for me."* (Anneli, 54, Team Manager, 26.10.2020 10:00 EET). The autonomy not only admitted prioritizing and arranging work activities, but also enabled a more comprehensive arrangement of work and nonwork items in order to adapt to needs: *"I have got free hands to act on the job. I can take my vacation when I want, and in as many periods I want, and since we don't have formal work-time monitoring, I can start later, or at six o'clock in the morning"* (Gary, 50, Sales Manager, 14.10.2020 13:00 EET).

This development helped employees more effectively reconcile home and work duties. One participant explained that if he needs to take children somewhere or look after the children for a while during office hours: *"No one is monitoring if I am at my computer. It's enough that I do my job. My supervisor has told me it doesn't matter if I use 10 hours or one hour a day, just if I do my job"* (Matt, 31, Line Manager, 12.10.2020 15:00 EET). Participants who particularly felt they enjoyed high job autonomy, also felt they could organize work in a way that improved their performance at work:

I feel like I can succeed [in those life domains which I consider important] now that we are remote and I can do things arbitrarily or within the limits that have been given to me and I can utilize [my freedom] better. (Mary, 43, Service Specialist, 28.10.2020 09:00 EET)

#### 7.2.3. Time saving (energy resource)

One common factor was recognized by all participants, and this related to the fact that they had all stopped commuting to work since the transfer to the extensive remote working. For some, it also included reduced work-related travel. Participants mentioned that time was similarly saved from the pressure of getting properly dressed and ready for work, as exemplified in the below excerpt:

I have quite a short commute to work, and I never considered its impact on my time until I realized how much time it takes to get ready for work, commute to and from the office, and settle back into home life. It can feel like being in a constant cycle. (Amy, 30, Service Specialist, 13.10.2020 10:00 EET)

Apparent differences emerged however, in how employees chose to utilize the time saved. Some felt that they gained an extra hour to help them perform at work, or felt they were expected to attend meetings or work correspondence during the time usually spent commuting. Other participants explained that they allocated the saved time on themselves, in leisure activities, rest or even sleep —*"take all advantages and use the saved time all to myself"* (Mary, 43, Service Specialist, 28.10.2020 09:00 EET). They felt that the time saving significantly improved their WLB, especially if they were able to use the gained resource on activities they desired and valued. This comes across in the following citation:

I feel that [remote working] has given me energy and possibility to succeed with my goals because it saves time, and there is also more time to use for leisure, when the commuting does not happen. I have more peace to do what I am currently doing, and I can focus better. (Laura, 53, Group Manager, 27.10.2020 15:00 EET)

#### 7.2.4. Space (object resource)

While working from home, the participants had to allocate some of their domestic space for working. Many had assembled a permanent workstation at home, partly at their own cost.

Depending on the space and equipment available, the participants reported various consequences, mainly poor ergonomics or lack of domestic space. Participants with the possibility to arrange a separate work room or hide work-related devices at nonwork time, claimed that such physical separation helped them to psychologically detach from work. This hindered their engagement in work-related thoughts during nonwork time: *"I use my son's room. He is not at home, he comes home for the weekend. So, I shut down the equipment and leave it here. I don't return here in the evening"* (Samuel, 58, Design Engineer, 21.10.2020 10:00 EET). However, even if some participants felt they had lost some of the home space for working, while also losing access to office-based equipment, they described no substantial impact on their sense of WLB.

#### 7.2.5. Social support (social resource)

Most participants felt the type of social contact with co-workers leading to exchange of support, had reduced since the transfer to remote working. The perceptions of the support received from supervisors varied among the participants from no change in relation to earlier times, to major improvements, or weakened support. The supervisor's support had changed in form, and trust emerged as the most important form of support. The role of family support had also taken a turn. Some felt their family relations, for instance the relationship with a spouse, had improved because of the increased time spent with each other. At other times, the spouse was used as a place to offload the emotional burden of work. They were even targets for work rumination.

#### 7.3. Remote worker's self-efficacy as a key link in the resource caravan

While all the resource changes that could potentially contribute to one's WLB (time saving, flexible working, job autonomy) were commonly reported, not everyone felt they utilized these possibilities. Nor did all participants perceive that they had achieved similar gains in WLB. For many, remote working had meant a new way of working. With reduced boundaries between the work and home domain, they felt confused and lacked sufficient methods to control their work involvement: *It is difficult to cut off my work day, in the beginning I didn't succeed at all. I have found no solution ... I basically work all the time* (Anne, 36, Service Manager, 27.11.2020 11:00 EET).

In time, some of the participants had developed skills (routines and self-control) to more effectively balance their involvement in their home and work roles according to their desire and personal priorities. This strengthened the remote worker's self-efficacy (i.e. ability and courage) to steer their own WLB. They would develop new ways to utilize the work flexibility, for instance, by taking a longer break to exercise or even attend meetings while walking. From feeling as if work was taking over their homes and homelife, they developed ways to control work, and prioritize their own needs.

*In the beginning I worked long days. It was a big change and required some adjusting, it was easy taking the PC from my bag and just fix something in the evening. Then I thought I can't go on like this. I need to start controlling it. I need to shut down and start my freetime ... Now I don't feel like I am forced to work, but I can use the flexibility. I can do a shorter day tomorrow. I can plan my day according to deadlines but I am able to take time off with a good conscience if I've completed the stuff I planned for today. I can just shut down the PC with a good conscience, thanks to remote working.* (Amy, 30, Service Specialist, 13.10.2020 10:00 EET)

Individuals who possessed or had developed self-efficacy seemed to more effectively utilize necessary resources in order to navigate their balance in the new remote context. Those resources (e.g., flexibility) would then contribute to more productive working and efficient reconciliation of daily duties. This resulted in additional time saving, which could be used in favor of the desired WLB, for instance on leisure activities. In other words, together with the new resources (e.g., autonomy) given to in the remote context, self-efficacy formed a resource caravan. When utilizing the accessible resources effectively, even more resources (additional time saving, more time for resting and thus more energy created) could be generated.

Participants who lacked self-efficacy, on the contrary, tended to feel guilt about taking a break from work instead of practicing healthy life habits: *"I suffer from bad conscience. If I am offline in Teams, and away a while, to fill the washing machine, I get the feeling that I need to quickly go back to the laptop, to show that I really am at work—and working"* (Mary, 43, Service Specialist, 28.10.2020 09:00 EET). They usually admitted that it was themselves to blame for not utilizing the possibilities available to them: *"Remote working would have given a possibility [to prioritize important life areas], I haven't necessarily utilized them or the possibility [to utilize them]"* (Anne, 36, Service Manager, 27.11.2020 11:00 EET). One participant explained their work morale and the feeling of liability that drove him to work during nonwork time. This was coupled by his admittance of a lack of self-regulation:

You could achieve a better balance if you knew how to control the balance yourself. I know what I should do, I should plan my free time weeks in advance, but this is my weakness and I fail to do it. For instance, if we have a layoff day [without pay] and I, by all means, should take the day off, when the day comes, my entrepreneur mentality strikes through, and I feel liable to attend important meetings anyway. This is partly because of my attitude, and I admit it is a personal weakness. (Robert, 45, Service Specialist, 03.11.2020 15:00 EET)

This group of participants also claimed they tended to take on a heavy workload and felt that it was unbearable. They often needed their supervisor's help in prioritization of work tasks, while lacking the needed efficacy to limit their own resource consumption, which would eventually lead to depleted resources. Thus, with lack or loss of personal resources, in this case self-efficacy, the individual would effectively fail to optimally utilize available resources. If flexible working and time saved from commuting was used undesirably by increasing working hours, the situation was likely to be experienced as loss of resource (time, energy) in the home sphere and lost opportunity to sufficiently recover from work. Thus, individuals would face a potential loss spiral if they failed to develop self-efficacy.

#### **7.4. The role of supervisor trust on employee as a caravan passage in the remote work context**

As it seemed, remote working had unlocked many positive resources that potentially could enhance the employee's WLB. With the support of self-efficacy, the individuals had developed ways to utilize new conditions and energy resources in order to balance work and life in the new situation. However, there seemed to be one fundamental mechanism that either strengthened this self-efficacy or hindered how employees utilized the relevant resources, namely the perceived trust of the supervisor.

The participants described the role of the supervisor's trust as being a crucial enabler of work flexibility and job autonomy: *"[My] supervisor plays a very big part [in achieving maintaining the balance], that he trusts you and let you do your thing"* (Erin, 47, Group Manager, 30.10.2020 9:00 EET). It appears that there is a mutual understanding of where the limits lie as long as work is completed:

The supervisor makes [my work-life balance] possible and understands I've got other life than just work, I have children too. She permits working regardless of time, as long as I stick to the agreed amount of work. I can start early, and maybe someone else likes to work late, she supports that. (Mary, 43, Service Specialist, 28.10.2020 09:00 EET)

Such trust came as a new experience for many of the participants. Many explained that remote working had previously been limited, if allowed at all: *"I have always liked working remotely, but my supervisor ... He did not understand what remote working was. Luckily, that has now changed"* (Mary, 43, Service Specialist, 28.10.2020 09:00 EET). Instead, remote workers had been pressured to justify their work results achieved at home, and to work excessively hard to prove these results.

The experience of trust was recognized in various ways, such as the absence of monitoring and being given free hands. In many cases trust was also expressed and reinforced verbally by the supervisor: *"My balance has been supported by my supervisor's encouragement. She has particularly*

mentioned that if we ever have things we need to take care of in the middle of the working day, it's more than fine to do it." (Liza, 28, Office Assistant, 11.11.2020 11:00 EET). We noted that there was a connection between the clear expression of trust and the employee's experience of empowerment. This is exemplified in the excerpt of a person who felt her supervisor had begun to show more trust since the remote working began: "[The trust from my supervisor] feels like such a strong message to me. It motivates and inspires, and encourages you—that you can do as you prefer" (Amy, 30, Service Specialist, 13.10.2020 10:00 EET). Thus, there seemed to be a connection between the perceived trust of the supervisor and the employee's affective work-life experiences.

Supervisor trust was described to operate in two distinct ways. First, the demonstration of trust from the supervisor reduced the guilt of the remote workers, and contributed to self-efficacy via self-regulation activities, such as structuring or scheduling of work. Encouraged by the supervisor's trust, employees would feel permitted to use the freedom that remote working offered. For instance, this was exhibited through working from the summer cottage (flexibility), doing laundry in between meetings (autonomy), and ending a work day early (time saving). Second, the experience of being trusted by the supervisor reduced stress in situations where work and home duties collided. For example, this was seen in acute family/nonwork issues that needed to be taken care of during working hours (a common scenario in the remote working context). The opposite effect of not feeling trusted and not feeling enabled, was also true. In cases where participants did not feel sufficient trust from the supervisor, rather feeling that they were "micromanaged", the participants also likely experienced struggle with WLB. They claimed the feeling of needing to participate in meetings and correspondence after work hours. Thus, it seemed that the supervisor's trust was a passageway for the individual's resource caravan. Supervisor trust would enable or disable the individual's self-efficacy that, in turn, formed the important link to resources that enhanced their WLB.

I feel a difference because previously remote working was not viewed positively, and now I feel I've been given free hands, which encourages me to plan my day as it suits me. It makes me motivated and enthusiastic. (Amy, 30, Service Specialist, 13.10.2020 10:00 EET)

## 8. Discussion

By investigating the work-life experiences of individuals who worked extensively from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, and analyzing the resources that impact those experiences, this study offered novel insights into the construction and support of WLB. To summarize the findings, the authors developed a theoretical model (Figure 1) that illustrates key resources for maintaining WLB. This includes the factors that enhance the utilization of those resources.

The figure illustrates a caravan of resources, including contextual and energy resources such as *work flexibility* (ability to perform work independently of time and location), *job autonomy* (ability to perform work according to one's own schedule), and *time savings* (from commuting and preparing for work), which are believed to potentially facilitate WLB in the context of remote work. The model also suggests that the effective utilization of these resources depends on the individual's ability to make use of these resources. Therefore, to reap the benefits of contextual and energy resources, such as personal characteristics in this case, employees' *self-efficacy* (belief in their ability to successfully manage work and home demands) is necessary. The caravan is situated in a passageway, where employees perceive a sense of *trust* that comes from their supervisor. The passageway that consists of perceived trust, creates the conditions for the caravan to be enriched with resources (or weakened with the loss of resources) via individuals' personal resources. Thus, the model proposes that the perceived trust from the supervisor plays a crucial role in activating the personal resources. For example, when remote work increases job autonomy, individuals can better utilize this autonomy when they feel empowered to make decisions that are in their own best interest. These decisions include those of creating space for household chores during the workday and using the time saved in remote work to focus on activities that promote personal well-being. As an additional finding, it was observed that the extraordinary time of the pandemic had changed the way

resources (e.g., time) was allocated, triggering a re-evaluation of life values and priorities. In this model, such events are suggested to influence WLB.

### 8.1. Theoretical implications

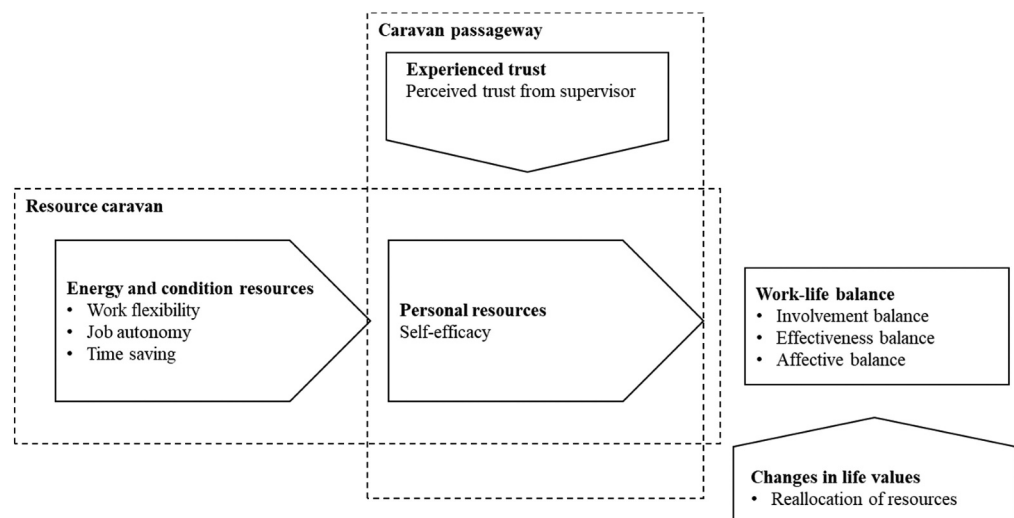
This study qualitatively explored the work-life experiences of remote workers by using Casper and peers' model (Casper et al., 2018) and the COR-model (Hobfoll, 1989) to gain an understanding of the resources that support different aspects of WLB construction, and the connections that these resources have. The findings of this study contribute to the theoretical framework in three ways: 1) the study extends the framework of Casper et al. (2018) to the context of remote work; 2) it emphasizes the role of self-efficacy as an important mechanism for achieving WLB; and 3) it identifies supervisor trust as an enhancer for the self-efficacy of individuals, and WLB.

#### 8.1.1. Extending the recent concept of work-life balance (Casper et al., 2018) into remote work context

The first important contribution of this study was the application of theoretical frameworks in a new context. This study was the first to use the theoretical framework proposed by Casper et al. (2018) in a qualitative exploration of the WLB construct, specifically in the context of remote work. By applying this framework, the researchers were able to identify how the experience of WLB is formed in both its cognitive dimensions (effectiveness and involvement) and affective dimensions.

Previous research has primarily focused on exploring how various energy and resource conditions in the remote context, such as flexibility and time-saving, impact the development of WLB (Franken et al., 2021; Grant et al., 2013; Rashmi & Kataria, 2021). Such resources are likely to affect WLB in terms of involvement and effectiveness. For instance, remote working has been found to improve employees' ability to balance work and home duties (Galanti et al., 2021) as well as strengthen family relationships (Evans et al., 2020; Toscano & Zappalà, 2020). Through a qualitative approach, this study explored the elements that form people's affective balance. However, the role of affective experiences in achieving WLB has been understudied. Thus, the purpose of the qualitative approach was to provide an opportunity to gain deeper insight into the factors that contribute to the emergence of affective experiences and their impact on WLB. The study's findings revealed that people commonly experience a sense of balance when they have sufficient energy and vitality in both their work and personal lives. This often results from adequate rest, sleep, and recovery. Therefore, it is likely that affective balance is closely related to sufficient recovery from tasks during and after work (feeling energized in the

**Figure 1. The theoretical model of an underlying support structure for remote worker's WLB.**



morning, and not feeling exhausted after the day). This is coupled by good quality sleep (i.e., reducing work-related stress at night).

The findings also demonstrated that the remote work context can have different effects on the dimensions of WLB. This implies that individuals' work-life experiences in remote work can be both positive and negative at the same time. For instance, as demonstrated in the current study, remote work enhances productivity and thus one's sense of effectiveness. At the same time, it often happens at the cost of one's nonwork roles (i.e., reducing time spent on breaks and leisure) hinders an individual's ability to balance their involvement in the home domain. Additionally, the resources that are often enhanced in remote work, such as flexibility and job autonomy, may have a dual effect on WLB. On one hand, they may increase the time spent on important tasks, but on the other hand, they may also increase the time spent on perceived obligations. These findings highlight the complexity of WLB (Haar & Brougham, 2020) and suggest that its building blocks are interconnected.

In addition to the study's focus on resources, the findings reveal that some individuals underwent a re-evaluation of their life priorities due to the extraordinary circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 context. Spending more time with family or engaging in leisure activities has led to increased involvement in non-work roles. This has also triggered a re-appraisal of their importance. As people place greater value on their non-work roles, this is likely to influence their assessment of WLB. Therefore, it is suggested that future research pay more attention to the value aspect of the WLB construct and investigate how sudden life events or changes in life priorities may impact an individual's WLB.

#### *8.1.2. The role of self-efficacy as a building block of work-life balance*

The second contribution of this study was the identification of the critical role of an individual's personal resources, namely *self-efficacy* as building blocks of WLB. Only a handful of studies have previously studied the work-life management related dimension of self-efficacy (e.g. Chan et al., 2016; Chu et al., 2021). One study has indicated that self-efficacy may steer the use of job autonomy (Badri & Panatik, 2020). Nevertheless, prior research has not fully conceptualized the importance of personal resources in an individual's ability to control their WLB. The current study highlights the individual's own agency in achieving WLB and stresses the necessity to enhance an individual's personal resources in order for them to effectively utilize various other resources.

Consistent with some previous studies, the findings from the current study suggest that remote work enhances employees' autonomy, flexibility, and time saving (e.g., Shirmohammadi et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021). It also found, however, that these factors can have different effects on WLB and do not always directly support the creation of it. This is because managing highly autonomous work may require employees to draw upon personal resources, which can be more challenging when working remotely (Mäkelä et al., 2023). On the one hand, these resources provide opportunities to prioritize important roles, such as family and leisure time. On the other hand, they can unintentionally increase the time spent on work, leading work to spill-over into personal time. Upon closer examination of the utilization of these resources, it becomes apparent that it is the individuals who must make the most of the available resources. Some individuals are successful at doing so. Others, due to lack of skills, poor self-esteem, or fear of guilt, are unable to take advantage of these opportunities. They may simply find it difficult to navigate in the virtual work context because of poor skills, which may increase workload, the feeling of isolation, and overall ill-being (K. Prasad et al., 2020; K. D. V. Prasad et al., 2023). The creation of WLB, therefore, depends on the employee's ability to effectively utilize available resources (Fan et al., 2021; Thilagavathy & Geetha, 2022).

It appears that in a remote work situation where work is autonomous and flexible, personal resources are essential for individuals to construct their own WLB. This is operationalized by having the courage to pursue one's own priorities. As a side note to the study's findings, it was also observed that there were several likely personal resources that steer people's WLB. These resources include healthy selfishness (taking the liberty of maintaining healthy lifestyle habits),



where an individual dares to prioritize themselves, and self-regulation. In these instances, people are about to set boundaries according to priorities in flexible work, take breaks throughout the day, and end the workday on time. As an implication for future research, the findings of this study provide a compelling reason to investigate different personal resources and their role as mechanisms for achieving WLB.

#### *8.1.3. The role of supervisor's trust in enabling individuals' self-efficacy*

The third contribution of this paper is the underscoring of the pivotal role of the supervisor's perceived trust in the WLB experience. Prior research has indicated that supervisor support regarding employee work and family demands is positively related to WLB (Allen, 2012; Brough & O'Driscoll, 2005; Rondi et al., 2022). Furthermore, supervisors also influence the utilization of work-life practices (Fiksenbaum, 2014). To the authors' knowledge, no other studies have deconstructed the WLB concept and recognized the detailed underlying structure where trust from supervisors (and trust culture) is considered. The present study contributes to this important work and reveals that supervisor support plays a significant role in supporting individual agency, i.e., their capacity to take intentional and self-initiated actions to achieve WLB goals. Through the lens of COR theory, the trust culture created by the supervisor can be seen as a crucial passageway for enabling other resources, specifically individual self-efficacy. Without the supervisor's trust, individuals may be less likely to feel enabled to utilize available resources to contribute to their non-work domain, such as utilizing autonomy or work flexibility to take needed time off for private purposes. Supervisor trust as experienced by employees, significantly contributes to the overall affective experiences of remote workers. A lack of trust prevents employees from fully exploiting available resources.

### **9. Conclusions**

In sum, the results of this study conclude that work-life balance has taken a new turn in the context of remote working during the pandemic. In remote work, the experience of balance is created by the employee's perception that they can increase proximity to family and thus achieve improved involvement in the nonwork sphere. Achieving effectiveness is also important in the experience of balance, meaning that employees feel they can accomplish their work efficiently while effectively managing household tasks in accordance with the expectations of remote work, often during work hours. Particularly, the affective balance experience (e.g. feeling of happiness in important life roles) seems closely related to employees' recovery experiences and the employee's ability to allocate their resources effectively in both life domains. Remote working releases important employee resources such as work flexibility (time and location independence) and autonomy in their own work (i.e., the employee can independently decide how to structure their work). It additionally saves time from reduced commuting. These resources potentially have a positive impact on the experience of balance, but only if individuals have sufficient personal resources to effectively utilize them. Here, self-efficacy emerges as an important resource. Without a sense of self-efficacy, individuals may struggle to navigate flexible and autonomous work, for example, work may spill over into leisure time, and individuals may experience guilt when taking breaks. Thus, remote work and the resources it provides can have the opposite effect on balance. In remote work, where the employee and supervisor operate at a distance to each other, perceived supervisor trust becomes important as a support for self-efficacy.

#### **9.1. Limitations**

This qualitative study's large sample size ( $N = 89$ ) contributes to rich and nuanced data. However, our interviews were limited to a single interview with each employee six months into the mandatory remote working period. A longitudinal or diary study could have given more information about the day-to-day fluctuations in both satisfaction and challenges with remote working. It may have also revealed trends during different stages of this new way of working. The study excludes comparisons between remote workers and non-remote workers, and similarly voluntary and involuntary remote workers. This could have offered greater understanding of the contextual features of the work-life experiences. Because this research took place after the relocation to

remote working, we do not know the experiences of the employees prior to the crisis. A future study could compare remote working during and after the crisis.

## 9.2. Practical implications

Based on the findings, the supervisor can be seen to play a role of gatekeeper to resources that individuals need in order to maintain a fulfilling balance in life. Therefore, organizations must establish work-life policies and avoid variations in supportiveness based on an individual supervisor's judgment or personal preferences. The researchers recommend consequent methods across organizations to be utilized when agreeing upon remote working practices at the team level. This is in order to avoid differences in individual supervisors' perceptions of work-life support and organizations' conceptualizations of work-life support (Mas Machuca et al., 2016; Talukder, 2019). One such method may indeed be the support for supervisors themselves (Talukder, 2019). Supervisors should engage in discussions on trust and autonomy, and what it means within their teams. It is noticed that self-efficacy helps employees utilize the beneficial resources that help them achieve WLB. We suggest that employees benefit from tools and self-leadership skills. These skills aid in the establishment of controls between work and nonwork (Allen et al., 2021), which operate bi-directionally—helping to prevent procrastination (Wang et al., 2021) and violation of trust. Even more importantly, these skills may help people to protect their leisure time and well-being, while increasing work pride (Mas Machuca et al., 2016).

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**Pensar:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Software, Writing Original draft, Resources, Project administration, Visualization

**Rousi:** Supervision, Validation, Writing Developed draft & Editing, Data Curation

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ABB

Accountor

Fennia

TeliaCompany

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Wärtsilä

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## Appendix 1. Background information of interviewees

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Role	Children in the household	Age of youngest child	Remote working prior to pandemic	Remote working at the time of the interview
Amanda	Female	35	Service Manager	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Amy	Female	30	Service Specialist	0	-	Never	Primarily
Andrew	Male	25	Team Leader	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Andy	Male	39	Line Manager	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Anette	Female	36	Service Specialist	2	9	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Anne	Female	36	Service Manager	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Anneli	Female	54	Team Manager	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Asher	Male	26	Service Specialist	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Partly
Ava	Female	35	Group Manager	2	9	Seldom/ Occasionally	Partly
Ayla	Female	31	Service Specialist	0	-	Never	Primarily
Birgitta	Female	33	Process Specialist	1	1	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Bobby	Male	53	Line Manager	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Britney	Female	49	Service Specialist	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Brooke	Female	49	Line Manager	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Charles	Male	38	Service Manager	2	7	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Cindy	Female	50	Service Director	1	17	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Christina	Female	[not reported]	Service Manager	2	5	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Dan	Male	34	Service Specialist	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Demi	Female	58	Service Director	1	16	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Dylan	Male	36	Service Specialist	1	3	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Ellen	Female	36	Service Specialist	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Emilia	Female	40	Service Manager	1	13	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Erin	Female	47	Group Manager	1	15	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily

(Continued)

<b>(Continued)</b>							
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Children in the household</b>	<b>Age of youngest child</b>	<b>Remote working prior to pandemic</b>	<b>Remote working at the time of the interview</b>
Evie	Female	38	Service Specialist	2	2	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Fawn	Female	32	Line Manager	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Freya	Female	45	Service specialist	2	14	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Gary	Male	50	Sales Manager	0	-	Never	Primarily
Hannah	Female	45	Group Manager	2	10	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Harry	Male	34	Product Developer	1	5	Never	Primarily
Henry	Male	53	Service Manager	1	18	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Ian	Male	48	Product Manager	3	7	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Iris	Female	55	[not reported]	[not reported]	[not reported]	[not reported]	[not reported]
Isla	Female	37	Service Specialist	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Jacob	Male	33	Sales Manager	1	1	Never	Primarily
Jada	Female	[Not reported]	Service Specialist	0	-	[not reported]	Primarily
James	Male	51	Accountant	2	17	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Janet	Female	60	Accountant	0	-	Never	Primarily
Jill	Female	37	Service Specialist	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Jo	Female	23	Office Assistant	0	-	Never	Primarily
John	Male	31	Group Manager	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Partly
Josi	Female	38	Team Manager	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Joyce	Female	41	Team Manager	1	15	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
July	Female	50	Accounting Specialist	2	13	Never	Partly
Latoya	Female	31	Process Specialist	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Laura	Female	53	Group Manager	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Leah	Female	40	Accounting Specialist	2	4	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily

(Continued)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Role	Children in the household	Age of youngest child	Remote working prior to pandemic	Remote working at the time of the interview
Liam	Male	32	Service Specialist	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Liza	Female	28	Office Assistant	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Lucas	Male	38	Service Specialist	1	1	Primarily	Primarily
Lucy	Female	[not reported]	[not reported]	[not reported]	[not reported]	Never	Primarily
Macy	Female	40	Service Manager	>3	5	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Marcus	Male	[not reported]	Line Manager	2	[not reported]	[not reported]	Primarily
Marianna	Female	28	Service Specialist	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Marie	Female	[not reported]	Service Specialist	2	16	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Mariella	Female	[not reported]	Service Specialist	2	17	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Martin	Male	57	Service Specialist	0	-	Primarily	Primarily
Mary	Female	43	Service Specialist	2	9	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Mason	Male	55	Operational Director	0		Never	Primarily
Matt	Male	31	Line Manager	>3	<1	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Max	Male	55	Service Specialist	0	18	Never	Primarily
Minnie	Female	26	Sales Manager	0	-	Never	Partly
Molly	Female	44	Team Manager	3	12	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Nancy	Female	53	Process Specialist	0	-	Primarily	Primarily
Nathan	Male	48	Design Engineer	0	-	Never	Primarily
Oliver	Male	49	Project Manager	1	17	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Oscar	Male	35	Design Engineer	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Owen	Male	60	Line Manager	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Paul	Male	52	Sales Manager	1	10	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Peter	Male	43	Line Manager	2	10	Seldom/ Occasionally	Partly

(Continued)

(Continued)							
Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Role	Children in the household	Age of youngest child	Remote working prior to pandemic	Remote working at the time of the interview
Rebecca	Female	47	Design Engineer	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Robert	Male	45	Service Specialist	1	<18	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Ryan	Male	32	Service Specialist	0	-	Primarily	Primarily
Sabrina	Female	38	Development Manager	2	10	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Samatha	Female	41	Group Manager	2	10	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Samuel	Male	58	Design Engineer	1	17	Never	Primarily
Sandra	Female	[not reported]	Development Manager	0	-	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Sarah	Female	29	Service Specialist	0	-	Primarily	Primarily
Sharon	Female	45	Service Specialist	3	12	Partly/Regularly	Partly
Sinitta	Female	37	Risk Manager	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Sophy	Female	57	Line Manager	0	-	Never	Primarily
Sue	Female	40	Accounting Specialist	3	6	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Susanna	Female	49	Service Director	0	-	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Thea	Female	43	Service Director	2	7	Partly/Regularly	Partly
Thomas	Male	46	Product Manager	2	10	Never	Primarily
Tina	Female	41	Service Manager	2	10	Seldom/ Occasionally	Primarily
Tom	Male	31	Development Manager	2	<1	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Vera	Female	48	Sales Manager	0	0	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
William	Male	50	Product Manager	2	16	Partly/Regularly	Primarily
Zofi	Female	46	Sales Manager	2	14	Partly/Regularly	Primarily