

Working from Wherever, Whenever: Lessons From the COVID-19 Pandemic That Are Shaping the Future of Work

Senior Honors Thesis by McCauley Palmer (BSBA '22) under the direction of Dr. Arvind Malhotra

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced millions of workers to adapt to a remote working environment nearly overnight. This reality tested the limits of enterprise technology, making this transition uniquely remarkable. For these reasons, the early 2020s present an important time to revisit the utility of worker autonomy and job meaningfulness to prepare for a post-pandemic workplace. The purpose of my research is to explore the lessons that employers and employees have learned throughout the pandemic, and how these lessons are shaping the future of work. Through 300+ survey responses and four interviews, I investigate the perceptions of autonomy and meaningfulness in different working arrangements. My results indicate that workers generally desire increased temporal and locational autonomy, although the utility of autonomy varies depending on their circumstances. Additionally, workers seek more opportunities for socially meaningful work in a post-pandemic context, and providing these opportunities benefits multiple stakeholder groups.

Introduction

The pandemic highlighted the relevance of autonomy and meaningfulness in working arrangements



Note. Word cloud of adjectives used in open-ended survey responses regarding ideal working arrangements and the future of work

Methodology

Quantitative component: 300+ Qualtrics survey responses from demographic A

Qualitative component: Four long-form semi-structured interviews from demographic B; 300+ open-ended Qualtrics survey responses from demographic A

Mixed methods research design

Demographic A: 21–25-year-olds that have a bachelor's degree and are currently employed
Demographic B: Human resource professionals

Interesting Finding #1: Not all workers respond favorably to autonomy

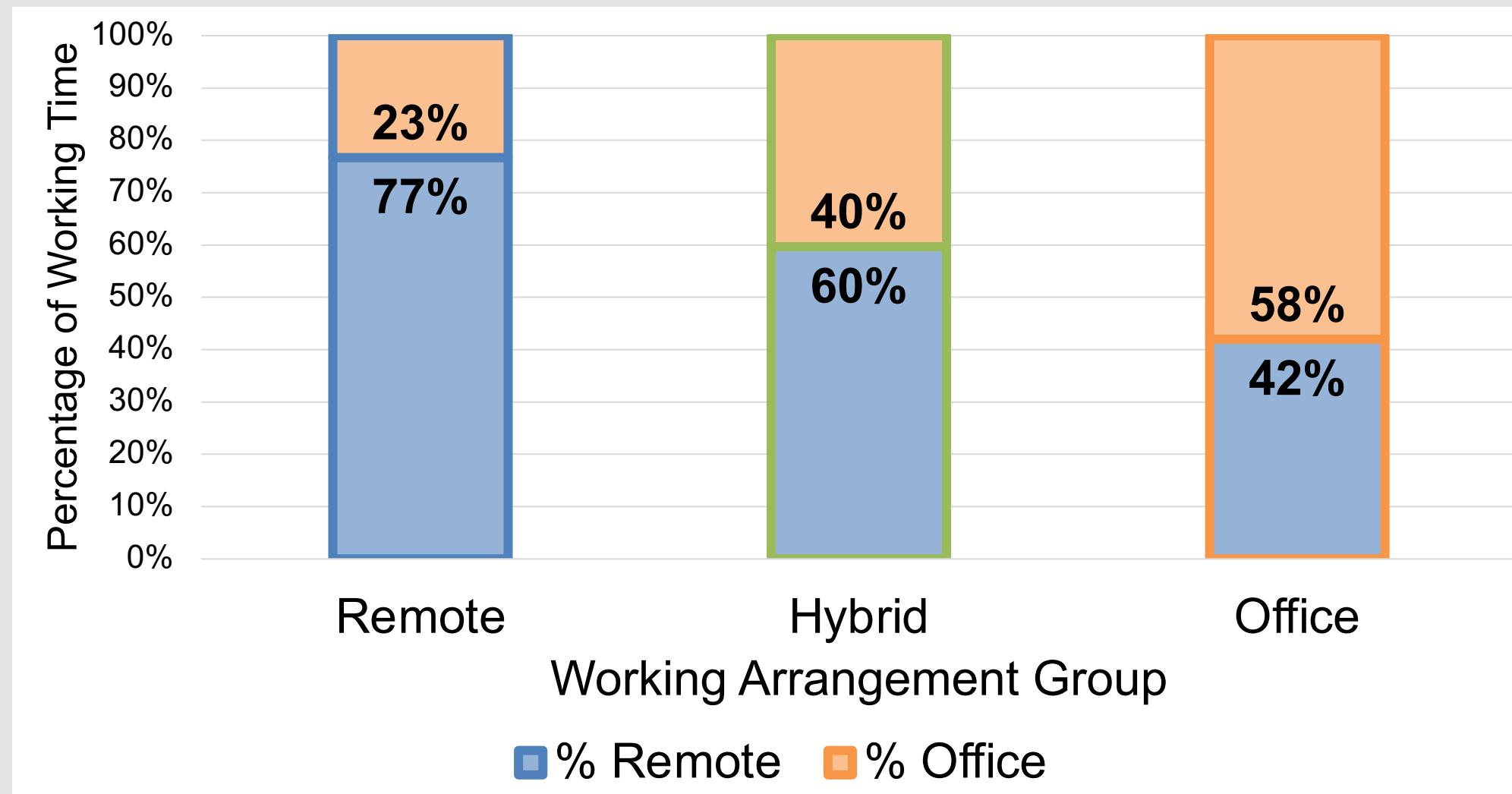
Negative Work Feelings by Location Across Working Arrangement Groups

Respondent group	Selection	Least satisfied	Least productive	Worse performance
Remote workers	Remote	14	14	18
	Hybrid	15	14	13
	Office	30	31	28
Hybrid workers	Remote	34	48	48
	Hybrid	19	25	28
	Office	84	64	61
Office workers	Remote	59	79	63
	Hybrid	27	15	26
	Office	55	47	52

Unfavorable circumstances for autonomy: Lack of physical resources, uncomfortable with less supervision, technological challenges, new to the company or role, and highly engaged/interpersonal teams

Interesting Finding #2: All working arrangement groups desire a degree of hybrid segmentation

Preferred Remote/Office Segmentation by Working Arrangement Group



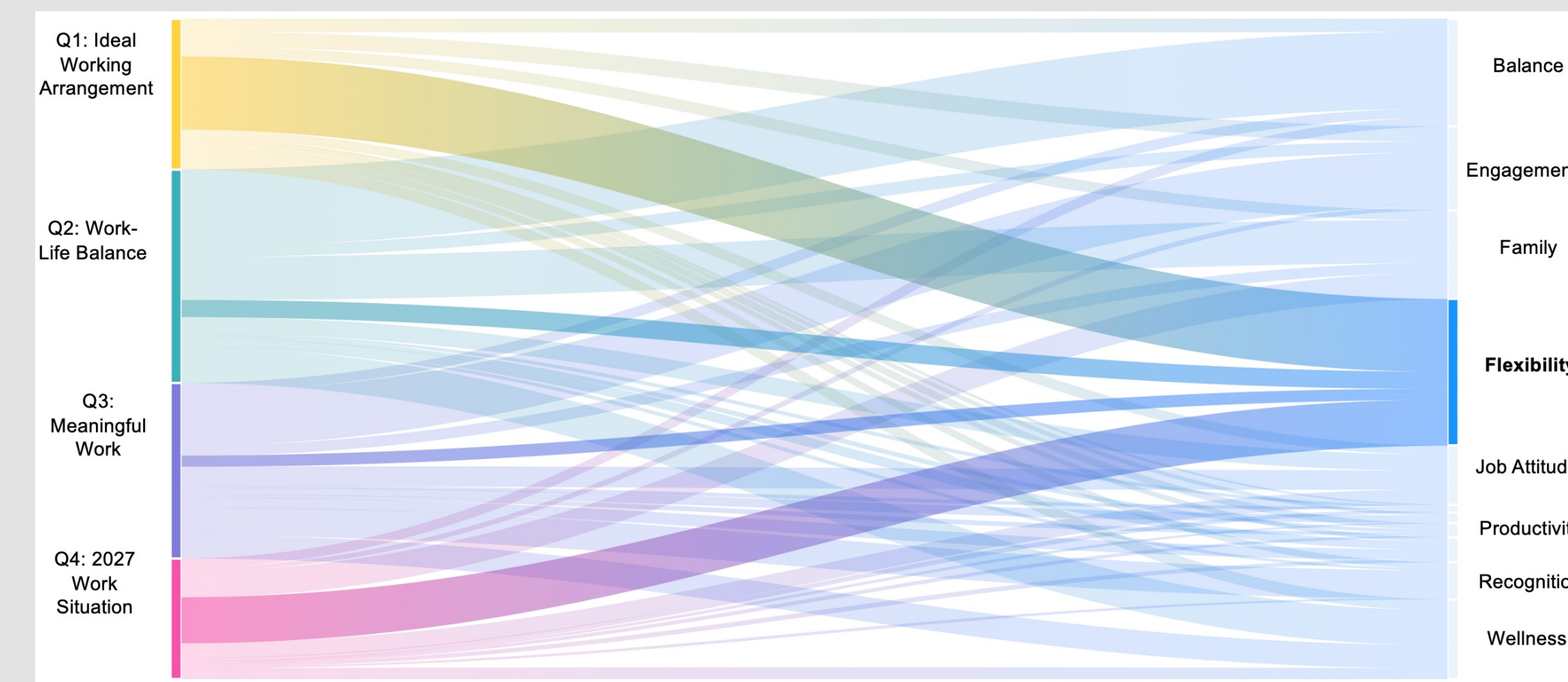
Interesting Finding #4: Autonomy is unlikely to have binary effects on organizations

Positive Work Feelings by Time of Day Across Working Arrangement Groups

Respondent group	Selection	Most satisfied	Most productive	Best performance
Remote workers	early morning (5AM–8AM)	16	11	10
	mid-morning (8AM–11AM)	19	17	17
	midday (11AM–2PM)	11	16	16
	afternoon (2PM–5PM)	11	9	12
	evening (5PM–8PM)	1	5	3
after 8PM	1	1	1	
Hybrid workers	early morning (5AM–8AM)	24	12	13
	mid-morning (8AM–11AM)	58	50	38
	midday (11AM–2PM)	43	46	42
	afternoon (2PM–5PM)	6	17	32
	evening (5PM–8PM)	1	6	10
after 8PM	5	6	2	
Office workers	early morning (5AM–8AM)	34	31	29
	mid-morning (8AM–11AM)	56	46	44
	midday (11AM–2PM)	30	41	41
	afternoon (2PM–5PM)	9	13	13
	evening (5PM–8PM)	9	6	12
after 8PM	3	4	2	

Interesting Finding #5: Flexibility is a key aspect in the future of work

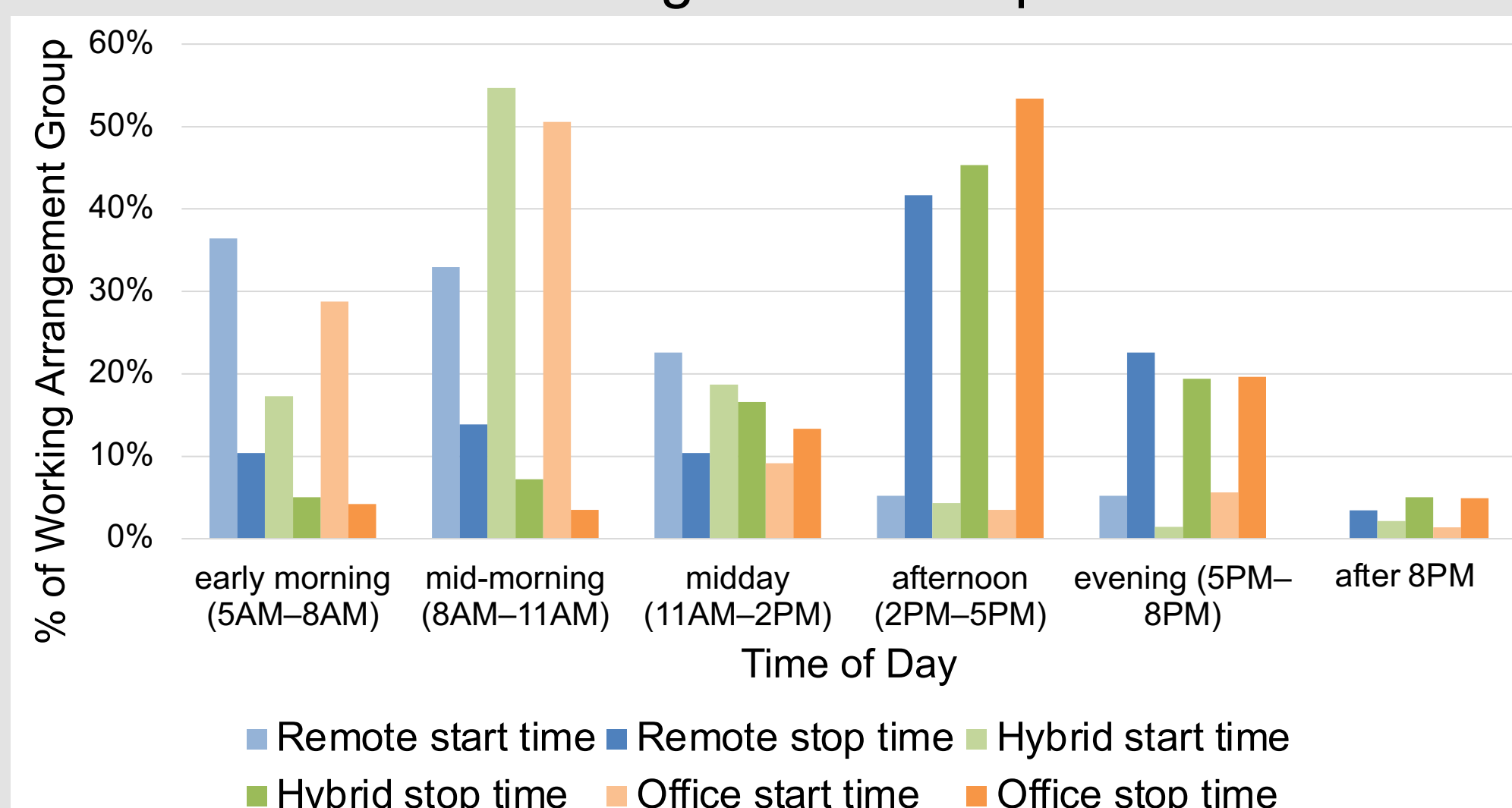
Magnitude of Relationships Between Job Benefits and Open-Ended Response Topics



Note. Sankey diagram indicating that flexibility was the most-discussed job benefit across open-ended responses, particularly for ideal working arrangements and the future of work

Interesting Finding #3: Workers benefit from the availability of temporal autonomy

Preferred Start and Stop Time by Percentage of Working Arrangement Group



Interesting Finding #6: Providing meaningfulness benefits multiple stakeholder groups

ANOVAs and Statistical Significance of Meaningfulness Variables Across Working Arrangement Groups

Meaningfulness variable	Remote means	Hybrid means	Office means	ANOVA p value	Pairwise significance
Perceived company impact	5.237	4.956	5.106	0.453	ns
Perceived society impact	4.898	4.934	4.985	0.933	ns

Dependent Variable	Perceived Meaningfulness	
	β coefficient	p value
Job Satisfaction	0.251	0.000****
Intention to Continue	0.305	0.000****
Job Search Activity	-0.090	0.374
Recommendation Level	0.200	0.002**
Reacceptance Choice	0.261	0.000****

Conclusion

I found that employers and employees favor increased temporal and locational autonomy, in addition to socially meaningful work. While this outcome may seem intuitive to some, this research solidifies lessons learned from a unique time in history as they shape the future of work. To conclude, below are forward-looking quotes from the interviewees:

- "COVID-19 has presented us with opportunities to innovate and elevate, but I see a rush to get back to the way things used to be. I think that's a fallacy. I think that we should abandon that and create pathways to a new future." — Interviewee 1
- "There are a lot of shifts happening because people are reprioritizing what is important to them, and work is starting to fall." — Interviewee 2
- "What we're seeing with the younger generation is that people don't live to work, they work to live. This is the way of the future." — Interviewee 3
- "We're all in this together so we're giving grace rather than casting stones." — Interviewee 4

I hope that this research is informative and useful for leaders in the post-pandemic workplace. What is clear is that unexpected events are making the world more complex. The future of work depends on organizations' ability to empower their employees to adapt to this complexity.

Recommendations

To researchers:

1. Longitudinal studies pre- and post- pandemic
2. Qualitative studies on job performance
3. Larger mixed methods studies
4. Relational studies between the autonomy types
5. Studies on post-pandemic meaningfulness of work

To business leaders:

1. Workforce entrants value and are seeking autonomy and meaningfulness in their roles.
2. Granting autonomy is unlikely to have negative effects on organizational performance or operations.
3. Provisions of autonomy and meaningfulness can benefit the entire organization when implemented fittingly.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Arvind Malhotra, Dr. Patricia Harms, Dr. Mohammad Jarrahi, Dr. Claudia Kubowicz Malhotra, my family, friends, mentors, fellow classmates, and everyone that helped this research come to fruition. This work is dedicated to you.