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1-24-2024

Perceived Organizational Support of Mothers of Preschool Children Who Transitioned to Remote Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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Remote Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic

by

Lindsey M. Marantos

MBA, Liberty University, 2013

BS, University of Phoenix, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Industrial and Organizational Psychology

Walden University

February 2024

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic sent millions of people home to work and now, after experiencing remote work, most employees prefer full-time remote work or hybrid opportunities rather than returning to working on-site postpandemic. For working mothers, remote work presents unique challenges while also offering employment opportunities for mothers. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to better understand the unique experiences and the perceived organizational support of remotely working mothers before, during, and after their transition to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, to offer insight that may help organizations develop effective, long-term, remote work policies. Data were collected from 20 participants between the ages of 18 and 35 years old through individual, virtual interviews with open-ended questions to learn about their experiences. Through a 12-step inductive data analysis process, four themes emerged: employment scenarios, gender and parenting, organizational support needs, and unsupportive experiences. Work/life balance was the primary sub-theme focus for each of the participants, with 90% of them preferring a non-traditional employment scenario rather than return to full-time, in-person work due to the flexibility allowed by a non-traditional opportunity. Childcare concerns, their need for connection, respect in the workplace, and understanding from their employer were also major sub-themes. These findings corroborate those of previous studies, indicate additional areas for further research, and offer timely, detailed information for positive social change for organizations wanting to hire and retain valuable employees including working mothers.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all the Supermoms out there, working hard at everything they do. You are extraordinary, inspiring, and you deserve to have it all. We moms need to support each other, celebrate each other, promote each other, and inspire each other, because it takes a village, and your village is powerful! The first person added to my village, and a Supermom this dissertation is dedicated to, is my best friend Ashley. Thank you, Ash, for your friendship through childhood and motherhood. You once said I was the only person you knew who did what I said I would do in life. Those words have kept me motivated through some dark times and I am thankful I hear your voice in those moments when I need an extra boost to keep pushing. And, Hanson rules, forever!

Last, but certainly not least, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my children, who have grown up understanding that Mommy must work and do schoolwork. While my goals have impacted their childhoods in various ways, I hope my experience has shown them they can accomplish anything if they are willing to work hard. Faith, Kollin, Emersyn, and Ari, you are the lights of my life. I love you more than you will ever know, and I love watching you grow and find your passions. I will always be your biggest fan no matter what path you choose.

"Do not let your fire go out, spark by irreplaceable spark in the hopeless swamps of the not-quite, the not-yet, and the not-at-all. Do not let the hero in your soul perish in lonely frustration for the life you deserved and have never been able to reach. The world you desire can be won. It exists… it is real… it is possible… it's yours." – Ayn Rand

Acknowledgments

There are countless people who have helped support me, mentor me, challenge me, and inspire me through my life that I cannot possibly thank everyone. But, there are a few incredible individuals I want to make sure I say a special thank you to.

George, you have shown me what an extraordinary life looks like and how to achieve it. I love planning and living extraordinarily with you.

Chip, thank you for sharing your entrepreneurial spirit and proving just how far passion, growth, and perseverance can take someone.

Dad, thank you for igniting my love of racing and helping me find passion and direction from early on. You're my forever favorite racing buddy.

Mom, thank you for showing me it's possible to dream of more and make those dreams come true through hard work and a willingness to learn and grow.

Donna, thank you for showing me how fun and valuable an education can be, even when only the candy counter piqued my interest early on.

Justin, you supported me and the kids through the early coursework years of my PhD program and I will be forever grateful for you, your support, and our friendship.

Wil, you have been my boss, my mentor, my confidant, my therapist, and most of all my friend. Thank you for believing in me even when I haven't believed in myself.

Dr. Ross, thank you for your guidance, your patience, your support, and your expertise through this process. Without you I would not have earned the title, Doctor.

Dr. Narayanan & Dr. Ngo, thank you for being expert guides through this process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This study focused on the lived experiences of mothers of preschool-aged children who transitioned to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Use of the qualitative approach in this study offered an increased understanding of individuals and their engagement with discovered meanings, which allowed for the individualized focus necessary to provide the desired level of understanding of the lived experiences of this group of working mothers (see Patton, 2015). This demographic was important for further remote work research since the flexibility allowed by this employment option may be the ideal option for women needing to balance work and caregiving and their forced remote work experience during the COVID-19 pandemic offers valuable insight for organizations (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Kniffin et al., 2021).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic tripled the number of people working remotely consistently and 95% of those people want to continue working remotely or at least a hybrid of in-person and remote, organizations must develop effective policies to offer and support these non-traditional employment opportunities if they wish to attract and retain valuable employees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022; Wigert & Agrawal, 2022). Perceived organizational support (POS) can be a critical factor in employee retention for organizations. POS can affect nearly every facet of an employee's work from productivity and job satisfaction to workplace deviant behaviors and turnover (Baran et al., 2012). Higher levels of POS reduce turnover intentions for employees and can therefore mean direct cost savings for an organization (Sartori et al., 2023). To develop effective remote work strategies and support systems for remotely working employees,

organizations need to understand the POS and novel experiences of their employees, such as those of remotely working mothers of preschool-aged children, who were the focus of this current study. In this chapter, I describe the gap in the literature regarding the experiences of this demographic, provide relevant background information for the study, and discuss the significance of this study to social change.

Background

Based on labor trends during and after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and current research detailing the desires of employees to remain working from home or have hybrid employment options, companies need to develop innovative policies to attract and retain valuable employees in this postlockdown workforce (Catalyst, 2021). In April 2020, after many states issued stay-at-home orders, the unemployment rate in the United States reached a historical high of 14.8% as non-essential businesses were forced to shut down or have their employees work remotely (Congressional Research Service, 2021). Those who began working remotely decided they preferred that employment scenario with only 6% expressing a desire to work entirely on-site in the future (Wigert & Agrawal, 2022).

By July 2021, the unemployment rate was still higher than it had been before lockdowns began as businesses struggled to recover from the pandemic and many closed permanently (Congressional Research Service, 2021). In addition to the involuntary unemployment situation, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) reported over 47 million people voluntarily left their jobs in 2021. While several factors played a part in this "Great Resignation" including low pay, lack of advancement opportunities, feeling

disrespected at work, and childcare issues, a lack of schedule flexibility and a desire for remote or hybrid options were contributors to these voluntary resignations (Parker & Horowitz, 2022; Wigert & Agrawal, 2022).

From an organizational perspective, turnover is an expensive and time-consuming process. Gallup estimated a range from half to 2 times the salary of each employee as the cost of replacing them, giving an example of "a 100-person organization that provides an average salary of $50,000 could have turnover and replacement costs of approximately $660,000 to $2.6 million per year" (McFeely & Wigert, 2019, para. 2). More than half of the employees who left jobs shared that in the quarter before their exit, no one within the organization asked them about their career trajectory within the company or their overall job satisfaction (McFeely & Wigert, 2019). A slightly larger group of exiting employees also felt there was either something the organization or their direct supervisor could have done to retain them (McFeely & Wigert, 2019). POS has been found to negatively impact turnover intentions because higher levels of POS increase job motivation, affective commitment, and normative commitment, which in turn reduce turnover intentions (Sartori et al., 2023). This means that POS can directly lead to cost savings because it can help reduce turnover and therefore the associated turnover costs to the company.

For working mothers, remote work is often the ideal employment scenario because it offers the flexibility needed to integrate the work and family domains even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). However, women experienced lower work productivity and job satisfaction than men while working remotely during the pandemic, and the increased domestic responsibilities added to the

negative impact on their overall well-being (Carlson et al., 2021; Dunatchik et al., 2021; Feng & Savani, 2020). The lockdown exacerbated the gender inequalities in remote work experiences, which has led to the need for further research (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Awada et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021). This study focused on this demographic's POS to determine if it can potentially help organizations better understand the perspectives of remotely working mothers of preschool-aged children. With this better understanding, the organization could then create more effective remote work policies to help attract and retain valuable employees, including mothers who want to work but may not be able to under traditional employment models (see Couch et al., 2021; Stone, 2021).

Problem Statement

Labor force challenges that began during the COVID-19 pandemic have continued in these postlockdown years. For instance, of the millions who left the workforce during the pandemic, 1.5 million mothers of children under the age of 17 years old had not yet returned as of September 2021 due to reported childcare challenges (Long, 2021). In that same month, an additional 300,000 women left the workforce, with men simultaneously gaining 220,000 jobs (Sainato, 2021). Childcare issues were a contributing factor to the voluntary resignations seen in 2021 and can be a barrier for mothers who want to enter or re-enter the workforce (Ciciolla et al., 2017; Parker & Horowitz, 2022). Mothers who want to work but remain unemployed are an especially vulnerable population with the lowest well-being scores compared to mothers in other employment situations (Ciciolla et al., 2017).

Remote work offers the flexibility often necessary for mothers and for other types of employees facing similar challenges, which has led to organizations being able to hire and retain a more diverse workforce according to 71% of HR leaders (McKinsey, 2022). One of the top reasons female employees cited for staying with or joining an organization is remote and hybrid work options (McKinsey, 2022). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, flexible work opportunities increased organizational attractiveness for prospective employees and decreased the turnover intention of current employees (Onken-Menke et al., 2018). Fuller and Kerr (2022) reported that "36% of workers said that if not given a hybrid or remote option, they would search for an alternative, and six percent reported being willing to quit outright, even without a new position in hand" (para. 15). The increase in voluntary resignations in 2021 shows the seriousness of employees in this postlockdown workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

These strong employee desires may create a need for organizations to consider long-term remote work arrangements, which would in turn create a need for policy and procedure development to accommodate those offerings. Because of the potential impact of an individual's POS on several work-related behaviors and mindsets, human resources (HR) professionals have been encouraged to gauge POS levels within their company (Shanock et al., 2019). Understanding the unique experiences of remotely working mothers of preschool-aged children and their POS levels can help organizations create effective remote work policies for long-term remote work opportunities. These policies may lead to reduced turnover for the company and more diverse employees, while

potentially enticing valuable employees like working mothers to stay or re-enter the workforce.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and better understand the unique experiences of remotely working mothers of preschool-aged children who transitioned to remote work during the COVID-19 lockdown. The individualized focus of the generic qualitative approach offered an in-depth understanding of the individual meaning of POS and the experiences of these participants, which led to insight into external consequences or applications based on what was learned from them (see Percy et al., 2015). These insights may lead to organizational applications for companies looking to attract and retain employees who desire long-term, remote work employment opportunities.

This study filled an identified gender-focused research gap, by focusing on the POS of female participants between the ages of 18 and 35 years old who are married or living with their partner and have at least one child in their home under the age of 5 (see Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Awada et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021). To be included in the current study, the participants needed to have worked in a brick-and-mortar environment for at least 1 year before the COVID-19 pandemic and transitioned to working remotely from home between March and May 2020. In-depth interviews with the working mothers who met these eligibility requirements offered deep insight into their unique perspectives while working remotely. The POS-focused research also offered remote work insight to expand organizational support theory (OST) research (see

Eisenberger et al., 2020). Overall, this study offers timely remote work research that can help companies develop remote work and POS-related policies and procedures to attract and effectively support valuable employees like working mothers of preschool-aged children.

Research Questions

In this qualitative study, the research questions focused on the individual experiences of the mothers of preschool-aged children who transitioned to remote work during COVID-19 and their POS before and after their transition. This information may help employers develop and refine policies and procedures for long-term remote work opportunities. The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: How do working mothers of preschool-aged children describe their perceptions of organizational support before transitioning to remote work during COVID-19?

RQ2: How do working mothers of preschool-aged children describe their perceptions of organizational support after their transition to remote work during COVID-19?

RQ3: What do remotely working mothers of preschool-aged children want or need from their employers to feel adequately supported?

RQ4: How do working mothers of preschool-aged children describe any experiences with feeling unsupported or under supported by their employers?

Theoretical Foundation

I used OST's concept of POS as a foundation for this generic qualitative study. OST involves the understanding that employees develop ideologies around their perceived valuation by their organization and how much their employer cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). This POS and the resulting employee ideologies create a reciprocal relationship between the employer and the employee because the employee believes their efforts will be rewarded by the organization accordingly (Eisenberger et al, 1986). This reciprocity is dependent on the strength of the employee's POS and their POS can affect nearly every facet of the employee's work including productivity and performance, organizational attachment, innovation, job satisfaction, turnover, employee well-being, work engagement, organizational citizenship behavior, organizational trust, and workplace deviant behaviors (Baran et al., 2012; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2020; Eisenberger, 2020; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Kurtessis et al., 2017). However, the POS of individuals can fluctuate in both the short and long-term, and reduced or low POS can harm some or all the facets of the employee's work including turnover intention (Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2016; Caesens et al., 2020).

I conducted this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the POS of remotely working mothers who transitioned from a traditional employment scenario during the COVID-19 pandemic. This increased knowledge of the participants' unique meaning of POS, their potential POS fluctuations before and after their transition to remote work, how their POS levels may have affected their remote work experience, and what they want or need from their employers to feel adequately supported may offer valuable

insight for OST research, remote work research, gender-focused workforce research, and applicable information for organizations. Companies that are looking to improve employees' POS or develop effective remote work policies may be able to benefit from this study.

Nature of the Study

I used a generic qualitative approach for this study to focus on the individual meaning of POS for remotely working mothers of preschool-aged children and their novel experiences and perceptions of POS during their period of remote work. Generic inquiries are used to gather the individual meanings and outward experiences of the individuals to offer insight into potential applications or consequences for what was learned (Percy et al., 2015). While phenomenology was considered a viable approach for this study, the external application insight offered by generic inquiry was a more ideal approach (see Percy et al., 2015). In the interviews, I asked open-ended questions, offering a conversational research interaction between me as the researcher and each participant to achieve comfortability and encourage openness when the participants were answering the questions asked (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This qualitative approach allowed for flexibility, which a quantitative approach would not have offered, because I was able to develop and immediately ask personalized sub questions based on the given responses of the participants (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach also allowed for deep, focused discussion without collecting a vast amount of data, which can potentially lead to data analysis and dissemination challenges seen with mixed-method approaches (see Halcomb, 2018). Use of the generic qualitative approach offered

valuable insight into what was experienced by each of the participants and what their unique experiences and perceptions can offer organizations wanting to improve the POS of their remotely working employees.

Definitions

Flexplace: Flexplace work arrangements can include remote work or hybrid work schedules with part-time work in an office and part-time work at home, as well as any other flexible work arrangements related to physical work boundaries (Thompson et al., 2015).

Flextime: These work arrangements can include flexible schedules, compressed work weeks, flexible shift work, and other flexible commitments related to time (Thompson et al., 2015).

Flex work: Similar to and often including remote work, these policies can include not only flexible work location arrangements, but also flexible hourly commitments, flexible work schedules, flexible time off, and other non-restrictive employment arrangements (Bontrager et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2015).

Open-ended questions: Questions that do not provide answer options for participants, unlike closed-ended questions that may have the respondent answer "yes" or "no" or choose options on a scale. Questions that offer participants the opportunity to share more than what is asked and go beyond any preconceived answers selected by a researcher using closed-ended options (Bradburn et al., 2004).

Organizational Support: Employees tend to view actions by agents of the organization as actions of the organization itself; thus, organizational support is the

personified organization's readiness to reward increased work effort and to meet employee needs for praise and approval (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Perception: A belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on how things seem (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

POS: The extent to which the organization values its employee contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Remote work: Sometimes called telecommuting, teleworking, virtual work, or work from home; an employment arrangement allowing the employee to work from any location other than the organization's base locations while often still maintaining full-time hours (Kniffin et al., 2021).

Assumptions

I made several assumptions when developing this study, and these assumptions correlated with the four philosophical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodology (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was assumed that individual participants have their realities, but that they were accurate and honest when sharing their personal realities, perspectives, and experiences; that they understood each question, and answered to the best of their ability. I also assumed that I remained subjective throughout each interaction with participants, though the potential for bias was identified as a possible limitation in addition to an assumption for this study. Another assumption was that the generic inquiry approach and the inductive analysis procedure were effective in collecting and analyzing the information shared by the individual participants who were assumed to be representative of the broader population.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was to understand the novel experiences of participants to gain insight into remote work and POS for this population, which can help organizations develop effective policies for remote employees. I recruited a purposive sample of 20 participants who were selected based on eligibility criteria. Purposive sampling ensured participants met the established criteria to address the critical issues of nonprobability sampling logic and determined the delimitations set for this study (see Burkholder et al., 2020). Participants had to be female, between the ages of 18 and 35 years old, married or living with their partner, with at least one child under the age of 5 in their home. They had to work in a traditional, brick-and-mortar environment for at least 1 year before the COVID-19 pandemic and have transitioned to a remote work environment during the early months of the lockdown, between March and May 2020. I conducted face-to-face interviews using Microsoft Teams video conferencing software and asked the participants open-ended interview questions with unique sub questions added during each interview based on the perspective and experiences of the unique participant. Each interview was expected to last approximately 1 hour, and pseudonyms were assigned randomly to each participant to maintain their confidentiality (see Heaton, 2022).

Limitations

I identified potential limitations that were believed to be present in this study. Locating participants willing to participate was a potential limitation due to selection criteria or sample size requirements. Participant openness or truthfulness was also a concern during the interviews because of the potential reluctance of participants to

discuss their experiences or to give complete, honest details, with an additional, potentially related limitation due to the differences between people willing to participate in a study versus those who are not (see Bradburn et al., 2004; Stadtlander, 2018). Due to the need for video conferencing technology to complete the interviews, time constraints, and technological challenges were additional possible limitations. I also considered researcher bias to be a potential limitation given I was a remotely working mother of a pre-school-aged child who transitioned to remote work during COVID-19; however, I did not transition to remote work until nearly a year after the lockdown began. For sub questions developed during the interview, I had to be extremely cautious about unintentionally activating values that may have influenced participants' future responses and created opportunities for bias (see Bradburn et al., 2004). I took field notes during data collection and used them during data analysis to help avoid bias by focusing on the participants and their experiences during each part of the process. These notes were written immediately following the interviews or within 24 hours after the interview with observations and impressions included. I used these notes throughout the analysis process to give myself reminders of those observations and impressions, which helped me identify and address any bias-related thought shifts.

Significance

With this study, I aimed to fill a gap in gender-focused research on remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gender differences in remote work experiences were evident in prepandemic studies, but the lockdown exacerbated these inequalities leading to the need for further research (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Awada et al., 2021; Kniffin

et al., 2021). This POS-focused study may also offer remote work insight to expand OST research (see Eisenberger et al., 2020). Additionally, the findings of this study offer knowledge that can add to the research surrounding every one of the top 10 work trends for 2023 as identified by the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology's 2023 trends were focused on the major themes of remote work, retention, employee well-being, inclusivity, and work-life balance, all of which were represented in the current study.

The insights from the current study may also offer valuable, actionable information for companies. By considering this population's POS specifically, the findings will hopefully help organizations better understand the population's perspectives to organizations them create more effective remote work policies because remote work continues to be the preference of employees (see Eisenberger et al., 2020; Stone, 2021). POS can have a significant impact on several aspects of employment and enhanced HR practices to help boost POS levels within an organization can be extremely beneficial to both the company and its employees' well-being and productivity (Caesens et al., 2020; Eisenberger et al., 2020). Effective policies and the option for remote or hybrid work can help companies attract and retain valuable employees, including working mothers who might be excluded from the workforce under traditional employment models (Couch et al., 2021).

Summary

In Chapter 1, I identified the criticality of the unique experiences of the vulnerable population of working mothers while working remotely and their perceptions of

organizational support on the development and implementation of effective remote work policies for organizations. This study provides important insights regarding these novel experiences and perceptions, to fill the research gap regarding gender-specific remote work research and POS (see Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Eisenberger et al., 2020). The findings from this study can be used to help organizations attract and retain valuable female employees who may need the flexibility offered by remote work that a traditional 9-to-5 schedule does not allow. By attracting and retaining these employees, the impact of the Great Resignation may be lessened.

In Chapter 2, I will present the literature review detailing what research has previously been done on remote work and working mothers, as well as establishing OST and the concept of POS as a solid theoretical foundation for this study. Areas for further research will be addressed, further supporting the need for this study and the research gap this study fills.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Remote work has been an increasingly popular employee work preference since the turn of the century, but the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting quarantine pushed millions of people into remote work scenarios with little warning. The experiences of the people in this situation offer a unique perspective into remote work that can be valuable to employers working on policy changes to accommodate long-term remote work opportunities. Available literature shows gender disparities in the experiences of remotely working parents, indicating a gap in the current research (Arntz et al., 2020). The vulnerable population of remotely working mothers, especially those with young, pre-school aged children, offer opportunities for additional research (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). To develop effective remote work hiring strategies, virtual training and development, new performance and appraisal systems, and remote work-related employee support benefits, organizations need to understand the novel experiences of their individual employees (Kniffin et al., 2021). This generic qualitative study offers insight into the individual experiences and POS of remotely working mothers of pre-school aged children who transitioned to remote work during COVID-19, which adds valuable information to this area of research, filling one of the many gaps in the available literature.

Literature Search Strategy

I performed an exhaustive literature search of peer-reviewed articles using the Thoreau multi-database accessible through the Walden University Library. Thoreau searches numerous databases including, but not limited to, APA PsycInfo, Business

Source Complete, Emerald Insight, and APA PsycArticles. Search keywords included

combinations of *organizational support theory, perceived organizational support,*

mother, motherhood, maternal, moms, parents, caregivers, family, father, fatherhood,

paternal, dads, remote work, virtual work, telework, work from home, telecommute,

virtual office, remote employees, preschool, infant, toddler, newborn, early childhood,

COVID-19, coronavirus, 2019-ncov, sars-cov-2, cov-19, and COVID. These searches

yielded more than 100 articles, which I then entered into Google Scholar. The "cited by"

feature was also used to find relevant, scholarly articles that cited the same resource.

More than 35 additional articles were discovered using this method.

Theoretical Foundation

I used OST as a theoretical foundation for this study. OST is based on the

understanding that employees form beliefs around their perception of how valued they

are by their organization and how much their company cares about their well-being

(Eisenberger et al., 1986). This perception of organizational support creates a social

exchange accordingly between employer and employee (Eisenberger et al., 1986). The

employee believes their efforts will be rewarded by the organization; thus this reciprocity

depends on the strength of the employee's POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Non-traditional employee-employer relationships were rare during the 1980s

when OST was first developed, but their increased popularity has left gaps in the

available literature especially as remote work has increased dramatically since the

COVID-19 pandemic (Baran et al., 2012; Stone, 2021). Though much of the research

available is focused on contract or temporary workers, rather than remote work scenarios,

there are some similarities, such as with organizational commitment concepts since physically disengaged employees may not develop felt obligation like traditional employees (Baran et al., 2012). However, remotely working employees would receive benefits contractors and temporary employees would not, so their organizational commitment despite their physical disengagement might be different from other non-traditional employment scenarios. Employee needs would also potentially differ between these groups of non-traditional employees. What contractors and temporary workers would deem important in an organization and their short-term employee-employer relationship would likely be different than what long-term remote employees would deem important (Baran et al., 2012). These differences indicate several areas for further research.

Organizational expectations of contract or temporary workers compared to full-time remote employees might vary, even with basic expectations like performance. While remote work performance is an ongoing concern for organizations with many contributing factors, contingent workers have been found to satisfy their felt obligation to both the client organization and their staffing agency, leading to high performance in both settings (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Awada et al., 2021; Baran et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2021; Kuruzovich et al., 2021; Tahlyan et al., 2022). Further research on remote employee performance and other organizational expectations is needed.

POS

Identified as the core component of OST, POS is how employees determine the level to which their organization values their efforts and the reciprocity, or felt obligation,

that value creates (Eisenberger et al., 1986). This reciprocal employment relationship can affect nearly every facet of the employee's work including productivity and employee performance, organizational attachment, innovation, job satisfaction, turnover, employee well-being, work engagement, organizational citizenship behavior, organizational trust, and workplace deviant behaviors (Baran et al., 2012; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2020; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Eisenberger, 2020; Kurtessis et al., 2017). POS can build trust between employees and their employers, which can lead to decreased workplace deviance (Khan et al., 2015). POS also impacts the intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction of employees by creating job autonomy, which in turn allows for improvement in the employee's performance, though felt stress is an important, impacting factor (Tran et al., 2021). Employees with high POS can be more invested in the organization's success, beyond their role, and will go above and beyond because of their desire to do so, not because they feel obligated due to reciprocity (Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2014; Kurtessis et al., 2017). This extra-role performance has a positive impact on the employee's mental health by reducing psychological strain, and POS has been linked to several additional aspects of employee mental and physical well-being including emotional exhaustion, chronic pain, and blood pressure (Baran et al., 2012; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2014).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, POS decreased the turnover intention of remote employees who were experiencing workplace loneliness because of a lack of socialization and technology burnout (Wahyuni & Muafi, 2021). POS also reduced the negative effects of technology spillover during the lockdown, and it was found to have a positive impact on work/life balance and job burnout for both traditional and remotely

working employees, especially when POS was supported by a servant leadership management strategy (Benlian, 2020; Lamprinou et al., 2021). Lamprinou et al. (2021) specifically stated that POS and servant leadership may be important for postpandemic work scenarios, indicating a need for further research on this specific focus and others.

HR professionals have been encouraged to gauge the temperature of POS within their organization and their industry due to positive correlations between POS and several HR practices including growth opportunities, reward fairness, and participation in decision-making (Shanock et al., 2019). While change management is often difficult, employees with higher POS respond more favorably to new HR policies and increased organizational citizenship behaviors, including extra-role behaviors, showing that employees with high POS are willing to go above and beyond for their organization despite the changes (Detnakarin & Rufkkhum, 2019). For these change scenarios, the POS of the employee's direct supervisor specifically helps remove the concern of potentially negative consequences of policy changes and increases the employee's acceptance of the change and their willingness to adopt the new policies (Straub et al., 2018). Involving employees in the decision-making stage of change management can be even more effective because this non-monetary benefit to employees makes them feel valued and leads to increased performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Shahzad et al, 2018). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, decision-making involvement, even with lower levels of POS, helped contract employees feel more involved with their organization (Ding & Shen, 2017). Similar studies on other non-

traditional employment relationships, such has remote work, would be an area for further research beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

An individual's POS has been found to fluctuate on both a short and long-term basis and POS varies overall by gender (Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2016; Caesens et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2020). The relationship between felt obligation and POS is stronger in men than women, meaning that men require roughly 25% higher levels of POS to engage in reciprocity due to felt obligation when experiencing low POS; the higher the POS, the more equal the felt obligation between genders (Thompson et al., 2020). POS impacts both work-family conflict and work-family facilitation, with a resulting decrease and increase in the two, respectively (Wattoo et al., 2018).

POS and perceived spousal support (PSS) are also indirectly linked to career success, with career adaptability moderating (Ocampo et al., 2018). Having either POS or PSS can be somewhat beneficial to employees, but the presence of high levels in both areas can increase career adaptability by approximately 22%, which leads to a relative increase in career success (Ocampo et al., 2018). This multi-level support system leads to positive career adaptability and overall career trajectories for employees who prefer or need to blur the lines between their work and home life, often women who work full-time but are also caregivers to one or more family members (Ocampo et al., 2018). Nevertheless, supportive work scenarios and supervisors create positive work experiences and better maternal health for women even for those who have high-conflict relationships with their spouses or significant other (Cozzolino, 2018).

Remote Work

Remote work and other flexible employment arrangements have become increasingly popular for employees since the turn of the century. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting quarantine lockdown forced millions of people into remote work scenarios with little notice, training, or decision-making participation. Organizations found roughly 80% of their workforce had to work from home unless employees were deemed 'essential' (Kniffin et al., 2021). This shift created many unforeseen challenges like work/life balance concerns when entire families were locked down at home together. Technology stressors, technology spillover, burnout, and loneliness due to a lack of socialization increased the employee desire for remote work opportunities (Alfanza, 2021; Lesniewska et al., 2021; Oksanen et al., 2021; Schmitt et al., 2021). According to a 2021 Pew Research Center survey, 54% of remote workers prefer to continue working from home, including nearly half of those who had never worked remotely before the pandemic (Stone, 2021). This desire from employees can potentially force employers to make policy and procedure changes to remain competitive in the hiring market and to retain quality employees. Conducting research to develop a better understanding of the novel experiences of remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic can potentially help organizations make more effective policy changes.

Before the pandemic, flexible work practices created increased organizational attractiveness for prospective employees and decreased turnover intention for current employees (Onken-Menke et al., 2018). Both flexplace and flextime opportunities showed similarly high levels of organizational attractiveness and having the option of

flex work increased levels of anticipated organizational support for job applicants (Kroll et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2015). Once hired, employees with a teleworking option demonstrated better employee attitudes overall, including job satisfaction and organizational commitment, than employees who did not have a remote work option (Lee & Kim, 2017). During the COVID-19 lockdown, remote work led to increased job-related well-being in employees and increased their affective commitment to the company when POS and supervisor accessibility were also present (Mihalache & Mihalache, 2021).

Work relationships and organization affiliation are important to effective remote work strategies. Organizational support and work-based social support for remote employees lead to stronger organizational identification and affiliation (Wiesenfeld et al., 2001). High-quality superior-subordinate relationships have a direct impact on the performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment of remote workers, while those with low-quality relationships demonstrate lower satisfaction, commitment, and performance (Golden & Veiga, 2008). Relationships with coworkers and family relationships are also critical. Remotely working employees show higher job satisfaction with increases in management relationships, coworker relationships, and family relationships, though the coworker relationships can plateau or decrease, potentially due to the lesser importance of these relationships in telecommuting scenarios (Golden, 2006b). During the early months of the COVID-19 lockdown, the need for companies to invest in effective communication systems for employees to maintain working contacts was evident due to the need for remote workers to feel supported by coworkers and

remain engaged with those connections (Bolisani et al., 2020; George et al., 2021). The quality of software, including telecommunication software, is also important, with high-quality software helping to reduce or negate the impact of the extensive use of remote work systems that lead to lower employee performance, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Kuruzovich et al., 2021).

Employee communication needs resulting in technology needs for organizations can be beneficial to productivity but can also cause technology stressors and spillover in remote work scenarios. During the COVID-19 lockdown, forced social media usage at work led to higher digital stress for those who had not previously used similar tools before the pandemic (Oksanen et al., 2021). Text-based tools were also found to be more cognitively taxing than video-based tools during the pandemic, potentially due to the asynchronistic nature of text-based communications (Oksanen et al., 2021). However, employees who used videoconferencing tools, at least as often as they did before the pandemic, saw increased work performance despite any potential cognitive overload, suggesting coping strategy disparities for individual employees (Schmitt et al., 2021). These usage stressors may raise generational, training, or change management questions, suggesting the need for further research on individual experiences.

Remote work spillover is not limited to technology usage. The lack of distinct work and home boundaries in remote work scenarios leads to spill over into both sides of the situation and can leave employees feeling overloaded, ultimately leading to lower satisfaction in both their personal and professional lives (McDaniel et al., 2020). While Golden (2006a) found remote work reduced work exhaustion because of the lack of a

commute and the tiredness accompanying the day-to-day rigors of traditional work in a prepandemic study, Chong et al. (2020) explained that higher task interdependence with remotely working coworkers led to increased end-of-day exhaustion followed by next-day work withdrawal behaviors during the COVID-19 lockdown. Task interdependence and heavy workloads lead to employee exhaustion, but employee self-efficacy and role clarity can reduce feelings of work overload and emotional exhaustion for remote employees (Mihalca et al, 2021).

Despite challenges like work/life balance, technology stressors, burnout, and a lack of socialization, many employees working remotely wish to continue doing so; however, organizations have additional concerns when offering such flexible work arrangements outside of government-imposed quarantine (Jeske, 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Stone, 2021). Results-based management and trust-building efforts are imperative to performance improvement for organizations offering remote work (Kim et al., 2021). One solution to improve productivity and trust for companies with telecommuting scenarios is the use of monitoring software on employee devices. While this type of software can offer feedback opportunities and display task progress for teams, these options can also make employees feel they are not trusted by their employer and have been linked to a reduction in organizational citizenship behaviors and increased turnover intentions (Jeske, 2021). Nevertheless, leader humility increases employee accountability in remote work scenarios while also increasing POS, which has a separate, positive impact on accountability (Septiandari et al., 2021). Further research on employee experiences may help companies develop effective policies to maximize productivity

while encouraging employer-employee trust and can offer unique perspectives for organizations to consider.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, productivity and overall remote work scenarios varied based on several factors including gender, age, and race (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Awada et al., 2021; Becker, 2021; Tahlyan et al., 2022). Gen Z employees, who value interpersonal relationships and prefer in-person work, struggled more significantly than other generations during the early months of the lockdown but have also experienced negative impacts on their career plans and professional development opportunities (Becker, 2021). Younger employees, who were newer to the workforce, and older employees experienced more challenges working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, saw fewer benefits, and saw more drawbacks (Tahlyan et al., 2022). Similar struggles increased for Black and Hispanic or Latino employees when working remotely during the lockdown (Tahlyan et al., 2022). Older employees, female employees, and high-income employees reported increased time at their workstations and productivity, while employees with younger children, those who adjusted their work hours, and those with additional factors reported working longer hours than before the pandemic (Awada et al., 2021). Working mothers "have been shown to be more likely to use, and to be expected to use, remote working as a means of integrating the work and family domains" before the pandemic (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020, p. 680). This may contribute to the long hours worked during the pandemic as work/life balance challenges arose, suggesting the need for further research on this specific population's remote work experiences.

Remotely Working Mothers

The option for remote work can offer the flexibility needed for people who struggle to adhere to a traditional 9-to-5 workday at a brick-and-mortar location; this includes women who are also caring for children, elderly parents, or have other household responsibilities or appointments within normal business hours (Couch et al., 2021). The option for flexible working arrangements from their organization increases POS and job satisfaction while decreasing work-life conflict and turnover intention for female employees (Shanmugam & Agarwal, 2019). Only one third of mothers are in their preferred work scenario (Jacob, 2008). Those mothers who are not in their preferred work scenario have decreased overall well-being, are more likely to feel isolated, overburdened, and depressed, and less likely to feel satisfied, confident, and appreciated (Ciciolla et al., 2017; Jacob, 2008). Mothers who are unemployed but want to work have the worst well-being scores, with the cost of childcare being the most common reason why these mothers remain unemployed despite wanting to be in the workforce (Ciciolla et al., 2017). Remote work can be a viable option for these women to enter or remain in the workforce while balancing their domestic responsibilities.

The relationship status of working mothers has a direct correlation to their flexible employment preferences. Working longer hours but fewer days per week is the best option for the well-being of working mothers who have never been married (Javed, 2019). Flextime options are best for single mothers who are divorced or widowed, and reduced hours, remote work, or full-time work only during the school year are the best options for married mothers (Javed, 2019). Regardless of their relationship status, remote

work and other flexible employment scenarios allow these mothers the flexibility they need to balance their home-life responsibilities and their careers. Women who have familial support at home and work for an organization with low POS or a lack of family-friendly policies are more likely to leave their employer or start their own business, to have more control over their work-life balance (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2020). Support at home plays a role in how working mothers see themselves and how they view the success of their work and career, including their ability to manage the responsibilities of work and home life. Working women partially determine their perceived career success (PCS) based on work-life balance (Chauhan et al., 2021). Work-family conflict decreases PCS, while family responsibilities and POS increase the PCS for working women (Chauhan et al., 2021).

Social support, spousal support, assistance with domestic responsibilities, decision involvement, and coping skills are important for the work-life balance of working women (Gupta & Srivastava, 2021). Spousal support is one of the most challenging work-life balance factors for working mothers (Duindam & Spruijt, 2005; Noonan et al., 2007). For instance, the higher number of hours a mother works outside the home has a direct and negative impact on the mental and physical health of the father, though the number of hours he works in comparison can help limit the negative effects (Duindam & Spruijt, 2005). Similarly, the father's salary determines whether the mother's salary has a negative or positive impact on his mental state; the more she makes compared to him, the worse it is for his health (Duindam & Spruijt, 2005).

Sharing household responsibilities is another challenge for married, working couples (Duindam & Spruijt, 2005; Noonan et al., 2007). Splitting childcare responsibilities is a critical factor in the work-life balance experience of working women (Martucci, 2021; Noonan et al., 2007). During the COVID-19 lockdown, unemployed husbands and employed wives spent the same amount of time on childcare as they did prepandemic, though working mothers spent less time working than their employed husbands (Carli, 2020). Collins et al. (2020) explain working mothers of young children saw a work-hour reduction nearly 5 times more than that of fathers in the early months of the lockdown. Working mothers showed decreased paid hours and increased unpaid hours, which were filled with chores and childcare responsibilities, while paid hours for fathers decreased slightly or remained the same and unpaid hours increased slightly and were most often filled with childcare responsibilities, though not as much as their spouse's (Craig & Churchill, 2020; Hazarika & Das, 2021).

While the number of working hours was affected, the quality of work hours and the number of domestic responsibilities also created negative experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic remote work for couples. Working fathers had roughly twice as many uninterrupted work hours than their employed wives and the same was true in single-parent scenarios; single fathers performed fewer childcare, homeschooling, and household responsibilities and worked more hours than single mothers, identifying this issue was not limited to working couples (Carli, 2020; Dunatchik et al., 2021). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Noonan et al. (2007) posited that flexible work options for the mother often did not increase the amount of domestic labor done by their spouse, leaving

working mothers responsible for most of the household responsibilities and leading to burnout. Women experienced lower work productivity and job satisfaction than men while working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased domestic responsibilities added to the negative impact on their overall well-being (Carlson et al., 2021; Dunatchik et al., 2021; Feng & Savani, 2020). These gender differences in remote work experiences were evident in prepandemic studies, but the lockdown exacerbated these inequalities leading to the need for further research (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Awada et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021).

The burnout Noonan et al. (2007) explained is just one of many mental and physical health-related factors linked to working mothers. These women, especially those working full-time hours, experience significantly higher levels of work-family guilt than fathers (Borelli et al., 2017). This guilt is related to several mental health concerns for these working mothers including depression, anxiety, attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance (Borelli et al., 2017). Remote work options allow for optimal time management for working mothers who use the time they would spend commuting to a brick-and-mortar location to attend to personal responsibilities, allowing them to experience a better balance between their work and home-life roles and their quality-of-life perception (Hilbrecht et al., 2008). The self-identity of being a "good" mother while also fulfilling work requirements leads to working mothers shifting their schedules to accommodate both, though this is often done by reducing their time for personal leisure which can increase their feelings of time-related stress (Hilbrecht et al., 2013). Thus, having the option to control their schedule and prioritize both the needs of their family

and the needs of their employer through remote work offers an overall better experience for these working mothers.

The balance offered by remote work also benefits the children involved. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Vikram et al. (2018) reported that while the children of full-time mothers working outside the home showed lower math and reading skills, the children of women who work from home or are self-employed performed in math and reading at the same level of those children with stay-at-home mothers. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the compounded stress of health concerns, the shifting work and school scenarios, and the decrease in socialization increased stress for parents and children alike (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2021; Chu et al., 2021; Craig & Churchill, 2020); however, the additional family time spent together also led to more feelings of closeness between parents and their children (Kerr et al., 2021). Gender disparities were apparent in these scenarios as well, with women experiencing more burnout, anxiety, and worry overall, with an additional increase in parenting-specific worries and anxieties (Kerr et al., 2021). This led to multiple levels of exhaustion and burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic partially due to the increased responsibilities in their work and home situations, but also due to increased avoidance-based coping mechanisms such as energy conservation, disengagement, and denial (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2021).

The stress levels and chosen coping mechanisms during the COVID-19 lockdown led to additional behavior changes in the daily routine of mothers. During the early months of the pandemic, mothers were 19% less likely to meet sleep guidelines and 11% less likely to meet physical activity guidelines (Kracht, 2021). Though, higher levels of

physical activity were found to mediate the negative impact of pandemic stress (Limbers et al., 2020). This more sedentary lifestyle may have created dietary concerns as well, but a study conducted by Schnettler et al. (2022) found links between POS, work-to-family enrichment, and diet quality for parents and their adolescent children, deducing that positive effects from workplace policies spilled over into the diet quality of the entire family. Workplace policies positively impacted the diets of these families during the lockdown, but workplace policies can affect working mothers in many other ways, especially for new mothers or those in the postpartum period. The link between workplace policies and employee experiences are areas where further research is needed, especially for working mothers with young children.

The demands of an infant combined with workplace stressors and sleep deprivation leave working mothers especially vulnerable to postpartum depression, which can lead to the mother's need for additional leave from work following childbirth or may cause them to quit their job or leave the workforce altogether (Selix & Goyal, 2015). The intention to return to work has a direct influence on a mother's intentions to breastfeed as well. Those with certain plans to return to work plan to breastfeed for a shorter time than those who were either not as certain or not planning to return to work at all (Thomas-Jackson et al., 2016). Working from home can offer the option for working mothers to breastfeed based on their personal preferences for nursing longevity. This option also limits the time and financial expense to organizations due to nursing-friendly requirements and regulations (Thomas-Jackson et al., 2016). Working from home between 6 and 24 months postpartum also shows a significant decrease in depression

scores and, at 2 years postpartum, a remote work option reduced maternal stress while increasing job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and work effort (Awotoye et al., 2020; Sheperd-Banigan, 2016).

The impact of remote work options in the postpartum period also affects the spouses of the working mother. The hours a mother works early in their child's life determines the level of paternal involvement throughout childhood (Norman et al., 2014). If a mother works full-time within the first year of their child's life, the father will be more involved by the time the child is 3 years old, regardless of the number of hours the father works in that same period (Norman et al., 2014). Thus, creating increased spousal support and the sharing of child-rearing responsibilities that are critical to work-life balance for working mothers.

Summary & Conclusions

The quick transition to remote work during the COVID-19 lockdown and the disparities in gender experiences of remotely working parents indicated a gap in available literature (Arntz et al., 2020). The "patchwork efforts at lockdown and reopening have meant a lengthy period of limbo for working families, with disastrous consequences for women" (Bariola & Collins, 2021, p. 1). Concern for the "enduring consequences for women's future occupational trajectories, opportunities, and lifetime earnings" due to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on employment for women and the importance of a rebound for women's workforce participation beyond the pandemic stressed the need to understand the individual experiences of these women (Mooi-Reci & Risman, 2020, p. 165). Additionally, the low productivity shown by remotely working mothers during the

early months of the COVID-19 pandemic raised concerns over the long-term viability of remote work opportunities for working mothers (Tleubayev & Kozhakhmet, 2022). The need to investigate these more vulnerable categories of employees, new training and development needs, new performance and appraisal systems, and additional employee support including mental health benefits was clear (Kniffin et al., 2021). Future research to understand the experiences of those working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the vulnerable population of working mothers, was important before workplaces made additional policy changes (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Couch et al., 2021; Tleubayev & Kozhakhmet, 2022). Understanding the unique experiences of remotely working mothers during COVID-19 is a key to creating effective remote work policies for long-term remote work opportunities beyond the pandemic.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of mothers of preschool-aged children who transitioned to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Use of the generic qualitative approach helped provide insight into the individual experiences of this vulnerable population and their perceptions of organizational support during their remote work experience. This research design offered the individualized focus necessary to provide the desired level of understanding of the participants' lived experiences. The detailed information in the findings may help organizations learn how to better support this population in remote work scenarios to help keep them in the workforce and have a positive impact on their overall well-being.

Research Design and Rationale

I employed a generic qualitative approach in this study to gain insight into the unique experiences of mothers of preschool-aged children who transitioned to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic to help identify ways to use this information for future organizational improvements. Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to try "making sense of the world" through the discovery of meanings and an increased understanding of how people engage with those meanings (Patton, 2015, p. 6). Generic inquiry then "seeks to illuminate and interpret meanings of the phenomenon under inquiry based on the individual perceptions and experiences described by the participants" (Kostere & Kostere, 2022, p. 3). I chose the generic approach over the phenomenological design for this study because this approach considers the individual meaning of a phenomenon or process, whereas phenomenology "seeks to discover the

shared essence or meaning of a process or phenomenon" (Kennedy, 2016, p. 1373).

Where phenomenology is used to investigate the internal context of the conscious

"experiencing" of participants, generic inquiry is employed to consider the outward

experiences of the participants, which can lead to insight into external consequences or

applications of what was learned from the participants (Percy et al., 2015). This made the

generic qualitative approach the ideal option for this study.

I conducted one-on-one interviews with open-ended questions, which allowed for

a conversational tone and encouraged openness and honesty from the participants (see

Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The flexibility allowed by this qualitative approach was ideal,

because I was able to develop and immediately ask personalized sub questions based on

the responses given by participants during the interview (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A quantitative approach did not offer the same flexibility and a mixed-methods approach

would have led to a higher volume of data, which may have created undesirable data

analysis and dissemination challenges (Halcomb, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The

generic qualitative approach and external focus offered valuable insight into what was

experienced by each of the individual participants and what those unique experiences can

offer organizations wanting to improve the POS of their employees.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative inquiry advances learning, and researchers achieve this advancement

in a variety of ways, with some measuring it, some watching it, some doing it, while

interviewers "ask questions about it" (see Patton, 2015, p. 1). My role as the researcher in

this study was to advance learning by asking questions about the experiences of the

participants to understand their unique perspectives and determine how those perspectives might be able to help organizations in the future. I also personally transcribed and coded the interviews in a way that protected participant confidentiality and effectively identified themes to accurately describe their experiences, while also maintaining credibility by reducing the risk of researcher bias.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

I used purposive sampling for this study to identify interview participants. Based on the research questions, eligibility criteria were defined and a strategy for ensuring participants met the established criteria was put in place, to address the critical issues of this nonprobability sampling logic (see Burkholder et al., 2020). To be eligible, participants had to be:

- female

- between the ages of 18 and 35

- married or living with their partner

- have at least one child in their home under the age of 5

- have worked in a brick-and-mortar environment for at least 1 year before the COVID-19 pandemic

- have transitioned to working remotely from home between March 2020 and May 2020

The participants were required to fill out consent forms, which included the criteria, to assure their eligibility for the study. I set a sample size of 20 participants to hopefully achieve data saturation, which is when no new information would be gained through additional participation and that the research questions would be sufficiently answered (see Burkholder et al., 2020). I chose the sample size of 20 with confidence because there is no exact number to ensure saturation with estimates ranging from 10 to 50 participants based on the research approach (e.g., three to 10 participants have been suggested for phenomenology and 20 to 30 for grounded theory) (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). If, however, saturation had not been achieved after 20 interviews, additional participants would have been recruited and interviewed in five participant increments until saturation was fully achieved.

Instrumentation

The interview questions were not taken from any existing instrument and instead were developed by me based on the research questions. Each open-ended question was designed to gain insight into the unique experiences of each participant while also gathering data that can be used for future organizational policy changes. I also developed the questions to encourage specific, thoughtful answers from each participant, such as:

- What organizational policies are the most important to you or do you feel have the most impact on your organizational commitment while working remotely and why?

- What organizational policy changes would help you feel more supported by your current organization in your remote role and why?

- While working remotely, what makes you feel valued by an employer and how does this differ from when you are working in a traditional setting?

I asked the same semi-structured interview questions of all participants and conducted the interviews face-to-face using Microsoft Teams, which allowed me to develop sub questions during each unique interview. The sub questions were asked to gather additional information, provide clarity, were developed on-the-spot, and were participant-specific to gain further insight into their specific experience (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I recruited participants for this study using the social media platforms of Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn as well as the Walden Participant Pool. Posts were made on each platform with a visual created in Canva explaining the purpose of the study, providing information on how the study was to be conducted, listing the identifying criteria required for participation eligibility, and including a link to a Google Forms questionnaire for interested individuals to fill out. The questionnaire asked for criteria verification to ensure eligibility and included the informed consent, allowing the participants to check an "I Consent" box rather than sign their name, allowing for confidentiality. The only identifying information requested from the participant was their preferred email address which was requested on the questionnaire so I could contact them to schedule their initial interview and follow-up member checking call.

Once an individual's eligibility and consent forms were received, and the prospective participant was confirmed to be eligible, I scheduled the interview with the

participant at their convenience, with an expected interview length of approximately 1 hour, and issued the participant a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes. A pseudonym list was developed before the first interview was scheduled to avoid any unintentional correlations with the participants after initial communications had taken place. Each interview was audio recorded using a digital voice recorder as a backup after receiving permission from the participant at the beginning of the interview. The Microsoft Teams transcription tool was then used to transcribe the interview.

At the end of the interview, I debriefed the participant, and saved digital voice files under the participant's pseudonym on a private, secure server in my home along with all other electronic files related to the study. The list of pseudonyms is kept on a separate, private, secure server also in my home. The original audio files were deleted from the original devices, and any physical documents were destroyed after being scanned electronically. I immediately added my field notes to each participant's file and checked the Microsoft Teams' transcription for accuracy for each interview using the audio files, to maintain inquiry trustworthiness (see Burkholder et al., 2020). Data will be kept for a period of 5 years before being destroyed, as required by Walden University.

Data Analysis Plan

I manually coded the data, by following Saldana's (2021) suggestion that first-time researchers should start with manual coding before learning coding software. The following 12-step inductive analysis procedure outlined by Kostere and Kostere (2022) was used to analyze each interview individually, without consideration or concern for the other interviews.

1. A review of data for each participant was done by reading field notes, transcription, and any additional pertinent information and intuitively highlighting any meaningful words or phrases.

2. Highlighted information (i.e., meaning units) were reviewed to determine the relation to the research question to extricate the truly relevant information.

3. Unrelated data were moved to a separate file, labeled, and stored for any future reevaluation.

4. Codes were created for each relevant meaning unit

5. The codes were then clustered, and patterns were identified

6. As patterns were identified and named, codes were grouped under the relevant pattern

7. The patterns were described and related to the research question

8. The patterns were then clustered, and themes related to the research question were identified

9. The patterns were listed under each theme to explain the theme

10. A detailed analysis was then written about each theme and the relevance to the research question

11. This process was repeated for each interview

12. Once every interview was analyzed, the repeated patterns and themes were

synthesized together and meanings and implications relating to the research

question were investigated

After conducting this inductive analysis, I engaged in member checking as a way

of verifying the accuracy of the results by requesting a follow-up phone or video

interview with each participant based on their personal preference. These interviews were

to be audio recorded and were expected to last approximately 15 minutes during which I

would have shared the findings and asked each participant for feedback regarding

discrepancies, areas for clarification, and whether they had any revisions or additions.

Kostere and Kostere (2022) encouraged member checking for generic qualitative analysis

to help maintain validity. Unfortunately, only one participant responded to this request,

and they requested their information be sent via email rather than on a follow-up call.

They did, however, verify the accuracy of their information.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility, or internal validity, confirms that the research question is the basis for

all data collected (Burkholder et al., 2020). Member checking is one of the recommended

methods of establishing credibility, according to Burkholder et al (2020), with reflexivity

being another. When writing field notes for this study, I engaged in reflexivity by

including self-critical analyses and bias awareness in the field notes alongside

observations of the participant. This practice also aided in transferability for this study.

Transferability

Transferability, or external validity, confirms that the sample of a study, and therefore the findings, are representative of the population of interest and apply to other situations (Burkholder et al., 2020). By using reflexivity, I sufficiently addressed the assumptions of the study so the reader can apply the findings accordingly (see Burkholder et al., 2020). By incorporating self-critical analyses into the field notes and a thick description of the setting and findings within the research report, the transferability of this study can be confirmed.

Dependability

Dependability shows "evidence of consistency in data collection, analysis, and reporting" which includes documenting any methodological shifts; consequently, this is why inquiry audits, such as audit trails, are used to help confirm dependability and were used for the current study (see Burkholder et al., 2020). In addition to the field notes and reflexivity, I kept a daily reflection journal for the length of the research process where I provided in-depth details of how the study was conducted and the data analysis process to help maintain the dependability and confirmability of this study.

Confirmability

Confirmability, or objectivity, can be difficult in qualitative research due to the admission of existing researcher subjectivity (Burkholder et al., 2020). Because subjectivity is assumed to be present, the research methods must be flawlessly objective so "that other informed researchers would arrive at essentially the same conclusions when examining the same qualitative data" (Burkholder et al., 2020, p. 91). I was acutely aware

of the potential for existing bias because I met most of the eligibility requirements of the study, aside from the fact that I did not transition to remote work during the required time frame. The combination of member checking, reflexivity, thick descriptions, and an audit trail helped maintain confirmability for this study.

Ethical Procedures

All research must be conducted ethically, and must consider several key factors including voluntary participation, causing no harm to the participants, confidentiality, and ethical analysis and reporting (Babbie, 2017). While this study presented no known harm to the participants, I used pseudonyms to maintain participant confidentiality; redacted personal identifiers from the interview transcription; reminded participants the study was voluntary multiple times throughout the process; and maintained confidentiality by securely storing the data, personal transcriptions, and coding. Before data were collected, the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study, issuing IRB #07-28-23-0471967. After IRB approval was granted, the eligibility questionnaire and Informed Consent explaining the research purpose, the confidentiality protections, and the voluntary nature of the study was posted, and each potential participant was required to check, "I Consent" before an interview was scheduled with them.

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Summary

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In this chapter, I thoroughly outlined the research process and methodology of this study, including its relevance to the research question. Participant recruitment and participation were described, and ethical concerns were discussed. The data analysis process and the role of the researcher were explained. In Chapter 4, I will restate the

purpose of the study, offer in-depth explanations of the data collection and analysis

processes, and reiterate the trustworthiness and ethicality of the study results.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and better understand the unique POS meanings and individual lived experiences of remotely working mothers of preschool-aged children who transitioned to remote work during the COVID-19 lockdown. This is a key demographic for further research with a remote work perspective because of the potential attractiveness of this employment opportunity for mothers with small children who may require the flexibility allowed with remote work (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Kniffin et al., 2021). This attractiveness, combined with the high turnover seen during the Great Resignation in 2021 and the fact that 95% of people who were working remotely as of 2022 wanted to continue doing so, makes the current study of remote work timely and relevant for employers (see Parker & Horowitz, 2022; Wigert & Agrawal, 2022). The POS focus of this study adds additional value for organizations because POS can affect nearly every facet of an employee's work. Learning more about POS can help companies understand the POS and experiences of their employees, which may help them use POS as a tool for decreasing turnover and increasing productivity and job satisfaction (Baran et al., 2012; Sartori et al., 2023).

Four research questions were addressed in this study:

RQ1: How do working mothers of preschool-aged children describe their perceptions of organizational support before transitioning to remote work during COVID-19?

RQ2: How do working mothers of preschool-aged children describe their perceptions of organizational support after their transition to remote work during COVID-19?

RQ3: What do remotely working mothers of preschool-aged children want or need from their employers to feel adequately supported?

RQ4: How do working mothers of preschool-aged children describe any experiences with feeling unsupported or under-supported by their employers?

This chapter includes a discussion of the setting of the study, participant demographics, data collection and analysis processes, evidence of trustworthiness, and results of this study.

Setting

I used a generic qualitative approach for this study and conducted one-on-one interviews in which I asked scheduled, open-ended questions, and incorporated individual sub questions when applicable to each participant during their interview. A generic qualitative inquiry design was chosen for this study because of its focus on the individual meanings, rather than the "shared essence" with a phenomenological approach (see Kennedy, 2016, p. 1373). When using the generic approach, a researcher also considers external application possibilities based on what participants share, making this the ideal approach for the current study because of my goal of offering valuable insights into this demographic for employers (see Percy et al., 2015). Through conducting the individual interviews with open-ended questions, I attempted to hold a safe, relaxed conversation

with each participant, allowing them to be as open and honest as possible (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I recruited participants via social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn as well as the Walden University Participant Pool with multiple shares occurring on each of the platforms and potentially via email, text message, or other similar means. Identifying information beyond the participant's email address and the prescreening questionnaire items were not asked for before or during the interview, and pseudonyms were randomly assigned to participants when the interviews were scheduled to maintain confidentiality. However, based on some similarities in the email address format, participant accents, and the little employment role information gathered from interview responses, I believe that six of the participants may have worked for the same organization. Based on the code development during the data analysis process, I believe saturation was still achieved despite the similarities in those participants.

All interviews were scheduled and conducted during a 9-day time frame with only two issues arising that required the interviews to be rescheduled. One participant was struggling with the technology and could not unmute her microphone within the Teams platform, so her interview was rescheduled for a few days later, and the second time there were no technical issues. Another participant was scheduled for a morning interview but was experiencing stomach pains and needed to be checked out by a doctor at the hospital. She rescheduled for later that day and was feeling better by then.

Demographics

The demographic of remotely working mothers of preschool-aged children was identified as an area of future research for multiple studies due to the exacerbated gender inequalities in remote work experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Awada et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021). To address the critical issues of the nonprobability sampling logic, I developed eligibility criteria based on the research questions and developed a process to ensure participants met the criteria (see Burkholder et al., 2020). While there is some debate about qualitative research sample sizes needed to achieve saturation and with estimates ranging from 10 to 50 participants, a sample size of 20 participants was set for this study with the option to recruit additional participants if necessary to achieve saturation (see Burkholder et al., 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The specific eligibility criteria for this study were that participants had to be female, between the ages of 18 and 35, married or living with their partner, have at least one child in their home under the age of 5, have worked in a brick-and-mortar environment for at least 1 year before the COVID-19 pandemic, and have transitioned to working remotely from home between March 2020 and May 2020. The youngest age ranges from 18 – 20 years old was not represented in the study. I believe that the other participation requirements and the short amount of time since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic may be the reason that such young participants did not meet the rest of the criteria (see Table 1). The two age ranges of 21 – 25 year olds and 31–35 year olds made up 40% of participants, respectively, while the 26–30 year old range completed the

additional 20% of participants. Regarding relationship status, there were significantly more married participants, making up 70% of participants, compared to the 30% who were living with their partner (see Table 2). 60% of participants had worked in a traditional setting for more than 1 year before COVID-19, while 40% had worked in a traditional setting for more than 5 years; however, no participants had worked in a traditional setting for more than 10 years before the pandemic (see Table 3). The maximum age requirement and time since the COVID-19 lockdown may again be the reason for the underrepresentation in this demographic since the oldest participants for this study would have only been 32 or 33 during the lockdown period and 10 years before that may have still been in college or not yet working.

Table 1

Participants' Age Ranges

	18–20	21–25	26–30	31–35
Number of participants	0	8	4	8
Percentage of participants	0	40%	20%	40%

Table 2

Participants' Relationship Status

	Married	Living with partner
Number of participants	14	6
Percentage of participants	70%	30%

Table 3

Participants' Length of Time in Traditional Employment Setting Before COVID-19

	More than 1 year	More than 5 years	More than 10 years
Number of participants	12	8	0
Percentage of participants	60%	40%	0

Data Collection

I recruited participants via social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn as well as the Walden University Participant Pool. Potential participants who were interested in the study completed a prescreening questionnaire and informed consent form through Google Forms so their eligibility could be verified before scheduling an interview with them. Only two participants completed the consent form and questionnaire early on, so I requested a change from the IRB to offer a $25 Amazon gift card incentive for participation. The request was approved, so I modified recruitment materials accordingly, and after another round of posts on social media, more than 50 interested participants completed the prescreening questionnaire and consent form.

Participants provided their email addresses on the prescreening questionnaire, and I contacted 20 of them via email to schedule one-on-one interviews via Microsoft Teams. Each participant's pseudonym (see Appendix A) was assigned at the time the interviews were scheduled to help maintain confidentiality beyond the participants' email addresses (see Heaton, 2022). I used the transcription function within Microsoft Teams and audio recorded each interview using an audio device to help accurately edit the transcription for

each interview. Each participant was asked multiple open-ended questions in a semi-structured format that allowed for specific sub questions to be asked according to the participants' responses. The interviews lasted from 15 to 55 minutes in length, with the first two interviews being the longest and leading to the most identified codes. The incentives were sent to participants within 14 days of their interview. I also sent a request for a follow up via email and only two participants responded. One said a follow up was not necessary and the other requested information be sent via email rather than connecting on another video call.

Data Analysis

I used a 12-step inductive analysis process that allowed me to have an individual focus on each participant's data (see Kostere & Kostere, 2022). After the transcripts were edited by listening back to the audio recording while reading along to them, I reviewed my field notes and reflections before working through the 12 steps for each data set. Meaning units were identified and coded, patterns in the codes were identified and described, and 21 emerging themes were found between the 20 data sets. After each participant's data were analyzed separately, I synthesized patterns and themes and identified four significant, composite themes (see Table 4).

Table 4

Summary of Individual and Composite Themes

Individual themes	Composite themes
Remote work benefits	Employment scenarios
Remote work challenges	
Transition back to in-person	

Likes to work
Mother's choice
Hybrid preference

Gender experiences   Gender and parenting
Parenting experiences
Childcare challenges
Superwomen
Mom guilt
Mother's health

Support needs
Work/life balance   Organizational support needs
Community
Organizational trust
Growth
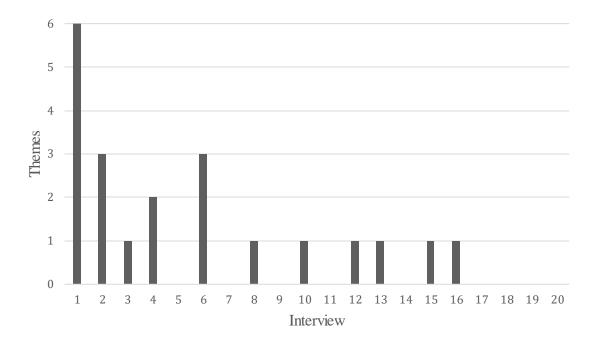Communication
Feedback and evaluations

Unsupportive experiences   Unsupportive experiences
Toxic environment

The lack of guidelines around qualitative sample sizes and the achievement of

data saturation may be a bit controversial, but the overall understanding is that saturation

is achieved when additional data collected seems "repetitive and redundant" (Kostere &

Kostere, 2022, p. 26). After I analyzed each participant's data set individually and in the

order the interviews were conducted, I identified repetitive themes and determined which

interview each theme was originally identified from. This theme identification offered

insight into data saturation for this study, and with it, I believe saturation was achieved.

The development of multiple themes from one interview no longer happened after the

sixth interview, and no themes were identified from the final four interviews (see Figure

1).

Figure 1

Theme Development by Interview

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I recognized a potential for bias because I met nearly all the eligibility requirements for participation in this study; consequently, I took many steps throughout the data collection and analysis processes to demonstrate evidence of trustworthiness by establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. A daily reflection journal, to create an audit trail, and field notes with reflexivity were maintained throughout the data collection and analysis processes in which I incorporated self-critical analyses, bias awareness, and thick descriptions, which can help maintain credibility, dependability, and transferability (see Burkholder et al., 2020). Field notes with observations and impressions were completed within 24 hours of the interviews, though

most were done immediately following the interview. Kostere and Kostere (2022) encouraged member checking for generic qualitative analysis to help maintain validity, so I included member checking as a part of the data collection process. All participants were offered a follow-up meeting to discuss the transcription and findings; however, only one participant agreed to a follow up and they requested the information be sent via email rather than connecting on another call. Documenting my thoughts in field notes, providing rationales behind themes in the reflection journal, and attempting to complete member checking, allowed for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to be established for this study.

Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and better understand the unique experiences and POS of remotely working mothers of preschool-aged children who transitioned to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The individualized focus afforded by use of the generic qualitative approach offered insight into the participants' individual meaning of POS and their experiences. The study findings may lead to organizational applications that companies could use to help attract and retain valuable employees. Four research questions guided this study, and I identified four themes during data analysis that are discussed individually in the following subsections.

Theme 1: Employment Scenarios

The first two research questions for this study consider traditional work scenarios as well as remote work scenarios, respectively. The first major theme to emerge focuses on employment scenarios because the experiences participants shared touched on not

only traditional scenarios and remote work, but hybrid, non-traditional work options, and the transitions to and from each. After transitioning to remote work during the early months of the COVID-19 lockdown, only a few of the participants were still working remotely at the time of this study. Some had changed jobs or employers, and each participant had a unique perspective on their past and current work scenarios as well as the transitions to and from each.

Regarding the transition to remote work, the participant assigned the pseudonym Emilia shared, "I thought it was really challenging and I found myself working more because also I was going through training and through adjusting. You'll tend to work more to acclimatize to everything." She went on to explain that she was able to learn fast and planned her time well, so once she understood the expectations of the new work scenario, she was able to become more efficient with her work. The participant assigned the pseudonym, Cora, shared, "at first it was very difficult because I wasn't used to working from home, but at some point, I was very OK with it… Because it gave me time to take care of my family and take care of my baby." Many participants shared they experienced additional stress during the transition, but all but two found they preferred remote work or at least a hybrid work scenario. The two who preferred in-person work still saw some benefits to remote work. The participant assigned the pseudonym, Dale, said:

> The easiest thing in terms of family with remote is that piece of being able to start work right away and stop work right away. Because it does make it easier in terms of like getting the kids out the door in the morning. My husband takes them, but I

get them ready and then send them out. And I'm like "woo hoo" I'm here. We're

ready. We can go. And, on the reverse, when they come home from school, as

soon as I finish my 4:30 to 5 o'clock call we're starting dinner and we've already

got it going.

She also recognizes that certain tasks are more effectively completed at home without

distractions from coworkers in an office setting. The participant assigned the pseudonym,

Bethan, a social person who enjoys the community at the office and the break it gives her

from being a mom, enjoyed the flexibility of her work hours when working remotely and

taking care of her newborn who "didn't like to sleep at night, so at night when I was done

feeding, we would sit together and work together."

Several other benefits of remote work were shared throughout the interviews.

Efficiency, like Dale's experience, was mentioned by others, as was saved time without a

commute. Childcare-focused benefits were common, such as being able to take care of a

sick child without having to miss work, saving money by being able to reduce or

eliminate paid childcare, and being able to work while taking care of a newborn or

nursing. One participant felt more independent when working from home and another

was able to avoid a toxic coworker after transitioning out of the office. However, there

were also negative experiences.

Multiple participants shared their struggles with having their hours reduced after

transitioning to remote work, which caused financial challenges for their families, such as

the participant assigned the pseudonym, Hafsa, who ended up having to take a second job

and is now working 7 days a week. On the other hand, some participants, like the

participant assigned the pseudonym, Annie, who found themselves working more hours for their employer because of a lack of boundaries and reduced workload visibility, she said:

> Initially working in-person, you will work for a particular number of hours. But, when I started working remotely, the hours increased, and I realized I didn't have time for myself. I didn't have time for my family so much, even though it seemed that it should have been a reverse case since I was working remotely. So, that kind of just made me feel like I don't think I want to continue like this. I don't want to be so lost in my job that I don't have time for my family and also it got to the point that I actually broke down and my company was so unconcerned about me and my health. All they were concerned at that point in time was that I was not doing my job effectively. So, I felt like there was no respect for me being human… I had to work all week, even during the weekends and sometimes I could work for about 14 hours… The work would keep coming in and then the workload when I was in-person, there's a particular amount of workload you would do before closing… it just kept on coming because I was working from home. They felt I should have all the time to just do all that."

Boundary issues were prevalent in the experiences of many participants though some were able to problem solve in creative ways, like Dale who was able to get a work-issued cell phone rather than using her personal phone for work. This allowed her to truly shut off her connection to work when necessary. Others were frustrated by the lack of collaboration when working remotely, unclear expectations, and a lack of check-ins with

their supervisor. Balancing work and childcare were positive for some, like Cora and Bethan, but others like the participant assigned the pseudonym, Frankie, find the multitasking to be extremely challenging. She tried to entertain her children in various ways to keep them occupied until she was free, but it was challenging to get them to understand that she needed to work.

Despite the challenges, six of the participants want to continue working remotely with most of the participants sharing they would be happy with a hybrid work scenario or having flexible work hours. The participant assigned the pseudonym, Sofia, is currently in a hybrid role and appreciates having that opportunity from her employer:

I currently shuffle between working in-person and remotely… It is actually a matter of convenience. My company has decided to consider me for it considering I am a mother and I have a child. So, my company actually allows me when it's not very important to work from home, except when it is actually really necessary for me to be there in-person… My employer is ready to bend the rules for me and just being understanding makes me feel like they do not want to lose me because the value myself is. So that means a lot for me, and I just try my best to always give my best when I work, whether remotely or when I have to be present at work.

Some participants shared they feel there is a need for individualized work options and that mothers should have a choice. The participant assigned the pseudonym, Teresa, said:

I do think COVID kind of brought a lot of that to light for me at least both as an employer and as an employee. Realizing that people need very different things, whether they have children or not. But, really, especially if they have children.

The participant assigned the pseudonym, Joanne, shared, "People are very different. You cannot compare me and someone who's just living a single life without so many hassles like it's very different. So, situations should be treated differently." Addressing this concept from a new mother's perspective was Bethan, who said, "Being able to choose between remote work and going in-person should be applicable to a lot of jobs for mothers, as this gives them the ability to see what is best for them and their newborn."

Having the option to choose their ideal work scenario was important to all the participants, no matter which option they chose. One participant, assigned the pseudonym, Tess, described how she wishes she could be a full-time mother, stating, "I cannot afford that right now and that is why I have to work so much hours." Tess is a housekeeper for another family who allowed her to collect their deliveries and mail and do their shopping even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic lockdown and now that the lockdown has been lifted, Tess started her day at 4 in the morning, doing her housework and spending as much time with her child as she could before she left for her workday, which usually lasts 12 or more hours, three times per week. She said:

I wish I had more time, but out of the little I have, I make sure to see my child and make sure he knows he has a mother too. She is just busy, but she loves him just as much.

Because she works long hours three days of the week, the other four days she spends as much time with her family as she can.

The other participants prefer to work, at least part-time. The participant assigned the pseudonym, Darcie, explained that she loves to work and keep herself busy, while the participant assigned the pseudonym, Amira, took a month off after having her baby, but "after that 1 month, I just felt that I was so idle. I didn't have anything to do and so I decided not to stay idle." She is a hairstylist who was unable to work from a public shop during the COVID-19 lockdown, so she began cutting hair out of her home and decided to start her own YouTube channel "to offer advice and tutorials on how to do hairstyles and skin care." Amira is one of a couple of participants who became interested in non-traditional, online work opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic or who aspire to own their own business someday to stay busy and support their families while pursuing a personal dream or goal.

Theme 2: Gender & Parenting

The second major theme to emerge from the interview was gender and parenting. This theme includes experiences relating to the final two research questions for this study. While most of the participants enjoy working, the complexities of being not only working women but also working mothers proved challenging in some way for all 20 participants.

Gender disparities in employment situations were present in the experiences of several participants, including Dale, an attorney who was left feeling unsupported by her

pre COVID pandemic firm due to significant workload differences between her and her male colleagues. She stated:

> I had a lot higher load than my counterparts in terms of nonbillable and firm commitments. I ran the Social Committee and the Professional Development Committee and all of that, so I made everybody else better at their job, and that meant I had to work more… I was a female associate, and the male associates were not on any of the committees and they didn't do any of the help-other-people type of jobs at the firm. And so, one of the things that frustrated me is I actually went down to what's called a reduced load. So, a lower billable hour load because I had so many nonbillable hours. Well, that automatically decreases your salary, so I was making the least and working the most.

Teresa, a U.S. expatriate who works in public school administration in Switzerland, described the "patriarchal" nature of Swiss employment, which is "very much for the working man." She explained that working moms do not have employment protections in Switzerland, so missing too much work because of children or even pregnancy can lead to termination without recourse. There are also not enough daycares available and the ones that are cost roughly $3,000 U.S. dollars per month because "the idea always was that the mother stays home." The spoken and unspoken Swiss perceptions of working mothers led Teresa to adapt her work habits, she stated:

> I worked like a man. I don't really know how to say it. I felt like I had to kind of prove that I could keep up with the men and other leadership roles and so that meant a lot of time away from my family. At that time, I only had one child and it

wasn't until I had my second child and then COVID that I realized actually I needed to set a better boundary for myself.

She recognizes there have been improvements since the COVID-19 pandemic, however. Before the pandemic, their nine-person administrative team was made up of two women and seven men. Now, their team is more evenly split, so she continues to hope for further improvements in the future, including more working mother-friendly policies and additional daycare facilities country-wide. In the meantime, Teresa has begun setting better boundaries for herself. She said, "I think it's very easy to get sucked into work all the time… I needed to be able to switch off."

Teresa and her team have created several work/life balance policies for the teachers in their school after admittedly handling the COVID-19 lockdown poorly, overwhelming the teachers, and leading to several taking mental health leave. During the school year following lockdown, at any given time the school had a quarter of their employees out on mental health leave. The policies now allow for more flexible hours and the ability for the teachers to leave the building when they do not have a class. She explained:

> You can go home. You can go, you know, walk along the lake if you want, or you can go home and come back when it's your next period. And that pretty immediately it was almost an audible sigh of relief from people. And we've kept that because really, I just think it's a kind thing to do and it has made it easier for some teachers who have children… Quite frankly, it's also more appealing for new hires.

These new policies, however, do not extend to administration. So, Teresa's husband, a teacher at the school, enjoys these flexible benefits while she does not. Most days she works from 8 in the morning to 5 or 5:30 in the evening, with bad days keeping her at the office until 6. Meanwhile, her husband must pick up their youngest child from daycare before the facility closes at 5 p.m.

Several participants explained how they feel unsupported at times because of male supervisors or colleagues who do not understand the challenges of being a working mother. Joanne said, "Especially if you're working with the male gender mainly, some of them are not very understanding. Especially those who are very young, who are not yet having families. You cannot explain to them why you get there always late." The participant assigned the pseudonym, Robbie, shared, "Knowing the times, the bad days, where we come looking like crazy people because we got up on the wrong side of the bed, we have our kids crying, and just be nice and understanding."

Some, including Joanne, shared past experiences with harassment and other negative workplace behaviors. Joanne said:

> Policies regarding racism and policies regarding harassment because these are things I have experienced in the past, and if an organization is advocating for equality and justice and equal treatment for all, that will be something I'll really be happy about.

The participant assigned the pseudonym, Edie, shared, "I had a very racist person who was a supervisor. And, honestly, it really pulls you down. You were really trying to work on your productivity, but just a statement from him can be very demoralizing." Because

of these scenarios, several participants described their desire for additional policies to combat these behaviors as a way of making them feel more supported.

Childcare was the most prevalent challenge discussed with a variety of personal struggles presented based on individual work and family scenarios. Balancing remote work and childcare during the COVID-19 lockdown was a unique challenge for many. Robbie said:

> I had to always be with my child in the same environment and sometimes you're working, but they also need your attention. And it was quite difficult. And at that time, it was hard to find nannies and people who could help out because it was a down period for everybody. So, I have to find ways to adjust myself, and take breaks, and find time to also attend to my little one.

Fortunately for Robbie, as she continued to work remotely, her company's flexible remote work hours helped her eventually find a better balance. She stated:

> I had to rearrange my schedule around when my little one was sleeping or tired… It did so much, it made me not go crazy, literally because if I had to work, I struggled with the little one clamoring for attention. It would have been a whole lot, but this way I could break my work into a few hours on each and I could take breaks where I go feed my baby or play with my baby. And, yeah, it was really great."

Remote work and the flexibility it offered gave her valuable time with her partner and her children. Now that she's back working in-person, however, she has to utilize a nanny

during the day or her mother will come to visit and help out when she can, leaving

Robbie with less time for her family.

Nannies and daycare needs can create additional challenges for working mothers.

As previously mentioned, Teresa shared that daycare facilities in Switzerland close

promptly at 5 p.m., even though her workday often doesn't end until 6, in addition to the

high cost. For Joanne, her nanny's schedule before COVID-19 left her with similar

timing struggles, but the transition to remote work allowed her to stop using a nanny

since her husband was also working remotely and the two were able to balance work and

childcare without additional help. After returning to in-person work, to avoid the

scheduling issue with the nanny, the couple decided to put their children in daycare

despite the cost increase.

When asked what her employer could do to make in-person work better for her,

Joanne's requests entirely revolved around her childcare struggles. She mentioned

wanting an on-site childcare center and an area for nursing mothers because of her

challenges balancing work and breastfeeding. Going back to in-person work left her

unable to breastfeed after 3 months, despite wanting to nurse for a full 2 years, due to her

child becoming attached to the bottle at daycare and her lowered milk supply. The

participant assigned the pseudonym, Kye, also shared she would have nursed her child

longer if she could have continued working remotely. For Joanne, the additional cost of

formula forced them to budget more closely and forgo luxuries like vacations and doing

family activities on the weekends that cost money. These challenges have left her

rethinking the number of children she wants to have. She said, "I wanted to have three

kids. But, right now, I'm thinking I have two already and it's a lot. So, I'm thinking, what if I get pregnant?... How will I cope?"

For some participants, their organizations already have policies that help working mothers feel more supported. For example, some mentioned they were given additional time to work remotely after the COVID-19 lockdown lifted because they were breastfeeding or had just given birth. Sofia's organization allows their employees to bring their children to work with them when working in-person, before the pandemic and now, though she is currently working in the hybrid scenario they also offer. Sofia said:

> When I was working in-person I was allowed to bring my child to work. And, yeah, it was never an issue bringing my child to work and attending to my child. As I said, I kind of work like we are divided into teams. So, I think I have the most supportive team ever.

But, if she were faced with going back to in-person work full-time in the future, she would have productivity concerns as her child got older. She said, "Eventually, my child would actually become a distraction for me at my workplace and not just for me, for other coworkers."

Work/life balance issues were also prevalent with all twenty participants, some more extreme than others. Several participants described issues with "mom guilt" as they explained their challenges with spending time with their children, spending time with their husbands or partners, and managing their household responsibilities while balancing their work schedules. Others have experienced challenges that have led to mental and physical health concerns.

Dale shared:

> I was working like the normal hours during the day and then I worked every night
>
> after the kids went to sleep for another three to four hours. And I would do the
>
> nighttime work probably four or five nights a week.

This grueling schedule before and during COVID-19 left her averaging 5 hours of sleep per night. Bethan, the mother who balanced her remote work with her baby's sleep schedule, often leaving her working overnight, also experienced sleep deprivation. Frankie, who felt unsupported by her organization before the pandemic but was unable to find a job during the pandemic eventually left because of the unsupportive nature of her company and the work/life balance challenges. She was always extremely tired and she "really lost weight because it was hard."

The stories shared offered insight into the perseverance of these mothers with Tess and Robbie naming the phenomenon. Tess said, "we are superwomen." Robbie expanded by saying, "women are superheroes and they do so much." Tess went on to confirm that she will do whatever it takes to take care of her child and her family, no matter the personal cost. She explained, "I want him to have a better life than I do right now."

Theme 3: Organizational Support Needs

The organizational support needs theme was developed from the largest number of coded meaning units and patterns, while directly addressing the third research question for this study. Thirty-three patterns were identified, from which 7 individual themes were developed and were ultimately combined under this composite theme. Out of all the

patterns, work/life balance was the most common, followed closely by salary, and a sense of community or connection.

Work/life balance was mentioned directly or indirectly by every participant, with many sharing how remote work helped their work/life balance, which was previously discussed under the employment scenarios theme. Edie, who had a 45-minute commute when working in-person, shared how difficult her mornings were before she was able to start working remotely. She said:

> I think reporting to work very early in the mornings, I don't like to do that because by that time I had to wake up so early and you know, especially when you have kids, you have to do a lot to prepare them, like it's a whole lot of work in the mornings.

Remote work offered her flexibility and better work/life balance, she explained, "You also get time to like bond with your kids because they're at home and if the kids are small you also get to see them, you'll have more time."

In contrast, Annie experienced an increased workload when her organization transitioned to remote work, leading to her decision to find a new role with a different company. She shared:

> I felt like that was a very critical point for my child. I felt like she needed me a lot and I was not really giving her all the attention and the love that she needed at that point in time… She played a big role in my deciding factor… I felt like if they hadn't increased the working hours and paid more attention to the main physical health of their workers, they might not have lost me.

She went on to explain her preference for in-person work and her hesitancy to take another remote work opportunity in the future, after her bad experience during the COVID-19 lockdown. She said:

> You have to know that I'm a mother. So, my child has to be included in my schedule and also I need to know what's in it for me working remotely and the job that I'm going to be doing for you.

Sofia summed work/life balance up well by saying:

> I really wish most employers would understand that being a mother is a job itself and they could actually be more lenient with hours when it comes to the working environment. I just really hope that they actually get to see that."

Salary also played a big role in the experiences of many participants. Amira, who has been building her online business since the salon she worked at was forced to close during the COVID-19 lockdown, shared that an offer from a company with a bigger salary would be something she would consider even if it meant returning to in-person work. For Annie, her new position does not pay as much, but her job satisfaction is higher than with the employer she left. She said:

> I am really confident. The pay is not even as much as my previous job, but I am definitely confident about my new employer. I love my job and I love everything that comes with it. You know, when I wake up in the morning and I have to prepare for work, I don't have to be grumpy about it. It's something I'm happy to do.

Frankie, who also left her organization after the way the pandemic was handled, is working in-person again at her new company, but the pay is better and the hours are more flexible. She shared she's able to work half days sometimes, which has allowed her to not only have a better work/life balance in general, but she now even has some time for herself. Meanwhile, because Hafsa's primary salary was not enough for her family after transitioning to remote work, she is now working seven days per week after taking on a second job to pay her bills and support her family.

For Dale, her employer's proactive attention regarding her salary has increased her organizational commitment exponentially. She shared:

While I was in the middle of interviewing with this other company, I got the information that they were like "oh, HR started looking at it on their own initiative. They did some random internal and external metrics and we're upping your compensation." And so, they did. The job offer I got ultimately was slightly higher than that and they matched it again. But the fact that they upped my compensation without anybody asking them to was actually a really good sign to me that they're proactively trying to make sure that it's going well.

The proactive salary increase and the culture within the organization was her deciding factor in declining the new offer and staying with her current company.

Beyond work/life balance and salary, most of the participants mentioned wanting a sense of community or connection no matter their employment scenario. Some participants, like Edie, longed for a sense of community when working remotely, so she created it by reaching out to her friends working either remotely or in-person to stay

consistently connected. When working remotely, the participant assigned the pseudonym Claudia shared she would like to have regular "group gatherings" for that connection as well as training opportunities because full-time remote work was less favorable for her because of the lack of connection. She said, "The aspect of being cut off, not getting those relationships, that closeness" was difficult for her to adjust to. Hafsa expressed her appreciation for the lunchroom one of her employers had when working in-person. Dale explained how she doesn't feel as close to her coworkers when only seeing them virtually, saying:

> Six months into my time with (my company), it was really hard because I was like, I don't even know anyone I work with and I've met them like once. And, because you have so many video calls that are I assume transactional, like we're getting something done on a video call, you're not chitchatting as you're walking to a meeting, chitchatting on the way out, walking down to lunch with somebody. There has to be a little bit more intentionality to that connection piece of it.

Meanwhile, the participant assigned the pseudonym, Violet, debated the benefits and drawbacks of the different employment scenarios and how community and connection come into play. Regarding communication and community, she said:

> In-person communication is immediate and effective for nonverbal cues, gestures, and body language to enhance understanding… Working remotely, communication is primarily through mostly written messages and we could do a video conference or phone calls, which may require more concise and explicit communication. Without non-verbal cues, there is a risk of misinterpretation or

miscommunication. And, in-person actually also has collaboration and

teamwork… In in-person settings it can be more spontaneous and organic and you

can easily get around a whiteboard and physical documents can have impromptu

discussions. Maybe, the other way around, online the remote setting you know

often requires deliberate planning.

She continued by considering the potential distractions for in-person and remote work,

saying:

There are coworkers you know personally that can actually expose me to various

distractions and just office noise, you know, from the environment. And it could

be interruptions from colleagues and we could be informed of meetings. While

remote can also present distractions there about, you know, trying to figure out

your activities at home… I get a whole lot of disruptions from the household and

a relationship.

As with most concepts discussed, there are positives and negatives to each, which every

individual has to consider for themselves.

As each code and pattern emerged, the unique aspects of each participant's life, as

well as their wants and needs became evident. While similarities within the themes

developed, each participant had slight variances that were important to them and often

tied to other patterns.

For example, Claudia's "group gatherings" idea for potential training and other

connection purposes ties in with the need for growth that several participants, including

Claudia, shared. Some participants expressed similar desires for feedback, increased

touchpoints with their supervisors, and a desire for mentorship. Several participants

shared they felt supported by recognition, others specified a desire for incentives,

discounts, and other financial rewards. Maternity leave and childcare benefits, like

extended leave time, on-site childcare, or allocations for nanny or daycare expenses, were

also discussed often. Paid time off and other traditional benefits, such as health insurance,

were discussed but only minimally, perhaps because these are basic benefits offered by

most employers and are therefore more expected by their employees. Additionally, some

individual participants had unique ideas and stories to share like Bethan's appreciation of

her organization for giving good recommendations to employees who leave the

organization and her idea of a women's community group that could meet to talk and

relax regularly, or Claudia's preference for a fitness center at her place of employment,

Kye's appreciation for the baby gifts her organization brought to her home after she gave

birth, and Hafsa's recognition of an employer who ensured their employees had access to

transportation to get to and from the office.

Ultimately, all the participants alluded to a desire to have their employer be

concerned with their well-being, to show compassion, and to be respected. Dale specified

how satisfied she is with her organization's willingness "to get it right" and many others

shared how they trust their company to make decisions that will be good for them as

employees but will also be good for the organization. A few shared they would like their

employers to implement changes that would make them feel more supported, but only if

it is what is best for the company. Teresa described the changes she has seen in her

leadership team since the pandemic, how they are more supportive, and how they are

working hard to understand the teachers in their school to continue improving things in the future. She said:

They're (the leadership team) very committed at the moment to making things better moving forward. And so one of the things we're trying to create for this year is just calling it kind of a task force of staff members and really getting consistent input from teachers in terms of what's going well, what's not. And then looking at things that are not going well and saying "Ok, how can we brainstorm together. You know, what are some realistic things we can put in place because we don't want a repeat of last year." It is incredibly important for me and for the organization as a whole for people to feel supported. Years ago I felt like it was kind of lip service, but now it's really authentic. And so hopefully we're giving teachers more of a voice and we can kind of help change the way we are supporting everyone.

However, the overarching theme within this organizational support needs theme is the desire from all participants to be recognized as valuable by their employer and to feel like they matter. Annie said, "Workers are also human, so employers out there should know that they need to treat their employees better because they could actually make you or break you."

Theme 4: Unsupportive Experiences

The fourth research question for this study considers experiences where participants feel unsupported or under supported by their employers, and a theme of unsupportive experiences emerged as the participants shared their stories. Some

unsupportive scenarios have been highlighted within other themes, such as mental and physical health issues, being treated as expendable, and toxic environments including difficult coworkers. Additional unsupportive experiences were described by several participants, many of which go along with the wants and needs in the third research question for this study.

For example, where several participants discussed wanting to "be heard," some participants, like Violet, shared that "opinions have been devalued" and how that made her feel unsupported. Joanne mentioned being undermined and Dale shared, "When you're not involved in decision-making, I think that can feel devaluing when decision-making that affects you is being done without your input."

Similar concerns shared by participants are unclear communication and challenging expectations. When lockdown began, Joanne faced a swift layoff with very little explanation and no information regarding the future. She received her final paycheck and then immediately had to figure out how to survive without her income moving forward. "My mind was running about how to use my savings and how to minimize on things that I don't really need." Thankfully for Joanne, the company called her back to work a month later and offered remote work that lasted roughly a year before they called everyone back to in-person work.

Amira struggled with challenging expectations and rules "they were too much exaggerated and so I had to follow so that I don't lose my job." When expectations were not met, such as when Amira would arrive 5 minutes late, her manager would stop communicating completely. "There were days she didn't even talk to us. Like when we,

maybe, the days that we weren't punctual and so I thought at pressure was too much. She could have been understanding."

Unattainable goals, unfair reward distribution, and delays in promotion were also identified as unsupportive by some participants. Violet shared, "I think most of the time recognition and rewards are actually, you know, being misused. You know it's not fair, it doesn't go around the way it should." Annie described her organization's metrics and explained it was impossible to get a score of 100, which was frustrating. However, she also explained how she understands "that we as humans, we have to learn to accept and endure some kinds of things," suggesting that unsupportive situations can be overlooked by employees if they choose to.

While these other scenarios are applicable in both remote and in-person work situations, Joanne saw a change in her organization's evaluation and promotion processes when the company transitioned to remote work which left her feeling unsupported. Evaluations, previously done on an annual basis, did not happen at all while Joanne was working remotely, and communication regarding salaries stopped. She understood the unique circumstances but feels these processes would need to be evaluated and revised to be effective for long-term remote work situations and to properly support employees.

The overlap between the wants and needs themes with the unsupportive scenario themes of the participants is clear. These trends also offer insight that organizations may find useful not just for long-term remote work scenarios but with any employment scenario in the post-COVID-19 lockdown workforce, especially for organizations attempting to attract and retain valuable employees who are also mothers.

Summary

In this chapter, I explored the unique experiences and POS of remotely working mothers of preschool-aged children who transitioned to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the research questions and the interviews with participants, four themes emerged: employment scenarios, gender and parenting, organizational support needs, and unsupportive experiences. These themes offer insight into the POS of the participants as well as potential external consequences and applications for employers.

Overall, the interviews revealed that the POS and experiences of the participants were incredibly unique and specific to their individual lives, priorities, and preferences. While this individuality might be concerning for organizations attempting to understand their employees and develop effective policies, many of the experiences, and therefore the themes of this study, have commonalities that can potentially help organizations sufficiently support a diverse workforce even if not every employee's wants or needs are completely fulfilled.

The first and second research questions are very similar, but they focus on traditional employment settings and remote work, respectively. In general, the participant experiences suggest how life-changing the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting change in employment was for these working mothers. Not only did their physical work environment shift, at least temporarily, but their mindset seemed to shift as well. When confronted with a forced change in employment scenario due to enforced lockdowns, they each seemed to realize in their own way that going forward their work could look different and have more flexibility. Often, the additional time spent with their families

and children was something they wanted to continue to have with many preferring remote work or a hybrid employment scenario in the future to create a better balance in their lives. However, a connection and sense of community was also important to most participants. Two of the working mothers value that connection so highly, that they would prefer to work in person to have more social interactions with colleagues than they get through virtual meetings.

Interestingly, a few of the participants demonstrated just how important their specific organizational support desires are. These women chose employers and employment scenarios that supported them so effectively in some ways that they were able to overlook other POS concerns. Dale chose to stay with her employer working remotely despite her preference for in-person work because of the proactive salary increase they gave her and she said:

> I do like a lot of the culture and I think they try to get the right people and
> maintain a fairly, I'm gonna use some language, but like a no bullshit policy…
> and so ultimately that's why I stayed.

Annie took a job with a new company that has a lower salary but gives her more balance in her life and makes her feel "really, really appreciated." And Tess prefers her job where she works 12 hours or more per day, 3 days per week. While the long workdays are hard, having 4 days per week to spend with her family makes the lack of sleep and balance on those workdays worth it.

The third research question digs deeper into the individual wants and needs of each participant. The number of codes and patterns that emerged from the interview

questions focused on this research question fully demonstrated both the importance of organizational support for working mothers, but also their individual preferences and desires from their employer-employee relationship. Work/life balance, salary, connection/community, childcare support, growth opportunities, and recognition were some of the most popular wants based on participant responses. However, the overarching concept revealed from the interviews was the participants' desire for compassion and respect from their employer. Violet shared:

> What makes me feel valued is a sense of belonging, the fact that my being in the workplace is actually vital and what I have to offer is really necessary, trying to respect my views, and I am someone who has something meaningful to offer.

These working mothers want to know that their time away from their children is valued by their employer beyond their salary. They want to do meaningful work for a job they enjoy going to and for an employer who supports them, understands their needs as working mothers, and appreciates them being a part of the organization.

The final research question offers insight into what not to do for employers wanting to support employees who are working mothers. Some participants shared experiences with racism, harassment, and toxicity in the workplace at the most extreme end of the unsupportive experiences theme. More commonly, several participants discussed being treated as expendable, not being respected, or included in decision-making, unclear expectations and communication, misused rewards, and other organization-controlled unsupportive scenarios. Some of the participants also shared frustrating productivity scenarios with unattainable goals, efficiency not mattering, and

promotion delays, further demonstrating how many of these working mothers truly value their careers, how much they want to succeed as an employee, and how much they value growth opportunities and recognition. Dale's former organization's billable versus non-billable hour structure left her feeling overworked despite improving her efficiency. She said:

> When you're working on a billable hour, it doesn't matter how efficient you are. I mean, it does. It does. But, in terms of giving yourself back time, if I finish something in 4 hours that would take somebody else 6 or 8, all that means is I have to work another 2 or 4 hours. So, I do think that was hard for me that there was never, you never got more time back and I didn't like that.

Annie's organization had an evaluation process that made achieving top scores impossible no matter how much she worked and the company's willingness to push employees extremely hard became even more evident when they transitioned to remote work. The working hours and workload increased, taking away their valuable weekends and their time to rest. When Annie realized her work would not allow her to spend enough time with her daughter, she set out to find another position. Her new company offers more balance, but lower pay, and yet Annie is "confident" about her new organization and is excited to go to work each day.

Evaluations stopped when Joanne's organization transitioned to remote work, leaving employee salaries stagnated and no opportunity for promotions. Though she experiences mom guilt, especially because she had to stop nursing her youngest at only three months old after going back to in-person work, she is also questioning her original

family plan. She and her husband originally planned for three children, but the financial challenges of childcare and the work/life balance struggles have made them consider being done now that they've had their second. Her income is needed for their family life, but she also shared that she loves her work, so having promotional opportunities is something she values deeply. She also shared that she wishes she could have more flexible working hours and that she would consider accepting an offer from another company "if the policies are more considerate to moms."

Most of the participants may not only need to work, but they enjoy working and want to grow their careers. Their unsupportive experiences can be terrible, but also seem to be the catalyst that pushes them into a new opportunity with an organization that fits their support needs more sufficiently. Additionally, their loyalty to the organizations that support them effectively is not only enough to keep them working there but motivates them to give their best efforts including going above and beyond. Claudia explained this by saying she needs "things that make you feel passionate about work" and went on to describe having a sense of belonging and an employer who is concerned with the welfare and inclusivity of employees, suggesting her passion is ignited when she feels truly supported by her company.

In this chapter, I have explored the research questions and the themes that emerged from the interview process. It offers insight into the experiences and POS of the participants, as well as potential external consequences and applications that may lead to organizational applications companies could use to help attract and retain valuable employees including these persevering, passionate working mothers. In Chapter 5, I will

provide an interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, and

future implications of this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

I designed this generic qualitative study to fill an identified gender-focused research gap by learning about the experiences and POS of remotely working mothers through one-on-one, semi structured interviews (see Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Awada et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021). By exploring and attempting to understand the unique experiences of remotely working mothers of preschool-aged children who transitioned to remote work during the COVID-19 lockdown, insights into the individual meaning of POS for the participants were gained. In turn, the gained insight into participant's individual POS meanings and outward experiences could be used to help identify potential applications for organizations looking to attract and retain employees who desire long-term, remote work employment opportunities. In this chapter, I discuss my interpretations of the findings, the study limitations, my recommendations for future research, and the social change implications.

Interpretation of the Findings

During the COVID-19 pandemic, productivity and overall remote work scenarios varied based on several factors including gender, age, and race leaving numerous opportunities for further research (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Awada et al., 2021; Becker, 2021; Tahlyan et al., 2022). Female employees were one demographic that reported increased time at their workstations and productivity, while other demographics, including employees with younger children, reported working longer hours than before the pandemic (Awada et al., 2021). Working mothers often used "remote working as a means of integrating the work and family domains" before the pandemic, which

suggested that further research was needed on this specific population's remote work experience, especially with the increased opportunity for remote work during the pandemic (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020, p. 680; Baran et al., 2012; Stone, 2021). While POS-focused research has been conducted on contract employment scenarios, gaps in the literature have been identified regarding remote and hybrid employment. Additional research on this topic could be not only relevant but timely for organizations as they continue to work on the future state of remote work and the organizational policies to support this non-traditional employment option.

Reciprocity is the cornerstone of POS, with employees believing their efforts will be rewarded by the organization and the level of effort would be directly impacted by the employee's POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Research has shown that contingent workers satisfy their felt obligation to both the staffing agency and the client organization, with comprehensive high performance, but additional research is needed regarding remote work performance and these performance concerns are a major focus for organizations as they face the long-term workforce changes since the COVID-19 pandemic (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Awada et al., 2021; Baran et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2021; Kuruzovich et al., 2021; Tahlyan et al., 2022). While the current study did not directly focus on productivity, by understanding the POS and experiences of the participants, insight has been gained into the motivators and barriers to work productivity of remotely working mothers.

HR professionals have been encouraged to consider the POS levels of the employees within their organization because employees with higher levels of POS are

more receptive and accepting of change (Detnakarin & Rufkkhum, 2019). HR practices including growth opportunities, reward fairness, and participation in decision-making also have a positive correlation with POS (Shanock et al., 2019). Many participants in the current study shared that they trust their company to make good decisions for the organization, but that these decisions will also be good for the employees. Gaining employee trust may be imperative for effective change management and to encourage positive employee behaviors. Building trust between employees and employers while decreasing workplace deviance is possible through POS (Khan et al., 2015).

High POS can also lead to extra-role performance from employees because higher levels of POS can lead to more investment in the organization's success plus, and this extra-role performance can lead to a reduction in employees' psychological strain, while POS has also been linked to several other aspects of employee mental and physical health (Baran et al., 2012; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2014; Kurtessis et al., 2017). For the participants who shared the depths of their stress, sleep deprivation, and weight loss during their interviews, their need for organizational support and work/life balance appeared critical to their overall well-being.

POS and PSS can combine to create a multi-level support system that improves overall career trajectories for employees who need to blur the lines between their professional and personal lives, such as employees with children or employees caring for aging parents (Ocampo et al., 2018). However, supportive work scenarios, especially with a supportive work supervisor, lead to not only positive work experiences but also better maternal health even for working women who have lower PSS or even a high-

conflict relationship at home (Cozzolino, 2018). The participants of this current study were required to be either married or living with their partner and, though the relationships were not specifically discussed, spouses and partners were mentioned in many stories. Most of the participants described how they appreciated the additional time with their significant other when working remotely, including some who described how they shared childcare responsibilities with them and occasionally other family members. The participant assigned the pseudonym, Cleo, shared, "My family has been of great help to me, especially my mom and my husband have really helped me… they have been of help trying to balance my work life and my nursing, as I am a nursing mother."

Golden (2006b) found that remote worker job satisfaction increases with the development and success of other relationships including management and family, though coworker relationships were found to plateau or decrease over time. Several participants in the current study agreed that the lack of collaboration and connection is missed when working remotely and many desire some plan for connection for long-term remote work scenarios, some regular check-ins with colleagues, opportunities to relax together and talk, and potentially partnered with growth opportunities like training. However, questions remain regarding the long-term need for co-worker relationships, especially for this demographic that desires this type of connection.

Nearly 15 years ago, a pair of studies determined that spousal support is one of the most challenging work/life balance factors for working mothers (Duindam & Spruijt, 2005; Noonan et al., 2007). During the COVID-19 pandemic, working mothers saw decreased paid hours and increased unpaid hours filled with childcare and chores, while

fathers' paid hours remained the same or only slightly decreased and unpaid hours only increased slightly, supporting the older studies on remote work (Craig & Churchill, 2020; Hazarika & Das, 2021). Other studies found lower work productivity and job satisfaction for women than their male counterparts during the pandemic and a negative impact on overall well-being due to increased domestic responsibilities (Carlson et al., 2021; Dunatchik et al., 2021; Feng & Savani, 2020). Mothers were 19% less likely to meet sleep guidelines during the early months of the pandemic (Kracht, 2021), which was confirmed by a few participants in this study. However, pre pandemic remote work studies also explained the increased schedule control and opportunity for optimal time management for remotely working mothers helped them create better work/life balance (Hilbrecht et al., 2008).

A 2021 Pew Research Center survey found that 54% of remote workers prefer to continue working from home, but the current study suggests that a much higher percentage of working mothers prefer remote or hybrid, with only 10% of the participants for this study expressing a desire to work in-person full-time (see Stone, 2011). Most participants in the current study shared that the increased time with their families was the main reason for this preference. Their desire for on-going flexible working hours, suggests the control they have over their schedule when working remotely helps them better manage their time and create better balance for themselves. This is especially true for the postpartum and nursing participants who were either struggling with a newborn not yet on a sleep schedule or attempting to balance a nursing schedule, leading to 'mom

guilt' when they had to stop nursing before the recommended 2 years due to work constraints.

Several participants shared their struggles with newborns, some explaining how their schedule flexibility allowed them to work during nap times or even overnight when their baby would not sleep, while others wished they could have been able to maintain their milk supply if they had been able to continue working remotely but had to wean at 3 months when they went back to in-person work. Because the demands of a newborn, stress, and sleep deprivation can leave postpartum mothers vulnerable to postpartum depression and the need for an extended maternity leave or can cause them to leave the workforce, the experiences of the postpartum participants sharing their ability to effectively balance work and their newborn while working remotely is invaluable information for organizations wanting to retain valuable employees. However, the need for organizationally supported boundaries is crucial to remote work success for these working mothers.

The lack of distinct boundaries causes spillover into both work and home life, leaving employees feeling overloaded, and reducing both personal and professional satisfaction (McDaniel et al., 2020). The lack of the rigors of traditional work and the lack of a commute saw reduced work exhaustion for remote workers in a pre-pandemic study, which was confirmed by multiple participants in the current study who specifically shared how the lack of commute was ideal for them as working mothers (Golden, 2006a). Being able to end a meeting and then walk into the kitchen and start dinner is just one

example of how a lack of commute helps save these hardworking, buy mothers some time in their day.

The connectivity and productivity needs of employees during the pandemic led to a high level of importance being placed on software quality for remote work, with software quality directly impacting employee performance, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Kuruzovich et al., 2021). Fortunately, while many current study participants described a stressful, challenging transition to remote work, most explained that training provided by their organization and time in the role led to a shorter transition period as well as comfort and confidence within the role within a few weeks of the transition. Technology frustrations were not experienced beyond the first few weeks of working remotely. Technology spillover, however, caused some of the boundary issues experienced by most of the participants. Dale was able to obtain a work phone from her company allowing her to separate her work connectivity from her personal mobile device. Teresa described her need to disconnect and intentionally set boundaries for herself and how the leadership team at her school made significant changes to their policies after the traumatic COVID-19 lockdown and the following school years when a quarter of their staff was on mental health leave at any given time. Though she struggles to put boundaries in place for herself, since the same boundaries for teachers do not apply to the administrators, Teresa now sees the importance of having organizational support with the boundaries as they move forward.

Work/life balance, organizational supported boundaries, salary, and connection were some of the most important POS needs of the participants of this study. Each

participant also shared specific needs unique to them and their situation, which may seem daunting to an organization with hundreds or thousands of employees they are trying to effectively support. However, several participants also shared that they trust their organization to make decisions that are both good for the company and good for the employees. When the most important needs are met, these women become increasingly loyal, incredibly hardworking, passionate employees who can successfully balance their work responsibilities with their motherly duties, reaching high satisfaction and well-being in both domains.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study included challenges presented by the recruitment process, the technological requirements, and the potential for researcher bias. I posted the recruitment flyer on the Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn social media platforms, as well as the Walden University Participant Pool. The user demographics of these platforms and the technological requirements for the interviews that were being conducted via Microsoft Teams may have impacted the study's participant pool. At first there was very little participant interest in the study until I requested a change through the Walden University IRB and began offering a $25 Amazon gift card incentive to participants.

After the incentive was included, my participant needs were met in 2 days and all interviews had been scheduled. However, after interviews had been completed, I identified a possibility that some of the participants worked for the same organization, though it was not verified since company information was not collected. Since there is no

exact number to ensure saturation, I chose the sample size of 20 with confidence and I believe saturation was achieved, despite thinking some participants worked for the same organization, based on the theme development by interview (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, different demographics, additional participant interest from others open to sharing their honest experiences, and potentially reaching participants from a wider variety of companies may alter the findings of a future study.

Researcher bias may also be a potential limitation given that I am a remotely working mother of a preschool-aged child who transitioned to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, my age at the time of the study was beyond the study maximum and I did not transition to remote work until a year after the pandemic lockdown began. While the findings were based on the unique experiences of the participants, they were interpreted by me who fit most of the inclusion criteria for the study. Therefore, I took measures throughout the study to ensure trustworthiness, dependability, transferability, and credibility. Sub questions were developed during the interviews themselves, and I was extra cautious about unintentionally activating values that would influence responses (see Bradburn et al., 2004). I also used field notes to help eliminate bias during the data analysis process (see Kostere & Kostere, 2022).

Recommendations

While this study filled a research gap regarding remotely working mothers, this gap in the literature was one of many identified because of the increase in remote work opportunities following the COVID-19 lockdown (see Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Awada et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021). However, the research questions developed, the

emergent themes, and the participant demographics not included in this study offer further opportunities for future research. Conducting a similar study with remotely working fathers would be a great opportunity to learn their individual meanings of POS and remote work experiences. Additional studies that considered their stress levels and potential for burnout, or overall well-being, and productivity would also offer a better understanding of their experiences and POS long term and build on studies conducted during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic that compared men's experiences to women's (Carlson et al., 2021; Dunatchik et al., 2021; Feng & Savani, 2020).

To continue addressing gaps in female-focused research, I also recommend that a similar study focused on the well-being of mothers who are not in their ideal work scenario. This would be an opportunity to learn if remote or hybrid employment could help these mothers achieve their ideal work scenario, especially if this phenomenon was considered from a POS perspective (Ciciolla et al., 2017). Additionally, conducting remote or hybrid research on PSS and work/family conflict by building on the research of Hilbrecht et al. (2008) regarding work and home life roles, perceptions of quality-of-life, and work/life balance for men and women, again with a POS focus could help gain further insight into the benefits and challenges of these non-traditional employment scenarios for families.

After learning about Kye's experience working remotely while giving birth and understanding the challenges for nursing mothers and the potential for 'mom guilt', I suggest that further research be conducted on remote work and its impact on postpartum mothers to gain further insight into retaining working mothers and the potential

modifications necessary for maternity leave. Another opportunity would be to conduct an updated study focused on the academic performance of children of remotely working mothers after the increase in remote work opportunities following the COVID-19 pandemic (see Vikram et al., 2018).

There are multiple opportunities for additional remote and hybrid work research given the continued workforce developments as the years pass following the initial COVID-19 lockdown. This continued development and evolution of employment scenarios, employee preferences, and organizational policies will continue to create further research opportunities and a need for companies to gain insight into employee perceptions of organizational support. This valuable information will help organizations successfully attract and effectively retain valuable employees, while potentially expanding employment opportunities for vulnerable populations that may struggle with traditional employment scenarios, like working mothers.

Implications

The findings of this study offer potential valuable, useful perspectives for organizations to consider when developing policies and procedures for employees as they move forward in the post COVID-19 pandemic workforce. Working mothers can be productive, motivated, loyal employees when their needs are understood, and they are properly supported by their employer. Additionally, because women require lower levels of POS to engage in reciprocity due to felt obligation than men, they are theoretically easier to please than their male counterparts (Thompson et al., 2020). Several participants of this study supported this idea by sharing they trust their organization and believe the

company will make the right decisions for the company and the employees. One participant specified that she believes employees must overlook certain drawbacks of an organization and, presumably, they will do so when their most important support needs are met. If companies can learn the POS priorities of their employees, they can potentially achieve reciprocity without meeting all the employee needs, if they meet the most important ones.

Only one third of mothers are in their preferred work scenario and the option for flexible working arrangements from their organization increases POS and job satisfaction while decreasing work-life conflict and turnover intention for female employees (Jacob, 2008; Shanmugam & Agarwal, 2019). 90% of the participants in this study shared they would prefer flexible hours with either a remote work scenario or hybrid. Satisfying this need by offering these employment opportunities will help more working mothers achieve their preferred work scenario, therefore decreasing turnover intentions and increasing POS and job satisfaction.

Even before the pandemic, flexible work options, both flexplace and flextime, increased organizational attractiveness for prospective employees, decreased turnover intention for current employees and saw new hires demonstrating higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment than employees who did not have a flexible work option (Kroll et al., 2021; Lee & Kim, 2017; Onken-Menke et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2015). So, satisfying this expressed need of working mothers for long-term remote work or hybrid employment options will also help the organization attract, satisfy, and retain other employees as well.

However, supporting work/life balance will also be critical to the retention of working mothers. Low POS levels and a lack of family-friendly policies, especially for women with a support system at home, make them more likely to leave their employer or start their own business to have more control over their work/life balance (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2020). The importance of work/life balance is also important for postpartum and nursing mothers. Supporting new mothers with postpartum-friendly policies, such as flexible hours whether working remotely or in-person and a secure nursing mother's area for in-person employees with appropriate breaks to allow them time to pump, can help reduce stress and therefore the risk for postpartum mothers to need extended maternity leaves and to reduce their "mom guilt" by helping them continue nursing as long as they prefer to do so.

For participants in this current study, work/life balance and related themes were the most important support needs. Salary was a close second, but one participant explained how she took a new job that paid less but offered her more flexibility in her schedule and therefore better balance, promoting the idea that the individual priorities of employees are important to understand and support effectively. This scenario also makes it clear that salary is not always the most important element of employment and is therefore not the only way to fix a problematic employer-employee relationship. A sense of community was another frequent pattern, followed by other patterns like recognition, growth opportunities, and effective communication. However, beyond work/life balance, the only other patterns echoed by all participants in one way or another were their

collective desire for respect from their employer, compassion, and understanding of the fact that they are employees, but they are also mothers.

POS affects nearly every facet of the employee's work including productivity, organizational trust and commitment, job satisfaction, turnover, employee well-being, innovation, work engagement, and organizational citizenship behavior (Baran et al., 2012; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2020; Eisenberger, 2020; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Kurtessis et al., 2017). POS is therefore potentially the most critical factor for the employer-employee relationship and one of the most important considerations when attempting to understand employee motivation. If organizations see the value in their employees who are working mothers, understand their needs, and can learn to support them effectively, these companies can not only retain these employees, but ignite their passion, encourage a high level of productivity, and increase their organizational commitment.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the world and each individual person. Arguably, some of the most significant shifts were those seen in the workforce, how people work, how people prioritize their personal and professional lives, what matters the most to people, how they communicate, and how they do business overall. When nonessential employees were forced into either unemployment or immediate remote work due to the COVID-19 lockdown, mindset shifts occurred for employees and employers alike. Employers had to implement a swift change management plan that would effectively train and support their workforce through a lockdown with no set end date.

They were forced to offer nontraditional employment scenarios to follow the Center for Disease Control guidelines, despite concerns with productivity and profitability in an unstable economy caused by a worldwide health crisis that put many individuals into a less-than-favorable mindset. Meanwhile, employees had to immediately transition to a new way of working and a new way of living, often with little to no direction, training, or communication as their employer scrambled to implement such a hasty and significant change management plan. This "new normal" presented employees with new and unique challenges, but also offered them an opportunity to re-evaluate their priorities and their professional desires.

As 2020 ended, these employment mindset shifts led to a "Great Resignation" in 2021 and beyond which has caused countless challenges for employers. Recruiting valuable, reliable employees has become difficult, and retaining those employees is more difficult still as employee preferences continue shifting, more employees express their desire for non-traditional opportunities, and work/life balance has become a major focus.

Remotely working mothers were especially focused on work/life balance, with 90% of participants in this study preferring a nontraditional employment scenario rather than returning to full-time, in-person work. Despite the overarching desire for work/life balance, the other major desires of remotely working mothers are relatively basic. All participants described their need to be respected and understood by their employer, as well as working for a company that is compassionate to their needs.

When recruiting and retention are difficult and working mothers who can be passionate, motivated, loyal employees are willing to work if their basic needs are met,

employers should evaluate the POS levels within their organization, learn about the individual needs of their employees, and build policies that more effectively support their people, including those who are working mothers. Organizations need employees who are dependable and productive. Mothers who work remotely want an understanding, compassionate organization, that will support their need for work/life balance. If companies learn to acknowledge the needs of their employees and support their top priorities, they can attract and retain people who will meet or exceed their expectations while remaining loyal and satisfied, therefore allowing the organization to grow and thrive in this post-COVID-19 workforce. One participant summed up this phenomenon by saying, "workers are also human, so employers out there should know that they need to treat their employees better because they could actually make or break you."

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Can you please share with me how long you have worked for your organization and what made you feel supported or unsupported by your organization when you were working in a traditional (brick & mortar) setting?

2. What makes you feel valued by an employer?

3. What makes you feel de-valued or unsupported by an employer?

4. For your efforts at work, what policies or benefits do you value most beyond your paycheck?

5. What was your level of organizational commitment with your employer when you were working in a traditional setting and why?

6. What organizational policies were the most important to you when working in a traditional setting and why?

7. What organizational policy changes, if any, would have made you feel more committed to your organization, more supported by your organization, or give you increased job satisfaction when working in a traditional setting and why?

8. What was your level of organizational commitment with your employer immediately after you transitioned to working remotely and why?

9. If you are still working remotely, how has your organizational commitment changed since the initial transition to remote work?

10. What organizational policies, if any, are/were detrimental to your organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and perceived organizational support when working remotely?

11. What organizational policies were the most important to you when you first transitioned to remote work and why?

12. If you are still working remotely, what organizational policies are the most important to you now and why?

13. What organizational policy changes, if any, would have made you feel more committed to your organization, more supported by your organization, or give you increased job satisfaction immediately after transitioning to remote work and why?

14. If you are still working remotely, what organizational policy changes, if any, would make you feel more committed to your organization, more supported by your organization, or give you increased job satisfaction immediately after transitioning to remote work and why?

15. How likely are you to stay with your organization in a long-term remote employment setting and why?

16. Is there anything you believe to be relevant to this research that you would like to add?

Appendix B: Pseudonym List in Order of Interview Completion

1. Dale

2. Teresa

3. Beatrice

4. Darcie

5. Cleo

6. Edie

7. Claudia

8. Emilia

9. Cora

10. Kye

11. Amira

12. Violet

13. Robbie

14. Annie

15. Bethan

16. Frankie

17. Hafsa

18. Sofia

19. Tess

20. Joanne