# Diversity Management: To What Extent Could It Be Argued that "New Normal" Work Systems Affect Work-Life Balance in the UK's Labour Market

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## Abstract

Post-COVID-19 pandemic, there are suggestions to retain the work systems that were developed during the pandemic as a means of establishing resilience and adaptiveness to potential future disruptions in the UK and other places across the globe. These work systems predominantly were constructed based on digital technologies that supported home offices and remote working. Previously, remote working was considered to be an option to the office environment that allowed for increased flexibility thereby conforming to the needs of work-life balance. However, remote working was not a mainstay work arrangement but rather an option exercised particularly in high-skilled industries. The pandemic forced a mass transition to remote working eliciting new perspectives on work-life balance. Emerging literature indicates that contrary to the arguments of increased flexibility, remote working contributes to work intensification and increased inequalities that have led to a negative distortion of the previously established work-life balance. Thus, the extent to which the new work systems impact work-life balance in the UK remains ambivalent and necessitates further research.

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted the UK's labour market generating instant and consequential experimentations with various flexible work systems. The work systems operate under the traditional centralised working environment triggering paradigm shifts in work relationships (Gigauri, 2020). Such flexible work systems are the basis of a new normal in the UK's labour market. As organisations in the UK just as others around the world set up responsive and adaptive work systems to develop resiliency against future disruptions, the new normal work arrangements are likely to crystallise into permanent structures. These flexible work systems are challenging traditional employer relations, work hours, and work time with an impact on work-life balance.

Recovery in a post-pandemic era has to address labour market interactions given the infusion of numerous experiments, particularly for new relationships, flexible work arrangements and remote work in relation to the centralised working environments. Whilst these are agreeable short-term goals, long-term diagnosis is still debatable (Chung & Lippe, 2020). One strand of the debate examines the pandemic as nothing more than unique devastation that would allow traditional work systems to regenerate (Sevilla et al., 2020). The other strand argues whether the post-pandemic era will precipitate various new normal work systems causing sweeping disruptions in labour markets (Sevilla et al., 2020). Either way, there are speculations among governments and researchers discussing what and how future states of the labour market would look like. Lost in the discussion at a micro level are unforeseen consequences for work-life balance for individual employees as work systems coalesce at

the macro level (Gigauri, 2020).

From the discussion above, this research intends to examine to what extent the new normal work systems have impacted the work-life balance of employees in the UK's labour market. As such, the research question will argue how much have the new normal paradigm shifts in work systems been influenced by the pandemic affecting traditional work-life balance arrangements within the UK's labour market.

## 2. Literature Review

This literature review evaluates texts on what extent the new normal work systems have impacted the work-life balance of employees in the UK's labour market. However, to build a coherent case, this study examines this topic from a global perspective while drawing references from the UK context. To start with, an overview of work-life balance is provided with particularity to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is followed by the location of the changing work environment in theoretical perspectives particularly Adaptive Structuration Theory with an intention to understand the appropriation of individuals to the transformation of the digitally oriented home office work conditions. Thus, the analysis will concentrate on work conditions judged by individuals to be influential to their job productivity, job stress and job satisfaction as critical constructs of work-life balance. Lastly, the review of literature will seek to evaluate how the new work systems evolutions and their usages interact with the paradox of improved productivity and improved employee well-being.

Studies have indicated that maintaining work-life balance is an important employee relations concern for employee motivation, engagement and performance (Fleetwood, 2007). Edwards and Wajcman (2005) argue that researchers and practitioners have been interested in work-life balance because of its significance to employee well-being. According to Gregory and Milner (2009), previous research has supported the notion that work-life balance produces positive impacts such as positive energy and synergy among employees as well as positively influencing their well-being. It has also been demonstrated that work-life balance is a critical mediator of turnover intentions and job engagement (Özbilgin et al., 2011). Chung and Lippe (2020) add that work-life balance can be mediated through remote working because of its support of flexible employment thereby facilitating a balance between professional and private life.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, employees have been confronted with paradigm shifts in both their home and work systems. Functional office setups moved from work environments into homes almost overnight. To make up for the lost time, employees have had to endure high work demands (Sevilla et al., 2020). The closure of schools and childcare programs meant parents had to contend with increased primary care duties such as homeschooling and childcare in addition to the unfamiliar home/work systems. All the while, employees were restricted to their homes thus precipitating deterioration of social life. As such it was difficult for employees to separate their work and personal lives leading to negative impacts on their well-being (Kersley et al., 2006). Given the novelty of the pandemic, most employers had not anticipated conciliation strategies between family and work responsibilities to manage stress and appropriate performance.

Only recently however has remote working been a common feature although not the prevailing work system world over. Even with its growing popularity, some established multinationals such as Yahoo had withdrawn the implementation of remote working (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). The sudden and widespread changes that necessitated the employment of remote work due to the restrictions of movements occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic rekindled waning attention to the work system (Ozimek, 2020). Yet, evidence suggests that a key challenge to remote work is the maintenance of work-life balance (Palumbo, 2020). Muralidhar et al. (2020) reported that remote work disrupts employees' work-life balance. Sevilla et al. (2019) suggest challenges of conflict of roles due to remote working given that employees are expected to use a single physical space to engage in different and sometimes conflicting responsibilities. As such, even with its significant benefits, remote working systems are a significant factor in disturbing work-life balance. Yet, when there are no other choices as occasioned by the pandemic, research is required to determine the new equilibriums for work-life balance as remote working becomes a permanent feature, particularly as a strategy to maintain resilience and agility to possible future disruptions.

Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) examines the resources, rules, and structures afforded by institutions and technologies as the catalyst of human activity. According to AST, technology and its structures and human actions and its structures shape each other continuously and are inherently intertwined (Rains et al., 2017). In particular, AST examines the construction of technology and how end-users perceive and interpret its designs. AST was conceived as a group-level theory for analysis. However, in recent times, it has been adopted for individual-level analysis. Therefore, AST transcends the technocentric technological perspective that encompasses evaluating how technology predicts environmental changes in organisations. Similarly, AST transcends human-centric perspectives in which the agency and interpretations of individuals of technology and its usage are only considerations (Rice & Leonardi, 2014). The implication of AST is the creation of an environment in which organisations and individuals leverage technology to create dynamic work conditions that

inadvertently create perceptions about technology's utility and its role. Particularly, the most critical element is how technology is applied to support human activities. AST suggests that these perceptions about the technological application and its implications vary widely across organisations and individuals. As such, perceptions about technological application inherently influence the usages of digital tools and their appraisals thereby mediating the impact of such perceptions on organisations and individual outcomes.

Viewed from this perspective, it is suggested that digital tools and technology at large have constraining characteristics. This is to mean that technology is rarely modified by the user post-implementation (Rains et al., 2017). End users' technological choices project the life and spirit of technology (Rains et al., 2017). Within the context of digital tools, the emerging behaviours of end-users can be categorised into either intensive use, minimal use or total rejection. In an intensive use scenario, the end-user embraces the technology and makes an effort to master it. With minimal use, the end-user is bound to common usages. The total rejection scenario means technology is not adapted and old ways of working are maintained (Rice & Leonardi, 2014). However, end users can also use appropriate technology. Technological appropriation means varying degrees of integration into the end-users operating mode. The assimilation of technology through appropriation connotes combining minimum mastery of the technology, integration in daily use, and the possible development of innovative use of such technology (Rice & Leonardi, 2014). Appropriating technology means that the user considers technological characteristics, the context of the application, and individual characteristics. In the context of assimilation or appropriation of technology such as a remote working, AST envisages the perceived ease of use or usefulness of digital tools, support for users such as the existence of training, and individual characteristics such as sensitivity to technology, pressure, change, social professional category, gender and age among others (Rice & Leonardi, 2014).

As such, the digital environment characteristics that make up the home office environment and worker/employee characteristics may have an impact on how technology is appropriated. It emerges therefore that the social and technical home office artefacts are critical considerations (Silver & Markus, 2013). Both the social and technical environments in the home office environment become important factors in anticipating and understanding the consequences of the end-user. For instance, workplace characteristics, job characteristics, and individual characteristics can have an impact on how web conferencing, instant messaging, workflow, and the use of groupware are applied. Here, the critical factor is to consider that employee appraisal of such an arrangement will probably differ from one individual to another with respect to perceived job productivity, stress and satisfaction.

The COVID-19 crisis added new directional impetus to questioning traditional views of technology appropriation in the workplace. Almost overnight, the use of digital tools and home offices became part and parcel of employees' working tools, particularly during the lockdown periods. In such a scenario, the option of total rejection was not a possible action for employees. To complicate matters, the training period on how to apply and use home offices was either very short or null altogether, particularly at the beginning of the lockdown period (Lewis et al., 2017). Generally, the mass use of home offices was unanticipated and sudden, particularly for employer relationships and business continuity. Given that the total rejection option of technology appropriation had been eliminated, employees and employers who are limited to the business continuity of appropriation in which organisational activities are to be maintained and an appropriation that considers technology as a tool of correspondence and information sharing beyond the norm (Zammuto et al., 2007). However, it is conceivable that given that the pandemic and its lockdown periods were exogenous forced events, both employees and employers first face the same challenges of transitioning from the traditional to the new work systems. According to Sutan and Vranceanu (2016), such circumstances reduce the impact of change resistance among individuals because the collective stress motivates individuals to consider an unequal sharing of accrued benefits particularly since the constraints to their normal working environment was external. Being an external constraint, the pandemic diffused any blame intentions on the part of employees who would have been otherwise reluctant to function in a significantly transformed digital work environment.

Studies on the impact of home offices on job stress and job satisfaction during and post-pandemic are still emerging. With regards to well-being indicators such as happiness at work and negative affect elements particularly lack of interest, anxiety, wearisomeness, and depression indicated heterogeneity. This heterogeneity was between variation and countries during the months of the pandemic parallel with lockdown and other health restrictions (Cotofan et al., 2021). In another study by Felstead and Reuschke (2020), employee data derived from a COVID-19 pandemic survey codenamed 'Understanding Society' between April and June of 2020 found that mental health issues were correlated with home offices. However, as the effects of the pandemic subsided, the mental health issues also subsided particularly as employees began to shift back to the traditional workspaces (Felstead & Reuschke, 2020). Pelly et al. (2021) evaluated the performance and wellbeing outcomes of 15 workers out of a pool of 621 assessed between November 2019 and February 2020 and compared to similar outcomes assessed between May 2020 and June 2020. The observations indicate that measures of well-being of

the 15 employees were not adversely affected. Explaining this phenomenon, Pelly et al. (2021) captured sentiments such as few negative emotions, higher organisational, increased autonomy, and more engagement. A study by Kuruzovich et al. (2021) seems to contradict these findings concluding that the home office precipitates limited interactions between coworkers thereby negatively impacting job satisfaction although the caveat to these findings of home offices is used extensively. These findings portend an interesting research opportunity to examine precisely the interplay and evolution between employee well-being and satisfaction in their home offices before and after the pandemic. Satisfaction and employee well-being are interlinked with performance and productivity (Böckerman & Ilmakunnas, 2012). Therefore, the next section evaluates how home offices affected job productivity, particularly during a pandemic.

Past studies on job productivity of employees before, during and post endemic periods have resulted in heterogeneity and mixed results among employees working from home. Some studies have indicated that job productivity has had a positive evolution (Baudot & Kelly, 2020). In a study of 592 Amazon Mturk research participants, Baudot and Kelly (2020) concluded that the respondents experienced increased job productivity of themselves and coworkers during the pandemic. However, the increase is linked to the degree of supervisory control and the number of work hours attained by remote workers. Data from Kunze et al. (2020) indicates that in Germany, 700 employees working from home had exhibited increased commitment and productivity during the pandemic. Other data collected in the UK corresponding to various waves of the pandemic between May and November 2020 showed that employees exhibited higher self-perceived productivity with increased frequency of home office hours (Wang et al., 2020). Similarly, data collected in the US between May and October 2020 indicated that in terms of productivity, the expectations of 63% of individuals amongst the employees that were working from home had increased by 61% as compared to 13% indicating lower job productivity expectations (Barrero et al., 2020). 26% estimated unchanged job productivity during the pandemic (Barrero et al., 2020).

Conversely, conclusions from other studies suggested the absence or negative evolution of job productivity during the pandemic. Data collected from Japan in June 2020 indicated that the job productivity of employees had decreased by a range of between 60 to 70% for employees working from home as compared to the productivity levels in their usual workplaces. Similar sentiments of decreased employee outputs have been expressed by Pelly et al. (2021) in a study that examined the job productivity of 621 full-time workers whose performances work compared between pre, during and post-pandemic periods. In yet another study with similar conclusions, 1,014 respondents surveyed globally between March and April 2020, 56% of the respondents indicated that as compared to their traditional workplaces, the pandemic had mediated lower performances (Rubin et al., 2020). In the same study, 43% of the respondents indicated that productivity remained constant (Rubin et al., 2020). Felstead and Reuschke (2020) used data collected and hosted by 'Understanding Society' to understand the influence of working from home on job productivity as perceived by employees. 28.9% of those surveyed indicated that productivity has increased in the last half of 2020 as compared to the first half. With these time periods in mind, 30.2% of surveyed employees indicated their productivity was less while 40.9% stated that their productivity remained the same although there were variations informed by infrequent quality support of home office systems.

Given the paradox of employee well-being and productivity, the pandemic accentuated this debate further with a conflict between the need for increased employee surveillance and control on one hand and on the other the need for increased attention to employee work-life balance. Popular representations in literature for remote working often depict it as an advanced innovation in work systems (Bryant, 2000). However, the autonomy, flexibility, and feasibility of remote working inevitably invite technological pressures whose main effect is the eradication of leisure and the blurring of the boundary between office duties and home duties (Boggis, 2001). However, during the lockdown period, an epistemic phenomenon was observed in that the blurring of the boundary between office duties and home duties was substantially amplified by the inability of employees to leave their own homes that had been converted into home offices. It can be conceived that the easement of social distancing and lock dimensions have assisted in alleviating the pressure on the boundary between office duties and home duties because employees can now oscillate between their traditional workplaces and home offices. However, there is an agreement that the new work system has increased work intensification in the context that employees are now more available and online than it was before (Muralidhar et al., 2020). In this respect, it is argued that as compared to the traditional work systems in which managerial control ended after working hours, the new work systems expose employees to managerial control round the clock (Ozimek, 2020). Although Palumbo (2020) argues that whereas managerial control is increased, it is often exaggerated. However, Gigauri (2020) argues that instead of overtly, managerial control has increased covertly based on the availability, visibility and presence of employees. This has been enabled by the growth of video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp and Skype in addition to a host of social media-oriented organisational personalised applications that have been used throughout the pandemic as new communication tools. These tools were developed on the principle of maintaining instant communication and informational exchange in the new work systems as it would

be in the traditional work systems. Notable in this context is that these new applications were predominantly installed on the personal mobile phones of employees. In this case, personal phones became instant work portals (Muralidhar et al., 2020). Personal phones in contemporary settings are predominantly mobile phones whose operational heuristics for messaging are notifications. While it is possible to set notifications for different activities, this function is rarely used. As such, both work and personal notifications draw the attention of employees. Thus, the mobility of personal phones means that inadvertently office work is being carried around by workers further convoluting the already blurred boundary between working in the private lives of employees.

The dominant notion of interference in work-life balance may seem to blame employers more than workers. However, it is also emerging that workers have a role to play in mediating work-life balance. Indeed, employers in the employer relations are responsible for triggering remote working systems. As the spatial employee mobility was temporarily halted for many, a plausible assumption would have been that the reduced to and from work travels would be beneficial to employees. Instead, employees are now embroiled in multi-locations of virtual teams. Being part of virtual teams means that the working lives and the task orientation of employees are highly fragmented particularly as employees are required to adapt to their own individualised workspaces (Muralidhar et al., 2020). In effect, however, employees have been exposed to distinctly disappearing mutual support from their coworkers. This has been argued to have a negative implication for employees' career progression, particularly those on entry-level and require coaching or mentorship.

Furthermore, previous studies have indicated that separation from social buzz and banter, the office environment, and professional colleagues contributes to psychological stress (Gigauri, 2020). The sudden change from such social office environments to home offices incubated the need to fill this gap in social relations among employees. Digital communication tools became the best propositions in this regard. However, given that some of the digital communication tools such as WhatsApp and other social media-oriented applications have specific heuristics in that they support round-the-clock communication, it meant that employees would communicate with each other about work round the clock.

## 3. Changes in the UK's Retail Work Environment

Prior to the pandemic, the work environment in the UK was experiencing a growth albeit slow in the number of workers who are embracing the working from home office system. In 2019, about 5% of the workforce in the UK reported having worked mainly from home (ONS, 2020). Those who reported having experience working from home were about 30% of the entire workforce in the UK (ONS, 2020). This is in comparison with about 46.6% of the entire workforce in the UK that reported to have done at least some work related to their jobs at home at the beginning of the pandemic (ONS, 2020). In the retail sector, nearly 40% of all workers worked from home (De Fraja et al., 2021). OECD (2020) estimates that the retail sector was the most impacted by the pandemic whereas in OECD countries, on average, 1 in every 12 workers work in the retail sector. The UK retail sector is selected because it arguably employs most workers in the UK and contributes over 5.3% of the UK's gross domestic product (GDP) (De Fraja et al., 2021). According to ONS (2022), the UK's retail sector employees make up nearly 10% of all workers in the country making it one of the most affected.

It has been reported that home offices set up during the extended periods of lockdowns and enforced by the government had mediated a cultural shift in the attitudes about work systems and how they can be configured differently (Parry, 2020). Some scholars argue that in the UK, the sustenance of the new work systems over the long term, particularly the working from the home model and increased flexibility, has the potential of increasing the productivity and well-being of some employees (Parry et al., 2021). There is also a worry that flexible working benefits may not necessarily be reflected in the entire working population in the UK thereby causing increased inequalities and adversely affecting work-life balance for some employees particularly in the retail sector (Blundell et al., 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, particularly before the major lockdown periods, home offices were not considered to be normal work systems by a large population of the UK retail workforce (Mallett et al., 2020). A notable divide existed between the self-employed population and the employee population in regards to the prevalence of home offices in the UK. The self-employed population accounted for nearly two-thirds of the entire home offices in the UK in 2014 (Reuschke & Felstead, 2020). In 2019, only approximately 10% of workers in the UK working in the food, services, accommodation, storage and transport sectors have ever worked from home. This is compared to about 50% of workers who work in the scientific, professional, and information and communication sectors in the UK's retail sector (ONS, 2020). Generally, it has been observed that employees with high skilled occupations report being more likely to have home offices and work effectively as compared to workers with lower skills (ONS, 2020). It has also been observed that working from home is related to the geographic location with employees located in more urban areas such as the southwest, the south-east and London areas reporting higher prevalence than the rest of the working population in other areas in the UK (ONS, 2020).

Based on the research studies in the UK undertaken prior to the pandemic, evidence suggests that flexible and

remote working is positively correlated with higher levels of job productivity and job satisfaction (Charalampous et al., 2019). Higher levels of job productivity and satisfaction are tied to the feelings of granted work-life balance and autonomy (Wheatley, 2021). In addition, autonomy and flexibility reduce the conflict between family and work life. Conversely, evidence in the UK also suggests that flexible and remote working can contribute to work intensification (Parry et al., 2021). Employees who are working remotely also report higher incidences of professional isolation (Charalampous et al., 2019). Professional isolation is considered by employees as a threat to their career advancement (Charalampous et al., 2019). However, it is also argued that the more time employees spend in the home offices, the more the positive effects of flexible and remote working levels off leading to improved work-life balance.

The advent of the lockdown measures forced many employees particularly those in the higher-skilled sectors and a substantial number of those considered to be low skilled were expected to work from home. However, the ability of these employees to execute their mandate was dependent on their proximity to the supervisors or organisational structure, necessary tools to support work execution and specific physical environments. To fill this gap, information and communication technologies have been applied widely as infrastructural support but also as a means of re-skilling employees to adapt to a fast-changing post-pandemic environment (ONS, 2020a). In the UK, as of April 2020, employees were reported to have done at least some work at home constituting around 46.6% of the entire workforce. At least 86% of those who reported having done some work at home attributed it to the pandemic (ONS, 2020). The critical data to note is that around April to June 2020, the number of employees who reported to have worked exclusively at home reached 30%. However, by September 2020, this number has reduced to 21%. As such, there is a considerable number of employees in the UK who were previously working exclusively at home that has reverted back to office work environments (Parry et al., 2021). According to findings, employees were quick to adapt to new work systems. It has been noted that the initial mental health issues associated with the sudden shift of two home offices gradually decreased over time (Felstead & Reuschke, 2020).

In addition, data suggest that employee productivity, in general, has not been adversely affected by the transition from traditional office environments to home office systems (Felstead & Reuschke, 2020). However, this observation is highly contextual and related mostly to highly-skilled sectors. Nonetheless, overall, it has been observed that the new work systems post-pandemic are exacting new kinds of pressures on workers in the UK's retail sector. People with management responsibilities, carers and parents have had to endure the double shift phenomenon or generally put in more hours as work and home boundaries collapsed (Parry et al., 2021). As such, there are concerns in the UK that flexible work systems and home offices could exacerbate the double sheet phenomenon further exacerbating the blurring of the boundaries existing in work-life balance.

Another notable finding is that there is an aura of excitement and an increasing latent demand for work systems that can support remote and flexible work arrangements. The office and home hybrid work system and also the home office work system is touted as potential next generation work arrangements in the post-pandemic era with the pandemic having unlocked their potential (Parry et al., 2021). In addition, work-life balance and job satisfaction for some employees could increase due to flexible working (Wheatley, 2021). It is also possible that flexible working could develop an atmosphere of an inclusive working environment thereby increasing equality, particularly for employees living with disabilities (Parry et al., 2021). Coupled with the substantial increase in the time that parents, particularly fathers, invest in caring responsibilities for the children, the new work system could evolve traditional gender norms to the extent of benefiting the professional lives of mothers (Wheatley, 2021). Therefore, there is a suggestion that some sections of the UK workforce may benefit from the improved work-life balance due to flexible work systems and home offices (Felstead et al., 2004).

Additionally, it has been argued that flexible work systems and home offices are challenging the dominance of urban areas as the main hubs of employment. Urban areas provide supportive social amenities, services and facilities in close proximity greatly improving the lives of workers. However, in developed nations such as the UK, the standards of living between urban and peri-urban and rural areas are not as greatly differentiated as in emerging economies. As such, there are suggestions that home offices and flexible work systems can disperse the UK working population reducing pressure on urban areas. Congestion in urban areas results in negative consequences particularly pollution and exposure to social, economic and health risks that are otherwise not common in rural areas. Indeed, there are suggestions that flexible work systems may assist in reducing the dominance of London as a main hub of employment in the UK. Indeed, there are countries such as the UK that have come up with special visa arrangements that embrace remote working allowing foreign employees to work for companies in the UK in their own countries (Parry et al., 2021).

In addition, entry-level workers predominantly constituting young employees who live in bedsits and shared accommodation are less likely to set up suitable workspaces. Thus, the lack of both physical and spatial space to function effectively and efficiently exert more pressure on work-life balance. This is because young workers may

be forced to look for other areas to set up their workspaces. The time and resources spent in prospecting for secondary locations to set up suitable workspaces mean that young workers will expend their own personal time, effort and resources to set up the necessary infrastructure required for them to execute their duties on behalf of the organisations thereby significantly infringing on the work-life balance.

## 4. Discussion and Analysis

From chapter 2 which examined the context of New Normal work systems from a global perspective and the more specific UK context in chapter 3, it has become apparent that there are several emerging recurrent themes informing the relationship between these work systems and work-life balance. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss what the new work systems mean and their implications. This is followed by a critical analysis of these new work systems affect work-life balance and possible implications for the UK work environment.

From the discussion above in chapter 2 in chapter 3, the term New Normal has been used extensively. New Normal as used in the study connotes the novel realities in a post-pandemic world in terms of economic, social, political and cultural responses needed in the behaviour and nature of employees or organisations to successfully navigate the existing challenges. The pandemic, although significantly reduced, continues to bear sustained effects that have signified fundamental shifts in the behaviour and operations of employee organisations. It is expected that some structures that were built in the UK economy in response to the pandemic will remain permanent features to enable the country to grow resilience in preparation for future major disruptions (Parry et al., 2021). However, some scholars consider the New Normal to be a transitory phase (Wheatley, 2021). The implication is that the changes made by organisations and the government in response to the pandemic may vary in terms of intensity, scale and pace across various sectors and professions. Therefore, there is an indication that significant changes in how organisations and employees conduct business will occur over the traditional model. However, the extent and scope of these changes are yet to be demarcated. Consequently, New Normal work systems are an opportunity for the UK society to push and undertake measures toward path-breaking innovations and changes at the behavioural, structural, and operational levels. Particularly in the context of work-life balance, there are suggestions that these other costs and pains to bear in order to engender more flexible and resilient organisations and adaptive behaviours and attitudes for both organisations and employees at micro and meso levels (Wheatley, 2021). Given these arguments, it is apparent that the existing boundaries of work-life balance have been obliterated and there is a need to re-examine and reconceptualise how work-life balance will be characterised in the new normal work systems. Studies in this regard will have to consider the effect of digital technologies that support flexible working and home offices on employee well-being. However, as suggested above, unlike the traditional office work environment, home work environments are constituted by several non-actors who are equally important in the work-life balance debate. Thus, there is a need for future studies to examine how home offices and flexible work systems impact non-actors and the implication for the work-life balance of employees.

As a mediator of performance and productivity, work-life balance has been suggested as an important concern in the contemporary work environment. Work-life balance continues to receive attention from researchers and practitioners particularly in the advent of New Normal work systems because of its implications on employee well-being (Oh et al., 2020). As established in the discussions above, the general value of work-life balance is how it immediately positively impacts on the energy and well-being of employees in both their professional and private lives. Indeed, work-life balance is attributed to be an important factor in the turnover intention and job engagement of employees (Jaharuddin & Zainol, 2019). To this extent, researchers have been keen to determine ways of ensuring work-life balance is maintained.

Dominant text seems to suggest that flexible employment in its various forms such as remote working and home offices portends new opportunities to facilitate a favourable balance between the professional and private lives of employees. Yet, while remote working and home offices were common in the dominant text on employee management, they are not prevailing and established types of work systems (Todd & Binns, 2013). Some evidence suggests that in fact, major organisations such as Yahoo are in the process of restructuring their work arrangements to eliminate remote working and home offices as options (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). It has to be realised that the purported New Normal work systems are a product of "forced" and sudden circumstances (Ozimek, 2020). Therefore, unlike before when the work-life balance was a product of considerable debate in both research and practice, the new norm of work-life balance is due to largely artificial events. As Palumbo (2020) argues, sooner or later an equilibrium work-life balance will be established through a more natural process in the New Normal work systems.

Part of the reason why there is increased ambivalence about all the new boundaries of work-life balance under the New Normal work system is due to inconsistent literature findings (Palumbo, 2020). It is suggested that in the New Normal work systems, it is possible for employees to realise several benefits. One of the benefits suggested that could be beneficial to the UK work environment is the better management of responsibilities.

Home offices for instance limit movements allowing employees to concentrate on their core mandate thereby saving time. However, to work efficiently as perceived in this scenario, it is mandatory for employees to access all the resources they require to function effectively in their home office. As the literature suggests, one of the reasons that contributed negatively to the work-life balance in the UK was lack of support both from the organisational structure and co-workers. Nonetheless, if employees can find optimised workspaces in their homes, it would mean task execution would take relatively shorter times particularly when the transit time to and from their traditional workspaces is considered. Reducing task execution times means employees will save time from work activities and transfer such benefits to their personal life thereby significantly improving work-life balance. Furthermore, the flexibility of the home working environment means that employees have an easier time managing role conflicts (Beauregard & Henry, 2009).

Conversely, a recurrent theme in the analysis in the previous chapters indicates that new normal work systems can precipitate a reduction in the satisfaction with work-life balance among employees (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). Contradicting evidence has emerged in relation to the actual working hours in the new work systems. While there are suggestions that employees can significantly save time for as long as they can access efficient infrastructure and organisational support, it is perceived that the actual working hours can be prolonged thereby disturbing work-life balance (Tipping et al., 2012). This concern mainly emanates from possible role conflict and overlap of professional and domestic duties. Indeed, given the infancy of the new work systems, the discussions in the previous chapters have shown that the demarcation of new boundaries for work-life balance is yet to emerge and may take a considerable time.

Indeed, there is evidence even before the pandemic that suggests remote working employees would attempt to counteract the challenge of losing socialisation with their colleagues by increasing and fostering an online culture as a stopgap measure (Ogbonna & Harris, 2006). In one study, it was observed that remote working employees report a high amount of time spent online as compared to their colleagues working in workplace offices. Remote employees justified this behaviour alluding to the need to keep in communication with their colleagues (Hurrell et al., 2017). Again, evidence from studies from the pre-pandemic era suggests that various issues can arise when employees use their personal social media accounts to execute work-related activities (Archer-Brown et al., 2018). Involuntary and sudden changes in the work-life of employees that leads to a further blurring of the boundaries between personal life and work-life have been shown to result in feelings of guilt, worry, irritation and loneliness (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003). It is said that these ambivalent feelings often take on a gendered discourse.

The shift to remote working, particularly in home offices, has reinforced the concern of gender inequality in the professional lives of employees (Connolly et al., 2020). From past evidence, there is a notion that home officers tend to favour male workers more than female workers (Ferguson, 2020). Based on these gender inequalities, it is said that male workers compared to female workers are provided with priority in their home offices. Working from home for men as compared to women enables them to fight off distractions (Doherty, 2004). The reason for this is that female workers also double up as primary caregivers. In addition, the history of home working indicates that early adoptions of the work system were mainly a preserve of male workers. Consequently, male workers continue to enjoy high trust relationships in-home working systems with employers compared to female workers (Doherty, 2004).

The implication for work-life balance is that male workers endure less surveillance and control as compared to female workers. As established above, the need for surveillance and control as tools to ensure employee productivity and performance often precipitates into work-life balance creep. Yet, as McCarthy (2020) argues, increased mechanisms for surveillance and control due to the advancement of technology over time have presented an opportunity for equality for women, particularly those involved in primary caregiving. According to the author, teleworking has been embraced by female workers who perceive it as an opportunity to maintain their hard-won careers particularly because of the flexible work systems of home offices. However, Wheatley (2012) argued that the time spent by female workers on primary caregiving duties pressurises the time available for female workers to execute the tasks of their paid work buttressing the double shift phenomenon. Wheatley (2012) describes the double shift phenomenon as primary caregiving that is unpaid and employer-provided paid work. Arguing from this perspective and within the context of work-life balance, Connolly et al. (2020) note that the social and economic consequences of the pandemic have provided circumstances that are adversely greater than female workers threatening to revert women to traditional roles. According to the scholars, if these traditional roles mediated by the pandemic are left to cultivate, it would be difficult to terminate them in the long run well beyond the pandemic (Connolly et al., 2020).

Alongside all of this, it is important to acknowledge that the surveillance and control executed by employers are through the technology provided by the organisations (Satariano, 2020). Harari (2020) expresses concern that employer-provided technology can inadvertently encourage increased levels of surveillance well and beyond the

established norms. While the concept of privacy in contemporary technology developments has been described as a liquid, ambivalent or fuzzy phenomenon, it is critical to ensure that the confidentiality and privacy of employees are protected (Vasalou et al., 2015). Jeske and Santuzzi (2015) argue that it is important for employers to understand and consider the psychological implications involved in electronic performance monitoring and the reality of surveillance and control of employees. Concerns have been expressed by various employees and pressure groups over contact tracing applications leveraged by various organisations as a possible platform through which a culture of hyper surveillance and control can take root in organisations (Ponce, 2020). Governments across the world had allowed employers some degree of authority and autonomy to keep tabs on the real-time locations of their employees as a means of contact tracing. The UK government is amongst a handful across the world that provided greater mandates for contact tracing through the National Health Service (NHS) to limit the impact of coronavirus on its population. Therefore, the next chapter is dedicated to examining the changes in the UK work environment as occasioned by the pandemic contextualised within the topical issue of work-life balance.

The office work system still dominates the post-pandemic work environment in the UK. However, one of the implications of the pandemic is the development of hybrid work systems for employees. The implications of the acceleration of digitisation of work systems on employees have tilted the work-life balance in the UK. Furthermore, the paradox of work-life balance and performance management in the new hybrid systems has strained work-life balance. Nonetheless, concerns are being expressed on a number of issues in home working environments. These concerns centre around data security and privacy as well as the safety and health of remote working employees (Wheatley, 2021). To some extent, these data suggest that flexible work systems and home offices could allow a decongestion of urban areas with an effect of improving the quality of life of workers working remotely in urban and rural areas providing an opportunity for better work-life balance. Yet, the boundary between work-life balance is not being addressed.

Specifically, in the UK, there are concerns by experts examining the possibilities of remote working systems being a major alternative to the traditional work systems. The need to develop alternative work systems stems from a need to maintain responsive, robust and adaptive production structures across many sectors of the UK economy. This is in a bid to ensure that the UK economy is not adversely affected by major disruptive events. However, there are fears that for some categories of workers, flexible work systems and home offices engender the already existing employment inequalities including geography, ethnicity, gender, age, education and socioeconomic status (Parry et al., 2021). For instance, while some text suggests that traditional gender norms can be addressed by flexible work systems that provide an opportunity for both parents to become primary caregivers, actual data suggest that more women compared to men are leaving the UK Labour market as a result of the pandemic particularly due to the unequal burden of caring (Parry et al., 2021).

As much as there is excitement about the prospects of new work systems that mainly portend flexible employment and remote working infrastructure that is efficient and cost-effective to run, the work-life balance environment in the UK is still highly convoluted. As established above, evidence from the UK is not conclusive as to what extent could it be argued that new normal work systems affect work-life balance in the UK's labour market. In particular, it is unclear how job productivity and organisational culture will be impacted or influenced in the long run due to the possibility of home offices and flexible work systems becoming New Normal work systems (Parry et al., 2021). Also, the transition from the traditional work systems to mainly technology-mediated flexible work systems was sudden. As such, the impact of these technologies has not been appropriated within the context of well-being and health employees. Given that new work technologies have been transferred to home environments, it is not apparent the implication on various stakeholders at home apart from just the employees. For instance, in the discussion above, it has been noted that employees have to endure caring responsibilities. Caring responsibilities are predominantly geared toward ensuring children and the elderly receive the necessary attention in their day-to-day activities. As such, how New Normal work systems technologies can affect these secondary stakeholders is not clear although there are suggestions that primary caregivers are now reeling from work intensification compared to the traditional work systems. This means that more time is spent on work than on life.

## 5. Conclusions

This study sought to determine to what extent it could be argued that new normal work systems affect work-life balance in the UK's labour market. The pandemic emergency situation forced an evolution in the tradition of work systems predominantly based on the office environment work arrangements. These traditional work systems had fairly established work-life balances that demarcated where work ended and private life started from. Part of the reason for the existence of fairly established demarcation in the work-life balance of traditional work systems is the arrangement of work to be undertaken only in office environments. As employees left their workplaces for their homes, this action denoted the end of work and the start of life. As such, traditional work

systems make it easier to identify the scope creep of work into personal life mainly as evidence to buy employees carrying their work to their homes.

However, the pandemic emergency propagated an immediate transition to remote working. Remote working has had a tendency of work intensification leading employees to work longer. One of the features emerging in this research on the new work systems is the tendency of employees to disregard work schedules. By working from home, employees are unable to find distinct lines between free time and working hours. In traditional work systems, working hours are clearly demarcated and these have been built in the psycho-emotional state of employees over a long period. Therefore, the ambivalence around working hours triggers increased tension and deterioration of the psycho-emotional state of employees. Employers can provide effective guidance in assisting employees working remotely to determine their working hours. However, it is suggested that when employees are working remotely, especially in home offices, the work schedule should be flexible to allow employees to combine housework and work responsibilities. Together with increased psycho-emotional support, infrastructural support is important in assisting employees to locate the boundaries between work and life. In this scenario, there is an increased possibility for organisations to realise higher job productivity and work efficiency. On the other hand, employees are more likely to exhibit higher motivation, loyalty and commitment and improved health.

Yet, there are concerns that work-life balance may be difficult to be realised within the new work systems, especially mediated by digital tools. As alluded to above, employers will be seeking to maintain high productivity and performance. Inadvertently, the need for increased higher productivity and performance means increased surveillance and control. New work systems mean that unfamiliar infrastructure and structures have to be created. Since supervisors and managers cannot physically manage employees in for instance remote working systems, they would have to depend on digital tools that have increased capability of surveillance and control. For instance, online communication platforms have the ability to indicate the visibility and proximity of an employee apart from providing other key performance indicators. Whereas the primary reason for surveillance and control can be argued to be for supervisory purposes, they also provide an opportunity to infringe into the privacy of employees. As such, apart from work intensification, employees will face elongated work hours.

There is also an issue of increased inequalities with an effect on work-life balance. On one hand, it has been conceived that the new work systems, particularly home offices, can assist in addressing gender norms. For a while now, female career professionals have had to endure the double shift phenomena. However, as more fathers have had to spend time at home with the children, some pressure on primary care responsibilities undertaken by female career professionals has been relieved. As their male partners assist in executing some primary care responsibilities, their female counterparts have an opportunity to concentrate on their core work function. Yet, it is suggested that compared to female workers male workers are more trusted with remote working systems. It means female workers are subjected to more surveillance and control. Inherently, women workers have to endure comparatively longer work hours compared to their male counterparts.

Given the above evidence, it is inconclusive to what extent it could be argued that new normal work systems affect work-life balance in the UK's labour market. Two strands of opinion have emerged. On one hand, there is evidence that new work systems, particularly remote working and home offices, increase flexibility thereby supporting work-life balance. However, there is also evidence suggesting new work systems post-pandemic have led to work intensification leading to employees working longer hours. As such, further research is required on a large scale to find an aggregate of the evidence that can authoritatively indicate whether new work systems negatively or positively influence work-life balance and to what extent.

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