

Employee Well-Being & Productivity During COVID-19

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Master's Thesis
June 2022

Abstract

In March 2020, the globe was faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to major changes in how people lived their lives. Social distancing was enforced, travel bans put in place, and businesses had to change the way they functioned. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way individuals are used to working; companies all over the world have gone through changes in the way work is conducted on a day-to-day basis. This research study aims to investigate how young employees working in small and medium-sized companies and living in the Netherlands experienced working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of well-being and productivity. This research study was intended to help better understand the future of work, how companies can reform organizational culture favorably, and how young employees adapt and respond to changing situations, in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic. The lived experiences of young employees when the pandemic hit in March 2020, till present day (May 2022) were analyzed through in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with 10 respondents. These interviews were then analyzed through thematic analysis, which produced three overarching themes. The first main finding of the research was the importance of creating a sense of community that allowed interviewees to feel less alone during the pandemic. Secondly, productivity and motivation levels fluctuated throughout the pandemic by following three distinct phases: the initial onset of the pandemic, the realization that lockdowns would continue for longer than anticipated, and the beginning of hybrid working when changed work routines had become the norm. The last theme that came forward was the nature of communication these young employees had with their managers, and how this was pivotal in influencing their well-being and productivity throughout different phases. This paper brings to light some important recommendations for organizations relating to how they can better tackle issues that young employees face by providing a clearer picture of how these employees experienced various aspects of the pandemic and how they coped with the changes in their own lives. This research study also made it clear that personal lives and professional lives could not be neatly separated, and this was an important consideration for organizations with regards to the results presented in this research study.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, employee well-being, productivity, work-from-home, young employees

Word Count: 20021

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Theoretical Framework.....	6
2.1. <i>Work-Life Balance</i>	6
2.2. <i>Organizational Culture</i>	8
2.3. <i>Mental Well-Being</i>	10
2.4. <i>Productivity</i>	11
2.5. <i>Small and Medium Sized Businesses during COVID-19</i>	13
2.6. <i>Young Employees during COVID-19</i>	14
3. Methodology.....	16
3.1. <i>Qualitative Interviews</i>	16
3.2. <i>Sample</i>	18
3.3. <i>Data Analysis</i>	21
3.4. <i>Research Ethics</i>	23
4. Results	24
4.1. <i>Recreating a Sense of Community in Isolation</i>	25
4.2. <i>Phases of Productivity</i>	29
4.3. <i>Communication with Managers</i>	38
4.4. <i>Exploring Potential Patterns</i>	42
5. Conclusion.....	46
5.1. <i>Recommendations for Organizations</i>	48
5.2. <i>Limitations of Research</i>	49
5.3. <i>Scope for Further Research</i>	50
6. References	51
7. Appendix A.....	60
8. Appendix B.....	63

1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the traditional concept of ‘the workplace’ has gone through many unprecedented changes. Pre-pandemic, it was largely a taken-for-granted assumption that the workplace was mainly a physical space, with digital tools to facilitate it. Before the pandemic, there was a steady digitization of work that could be seen to be transforming the workplace, but this was forced into overdrive across industries where it had not been preceded at a large scale ever before (Juchnowicz & Kinowska, 2021). All of a sudden, managers and employees alike were grappling to reorganize the way work was done and were trying to ensure minimal hiccups while this accelerated transition was upon them. Organizations rushed to create new rulebooks for how work should be conducted, how regular meetings and catch-up calls should be scheduled to mimic physical collaboration, and ways to increase interaction across departments (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). It was clear that speed was one of the most important elements at play, and any changes that had to be put in place had to be done as fast as possible (Sneader & Sternfels, 2020). According to Sneader and Sternfels (2020), organizations of all sizes had to adopt a ‘start-up mindset’, characterized by agility and personal responsibility from all employees, in order to stay ahead of the competition and keep every-day tasks running smoothly for long-term gain.

When the pandemic hit, every industry had its own set of challenges that had to be overcome and business procedures analysed and rethought to ensure a healthy revenue stream (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021; Mitreğa & Choi, 2021). The transport, logistics, and freight industry for example faced an exceptionally difficult task as they had to deal with the coordination of a massive number of trucks and transport vehicles, while struggling with drops in cargo transportation business overall; it proved near impossible to adapt to the slashed number of orders and coordinating such a large operation across Europe led to many of these carriers going out of business (Mitreğa & Choi, 2021). Another notable example is that of the hospitality industry as it was considered one of the hardest-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic (Crespí-Cladera et al., 2021; Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Norris et al., 2021). While some industries had a chance to quickly rethink revenue streams, the hospitality industry was completely shut down when the pandemic hit (Breier et al., 2021). According to research, the establishments that managed to avoid bankruptcy, benefited from business model innovation (Breier et al., 2021; Gursoy & Chi, 2020). Embracing new technologies such as service robots and QR code scanning for

information and menus proved beneficial and allowed firms to adapt to the situation (Gursoy & Chi, 2020). Restaurants had to rethink employee roles and place sanitization and social distancing as a top priority by changing work schedules to limit the number of employees working at one time; this was facilitated by limited menu options and take-away options for customers (Norris et al., 2021). The airline industry was another one that suffered a huge blow with the onset of the pandemic (Albers & Rundshagen, 2020; Amankwah-Amoah, 2021; Vinod, 2021). Through accelerated research and development, airlines were able to make use of new, state-of-the-art deep-cleaning technologies that made aircrafts safer vehicles for flight (Amankwah-Amoah, 2021). Furthermore, crew and passenger safety was improved through protective gear and social distancing measures (Albers & Rundshagen, 2020; Amankwah-Amoah, 2021). Virtually every industry was hit by the pandemic in some way or the other and these examples shed some light on how businesses attempted to deal with the crisis at hand.

Employees working at these organizations across various industries also experienced some major changes. They had to get used to new ways of working, while at the same time dealing with the host of uncertainties that came with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. All over the world, employees faced a sudden lack of job security while many were being laid off (Samreen et al., 2022). The ones that were not victim to downsizing faced a ‘survivor-syndrome’ that led to feelings of anxiety, lower motivation, and high levels of uncertainty in one’s own abilities (Samreen et al., 2022). In addition to this, many workers faced added pressures to perform as there were constant concerns and uncertainties about their company’s health in the wake of the pandemic (Samreen et al., 2022; Tu et al., 2021).

This study will focus on how changes due to COVID-19 were met and dealt with by employees across industries. Since the shift in working practices has occurred on a global scale, studying the way it has been dealt with and the impact it has had is a valuable way of understanding the lived experiences of individuals during this change, the wide-reaching impact of changes, and what further facilitation may be helpful for employees to continue to adjust in a better way. This topic is relevant because of the pressing need to understand the impact of the pandemic on the nature of work, well-being of employees, and implications for organizational functionality (Al-Habaibeh et al., 2021). According to the growing body of literature regarding the effects of the pandemic, this study will borrow from and be inspired by the job demands-resources model which claims that when demands at work are high and organizational resources

are low, employees may experience greater dissatisfaction with their job (Demerouti et al., 2001). The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it new demands in the workplace from professionals across a wide variety of industries. With the addition of high uncertainties, perceived demands at work were high and organizations were scrambling to understand what resources would be required to meet the host of new needs. To illustrate this occurrence, an example from the education sector will help shed light on work demands and the supply of organizational resources (Falco et al., 2021; Sokal et al., 2020). For teachers, adapting to new ways of teaching, using new technological tools, keeping students engaged virtually, and incorporating interactive elements to encourage more communication among their classes proved to be new and daunting demands that were tough to keep up with (Sokal et al., 2020). This coupled with their own health and safety concerns in the wake of the pandemic led to a stressful working environment that led to burnout in some cases (Falco et al., 2021). In the study conducted by Sokal et al. (2020) it was seen that teachers who received high levels of support through administration at the educational institution as well as personal relationships were better equipped to deal with the unprecedented changes that came with the pandemic. This example is an interesting one as it highlights how truly complicated it can be to understand the many ways in which employees can be supported by their organizations and provided with the tools and resources they require.

For this research study, it is clear that there is great potential to understand how employees reacted to the crisis of COVID-19, the sudden changes and disruption of routine that came with it, and the new demands that they were faced with. In the light of the disruption of workplaces brought about by the pandemic, this study aims to investigate how employees have coped with the changes, high demands of adapting to change, and how their organizations are assisting them, if at all. The research question for this study is **“How do young employees living in the Netherlands and working at small and medium sized companies respond to work-from-home practices in terms of well-being and productivity?”** The reason for specifically focusing on young employees is that since they are generally at the start of their career, they may struggle more with the changing nature of work (Davies, 2021). According to Davies (2021), young employees may have a set of expectations about how their career would be and may have had to reset these expectations abruptly with the onset of the pandemic. Furthermore, younger employees living in shared accommodations and smaller dorms may face greater difficulty in

focusing on work and they may feel more isolated when they do not have access to social interactions during working hours (Parry et al., 2021). Younger employees are usually at the early stages of their career and have to create their own professional identity to make an impression on their colleagues and managers (Lazzarin, 2021). During the work-from-home period when COVID-19 hit, not being able to make this impression in person led to a perceived stunt in professional growth; younger employees felt insecure about a lack of connection with others in their organization and felt they did not have the chance to prove their own capabilities in the best way (Lazzarin, 202; Ing, 2021). Given these factors, it is interesting to specifically focus on young employees and understand how working from home affected their perceived professional performance and the challenges they faced coping with such a huge change at the start of their career.

Small and medium sized companies will be the main focus here due to the assumption that since these organizations do not have the resources available to large, multinational, or international corporations, they may struggle to provide the care, transitional resources, and help required by their staff to smoothly transition to working from home, especially since they may face greater financial concerns as well (Bartik et al., 2020; Kuckertz et al., 2020). Another reason why small and medium sized enterprises would be an interesting focus is that since there is a lower number of employees, it may in some cases be easier to adapt to change through the logic of inertia, meaning that companies with more employees may take longer to implement changes or troubleshooting tactics compared to companies with less employees (Reeves & Deimler, 2011).

Understanding the context of governmental policies in the Netherlands is also important to gain a clear picture of the challenges faced by small and medium sized companies, and how they were aided. The Dutch government introduced many timely initiatives to support small and medium sized businesses, start ups and scale-ups, and young entrepreneurs during the pandemic (Duteweert, 2020). Small and medium sized companies that were established before the pandemic and had less than 250 employees received grants, loans, and other forms of financial compensation to assist with high operating costs. Financial support schemes were also set up to help companies pay their employees' salaries so they would not be laid off (Stoop, 2022). These measures could potentially allow for lower levels of insecurity within small and medium sized companies and the people they employ. On the flip side, these government policies contributed

to keeping some companies alive artificially, and some struggled financially when the aid schemes came to an end as they could not sustain themselves independently (Stoop, 2022). Understanding the lived experiences of people in the light of these supplementary government policies will be helpful to gain a clearer picture of life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research is relevant at this point in time because there is still a lot being learned and uncovered about the consequences of the pandemic. While the world may have begun to rebuild slowly and gradually, it is still unclear what long lasting effects will remain. According to Popa et al. (2022), employees are a pivotal and crucial aspect of any organization, and their productivity, mental well-being and attitudes are essential in predicting how well a company will perform in any industry. Scholars have broadly theorized that employee anxieties, tensions, and uncertainties pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic adversely affect job performance (Kawugana & Mohammed, 2021; Mun et al., 2022; Popa et al., 2022). Delving into the different aspects of employee health and well-being will shed light on how people react to crises, what is important to them, and their productivity levels at work; it will also help organizations invest efficiently in their staff and understand what they can do better to keep up employee morale, which will benefit the employees as well as the business overall. This research will also prove beneficial for companies to plan for future crises and be better equipped to have contingency plans in place so as to have a guidebook to help smoother transitions and react in a calmer and more organized manner.

2. Theoretical Framework

Studies by Gubler et al. (2020), Shamsi et al. (2021), Sutarto et al. (2021), and Wood et al. (2021) about employee well-being while working from home during the COVID-19 lockdowns reveal contradictory results. In the study by Sutarto et al. (2021), the majority of participants surveyed reported that they prefer having the ability to manage home tasks while also working in the same space; this allows them to be more involved in their family lives without compromising work. On the flip side, the study by Wood et al. (2021) revealed that the majority of participants reported feeling certain challenges to creating this balance. This example sheds some light on the vast variety of viewpoints regarding employee well-being, productivity, and motivation levels across literature. Taking into consideration these studies among others, some main themes emerged namely work-life balance, organizational culture, mental well-being, and productivity.

2.1. Work-Life Balance

For employees who had to suddenly transition to working from home full time during COVID-19, there were multiple challenges faced, and the transition was not an easy one (Syrek et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2021). Syrek et al., (2021) shed light on how employees created a demarcation between work and home life, which was completely blurred when working from home was mandated. The authors explain that this led to multiple logistical issues for employees such as the availability of a physical space for working, undisturbed from home life; people ended up having to work in the same space as other members of the household (Syrek et al., 2021). Those employees who lived with their families, had children, and experienced familial and household responsibilities felt that it was challenging to play so many roles at once (Ipsen et al., 2021; Syrek et al., 2021). Ipsen et al. (2021) shed light on the reality of many employees not having ideal working conditions in their home offices; having to deal with distractions and adjusting to others living in the same space while trying to get work done proved to be difficult for many. It was also discovered that due to working from home, some employees reported an increased level of family conflict brought out by the intermingling of work and home life (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Furthermore, employees had to take extra time and energy to learn how to use new technologies to facilitate their work such as online communication and video-calling software (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2021).

According to the research studies conducted by Shirmohammadi et al. (2022), Irawanto et al. (2021) and Palumbo (2020), working from home during the pandemic led to an unhealthy work-life balance. Employees reported feeling a clash in work and life related demands and expectations which resulted in higher stress levels and a lack of job satisfaction (Irawanto et al., 2021). It was difficult for workers to have a mental and physical separation of work and non-work responsibilities and the spillover effects led to compromises in both aspects (Palumbo, 2020). Furthermore, employees experienced a much higher level of overall fatigue mainly attributed to juggling multiple responsibilities, greater work responsibilities, and elongated work hours (Palumbo, 2020). Since all employees were working from home, there was an expectation that people would be available to answer work calls and finish up tasks after the allocated work times; this occurrence contributed to more tiredness and less free time away from work (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022).

Despite the downsides of working from home prevalent in the literature, there is also a flip side reported by employees. Employees that were coached by their companies through the adjustment and given tips on how to handle the transition were more satisfied with working from home and reported favorable levels of work-life balance (Afrianty et al., 2022; Sutarto et al., 2021). Some employees who had children experienced a positive shift in job satisfaction at the beginning of the pandemic as they felt they could spend more quality time with their kids rather than being at work all day (Syrek et al., 2021). During the first few months of the pandemic, employees had lower workloads as their companies were trying to figure out how best to adjust to the changes; this free time allowed employees to enjoy the work-life balance that tilted towards having more leisure time (Sutarto et al. (2021).

Employees also preferred to work from home due to the greater level of flexibility and autonomy they had which resulted in them being able to create a desirable and workable work-life balance for themselves (Sutarto et al., 2021). It was reported that there were lower levels of stress as home was considered a familiar and comfortable environment and hence led to lower levels of tiredness after work hours (Sutarto et al., 2021). Some employees found it easier to take time out for themselves during the workday as they could take breaks more frequently, cut down on commuting time and create a schedule for themselves that best suited their needs (Ipsen et al., 2021). Overall, looking at the disparities in work-life balance for employees in different living situations, as explained in the literature, is interesting in this context of this research study. This

study built upon the context of these insights and gained firsthand accounts from young employees about how they tried various ways to find balance in their respective routines, the process of this, and their lived experience in the context of the pandemic.

2.2. Organizational Culture

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the nature of work relationships, networking, and communication (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). In terms of recruitment and workplace success, organizational culture was once touted as a pivotal element to the attractiveness of organizations to potential employees (Parry et al., 2021). According to a manual published by the International Facility Management Association, an extremely important element of reorganizing workplaces during the pandemic was to ‘reimagine’ the workplace and rebuild it in a way that allowed employees to feel more involved and integrated into the office culture, albeit online (Hou et al., 2021). To gain a better understanding of how organizational culture shifted and changed during the new working conditions brought about by COVID-19, it is important to lay down a definition that will be used as a benchmark to understand the ‘new normal’.

Organizational culture can be defined as “the way in which members of an organization relate to each other, to their work, and to the outside world that distinguishes them from other organisations” (Hofstede, 1998). Since interactions among coworkers, managers, and company stakeholders changed due to the pandemic, and new ways of working were made mandatory, organizational culture was also altered.

One major concern faced by employees was the break-down of effective communication amongst office colleagues when the pandemic hit (Mustajab et al., 2020; Singh & Kumar, 2020). With a heavy dependency on virtual interactions, coworkers may not be able to build personal relationships effectively as they lack the face-to-face element; there is a sacrificed comfort level as well where colleagues cannot just go up to each other’s desk to strike up a conversation (Singh & Kumar, 2020). Furthermore, working from home led to many people facing internet connectivity issues that hindered free-flowing communication amongst professionals (Marzban et al., 2021; Mustajab et al., 2020). This was one of the issues brought about by working in a home office and had a role to play in some employees not being able to get certain tasks done either. Since effectively, timely, and proactive communication was so imperative to the accomplishment of work tasks during remote working, a good back and forth between managers

and their subordinates was of increased importance during this time (Guzzo et al., 2021; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). Employees felt happier, more valued, and had felt more of a connect with their organization when they felt their managers trusted them to get their work done well from home compared to when they felt their managers were constantly checking in and micromanaging (Guzzo et al., 2021; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). If employees felt that they were being surveilled and micromanaged by their bosses, demonstrating a lack of trust in the working relationship, productivity and motivation levels suffered and employees were unhappy (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Yu & Wu, 2021).

To tackle some of the issues brought about by a compromised organizational culture, some organizations set up extra opportunities for their employees to socialize online. This has been regarded as a way for employees to destress, and rejuvenate (Bakker & van Wingerden, 2021). Since one of the common issues cited by employees in other research studies has been the challenge of social isolation that comes from working from home, this method may assist with employee motivation and rejuvenation, and contributing to creating an online office culture (Meyer et al., 2021; Shamsi et al., 2021). When managers chose to check in with their employees regarding health concerns and morale while working from home, employees felt better about their role in the company overall (Guzzo et al., 2021). During the pandemic, it became increasingly important for managers to leverage culture as a tool to keep the workforce motivated and encourage communication in a way that replicated the physical office environment. An example to illustrate the ways managers did this is to have brainstorming calls where everyone would share ideas for a particular project or task; this way members of a team felt valued and got a sense that their input was valuable and that varying perspectives were needed (Howard-Grenville, 2020). This essentially broke down the idea that people were working in silos as they were making valuable contributions in real time with each other albeit virtually (Howard-Grenville, 2020; Singh & Kumar, 2020). In conclusion, studying the various attempts by organizations to recreate work culture in a virtual setting was interesting to understand whether it was a priority, how employees reacted to it, and how organizational culture had far-reaching affects on employee well-being and productivity. In this research study, speaking to young employees was valuable in understanding what measures contributed to higher well-being and productivity, and how employee perceptions of these efforts varied.

2.3. Mental Well-Being

Perhaps one of the most commonly researched side-effects of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic is overall psychological impact with regards to mental health of employees. Many employees reported increased feelings of loneliness and lower levels of satisfaction as they struggled to detach from work due to the lack of demarcations between work and home space physically (Wood et al., 2021). Due to the fact that opportunities to socialize were limited and restricted across the world, employees felt isolated, and their mental well-being suffered (Gubler et al., 2020). It is important to note how Gubler et al. (2020) defines loneliness: “loneliness refers to perceived social isolation, which does not depend on objective criteria but on subjective feelings” (p. 2324). This goes to show that while employees may have had opportunities to interact with others virtually, they perceived a feeling of loneliness that came about due to a lack of physical interaction. During the completion of work tasks, some employees felt a divide from their team as they felt like the flow of ideas on a professional level was hindered (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). This was caused by communication of a compromised quality and a perceived lack of closeness as conversations between peers had changed in nature and medium (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022).

Furthermore, according to Gubler et al. (2020), some people working from home reported higher levels of stress and despair which increased conflict in their personal lives as well, hence impacting their emotional stability. Employees struggled with keeping their professional and personal lives separate and found that these feelings of emotional instability spilled over into their workdays leading to higher stress levels and dissatisfaction (Gubler et al., 2020; Syrek et al., 2021). In some cases, employees experienced a difficulty in disengaging from work after working hours, which contributed to higher stress levels; even when employees were spending time with their family after working hours, they recalled thinking about work tasks and not being able to separate the two realms (Oakman et al., 2020). Due to the different norms of working in various countries worldwide, professionals in Hong Kong highlighted elevated stress levels throughout the time they spent working from home mainly due to the increased workload (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). As employees feared for their job security and experienced high levels of pressure to continue to perform well, they ended up working longer hours at home, felt very burnt out, and did not get much time to spend away from work (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). While working from home, many employees were faced with the combination of family and work

responsibilities that now had to be managed side by side; due to children being schooled online as well, there were added responsibilities with the kids being at home all the time as well (Galanti et al., 2021; Syrek et al., 2021). Dealing with multiple responsibilities at the same time led to lower focus and in turn heightened stress levels (Galanti et al., 2021).

There were observed spikes in mental-health issues during the pandemic in employees who had to work from home, despite there being some positive outcomes of working from home as well (Gubler et al., 2020; Fukumura et al. 2021; Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). Due to a disparity in working conditions among colleagues in their home offices, employees felt that they were not able to perform as well as employees who did not have family responsibilities and had access to better technology to facilitate work; this led to increased feelings of uncertainty and stress overall (Fukumura et al. 2021). For employees who were satisfied with their home working conditions, mostly those who had manageable family responsibilities, claimed that it was nicer to have autonomy about when to work, being able to take more breaks, and cutting down on commute time, all factors that led to lower stress levels (Fukumura et al. 2021). Overall, it is interesting to note the wide variety of responses about the changes in mental health during the homeworking situation during the pandemic. It can be noted that mental health was a very variable aspect that depended strongly on each employee's working situation, personality, availability of support resources, and nature of personal relationships. In the context of this research study, the varying literature was helpful to understand how different people reacted to working from home differently and this could in part be attributed to differing living situations, social interactions, nature of work, and personality elements. Gaining a firsthand understanding of how young employees experienced their mental health changing, if at all, is a necessary part of understanding the impact of the pandemic on work and life.

2.4. Productivity

Some studies identify the need of employees to engage in meaningful work relationships and communicate with others; this missing fundamental factor leads to decreasing levels of motivation and productivity (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Those employees that received support from their managers and were provided resources to help ease the transition felt like they were better equipped to be more productive and get work done while at home (Galanti et al., 2021). The organizations that provided concessions to employees to improve their working space or

provided a budget for home office renovations experienced more productive employees (Fukumura et al., 2021; Galanti et al., 2021). This measure allowed employees to create a space that was conducive to their own productivity and helped maintain job performance. Productivity must also be viewed in connection to factors like mental well-being, organizational culture, and work-life balance as there are a multitude of factors that can have an impact. This is why it is of utmost importance for organizations to ensure that they check in with employees and harbor connection through online meet and greets, regular check ins, and other social activities (PwC, 2020). A big reason for increased productivity was the absence of commuting, a practice that many cited as stressful and exhausting, hence leading to lower productivity (Patanjali & Bhatta, 2022; Shirmohammadi et al., 2022; Sutarto et al., 2021).

Furthermore, increased interaction with family or household members can also have an impact on productivity levels (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). There have been conflicting reports about the relationship between family interactions and productivity. On one hand, employees enjoy having their loved ones in close proximity and being able to spend more time with them during the workday (Galanti et al., 2021; Syrek et al., 2021; Zimmermann, 2021). Employees reported feeling a sense of comfort and familiarity if they lived with their loved ones during the pandemic as this helped them feel less isolated and alone during the uncertain situation of the pandemic overall (Syrek et al., 2021; Zimmermann, 2021). Due to this, they felt a higher level of overall productivity while working from home. On the other hand, constantly being around others in the homeworking space was distracting and demanding for employees (Fukumura et al., 2021; Irawanto et al., 2021; Palumbo, 2020). Since employees struggled to create an effective work-life balance, they often found themselves being less productive as they had to manage home and work responsibilities at the same time, leading to less focus on work tasks (Irawanto et al., 2021; Syrek et al., 2021).

Other factors like access to technology, managers' attitudes, and relayed perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic had a role to play in changing productivity levels (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021; Mun et al., 2020). Those employees that had access to the technology they needed to get their work done felt more motivated and productive (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021). They had access to the basic tools needed to get their work done and were familiar with how to use this technology; employees who received timely support from organizations about how to use new technologies to accomplish work tasks also demonstrated increased productivity (de Lucas

Ancillo et al., 2021; Kawugana & Mohammed, 2021). Furthermore, employees who received open communication by their managers and bosses about the health of the company and transparent reviews of the way forward for business also felt more motivated to work and were more productive (Mun et al., 2020; Popa et al., 2022). Employees who felt that their job security may be compromised due to downsizing or heavy cost-cutting felt less productive, more anxious, and faced lower motivation levels (Samreen et al., 2022; Tu et al., 2021). Overall, the literature highlights many different factors and concerns that affected employee productivity. For this study, zooming in to young employees and picking up specifically their experience with productivity will help shed light on a focused facet of work during the pandemic.

2.5. Small and Medium Sized Businesses during COVID-19

According to Kuckertz et al. (2020), small companies, especially start-ups, struggle with providing resources to their employees to help ease the transition to working from home during COVID-19. Since small and medium-sized companies employ a lower number of employees compared to multinationals or large corporations, their resources are mostly limited and require external funding to be able to meet the needs of their workforce in terms of well-being and mental health (Kuckertz et al., 2020). According to a comparative study conducted by Skawińska & Zalewski (2020), it could be seen that companies operating on a smaller scale in the EU struggled to provide human capital the extra perks, benefits, and transitional resources required to facilitate a smooth transition during COVID-19. The occurrence of ‘survivor syndrome’ was more common in small and medium sized companies as, in some extreme cases, they were forced to make efforts to cut costs and keep their businesses afloat (Bartik et al., 2020). The reality of changing business operations and cost-cutting was a major source of anxiety to employees who were working in these companies (Bartik et al., 2020; Cusmano & Raes, 2020). Furthermore, business owners of small and medium sized businesses were much more pessimistic about the future of their companies in light of the COVID-19 pandemic; their belief that they would soon go bankrupt or would not make profits had an impact on the employees (Humphries et al., 2020). A survey conducted in the United States by Buffington et al. (2020) indicated that “almost 90% of small businesses experienced a strong (51%) or moderate (38%) negative impact from the pandemic; 45% of businesses experienced disruptions in supply chains; 25% of businesses has less than 1-2 months cash reserves” (Cusmano & Raes, 2020). In the

context of the Netherlands, these threats were lower due to various government aid schemes but were not non-existent. The overall atmosphere of tension was a reality as rapid changes had to be made; employees were concerned during this process and were unsure about how they would be impacted (CBS Netherlands, 2022). The precarity of small and medium sized businesses in the economic space will set an interesting context for this study. These businesses were faced with great challenges on many fronts and had to relearn many operational aspects of their business.

2.6. Young Employees during COVID-19

The younger population of employees is seen to struggle more with working remotely than older employees (Lazzarin, 2021). Lazzarin (2021) explains that since these employees have just started their careers and are getting used to the culture and workspace, they find it difficult to work from home due to COVID-19. Parry et al., (2021) also highlights some major drawbacks young people face while working from home. The authors discuss how young people may find it difficult to work from home because of shared living spaces and increased social isolation from family, friends, and co-workers. Since young adults are still at a developmental stage in their lives, they are still at a point where they are forming their professional identities in the workplace and making efforts to profile themselves in a specific way; not being able to go to work and do this in person has detrimental effects on mental well-being and productivity (Ing, 2021). While working from home during the pandemic, young employees were unable to create the impression they had wanted to, and this led to a perceived stunt in professional growth. Not being able to interact with colleagues and managers in person led to feelings of insecurity and a lack of meaningful connection with others at the workplace (Lazzarin, 202; Ing, 2021).

Young adults living in the Netherlands reported increased levels of stress about their job or education during the pandemic; they were mainly focused on the negative effects of the pandemic and felt a high level of social isolation from friends, family, and peers (CBS Netherlands, 2022). Young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 were also very concerned with themselves or their loved ones contracting the COVID-19 virus which enhanced feelings of stress, fear, and uncertainty (Longest & Kang, 2022). There was also an increase in symptoms of depression amongst young adults who had to stay at home as a result of the pandemic (Longest & Kang, 2022). Job security for young people also plummeted: “with closures in sectors that traditionally employ the youth labour force, such as retail, tourism and consumer services,

younger staff are often the first to be made redundant, moved onto insecure work contracts or not find jobs at all” (International Labour Organization, 2022). For all these reasons, young employees will be especially interesting to study and focus on in this research study. Focusing on this vulnerable group is even more important because they will be comprising the majority of the workforce in years to come as they get older and occupy even more positions within organizations.

3. Methodology

This research study was conducted only among those individuals who were living in the Netherlands while working from home; some of the people interviewed were working for companies that were headquartered in another EU country but moved to the Netherlands when the pandemic hit, hence they experienced the beginning of the pandemic while living in the Netherlands. Interviewees between the ages of 18 and 30 were interviewed as it can be argued that younger workers may be struggling more with the changes that have come about with remote working, as uncovered by existing literature (Davies, 2021). Small and medium sized companies will be the main focus due to the fact that since they may have a limited number of resources available to them, they may struggle to provide the care, transitional resources, and help required by their staff to smoothly transition to working from home (Kuckertz et al., 2020).

To gain an in-depth understanding of the ways employees have been dealing with working from home in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to consider their individual lived cases. This research project focuses on the feelings, struggles, and concerns employees have as the nature of work continues to change around them (Johnson, 2001). To truly be able to zoom in to individual lived experiences, in depth interviews was the most viable option for this research. To understand each interviewee's case would provide rich and detailed insights, and hence qualitative research was the best method for this study. Within this type of research, qualitative interviews were then conducted to understand how young employees experienced their lives while working from home when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

3.1. Qualitative Interviews

Within the category of qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were conducted for the purpose of this research study. In-depth interviews were useful in understanding how employees made sense of the new ways of working and what policies and practices they thought were useful or challenging (Johnson, 2001; Legard et al., 2003). Semi-structured interviews provided the chance to engage well with the participants as there was room for human interaction, follow up questions, and clarifications in real time (Legard et al., 2003; Roulston & Choi, 2018). This method was particularly beneficial as it provided insights on how young employees in the sample engaged in "meaning-making practices" (Dumitrica & Pridmore, 2019). In the context of this research, these meaning-making practices shed light on how young

employees experienced the onset of COVID-19 and how they adapted to the new homeworking conditions they were faced with.

In-depth interviews were suitable for this research in order to collect data that “concerns very personal matters such as an individual’s self, lived experience, values and decisions, occupational ideology, cultural knowledge, or perspective” (Johnson, 2001, p. 104). For this research regarding how people reacted and dealt with the working conditions during the pandemic, interviews helped to understand the interviewees’ reactions, thought processes, mindsets, and emotions regarding the changing of their own lives and routines. In this study, the interviews closely resembled an informal, conversation which was structured according to a rough interview guide (shared in Appendix A). The guide allowed room for using participants’ responses to spark further questions as well to truly understand their own unique situations and circumstances (Berry, 1999). Within these interviews, asking open-ended questions that allowed space for people to include their personal viewpoints, opinions, and emotions was of utmost importance; these questions were loosely structured into themes picked up from the relevant literature on the topic (Berry, 1999). This form of loosely structured interviews addressing certain themes allowed for probing, elaboration, and follow-up questions that provided a more holistic idea of an individual’s thoughts (Adams, 2015).

Conducting these interviews in the best possible way while adhering to best practices in this realm was of utmost importance. While the interviews were being conducted, the interviewee was made to feel comfortable and secure in the environment and with the researcher; building a rapport here was beneficial to gathering rich data (Alsaawi, 2014; Johnson, 2001). This was done by making small talk with the participant as engaging in light-hearted conversation to get started made both parties feel at ease. For this study, the interviews were conducted this way to ensure a casual and conversational back-and-forth allowing participants feeling comfortable and willing to share as many details about their experiences during the pandemic as possible.

The interviews started off with easier questions like demographics and the specific situation that each interviewee experienced was described with regards to which industry they were working in and how their company was affected because of the pandemic. These questions were easier to answer and allowed the interviewees to give a more surface level introduction to what they went through during this time (Alsaawi, 2014). Moving forward and delving into the

overarching themes was then easier as the ice had been broken and interviewees spoke more freely about some of their personal struggles, relationships, and changed work routines. By using the insights gained from existing literature on the topic, the interview guide contained questions regarding mental well-being, productivity, work-life balance, and organizational culture. The interview was concluded with overall thoughts and additional comments that the interviewees wanted to share. Empathy and understanding from the researcher's side here was of paramount importance to make the interviewees feel comfortable and heard (Adams, 2015; Berry, 1999). Towards the end of the interviews, participants were again brought back to some lighter questions regarding how their organizations dealt and assisted with the changes coming about due to working from home becoming a norm. Rounding off the interviews once again with lighter questions and shifting the focus away from personal subjects helped to preserve the conversational tones of the interviews (Alsaawi, 2014; Berry, 1999).

3.2. Sample

Sampling Procedure

For this research, participants were selected through snowball sampling. To ensure that the selection criteria was met, potential interviewees were initially targeted by posting on LinkedIn, and requesting people who met the set of selection criteria to come forward and opt for an interview. The selection criteria mentioned in the post called on people who:

1. Were between the ages of 18 and 30
2. Were living in the Netherlands when the pandemic hit
3. Worked for a small or medium sized company that employed no more than 200 people

After this post, there were a few people who reached out privately through the LinkedIn direct messaging feature mentioning that they fit the criteria and they would be willing to participate in the research by scheduling an interview. Once a few potential participants had come forward and shown interest in doing the interviews, they were scheduled to take place at a time of the respondent's choosing. These individuals were given the choice to schedule an interview in person or online based on where they were currently located and their convenience. It was mentioned to them that face-to-face interviews were preferred, but online interviews via Zoom or Microsoft Teams were also possible. Initially three interviewees were found through the LinkedIn post; once these individuals had been interviewed, they were asked to recommend

others in their social circle who fit the criteria as well. Hence, snowball sampling was used for this research as this seemed to be the most feasible way to gather participants. Since the age group was limited to the 18 to 30 range, snowball sampling proved to be a workable sampling technique to gather the respondents that fit the criteria required by the research. It was important to reach potential interviewees who I did not personally know in order to ensure that the interviews would be detailed and there would be no previous assumptions from either person (the interviewer or interviewee). Therefore, LinkedIn proved to be a good medium to reach out to people who were not in my immediate social circle but were mere professional acquaintances in my broader social circle. This was important as the young employees interviewed felt comfortable sharing their experiences but also had completely new information that I did not know about them before.

Snowball sampling, in the context of this research, did have its own pros and cons. To access the individuals required for this research, snowball sampling seemed to be the best course of action due to the selection criteria required. Snowball sampling seemed like a good choice because of the sensitive nature of the interview, especially with regards to mental health. Snowball sampling would allow people to be referred by individuals they already knew so it was easier to establish a rapport with the interviewee and to make them feel comfortable about answering questions about their innermost feelings and struggles during a challenging change in their lives (Flick, 2009). One important thing to watch out for while searching for interviewees was to ensure that they were not all people that were personally known, so they would have new information to impart (Flick, 2009). This proved to be easy as the people recommended by the first round of interviewees were all acquaintances that were not personally known by me as an interviewer, and hence information they provided was new.

Composition of Sample

Out of the 10 interviews conducted, 7 interviewees opted for the online interview option so that they could have more flexibility and convenience as they had busy schedules and doing a face-to-face interview at a particular location was tougher for them. 3 interviews were then conducted in person. Every interview lasted for 45 minutes on average, with a minimum interview duration of 35 minutes and a maximum interview duration of 75 minutes. Initially, the aim was to conduct 12 interviews as a reasonable number to achieve valuable insights. However,

only 10 interviewees were found that fit the criteria, were willing to participate, and were required to reach saturation within the data. After the first phase of interviews was conducted, many new insights came to light that helped to tweak the interview guide further and add some questions that facilitated with more in-depth data collection. These additions and alterations in the interview guide are illustrated in Appendix A. Each phase consisted of 3 interviews, after and during which iteration helped to add more probing questions and change the wording of some questions for richer insights (Adams, 2015). By focusing on creating a conversational and comfortable space for interviewees, showing interest in their innermost thoughts, and probing based on their previous answers, the interviewees were willing to share their experiences in great detail (Berry, 1999). During the third phase of interviews, it was clear that saturation was being reached as answers and themes that emerged were being reinforced and did not add new insights any longer (Adams, 2015; Flick, 2009). Due to this, after 10 interviews were complete, it was clear that respondents had begun to give similar responses and no new insights were being gained.

These interviews were recorded so as to minimize the number of notes that have to be taken in the interview to really be able to focus on the interviewee and keep them engaged in conversation, for it to really feel like a rather open conversation, shaped by the rough interview guide (Berry, 1999). The sample was composed with a majority of females and a minority of males, 7 interviewees were female, while 3 were male; the respondents were also mainly from marketing and sales departments. The interviewing process was divided into phases: each phase consisted of conducting and transcribing three interviews. This allowed for revision and reevaluation of the interview guide and reflection where necessary before going on to the next phase, i.e., the next three interviews. After the total number of interviews were conducted and transcribed, data analysis ensued. Details of interviewees, certain distinguishing demographic information, and serial numbers are demonstrated in the table:

Table 1

Identity of Interviewees

Interviewee Identifier	Demographics
Interviewee 1	Female, 22 years, digital marketeer
Interviewee 2	Female, 27, sales executive
Interviewee 3	Male, 25, music production assistant

Interviewee 4	Female, 23, assistant project manager
Interviewee 5	Female, 28, record label liaison
Interviewee 6	Female, 25, PR executive
Interviewee 7	Female, 26, marketing executive
Interviewee 8	Male, 28, media planner
Interviewee 9	Male, 25, marketing executive
Interviewee 10	Female, 23, social media marketer

3.3. Data Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed, each one was studied, and initial impressions and observations were noted down. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data from the interviews and categorize it into themes. According to the process of thematic analysis laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006), this data analysis process began by immersion into the transcribed interviews and the noting down of any initial codes or labels that emerged. For this process of coding, Microsoft Excel was used throughout, and this initial coding was done for each interview individually. After this initial screening of the data, it was once again studied and cross-checked to start forming any initial themes and sub-themes that roughly began to come to light. For thematic analysis, a theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). This process involved studying the initial codes and seeing which ones fit best into clusters of meaning. For example, codes like ‘increased productivity’, ‘improved performance’ and ‘decreased productivity’ were clustered into the larger theme of ‘changes in productivity’. Similarities and differences were noted among the responses, and these were valuable to form themes as opposing responses on a similar topic still formed part of the same theme of discussion. For example, ‘frequent check ins with bosses’ and ‘infrequent check ins with bosses’ formed part of the same axial code of ‘nature of interaction with bosses’. This kind of axial code, coupled with others like ‘social activities with bosses’ and ‘virtual team meetings with bosses’ all formed part of the overarching theme of ‘communication with managers’. This process of theme formation was repeated until saturation was reached and the data seemed to be categorized appropriately with the themes discovered as a roadmap for understanding the data collected. It was recognized that saturation was being reached when new interview codes were not revealing anything different within the data and the same old codes

were being repeated to label the new interview transcriptions. For example, in Interview 1, the interviewee mentioned:

I 100% preferred being in person with my colleagues, because the connection that you make just like walking together to the coffee machine or taking a break together and having your lunch one on one talking to each other about what everyone is doing in their life is a good natural break (Interviewee 1).

This section of the interview was coded as 'missed connecting with colleagues'. In a later interview, the interviewee mentioned something similar:

I think I definitely missed our morning coffee conversations. I think there's nothing like talking to your colleagues in the morning and just catching up on their normal lives... I feel like getting to know your colleagues was much easier in person than online, so I think it affected my relationships with my colleagues (Interviewee 10).

Both these interviewees mentioned missing the in-person connection with their colleagues in the context of chatting with them about things other than work, and hence were coded in the same way. This example of similar insights stretched to all other themes as well during the last few interviews and it was clear that no new insights were coming forward. The themes found were then named and defined to provide a holistic and clear picture of the interview responses (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Thematic analysis was chosen as the data analysis method for this research due to the flexible and systematic nature of this method (Braun & Clarke, 2012). By conducting thematic analysis step by step, the large amounts of data gathered did not seem as daunting and could then be further linked to wider theoretical concepts and placed in context of existing literature on the topic (Alhojailan, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2012). During the formation of themes, it was imperative to remain critical rather than descriptive as value could only be truly derived from the research in this way; it was important to read between the lines of what the interviewees were trying to convey and capture that in a succinct theme (Alhojailan, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2012). In the context of this research, the interviewees experiences, understanding, and meaning making of the changes they faced provide a solid base for thematic analysis (Alhojailan, 2012). Identifying patterns of understanding and emotions within the data collected allowed for meaningful themes to come to light. The table demonstrating the process of coding and theme formation can be found in Appendix B.

3.4. Research Ethics

During the research study, it was extremely important to remain reflexive throughout the process (Roulston & Choi, 2018). While interviewing participants as well as conducting the analysis, notes were kept regarding any personal biases, perspectives, and taken-for-granted assumptions (Johnson, 2001). An example of this was noting down the fact that since I had also been working for an advertising agency, I knew what the workload was like especially during the pandemic for one of the interviewees who had a similar experience working in the advertising industry. In our conversation during the interview, I mentioned that I could relate, and I noted down a memo that said: 'interviewee might not have fully elaborated because understanding was assumed'. These kinds of notes helped me remain critical throughout the process of analysis and helped me take some responses with a grain of salt due to personal connection with the interviewee and some possible assumptions that the interviewee may have held. Certain best practices were followed during the interview process to ensure richer results. The interviewees were not interrupted during their responses; they were made to feel comfortable and were reminded that they could stop at any time if they wish, as well as choose not to answer a particular question. At the beginning of the interviews, they were asked for consent to record and the purpose of this practice; they were ensured that their responses and identity would be kept confidential and once the transcriptions were complete, the audio files for the recorded interviews would be deleted.

Transparency and systematicity was ensured from the beginning of the research process and each decision was justified and explained in the form of notes and memos. Since the process of thematic analysis followed was completely in line with the one outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012) it was easier to follow and replicate as a reliable and valid method of analysis.

4. Results

This section will present the main themes that emerged through thematic analysis of the individual interviews that were conducted. After speaking with the interviewees and hearing their feelings, thoughts, and concerns while working from home, certain patterns emerged that were interested to delve into. A first theme that emerged was that interviewees attempted to create a sense of community in some way while they were in isolation, which allowed them to feel a sense of group belonging, whether on a professional or personal level. Secondly, productivity fluctuated through the different stages of the pandemic and was usually fueled by optimistic or pessimistic mindsets. Thirdly, the communication between interviewees and their managers played a major role in how employee well-being and productivity shifted, which tied in with the perceived organizational culture. These three main themes will be discussed in further detail with examples from the interviews conducted. The themes and their definitions are also illustrated in the table:

Table 2

Definitions of Identified Themes

Themes	Sub-divisions	Definitions
Recreating a Sense of Community in Isolation	Personal relationships	Ways in which personal relationships were leveraged to create a sense of group belonging
	Professional relationships	Ways in which professional relationships were leveraged to create a sense of group belonging
Phases of Productivity	Phase 1: Pandemic Hit	Motivation and productivity in week 1 to week 4 of the pandemic
	Phase 2: Reality setting in	Motivation and productivity in month 2 to month 4 of the pandemic

	Phase 3: New normal	Motivation and productivity in month 5 onwards of the pandemic
Communication with Managers	Favorable communication	Open, candid, and frequent communication between managers and interviewees
	Unfavorable communication	Infrequent, guarded, and overtly formal communication between managers & interviewees

4.1. Recreating a Sense of Community in Isolation

One of the main themes that emerged was the importance of community and a sense of belonging for the interviewees that had to shift to working from home when the pandemic hit. The interviewees were seeking this sense of community on an even more heightened level when the pandemic forced everyone into social isolation from friends, family, peers, and colleagues. They seemed to try to recreate this in some form whether that was through virtual group activities, phone calls, or regular check ins. If they were not able to recreate some form of social closeness to the people in their lives, they struggled to cope with the changes brought about by the pandemic. Interviewees were seeking this feeling of community and social closeness through personal relationships as well as work relationships, and this section will be divided into these two spheres to gain a better understanding of how people were impacted by this.

Personal relationships

When the pandemic hit, there was a lot of uncertainty about the virus itself and interviewees expressed that they were unsure about how it would impact them and their loved ones. Knowing that they were faced with a highly contagious virus, these young adults tried to take the social isolation rule seriously and not meet their friends and family, due to the fear that they may make them sick. This lack of social interaction with people who they deemed their support system, along with the uncertainties brought about by COVID, made interviewees feel like they had to make a conscious effort to maintain their relationships. On a normal day, before COVID hit, maintaining these personal relationships was an almost taken-for-granted occurrence as meeting loved ones was just a part of a normal week or a normal routine.

Now all of a sudden, with the onset of the pandemic, these interviewees had to make a conscious effort to reach out to friends and family members and get innovative with the way they would interact. Video-calling through WhatsApp was a medium that was heavily relied on to recreate face-to-face interactions. Sometimes friends would do group video calls and cook together or work out together to feel like they were not alone and were surrounded by their close friends while at home. Many times, participants would plan to go for walks together, go cycling together, or just be outdoors with others as this was the only thing that was allowed, although in small groups. Even though people were not allowed to meet indoors at other's homes, the young adults interviewed would often go to visit their family members if they lived nearby and would sit outside to socialize with them. One of the interviewees mentioned that this was much more difficult to do during the colder months right when COVID started: "during like the cold months it was bad because I was very isolated, but in summer it was much easier to see people outside" (Interviewee 2). It was also interesting to note that the interviewees who mentioned that they did not experience a negative impact on their mental health explained this by mentioning how they had loved ones nearby and could interact with them on a regular basis:

When COVID hit he [my boyfriend] couldn't travel anymore. I was able to spend much more time with him, which was great so yeah, like I wouldn't say it really affected me mentally that much. Also, because like in the same town I have my grandparents, I have like my cousins and my aunt and they didn't take COVID very serious, so I was still able to see them, and it was no problem to go and visit them (Interviewee 2).

This shows how important it was for these participants to have a support system in place and have people around who they interacted with on a daily basis. When their social interactions did not change drastically, they felt like that sense of belonging and community was replicated and took away some of the feelings of isolation. Many interviewees also tried to replicate previous social activities to create a sense of social communion. Some mentioned baking with their friends over video call, taking virtual group workout classes, and going out in nature with others where possible. Creating a sense of 'normalcy' whether real or perceived was extremely important for everyone interviewed and to use virtual tools to make themselves feel like they were in close contact with others was vital.

On the flip side, there were those interviewees who did not have access to a support system in the form of family or friends in close proximity and hence struggled with their mental

well-being. Those who lived alone reported finding it difficult to create a routine for themselves that helped them to feel connected with others. This however did not mean that having that sense of community was not important to those who did not have people nearby:

Knowing that other people are in the same situation as you, even though it might feel like it's only you alone in the studio, for example, or in your apartment. But knowing that everyone else around you is also in a similar situation, makes you feel less lonely
(Interviewee 1).

This was an interesting discovery as the pandemic helped some of the interviewees feel like they were a part of something bigger and they were not alone because others across the world were going through the same isolating feeling that they were. Recognizing that everyone was feeling alone at this time was something that made some respondents feel like they were not so alone as they belonged to a wider community that was experiencing something similar.

Professional relationships

In many situations, interviewees relied on their professional relationships and work colleagues to feel that sense of community. Even before the pandemic, some interviewees mentioned that they had close ties with their work colleagues and since work took up most of their days, these relationships were important in their lives as long hours were spent in close proximity with coworkers. When the pandemic hit, communication with colleagues changed drastically across the board. Interviewees found themselves grappling to recreate communication with their coworkers in the best way possible to replicate in-person interactions. The young adults interviewed mentioned that what they missed the most about working from the office was being able to make small talk with coworkers, have chats over coffee, or build personal relationships that in turn helped them in their work. This sense of community seemed to hold especially true for smaller companies: “considering my company was so small, we really felt like we were all doing this together... so close yet so far in a manner of speaking so we had a sense of community” (Interviewee 1).

It is also important to note that organizational culture was an important reason for these young adults to be attracted to working within a particular company. An informal company culture where colleagues would have good times together and build personal relationships alongside work relationships was a favorable aspect of working in a particular company and

contributed to job satisfaction. This aspect shifted in some important ways when the pandemic hit, and the nature of these casual and friendly work relationships changed as colleagues no longer had the same casual way of communicating because they were not in close proximity with each other:

It just didn't feel completely right like this was my first proper job and we would... have really fun times at the office like the people there were a lot of fun, super informal culture... I really found that enjoyable and felt like I suited within that and [that] was also part of the motivation to take the job. That kind of completely disappeared as soon as we went into remote working. So, I would definitely say that the first few weeks were quite lonely. It's just different to what you expect when you take a first job, and you know what the office is like and you're super motivated to go into that position so that was tough (Interviewee 3).

This was an example of an interesting insight talking about the extent of the impact that occurred due to the lack of informal communication with colleagues. When work from home began for young adults, it is important to consider that many of them were in the early stages of their career and they were looking forward to being a part of a community at the office. When they suddenly lost that feeling of community with their coworkers, they struggled to feel that sense of community once again.

Some interviewees had an easier time recreating that feeling of interconnectedness with their work colleagues and reported feeling more positive, optimistic, and motivated during the beginning of the pandemic. For individuals working in smaller companies, the size of the team played a role in enhancing those feelings of connectedness and community. When good work relationships translated into a support system while working from home, employees were happier and reported feeling more like a team that came together:

We also had a bigger meeting every alternate week where we would talk to the rest of the offices in the other countries and kind of do games with all my colleagues. So, we would all kind of get to know each other a bit more and whoever was new could become part of the company culture (Interviewee 10).

When a sense of community was recreated with office colleagues, whether that was through catch-up sessions during work meetings or regular check ins on a personal level away from work timings, interviewees shared that they felt satisfied with their job during the pandemic. Fostering

these personal relationships with work colleagues also helped to enhance productivity and motivation when it came to work tasks; according to interviewees, job satisfaction was also higher when this sense of community was upheld virtually during homeworking.

Employees interviewed did recognize that not everyone had the privilege of having a good relationship with work colleagues. They also acknowledged that when teams are smaller, and the company itself is not extremely hierarchical, it is easier to maintain close connections with work colleagues. When these personal relationships were maintained, employees thought that they performed better professionally as well. They have a sense of comfort knowing that they can easily reach out to coworkers or team members for help on work tasks without hesitation. It makes them feel more eager and willing to do their job well as they have the tools to excel in terms of a supportive work force. When managers and bosses were also involved in fostering personal relationships with employees, mental well-being and productivity was higher as well due to the heightened sense of community and the 'we're-in-this-together' attitude, as mentioned by the respondents. This alignment of values, priorities, and attitudes on a professional level was hence quoted to be extremely important when it came to employee well-being. Even during times of uncertainty, when interviewed employees were not sure whether their jobs were safe, and what the future would hold in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of them felt better and more optimistic knowing that their coworkers and colleagues were all communicating transparently. Through this regular, informal, and personalized communication, interviewees felt a greater sense of belonging to their organization.

4.2. Phases of Productivity

Productivity levels were seen to be closely linked to a myriad of different factors. Across the spectrum of interviewees, productivity levels waxed and waned frequently. It was interesting to note how personal attitudes and emotions towards the future seemed to be connected to different productivity levels at different times. When interviewees felt optimistic about their role in their company and their role as family members and friends, they responded to the world around them in a much more positive way. The attitude they had towards the pandemic was also an important element as some saw it as a time to slow down and spend more time doing things they enjoyed, while others felt restrained, bored, and scared about the uncertain future before them. These varying optimistic and pessimistic emotions were also seen in each individual,

where at times they could focus on the more positive aspects, while at times the negativity was more prevalent. These feelings could be seen in phases as the interviewees recounted their own personal experiences and attitudes as the pandemic progressed. Dividing these experiences into phases helped to illustrate feelings of optimism and pessimism throughout the pandemic and where these feelings came from. This section will be divided into the three distinct phases that participants recounted and how their well-being and productivity levels changed through the course of this time. Phase 1 was recounted as the time that the pandemic had just hit, and participants spoke about this period lasting for the first month; rough dates can be pinned down as 10th March 2020 to 10th April 2020. Phase 2 was recounted by interviewees as the time when they began to understand the reality of the pandemic and the uncertain future ahead of them with regards to their own personal lives. This time period can be roughly pinned down as 10th April 2020 till 10th July 2020. Phase 3 was recounted as the time period when participants began to get used to new ways of working and socializing coupled with the realization that some changes were here to stay, for example, hybrid working methods. This time period can be roughly pinned down as 10th July 2020 till the present (May 2020); participants gave insights about how their lives are still impacted and the learnings they have had from the pandemic and homeworking practices.

Phase 1: When the Pandemic Hit

At the beginning of the pandemic, when interviewees had to abruptly start working from home, they were faced with a major change that affected many aspects of their day. When the pandemic hit initially, everyone mentioned that they thought it would last for a few weeks only until things would ‘go back to normal’: “I mean I had a good time at the start because I kept thinking that this would be this would be over soon” (Interviewee 9). Since this occurrence was so new and the whole world was grappling to understand the extent of the disease, how far-reaching its impact was, and what it actually meant to be living through this time, different perceptions of this first phase could be identified in the interview data.

The majority of interviewees mentioned that they thought the changes suddenly implemented due to COVID-19 would be short-lived and they would have to work from home for only a few weeks until they would be allowed to meet their loved ones again and go back to the office in person. This new change was exciting for some, as all of a sudden, they did not have

to commute to work, they had much more time to spend at home doing things they enjoyed and had more time to focus on themselves. These young employees found themselves working from home with a lower level of pressure from their bosses and managers to get their work done as they were not physically at the office.

I did feel that I was allowed a level of freedom I didn't expect, which was great... the type of leadership [before the pandemic] was focused on micromanagement... we were kind of controlled at every stage, which was not the case once we moved to remote work and so everything kind of felt a bit more laid back and ... the beginning was really nice (Interviewee 4).

Not having as much accountability while working from home was one of the biggest changes that interviewees mentioned experiencing. They were not in an office setting, and hence had more privacy while they worked. This also meant that these employees were then taking breaks much more regularly and working shorter hours overall.

I did not have to wake up way earlier to commute, for example. So, in that way you could say 'life' balance was a bit more because I got to sleep in... have a proper breakfast instead of having to quickly run and go to the office. With that you could say that it improved my... life standard in that manner. It was a bit more calm in the morning than a very hurried alarm induced morning (Interviewee 1).

This was a common theme for the young employees who were interviewed as they mentioned really enjoying the fact that they did not have to wake up very early for their commute to work: "when you work from home you have... a lot more time... you don't have to commute, and like I just felt like I had more time to myself" (Interviewee 2). When these employees had more time to themselves, they felt they could do things they had been putting off for a while due to lack of time. Some individuals mentioned being able to read books, catch up on TV series, chat with friends, and work out, amongst other hobbies:

I played games on my console during work. That gave me some time to myself and whenever you know I had a ring from my client or from my manager, I would just quickly respond through my phone, so it wasn't that I had to be in a certain position, certain place and also obviously when there is no monitoring at home, it's impossible for people to know what you're actually doing on your time, so it was kind of like a mini vacation [at the start] (Interviewee 9).

Those who were living at home with their loved ones enjoyed the quality time they could now spend together as previously busy schedules had hindered this. When the pandemic hit, businesses were also unsure about how to proceed. This meant that many projects were put on hold, budgets were cut, and work did slow down a bit while organizations tried to adapt to and understand what was going on. In light of this reduced workload for the interviewed employees who worked at these small and medium sized companies, the work tasks were more manageable, and could be done in a shorter number of hours overall. For many, this was a good break from their workload pre-pandemic, and they made the most out of the extra hours they had in the day. Productivity and motivation levels were more or less unchanged at this point as the novelty of this new way of working had not yet worn off.

On the flip side, there were some interviewees who experienced feelings of unease and disturbing uncertainty in light of what was happening. For those who had just started their careers, this change was not good news as they had not had time to establish a rapport with their colleagues and managers. They had not fully been able to integrate into the organizations they were a part of, and when work became remote so abruptly, they felt like they were at a disadvantage because they could not really connect with their company.

It just didn't feel completely right like this was my first proper job and... during the internship we would have really fun times at the office... there was a super informal culture and I really found that enjoyable... I suited within that and that was also part of the motivation to take the job... [that] completely disappeared as soon as we went into remote working (Interviewee 3).

These feelings led to more disgruntled interviewees who experienced lowered motivation levels and productivity levels. They had expected something completely different and when these expectations were shattered with the onset of the pandemic, it was difficult for them to adjust and feel optimistic about their career and their role in the company they were working in during the initial stages. Some employees were alarmed by the changes and were concerned about their job safety. They had heard or read stories about downsizing and were concerned about how their companies would handle the change and whether they would be laid off or not. Since some small businesses did suffer economically, young employees were concerned about how their overall career would be impacted. This did lead to feelings of stress and in turn lowered motivation levels as there were other concerns at the forefront. Furthermore, employees were worried about

their health and the health of their loved ones. Since there was not too much reliable information available about the pandemic itself at the start, there was a lot of speculation going around about how dangerous it really was. The thought of contracting a potentially deadly disease was a very stressful thought for the interviewees and they were especially concerned about family members who were older or immune-compromised: “with everything actually going on in the world that was stressful... so it was a bit difficult to focus... in the beginning because you're thinking of your family and friends... and your own health” (Interviewee 1). Due to these stressful thoughts some interviewees did report feeling a level of disconnect from their work as they were worried about other things going on.

Phase 2: Reality Setting In

After the first few weeks had passed, and government regulations continued to tighten, the young employees interviewed realized that the pandemic may not end as quickly as was initially thought. This was a troubling realization and led to a lot of stress and demotivation for the interviewees. The changes that the majority of them had initially thought would last only a few weeks now seemed to be stretching for much longer than previously anticipated. As countries worldwide continued to go into lockdown, a very bleak future was anticipated, and it seemed likely that the pandemic would last for a long time. For interviewees, during this time, they realized that they would have to cope with the same work situation for a while, and work from home would be a reality for them for the foreseeable future.

For many young employees who were interviewed it was clear that this would be a difficult situation and very tough to cope with. One of the most notable struggles for young employees was not being able to do things that had initially helped them destress and recover from their workdays:

I couldn't dress in the way I liked because I didn't go out. I didn't travel which is also a huge passion of mine. I couldn't go out to restaurants, Uhm, I couldn't go out into art stores, I couldn't go out and do things that inspire me and that fuel me... I was really more struggling with like self-identity like what is my style, what inspires me... I was just seeing the same thing all the time basically (Interviewee 7).

Struggling with their own sense of identity was an interesting aspect because engaging in these hobbies and activities had helped interviewees feel grounded and enjoy their lives. When

COVID hit, most of these things could no longer be done and this took a huge toll on productivity and motivation levels at work as these were important aspects of one's holistic personality. It was clear during this time that work and leisure time could not be so clearly separated as both had an impact on each other. When work was hectic, communication was slow, and tasks were being done in isolation, productivity was hampered, but the same was true when individuals were dissatisfied in their personal lives.

Being at home all the time was a tough situation for some employees as their living conditions were not conducive to working in this space for a prolonged time period. There were roommates and family members present that made it difficult to have focused work hours and a separation of physical space that was important for mental clarity. "I just wasn't feeling comfortable in the place that I was supposed to be feeling comfortable, which was my home so that alone... [can] influence your productivity and just your ability to function" (Interviewee 3). While there was a negative impact on productivity and motivation levels, there was also a sense of lowered well-being, and living in a way that was not supporting self-care. Some interviewees had to try and balance responsibilities at home as well as work at the same time which was challenging.

There are too many distractions at home... and I think that if you go to the office, it's just this work environment and at home it's this leisure environment right so every now and then I'm like, oh, I still need to do this and I want to do the laundry these classic things, I mean, you just don't have these kinds of things at the office (Interview 5).

Not having this separation of physical space led to some interviewees not being able to create that separation of mental space either; many did acknowledge that doing that would have required a great deal of mental discipline. This was tough and nearly impossible for some to do, and due to this difficulty in creating a separation, they struggled to be productive in an environment that didn't support their own ideal way of working.

For some interviewees, it became difficult to go such a long period of time without being able to socialize with friends and family. Even people who identified themselves as 'relatively introverted' were missing the time they could go out and meet a friend over coffee, or just be able to go out and see social activity going on around them. In some cases, respondents claimed to be experiencing depressive symptoms due to the lack of interaction with others and feeling a lack of purpose in their day overall. The benefits they had quoted when COVID hit, such as

being able to sleep in and having more time to themselves soon became disadvantages as they now craved a normalcy in their routine in terms of waking up in the morning with a clear sense of purpose. Having a lack of accountability with regards to their workday also led to them not feeling the need to push themselves to work very hard and this seemed to contribute to feelings of complacency and low levels of motivation.

Over time, after interviewees had become used to working from home, it was clear that many employees within organizations did not end up spending as much time working as before. The young employees interviewed mentioned that it was difficult to get a hold of coworkers and managers when required as people were not always available: “when things went online, I just couldn't get a hold of people basically... I would send them messages they wouldn't respond. I would ask them for feedback they wouldn't respond” (Interviewee 7). It was observed that coworkers also were not always working, which led to decreased productivity levels for others who were affected by this as well. When employees felt that their colleagues and coworkers were also not putting in that much effort into getting their work done, they also felt that they could slack off and this led to a spiral of demotivation and productivity for most of the individuals interviewed. It was interesting to note that this was more common for employees who did not have a very close relationship with team members and managers. When they were not connected with colleagues on a personal level, they felt even more disconnected as a team and did not feel like their contribution to their work was heavily valued. There was a small minority of interviewees who saw this time as an opportunity to stand out by working harder than others in their team. These individuals expressed the desire to succeed in their career and believed that if they showcased their ambitions and hard work to their managers, they would stand out from those who were not working as hard from home during the pandemic: “I had... multiple successes and I... achieved a lot. I was... appointed as the best employee” (Interviewee 4).

It was clear that during this phase, when participants realized that the pandemic would go on for a while and they would have to continue to work from home for the foreseeable future, they either chose to look at this optimistically or pessimistically. Those who were optimistic about their role in their company and in society, felt like they had a responsibility to be more self-motivated, create their own routine, and find new ways to destress. Others who viewed this realization in a pessimistic way, struggled with their productivity levels and had a hard time

creating a workable routine for themselves that they found personally fulfilling, and that motivated them to be positive.

Phase 3: The New Normal

A few months after the pandemic had hit, interviewees had come to realise that this new way of living was here to stay. With more and more information from the government, and a greater access to reliable news services, these young employees realized that they had to cope with what was going on and this was indeed the ‘new normal’. It was interesting to note that at this time, people began to see the advantages of having a hybrid way of working, which was possible due to the government regulations in place at the time. Many respondents were learning how they operated best in light of the situation they were faced with. With regards to productivity and motivation levels, things were looking up because interviewees had now begun to understand how they could work better, function better, and feel better overall. Some people realized that it was extremely important for them to go out for walks every day, some felt that they felt better when they worked out on a daily basis, and some felt like they had established a routine of activities that made them feel socially fulfilled. They began to focus on the positive aspects of working from home and did mention that a hybrid way of working would be the perfect balance to strike, even when the pandemic was over.

They realized they had more flexibility in terms of work tasks, they felt that it was a more efficient way of working as commuting time was cut short, and they felt like they had a better work-life balance when every day was not spent at the office from 9am to 5pm. Letting the positive aspects of the flexibility sink in allowed these interviewed young employees to be more productive and strike a better balance for themselves. Each individual was unique, and they realized what balance worked best for them. Some interviewees enjoyed working at any hours they pleased: “So a routine I did not really have because I don't have [fixed] working hours which is... really nice because it gives you this flexibility” (Interviewee 5). People found it freeing in a way to have more time for themselves when they needed it, and then could get back to work when they were in a motivated and productive headspace. This allowed them to work smarter and more efficiently rather than working a fixed number of hours, which may not be as productive.

This hybrid form of working, I really enjoy that, so I think if like a company would offer that system... maybe you can come to the office if you want to. Or maybe you should even come to the office at least let's say once or twice a week, but to give the option of like doing home office. I think that would really be great and that would also enhance like the work life balance for many people (Interviewee 2).

In addition to being able to work when feeling most productive, a hybrid system that allowed interviewees the flexibility of working from home as well as going to the office during a work week was cited as the best way forward. The employees interviewed had only discovered this way of working during the COVID-19 pandemic and they seemed to really be focusing on the positive impact this had on their lifestyle overall. Along with a better work-life balance, they felt that they had more motivation to strike the right balance for themselves and discover ways in which they work best, which may not always be the 9am to 5pm routine that was considered the norm.

By the time interviewees got used to predominantly working from home during the pandemic or had hybrid working options in the present, they also felt that they had less workload, and they were less tired. This may not have been specifically because of a literal lack of workload, but also because the absence of a commute allowed them more hours to relax and unwind away from work. While the physical space was the same, employees could now quickly shift from work mode to their own leisure time. "I could relax for a while and spend time with my family. I mean, I was happy about that" (Interviewee 8). Even during work tasks, it was easier for employees to take breaks more regularly and, if they lived with others, could just take some time out during the day to socialize and spend time with others to help them unwind. They realized that these regular breaks helped fuel them for the rest of the workday. On the other hand, the new normal led to very different realizations for some. As they got used to the new way of working, some employees were unhappy with the way their companies were handling this 'new normal' and were dissatisfied with lack of transparent communication. They felt increasingly isolated and hence their productivity dwindled even further. They did not feel like a valued addition to the company, and it was clear that unfavorable communication had left a lasting impact.

Whether interviewees were feeling optimistic or pessimistic about the changes brought about by the pandemic and the new way of living, they had more or less settled into a routine that

they had created for themselves through experimentation. They had tried to incorporate things that kept them going throughout the day; for some these coping mechanisms were productive and positive, while others indulged in coping mechanisms that they knew were unhealthy:

It got to a point where I started to, uh, smoke weed regularly to sort of be able to cope.

That was towards the final four months of my job and back then...it sort of gave me a sense of comfort or an escape from all the thoughts (Interviewee 3).

Whether it be positive or negative, interviewees had found ways to deal with everything going on around them and their mental attitudes really shaped their productivity levels overall.

4.3. Communication with Managers

A pivotal theme that emerged during the interviews was the nature of communication with employees' managers or bosses and how this played a major role in the well-being and productivity of employees. It even had a vital role in shaping their professional identities and their belief in their own abilities. Through transparent, regular, and open conversations with managers, interviewees were able to make sense of the changes that were occurring and had more guidance about how best to deal with the new ways of working. When the pandemic hit and working from home was mandated for office employees who were interviewed, there was a great deal of confusion and uncertainty because no one really knew what exactly this would entail. In light of this, along with the risk of economic downturn, organizations were grappling to find the best way forward along with employees. In the interviews conducted, there were reports of both satisfactory and dissatisfactory levels of communication; there was also a clear demarcation in the attitudes of employees who experienced both types of communication. These interviewees did hold their bosses accountable for how they felt during the pandemic, their mental well-being, and productivity levels overall. It was made apparent that there were no clear divisions between work life and home life as both spheres had meshed together, hence feeling valued and productive during the workday was an important aspect for respondents. This section will be divided into the positive recounting of communication, and negative recounting of communication to best illustrate how different types of communication had an important role to play in employee well-being and productivity, and how interviewees responded to different types of organizational communication.

Favorable Communication with Managers

A minority of employees interviewed mentioned that they had a very close and informal relationship with their managers and had an open line of communication with them. When the pandemic hit, this close relationship really helped to alleviate some of the uncertainties and anxieties faced by employees during this time: “my boss reassured us that nobody would get fired” (Interviewee 2). With the threat of downsizing a very real presence, especially for small and medium sized companies, it was a huge relief being told early on that there would be job security for employees. This lowered stress and anxiety levels in interviewees as they felt that at least their jobs were safe during this uncertain time. Furthermore, it was clear that the change to homeworking would be a challenging one to navigate and there were many confusions about it in the beginning. In some cases, companies did try to help out: “we did have trainings about like the tools that we were using [and] additional features” (Interviewee 4). This provided some clarity and guidance to respondents about how to proceed and get their work done in a productive manner. For many of the companies, they had never used these online tools before and helping their employees transition to them during the pandemic was a measure that helped with productivity and motivation:

They were kind of also looking at like other bigger companies like... what they were doing to kind of like inspire themselves because that's also the time when mainly industry leaders were... the ones providing the resources as well, so that was nice to make use of (Interviewee 4).

For interviewees facing the transition, it was helpful for them to know what their company was doing, and how their managers were trying to cope with the changes they were faced with. Just being kept in the loop about the fact that managers and higher-ups were trying their best to incorporate some new and better ways of working through this transition was a source of comfort.

Moreover, when bosses were communicating their own experiences with working from home, participants felt a lot more at ease; this tied in with the need for community as well:

I think at least in my experience with the bosses that I have, they were very understanding. They were annoyed by the fact of... having to work from home as well, they all have children, so that was extra hard for them... I think that they just all were extremely nice about it and understanding (Interviewee 5).

When interviewees felt that their bosses were struggling with similar challenges, and were not coping perfectly with working from home, they felt more connected to them and in turn felt more motivated to get their work done as well. Knowing that they were all in the same boat, whether at a junior level or senior level in the company, helped to alleviate some of the anxieties. The professional dynamic of boss and subordinate dealing with a similar issue helped to strengthen a bond and open communication about how best to deal with this situation as a collective. When managers acknowledged that everyone would be facing personal difficulties in their lives and allowed some leeway for this, interviewees were more satisfied in their professional space which had a role to play in enhancing their overall well-being. Having a high level of communication and connectivity with bosses and managers became even more important during the pandemic as meeting in person was not possible. Interacting with them on a professional level, as well as on a personal level was especially valuable:

My bosses actually were very cute for the COVID time, they gave us a voucher for like a restaurant that we could order takeaway from... We did lunches together and they like covered the food that we ordered, we could all order food and we ate lunch together via Zoom (Interviewee 6).

This effort to recreate casual physical interactions was very positively perceived and allowed the team to connect with each other to foster personal relationships as well: “we did coffee breaks together. We posted funny things in the chat, we discovered GIFs” (Interviewee 6). When bosses facilitated personal communications amongst colleagues, there was a higher sense of community, higher productivity, and motivation to be a valuable professional member of a team, and also a greater level of well-being as work relationships also played the role of personal relationships. During COVID-19 when it was difficult to connect with people on a personal level, these non-work interactions with coworkers were a breath of fresh air for interviewees during the lockdown.

Unfavorable Communication with Managers

The majority of employees interviewed experienced a lack of communication from their managers and this contributed to lower productivity, dissatisfaction with their jobs, and a major dip in well-being overall. Employees interviewed mentioned a lack of transparency in the way the company was coping with the changes, whether there would be downsizing or not, how best

to work from home on daily tasks, and a major lack of communication with work colleagues whether on a personal or professional level. Some employees got the sense that their bosses were only concerned about their performance and had no interest in how they were doing on a personal level. Respondents also acknowledged that during homeworking days, personal emotional well-being could not be separated from work performance and hence managers should have played a role in checking in to make sure they were all doing okay during the pandemic. Some young employees who had just started their career were extremely distressed about not being able to gel in with the team on a personal level and this affected job performance as well. They felt even more isolated and did not feel like they were part of an organization or a team. Almost every young employee interviewed mentioned that they would have liked a higher level of personal concern and care from their managers with regular check ins about how work from home was going.

The young employees interviewed felt like they had no guidelines about how they should conduct their daily work tasks from home, and it took them some time to get used to using the digital tools, along with gaining knowledge of what features would be useful to help complete work tasks and facilitate professional communication. In many cases, managers did not set a precedent for how communication should be done and create bonding experiences between team members. This had a major impact on how well employees integrated into the company especially if they were relatively recent new hires:

There were a lot of things that I still didn't understand or that I needed help with, and yeah it was quite tough because nobody was really used to the whole Zoom setting... back then it was quite challenging and to be able to really ask people for help... people would be not picking up their [calls], not show their faces on the cams and then not really have any time for chit chat and just getting to know me a little bit... I felt like I just didn't know anybody in the company (Interviewee 3).

This sense of alienation from other colleagues as well as the organizational culture overall was blamed on managers by these employees during their interviews. They felt that their managers did not place these interactions as a high priority and were not concerned with employee well-being and morale. While they did acknowledge that the times were tough for managers to get used to and they were also struggling to find new workable solutions, interviewees themselves felt like the effects on them were prolonged. When their bosses did not facilitate team

coordination and interaction among their team, there was a lack of cohesion and empathy within coworker dynamics.

Also considering everyone is in a different situation when you're at home, for example, you might be the father of four children, or you might be living alone like I am... So, for everyone to be a bit more empathetic and understand, what's going on in each other's lives... [the organization] could definitely have had a workshop on that... I think that would have really helped (Interviewee 1).

Many managers did not make an active effort to foster this empathy among their team and this did eventually seep into the work performance as over time respondents reported feeling demotivated and unhappy with their role in their organization. They recounted feeling undervalued and experienced feelings of lowered emotional well-being.

In many instances, interviewees did not even feel comfortable bringing up their personal struggles and lowered job productivity issues with their managers. They felt that any issues they were having would have to be figured out on their own because the culture of asking for help was never really there. This lack of open communication between managers and the employees interviewed, who were reporting to them really came to light when COVID-19 hit, even if they had existed before:

I feel like there was generally a genuine lack of care from our company's side to actually on board us onto the platforms or also maybe define some rules of working right or maybe just give some structure or meaning to our working day... there was no structure to work, there was no accountability, there was no checking in, there was no progress checks (Interviewee 8).

This perceived lack of regard did have a serious impact on productivity levels and self-identification to some degree as well. Interviewees recounted feeling like they were not important members of the team or were not creating any positive impact. This lack of purpose on some level, and a lack of appreciation or acknowledgement from managers was tough to deal with.

4.4. Exploring Potential Patterns

After the process of thematic analysis was conducted and all the themes defined and detailed, there were some potential patterns that could be observed in the interviewee responses.

It was interesting to note how some of the themes were potentially inter-related. It is important to mention here that these linkages and patterns are rough observations and would definitely need further research to cement the emergences in this research study, and to determine whether these linkages hold true at a larger scale through a quantitative study.

Within this research, it was observed that the young employees interviewed, who experienced favorable communication with their managers and colleagues, were seen to have lower feelings of isolation, and reported a more fulfilling sense of community compared to interviewees who had unfavorable communication with bosses and colleagues. The interviewees that described their interaction with bosses and coworkers as informal and frequent, with a focus on casual social interactions as well on virtual platforms, mentioned feeling like they were valued more and that they were part of a collective identity at the workplace, albeit virtually. Interviewee 2 really stood out in this regard and mentioned: “we're [colleagues and I] friends so we... were calling each other every day and... not just talking about work like we were talking about life and how everybody was doing so we did that on a regular basis.” When asked how this affected overall morale, Interviewee 2 responded favorably and further went on to say “I wouldn't say these people were my work colleagues. I would even go so far and call them friends or even like a small little family, because that's how close we were”. This example is a relevant illustration of how favorable communication with colleagues and managers created a positive organizational culture and hence led to a greater sense of community.

Another example was that of interviewed employees who experienced unfavorable communication with their managers. These respondents experienced lower levels of motivation, productivity, and mental well-being throughout the different phases of the pandemic highlighted. It was interesting to note that the respondents who suffered the most at the hands of unfavorable communication with managers were those who did not have a strong social support system outside of their professional sphere. When these interviewees did not have a sense of community to focus on outside of work, issues in their professional lives had a much greater negative impact. This observation could be explored and confirmed further through a focused study and may be interesting to examine in detail. Interviewee 3 stood out the most in this regard and was seen to be negatively impacted by poor connection with his manager:

I definitely didn't feel comfortable sharing everything with him... his managing style in in general didn't really fit well with me... I would expect [my] manager to be maybe a bit

more emotionally invested in the people that work under him... he never did any of that he just expected work to be done and he would be going offline super early himself (Interviewee 3).

When asked if there was an impact on motivation levels due to this relationship with his manager, Interviewee 3 responded:

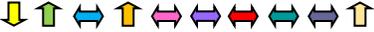
It did in a sense 'cause when I know that my manager goes the extra step I'll do it as well, right but if my manager basically, well, I wouldn't say treat me like shit, but like doesn't do anything extra that makes me feel like I'm part of it [the team] ... then I'm out (Interviewee 3).

This example illustrates how a bad relationship with his manager, led to a plummet in Interviewee 3's motivation levels, productivity levels, and overall satisfaction with the job. This coupled with an unfavorable living arrangement and a lack of social support led this respondent to resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms during the pandemic like smoking weed on a regular basis: "it [smoking weed] sort of gave me a sense of comfort or an escape from all the thoughts. I later learned that this is not healthy behaviour, and this is not something that is going to help in the long term" (Interviewee 3). These negative experiences led to this interviewee quitting his job while the pandemic was still going on. Other respondents also reported lower levels of productivity and motivation when their managers did not make them feel valued. The severity of coping mechanisms varied, however, and this example is an illustration of how serious unfavorable communication at the workplace can potentially be. The following table also illustrates the different sub-themes that were experienced by specific interviewees.

Table 3

Potential Patterns within Themes

Themes	Sub-divisions	Definitions
Recreating a Sense of Community in Isolation	Personal relationships 	Ways in which personal relationships were leveraged to create a sense of group belonging
	Professional relationships 	Ways in which professional relationships were leveraged to

		create a sense of group belonging
Phases of Productivity	Phase 1: Pandemic Hit 	Motivation and productivity from 10 th March to 10 th April of the pandemic
	Phase 2: Reality setting in 	Motivation and productivity from 10 th April to 10 th July of the pandemic
	Phase 3: New normal 	Motivation and productivity from 10 th July to present day (May 2022) of the pandemic
Communication with Managers	Favorable communication 	Open, candid, and frequent communication between managers and interviewees
	Unfavorable communication 	Infrequent, guarded, and overtly formal communication between managers & interviewees

Interview 1

Interview 2

Interview 3

Interview 4

Interview 5

Interview 6

Interview 7

Interview 8

Interview 9

Interview 10

5. Conclusion

The research question that this study aimed to answer is: “How do young employees living in the Netherlands and working at small and medium sized companies respond to work-from-home practices in terms of well-being and productivity?” The results of this study brought to light some important and interesting themes with regards to what employees value, what helps them work well, and what affects their mental well-being. Employees responded to work from home practices in a host of different ways during the different stages of the pandemic. When the pandemic initially hit, there was a lot of uncertainty about what exactly was going on. As an initial reaction, the novelty of being at home and working felt like a much-needed break allowing individuals to slow down and have more time for themselves. While organizations grappled to understand how best to go forward having their workforces at home, employees continued to manage their work tasks from home and the main feelings of isolation and loneliness only set in after a few initial weeks had passed. During the time when they realized that the pandemic would go on longer than they initially expected, employees responded by attempting to recreate physical experiences and interactions with friends and family, as well as with work colleagues. The level of isolation varied among employees as they all had different living situations and social dynamics. For those who lived alone, they responded to homeworking by making an active effort to create a routine that allowed them to unwind, take self-care measures, and create a sense of community through virtual means. For those who lived with others, they responded by creating a balance between spending time on work tasks, spending time with their housemates, and spending time by themselves.

Separate from the different reactions that came about in the different phases, the pandemic did bring to the surface the quality of humans as social beings, which was in line with the study by Gubler et al. (2020) about the different aspects of loneliness during homeworking in the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, this trait became even more predominant as people were forced to isolate; it was interesting to see the different ways in which interviewees made an effort to recreate some sense of community for themselves. If they were not able to clearly create this sense of community, there were other more implicit ways in which this was done. One of these implicit ways was young employees telling themselves that they were all dealing with a similar crisis together (i.e., the pandemic). They mentioned that they were part of a bigger global crisis, and this made them feel like they could deal with their isolation better as

others were going through the same thing. This idea linked closely with the definition of loneliness by Gubler et al. (2020). He mentioned that loneliness is not social isolation in and of itself, but rather “perceived social isolation, which does not depend on objective criteria but on subjective feelings” (p. 2324). For those individuals who were relatively optimistic towards the time they spent working from home in lockdown, they tried to relate to others in a way that helped them feel less isolated and alone. This response helped young employees cope with the work-from-home practices better and view their new daily routine from a relatively positive lens. This finding sheds some light on the psychology of young employees and the factors that they value; personality traits also came into play here and reactions to the pandemic were varied due to the mindset adopted by the interviewees. This was an interesting occurrence and explained why different people dealt with feelings of isolation in their own unique ways. It was also interesting to note how a sense of community was an underlying need for all interviewees, rather than something they directly expressed. It was a taken-for-granted assumption that they would need to recreate this community in one way or the other. This provides an important insight into how young people crave a sense of community for the sake of their emotional well-being. This may be something that these young employees strive for in an individualistic society, as they have an overt need to consciously socialize and be a part of a larger group, that makes them feel like they belong.

Employees’ response to the work-life balance was dependent on their unique living conditions. The research conducted by Ipsen et al. (2021) and Syrek et al. (2021) is in line with the results in this research with regards to employees mostly feeling like they had to juggle their home tasks and work tasks. Due to multiple distractions in their everyday routine while working from home, along with the struggle to create a workable routine, productivity levels and emotional well-being did suffer in some ways. This research also sheds some light on how younger employees reacted to these multiple responsibilities which is a valuable addition to research done mostly about how middle-aged employees dealt with working from home during the pandemic. Young employees are the future of the corporate world, and therefore understanding their psyche, needs, and preferences is pivotal to a more productive workforce overall. Furthermore, the employees who responded to homeworking by ensuring that they were doing something during the day that relaxed them like working out, cooking, or engaging in a hobby were able to mentally separate from their workday. When faced with a tough situation,

like the pandemic, every individual who was interviewed did realise that they had to cope with it by creating some sort of relaxation time for themselves; these employees took initiative to change their routine by bringing in some level of balance for themselves.

In addition to this, organizational culture and communication with peers and managers was a very important factor determining how employees responded to working from home. According to Shirmohammadi et al., (2022), the quality of conversations had completely changed when employees had to work from home. They no longer had free-flowing casual and informal chats that enriched personal relationships, which spilled over into improved professional relationships. Due to this enhanced divide amidst team members and a lack of communication between managers and employees, feelings of isolation increased, and employees responded by being dissatisfied, demotivated and less productive. According to Shirmohammadi et al. (2022), this changed nature of work led to a changed perception of organizational culture and many employees experiencing a work environment they had not expected. When organizations made an active effort to transfer an attractive organizational culture from the physical office to the virtual one, employees responded to these practices by being more productive, happier, and feeling more highly valued as a part of the team. This is in line with the research by Parry et al. (2021) as they make it clear how important organizational culture and work environment are to prospective employees. When organizations did not manage to keep this attractive working culture alive in an online setting, employee well-being suffered. On the flip side, as noted by Bakker & van Wingerden (2021), Meyer et al. (2021), and Shamsi et al. (2021), when managers decided to take initiative and set up opportunities for virtual social activities, both as part of the work timings, and outside work timings, employees felt a heightened sense of community with their work colleagues. They gained more respect for their managers' efforts as well and appreciated them trying to take extra measures for the team to bond and, as a result, feel more refreshed and productive.

5.1. Recommendations for Organizations

An extremely important aspect of this research was the potential recommendations for organizations that came to light. There were many interesting insights provided by the young employees who were interviewed for what companies could do better. Organizational culture was an extremely vital consideration for all employees and their productivity and well-being was

closely linked to this. Organizations could focus more on creating a positive working culture, where work is balanced out with social activities and opportunities for coworkers, managers, and other stakeholders in the company to interact in an informal way. According to interviews these interactions foster cohesion, a better understanding of the organization overall, and good working relationships with people who have the chance to get to know each other on a personal level. Existing research studies do report the importance of organizational culture as well for example studies by Meyer et al. (2021) and Shamsi et al. (2021). This research study, however, focuses solely on young employees, which is especially valuable for organizations to learn from as these will be the same demographic that will be working in these companies in the future.

Organizations also need to recognize the importance of keeping employee morale high as this is very closely linked to employee performance, and in turn will affect organizational profitability. If young employees are motivated to work and perform well, this will contribute to overall organizational health. Organizations can do this by allowing young employees more flexibility in how they want to work, whether this be working hours, hybrid working options, or an open environment in which they can discuss any personal issues they may be facing. Companies would benefit greatly from taking employee mental health seriously as well, by having options for young workers to speak to professionals if required.

Since young employees spend the majority of their days in the workplace, whether physically or virtually, it is imperative that they feel like a valued part of this community. Organizations can conduct team building exercises and company-wide social activities that allow for a strengthening of this sense of community. Managers should also be trained in a way that they are approachable if subordinates want to speak to them and should know how to create a space where young employees feel comfortable reaching out. This practice will further strengthen the bond within an organization and contribute to the culture overall.

5.2. Limitations of Research

There were some limitations of this research study that must be considered when reviewing the results that came to light. First of all, the sample of interviewees was mostly female, with 7 out of 10 respondents identifying as female, and only 3 as males. Secondly, in the sample, the participants were mainly from sales and marketing professions, and many were part of the media industry. These two factors narrowed down the scope of the research, and this

occurrence makes one wonder how results would be different if the gender split was equal and young professionals from a wider variety of industries and departments were interviewed. There were also some potential blind spots in this study. There was no talk or consideration given to vaccines, and whether respondents' attitudes towards the pandemic were influenced by this occurrence. It would have been interesting to understand how, if at all, health concerns changed over the course of pandemic with more medical knowledge, medicines, and vaccines available to combat the virus. This may have had a role to play in overall well-being and stress levels about the life during the pandemic.

5.3. Scope for Further Research

This research proved to be extremely insightful and a valuable starting point for further research. Since it focused on young employees who are in the beginning stages of their career, organizations would greatly benefit from understanding the needs of this demographic and how they can create a space for them to thrive, be more productive, and really put in an effort towards the good of the larger business they are a part of. This research could further inspire quantitative research studies to understand the true extent of how much certain factors affect employee well-being or productivity. Through this research, it is clear that well-being and productivity do go hand in hand, and companies may be even more inspired to understand how best they can do this. Further research studies could focus on gaining more detailed insights and recommendations from young employees about how working from home or working in a hybrid setting can be leveraged for maximum employee satisfaction. It would also be useful to study how employees with certain personality types respond differently to various work-from-home practices. Since this research study did not create a divide between personality types, this could be an insightful aspect that helps companies target different approaches to employees with different personalities.

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7. Appendix A

Interview Guide

Part 1 - Introduction

First of all, thank you for participating in this study on how working from home affected people when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. I'll ask you some basic questions about yourself, and then move on to your experience and how you were affected by the circumstances of working from home. The interview will take approximately 30 – 75 minutes. I want to assure you that your personal identification data will not be shared with anyone and will be deleted once the interview transcription is complete.

All information collected will be kept confidential. The data will be stored securely and will only be available to those conducting the research, in this case, me. There will be no mentions in oral or written reports that could link you to the research in any way. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study at any time and without any consequences. If you leave the study before the data collection is complete, your data will be destroyed. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? And do you consent to this interview being recorded?

Part 2

Age

Occupation when the pandemic hit

How long did you work there?

Part 3

Pandemic + work from home (general questions, easing into topic)

What has work been like during the pandemic?

Have you been working from home?

How do you feel about working from home?

How was the transition period to WFH for you? (added after first phase to get general feelings)

Part 4

Work-life Balance

Was your work-life balance affected?

In what ways?

What was your living situation? (added after first interview for specificity)

Part 5

Organizational Culture

How did you interact with your co-workers during WFH?

What all do you miss about being in the office physically if anything?

How has communication with coworkers changed?

How has communication with managers changed?

How have you dealt with these changes? (added after first phase for overall sentiments)

Part 6

Mental Well-Being

Have you struggled on a personal, emotional level with working from home?

How has your mental health been while working from home?

How have you handled the change?

What have been some of your stressors?

What do you do to de-stress?

Part 7

Productivity

What have your motivation levels been like while working from home?

What have your productivity levels been like while working from home?

Has your company helped to overcome these challenges? How do you feel about that?

(added after first phase of interviewees because interviewees held organizations accountable)

Part 8

Concluding Questions

Anything else you'd like to share about your experience working from home?

Is there anything that you feel your organization could do to help make work from home easier? (added after first phase as interviewees were already giving recommendations unprompted)

Part 9

Wrap-up

8. Appendix B

Thematic Analysis

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes/Main Themes
social isolation connecting with others through shared experience family support system social support system happy about meeting friends regularly upset about not meeting friends	Personal Relationships	Recreating a Sense of Community in Isolation
misses physical interaction with colleagues good personal relationships with colleagues no personal relationships with colleagues compromised company culture compromised organizational culture when pandemic hit lack of social interaction with colleagues no team building opportunities	Professional Relationships	
lowered productivity when pandemic hit unchanged productivity when pandemic hit exciting new change initially expected to end soon independent work routine at home more flexibility working from home WFH was an exciting change initially health concerns led to stress	1st phase	Phases of Productivity
new hobbies to keep busy not ideal living situation increased productivity when WFH became normal lowered productivity when WFH became normal	2nd phase	

<p>tried to create balanced routine</p> <p>self-motivated to work hard</p> <p>extended work hours</p> <p>difficult to be optimistic for long</p> <p>unhealthy coping mechanisms</p> <p>mental health suffered</p> <p>burnout due to overwork</p> <p>perceived career growth suffered</p> <p>missed going to work</p> <p>struggling with personal identity</p>		
<p>new hobbies to keep busy</p> <p>divided work space and home space</p> <p>increased productivity over the long run</p> <p>enjoyed hybrid working flexibility</p> <p>things opened up</p> <p>could meet friends and family more</p> <p>personal growth</p>	3rd phase	
<p>no transparency from managers</p> <p>managers did not help with transition</p> <p>work delays due to communication</p> <p>breakdown</p> <p>lack of transparency from company</p> <p>stakeholders</p> <p>lack of personal care from managers</p> <p>did not feel like a valued employee</p> <p>company performance insecurities</p>	Unfavorable Communication	Communication with Managers
<p>appreciation from managers</p> <p>managers checked in regularly</p> <p>trusted managers</p> <p>managers created opportunities for social</p> <p>interactions</p>	Favorable Communication	