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EMPIRICAL ARTICLE

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Does remote work erode trust in organizations? A within-person investigation in the COVID-19 context

Olga Stavrova[1] | Teodora Spiridonova[1] | Philippe van de Calseyde[2] | Christina Meyers[1] | Antony M. Evans[3]

[1]Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

[2]Technical University of Eindhoven, Eindhoven, The Netherlands

[3]Allstate Corporation, Northbrook, Illinois, USA

Correspondence
Olga Stavrova, Tilburg University, Warandelaan 2, Tilburg 5000 LE, The Netherlands.
Email: O.Stavrova@uvt.nl

Funding information
Herbert Simon Research Institute

Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic led to a widespread increase in remote work arrangements. This trend raised concerns regarding the potential negative ramifications it might have for organizational trust and cooperation. We explored the initial effect of COVID-19 induced remote work on trust in organizations: trust in co-workers, trust in the supervisor and in the organization at large. In a four-wave longitudinal survey of remote workers (N ~ 1000) in the UK conducted between May 2020 and August 2020 (first COVID wave), we examined the association between the share of remote work (out of total working hours) and different forms of trust at work. The results showed that, for the same individual, increasing the share of working hours spent remotely was associated with more trust in the organization at large (but not in the supervisor and co-workers). Further, during the months where individuals spent more time working remotely, they experienced lower turnover intentions (but not less burnout or more work engagement, productivity, and satisfaction) compared to the months where they spent less time working remotely. The results contribute to the literature on flexible work arrangements, organizational trust, and other work outcomes.

KEYWORDS
burnout, COVID-19, job satisfaction, performance, remote work, trust, turnover, work engagement

1 | INTRODUCTION

The global COVID-19 pandemic forced organizations to shift to remote work arrangements, creating an overnight generation of digital teleworkers. What are the consequences of this widespread shift to remote work? Previous research has found that teleworking can convey benefits to employees, such as increased schedule flexibility and greater autonomy (Delanoeije & Verbruggen, 2020). At the same time, teleworking might create new challenges: Teleworkers are less likely than in-office colleagues to receive raises and promotions (Baert et al., 2020) and might suffer from social isolation (Bollestad et al., 2022; Golden et al., 2008; Spilker & Breaugh, 2021). However, despite increased scholarly interest in telework and its consequences, the literature has neglected its impact on trust. While trust has widely been discussed as a necessary element of remote work—either on the part of supervisors, who need to trust remote workers to remain productive (Peters & Den Dulk, 2003), or as a prerequisite for the functioning of virtual teams (Breuer et al., 2016)—little is known about how remote work impacts employees' trust in their organization, supervisors, or colleagues.

On the one hand, there are concerns that increasing remote work during the pandemic has had deleterious consequences for trust (Mortensen & Gardner, 2021; Parker et al., 2020). The more time employees spend in remote work arrangements, the more they might feel detached and less committed to their employers. Consistent with this argument, remote work has recently been linked to the collapse of employee information exchange networks and collaboration (Yang et al., 2022). Furthermore, because working remotely reduces opportunities for spontaneous communication, and impedes knowledge sharing (van der Meulen et al., 2019), scholars see it as a risk factor for diminishing mutual trust among colleagues, as well as between supervisors and subordinates (Cramton, 2001; Vealey, 2016).

Alternatively, being allowed to work remotely might be a signal of employer trust in the first place. Based on the norm of reciprocity, employees who are afforded this trust should be likely to reciprocate and become more trusting towards their employer in return (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Gouldner, 1960). Trust has consistently been identified as a prerequisite for managers to allow their employees to work remotely (Kaplan et al., 2018; Toth et al., 2020). In addition, working remotely leads to increased autonomy and control (Ipsen et al., 2021), which have been linked to increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover intentions (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), as well as less burnout (ten Brummelhuis et al., 2012), and might thus also contribute to a more positive attitude towards the organization, including higher levels of trust and commitment (Martin & MacDonnell, 2012). Finally, in the pandemic context, allowing employees to work remotely might additionally signal care and concern for employee health (Shiffrin & Michel, 2021), thereby increasing trust in the organization and commitment (Kaluza et al., 2021; Kortsch et al., 2022). Taken together, prior research provides arguments for the transition to remote work being associated with either more or less trust in co-workers, supervisor and the organization at large.

We explored the effect of COVID-19 induced remote work on trust in the organizational context, that is, trust in co-workers, the supervisor, and the organization at large. Most prior studies on the consequences of remote work are based on between-person comparisons (comparing remote workers to non-remote workers) rather than within-person comparisons (comparing the same worker when they spend more time working remotely vs. in-office). In contrast, we take a longitudinal perspective, and we explicitly differentiate the between- from the within-person effects (Curran & Bauer, 2011). Specifically, we examined within-person associations between changes in the amount of remote-work hours and work-related trust during a period of four months in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, as prior research showed that remote work might have consequences for important work outcomes, such as burnout and engagement (Moens et al., 2022), we additionally explored the associations

between remote work and work-related outcomes available in the data: job satisfaction, work engagement, performance, burnout, and turnover intentions. Study materials, data, and analyses scripts are available at https://osf.io/w6bth/?view_only=f7e477c892504e86bd4fd9c8240d63f1.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Design and participants

The data were collected in a four-wave longitudinal survey of UK workers during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (from 13 May to 24 August 2020; with a one-month time lag).[1] Participants were recruited on Prolific Academic. Only participants who worked from home due to COVID-19 at least some of the time were allowed to participate (we used Prolific's "COVID-19 Working From Home" pre-screening option). 1014 individuals participated in the first wave. We removed 45 participants who indicated that they were not actually working from home or left this question blank. We also removed self-employed participants (for whom "trust in organization" does not make sense). The final sample consisted of 887 participants (40% female, M_{age} = 34.18, SD_{age} = 9.73). Of those, 674 completed all four waves.

At wave 1, the UK was still under lockdown, although the government started loosening some of the measures. For example, people who could not work from home were encouraged to return to work. Throughout the study period, the loosening of the COVID-19 regulations continued, resulting in more people returning to the work premises. In our dataset, at wave 1, the average share of time spent in home office was 91.09% (SD = 21.07), while at wave 4, it dropped to 76.42% (SD = 35.98).

2.2 | Measures

In each wave, participants indicated the *percentage of working time they spent at home* over the past month (0%–100%). To capture the effect of the share of remote work within individuals, we centered this variable by subtracting each individual's mean across the four waves. This allowed us to determine whether for the same individual, changes in the share of home office hours are associated with work-related trust and other outcomes. In addition, to account for potential differences between individuals, our analyses included each individual's average share of home office time over the four waves.

Each wave included measures of *trust in the supervisor*, *trust in coworkers and trust in the organization at large* (Podsakoff et al., 1990). Each was measured with five items (e.g., "I have complete faith in the integrity of my manager/supervisor (vs. my coworkers, vs. my organization"); 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*; α = 0.93-0.96).

In each wave, we measured self-reported performance over the preceding month (9 items, 1-5 response scale, α = 0.86-0.88, Griffin et al., 2007), work engagement (3 items, 1-6 response scale, α = 0.81-0.87, Schaufeli et al., 2019), job satisfaction (1 item, 1-7 response scale, Dolbier et al., 2005), burnout (5 items, 1-6 response scale, α = 0.92-0.95, Bakker et al., 2000), and turnover intentions (4 items, 1-5 response scale, α = 0.90-0.91, Moore, 2000).

We included the following control variables: time trend, average number of working hours per week, tenure at the current employer, industry type, organization size, team or department size, experience with remote work pre-pandemic, HEXACO personality traits, generalized trust and socio-demographic information (age, gender, education, income, presence of minor children). More details regarding these measures are available in SOM.

3 | RESULTS

We used multilevel regression with waves nested within individuals. For each outcome, we first estimated a model with the within- and between-person effects of the home office time (Model 1) and then added all the control

variables listed above (Model 2). All models included a random intercept and a random slope of the within-person effect of home office time.

For trust in the organization, the effect of home office time was positive within individuals and negative between individuals (Table 1). Individuals who worked more (vs. less) from home on average reported lower trust in the organization (between-person effect). However, for the same individual, increasing their share of hours spent working from home was associated with higher organizational trust (within-person effect). Increasing a worker's share of home office by 1% predicted an increase in trust by 0.002 points. After adding the control variables, only the within-person effect remained significant, suggesting that the between-person effect was probably due to a confounding with socio-demographic or other differences between individuals. The amount of time working from home was not related to trust in co-workers or the supervisor.

For work outcomes, we detected a negative effect of home office time on turnover intentions at the within- (but not between-)person level. This effect was robust against adding the control variables. Home office time was not associated with changes in burnout, work engagement, satisfaction, or self-rated work performance (see Table S1).

We conducted two robustness checks: First, we repeated the analyses including only participants who responded correctly to all three attention check items in all four waves (N = 431, see SOM for measurement details). These analyses replicated the prior results regarding trust in the organization at large (in Model 1; in Model 2, the home office effect became "marginally" significant), while the effect of home office share on turnover intentions was no longer significant (Table S2). Second, we repeated the analyses only among the individuals who actually experienced a change in the time they spent working from home as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown (N = 430). Here, we detected the same results for all outcome measures reported in the main analyses (Table S3).

4 | DISCUSSION

Using longitudinal data from the first pandemic wave, we explored the association between the share of time employees spent working from home and different types of trust in the organizational context. Increasing home office time was positively related to trust in the organization (but not trust in co-workers and supervisor). In addition, in the months where participants worked more from the home (vs. the office), they reported lower turnover intentions. Potentially, the act of encouraging (or requiring) work from the office is perceived as a sign of distrust towards the workers (who are believed to coach-loaf in the home office), and this distrust is reciprocated by the employees. This explanation is consistent with the effect being restricted to trust in the organization at large, rather than co-workers or the supervisor, as remote work arrangements are usually based on broader organizational policies, rather than privately made agreements between coworkers and supervisors.

The size of the effect of the remote work seems tiny at first glance. However, the most common amount of home office hours reduction experienced in our sample between wave 1 and 4 was 100% (i.e., people went from working fully remotely to working fully from the office). Therefore, for most participants who reduced their remote working hours, this reduction was associated with 0.22 points (0.18 SD) decrease in trust in the organization. This could be practically important, especially when considering that remote work arrangements are adopted by thousands of organizations nowadays.

While the longitudinal nature of our data allowed to document the effect within individuals, it's important to note that randomized intervention studies are needed before remote work arrangements can be recommended for organizations to increase employees' trust. In addition, self-reports of the time working from home could be supplemented with more objective measures (i.e., electronic log-in data) to reduce memory bias. Finally, it remains to be tested whether the positive remote work effect is restricted to the pandemic or extends into post-pandemic times where office presence is no longer associated with health risks. This is particularly important as now, several years after the beginning of the pandemic, organizations are expanding employees' long-term opportunities for telework. In conclusion, although the possibility of telework undermining trust has been widely expressed by the media and

TABLE 1 Multilevel regression results.

	Trust in the organization				Trust in co-workers				Trust in the supervisor			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
Predictors	***b***	***p***	***b***	***p***	**b**	***p***	***b***	***p***	***b***	***p***	**b**	***p***
Work from home (within-persons)	0.002	0.007	0.002	0.018	0.0002	0.826	−1e-05	0.985	1e-03	0.213	1e-03	0.230
Work from home (between-persons)	−0.004	0.026	0.0002	0.878	−0.002	0.072	−3e-04	0.752	1e-03	0.511	2e-03	0.099
Time trend	-	-	−0.02	0.117	-	-	−0.02	0.076	-	-	−0.02	0.084
Gender	-	-	−0.04	0.629	-	-	−0.08	0.202	-	-	0.03	0.715
Age	-	-	−0.00	0.468	-	-	−0.01	0.053	-	-	−0.01	0.255
Children	-	-	0.14	0.071	-	-	0.04	0.497	-	-	−0.11	0.165
Education	-	-	−0.08	0.003	-	-	−0.02	0.437	-	-	−0.04	0.212
Income	-	-	0.02	0.226	-	-	0.01	0.438	-	-	0.01	0.421
Tenure	-	-	0.01	0.406	-	-	0.01	0.080	-	-	0.01	0.446
Organization size	-	-	−0.08	<0.001	-	-	−0.00	0.724	-	-	−0.01	0.550
Industry: Healthcare	-	-	−0.01	0.957	-	-	−0.12	0.223	-	-	0.09	0.471
Industry: Other	-	-	−0.05	0.576	-	-	−0.13	0.072	-	-	−0.01	0.900
Industry: prof., scie., tech. Services	-	-	−0.13	0.269	-	-	−0.13	0.175	-	-	−0.06	0.633
Team size [10–20]	-	-	0.03	0.683	-	-	0.08	0.179	-	-	0.02	0.782
Team size [>20]	-	-	0.01	0.882	-	-	−0.01	0.890	-	-	−0.03	0.721
Average working hours	-	-	0.00	0.994	-	-	0.00	0.369	-	-	0.00	0.150
Work from home before COVID	-	-	−0.06	0.457	-	-	−0.13	0.045	-	-	−0.11	0.217
Extraversion	-	-	0.22	<0.001	-	-	0.26	<0.001	-	-	0.18	0.001
Conscientiousness	-	-	0.20	<0.001	-	-	0.04	0.358	-	-	0.20	0.001
Agreeableness	-	-	0.14	0.015	-	-	0.10	0.025	-	-	0.10	0.094
Openness	-	-	−0.08	0.128	-	-	0.01	0.833	-	-	−0.08	0.166
Honesty-humility	-	-	0.06	0.314	-	-	0.07	0.097	-	-	0.12	0.034
Emotionality	-	-	−0.01	0.904	-	-	−0.03	0.423	-	-	0.00	0.970

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Trust in the organization				Trust in co-workers				Trust in the supervisor			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
Predictors	***b***	***p***	***b***	***p***	**b**	***p***	***b***	***p***	***b***	***p***	**b**	***p***
Generalized trust	-	-	0.20	<0.001	-	-	0.27	<0.001	-	-	0.19	<0.001
ICC	0.79		0.76		0.70		0.62		0.79		0.77	
Marginal R^2/Conditional R^2	0.006/0.794		0.154/0.795		0.003/0.700		0.204/0.700		0.001/0.789		0.100/0.792	
N (individuals)	887		878		887		878		887		878	
N (observations)	3034		2936		3034		2936		3034		2936	

Note: Reference category for Team size: [<10]; reference category for Industry: educational services. Marginal R^2: variance explained by fixed effects; Conditional R^2: variance explained by fixed and random effects.

management practitioners (Mortensen & Gardner, 2021; Parker et al., 2020), our results provide consistent evidence against the idea that having employees work at home erodes trust, and thus contribute to the organizational literature and the management practice.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at https://osf.io/w6bth/.

ORCID

Olga Stavrova https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6079-4151
Teodora Spiridonova https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7967-2077

ENDNOTE

[1] This dataset is associated with one other publication that focused on a different research question—the effect of HEXACO personality on performance and well-being at work over time—without considering individual differences in either remote work or trust (Evans et al., 2022).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Olga Stavrova is associate professor at the department of Social Psychology at Tilburg University (Netherlands). Her main research interests include psychological well-being and health, cynicism and trust, social perception and social relationships. She uses multimethod approach that combines longitudinal and cross-national surveys, online and laboratory experiments, dyadic and experience sampling methods, linguistic analysis and Big Data methods.

Teodora Spiridonova is a PhD candidate at the department of Social Psychology at Tilburg University (Netherlands). She studies cynicism, trust and deception.

Philippe van de Calseyde is an Assistant Professor of organizational behavior at the Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e). His background is mainly in the areas of judgment and decision-making. Philippe's research focuses on understanding how situational- and cognitive factors influence people's judgments and decisions. Specific interests include how people respond to the decision-speed of others, interpersonal trust, human cooperation, negotiations, and the role of emotions in decision-making. In testing these relationships, he mostly conducts experiments and field studies.

Christina Meyers obtained her PhD from Tilburg University in 2015. She used to work as Assistant Professor at the Department of Human Resource Studies at Tilburg University. Her research interests include applied positive psychology, employee well-being, employee strengths and talents, and organizational talent management.

Anthony M. Evans obtained his PhD from Brown university in 2012 and he currently works as an applied behavioral scientist for Allstate Corporation. His research examines the psychology of trust and cooperation in online interactions.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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

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