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Preferences for Remote and Hybrid Work: Evidence from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for many American workers to work from home. Did the rapid and widespread adoption of remote work arrangements influence workers' preferences? This study analyzes the early pandemic work experiences of 52 participants (20 men and 32 women) in dual-earner households with children through in-depth interviews conducted in 2021 and 2022 via Zoom. The study explores respondents' desire for remote and hybrid work, considering job satisfaction as well as job characteristics, family structure, and household organization. Unless their jobs were poorly suited to remote work, most workers with pandemic-era remote work opportunities—and even some who had not worked remotely—wished to keep remote access in their post-pandemic work arrangements. Respondents reported enhanced job satisfaction and productivity from remote work, as a result of greater schedule control and flexibility. We found that some workers were willing to change jobs to maintain their preferred work arrangement, while others acquiesced to employers' return-to-work policies. The study highlights the need to understand workers' preferences in supporting flexible work arrangements and contributes to the understanding of remote work on family dynamics during the pandemic and afterwards.

Keywords: remote work; work from home; job satisfaction; desire to work remotely; productivity; flexibility; commute; childcare; household organization; pandemic

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created a new opportunity for remote work among American office and professional workers. In an effort to limit the contagious virus, workers remained at home whenever possible, and many learned to connect to their workplaces remotely through telecommunications technology. Americans began working remotely in large numbers in the spring of 2020, connecting from home offices, bedrooms, kitchens, and closets, managing their work responsibilities as well as they could, adjusting to a "new normal", and handling computer-facilitated meetings with cameras, unstable wifi, and reminders to unmute. But even with challenges, many remote workers were able to succeed and even thrive during the pandemic (Barrero et al. 2021; Fulford 2023).

Given that a large swath of workers transitioned to remote work overnight, this study asks how newly remote workers experienced this new mode of working. What workplace arrangements did workers wish to maintain going forward as the pandemic waned? Under what circumstances did workers tolerate remote work as situationally necessary, and when did workers wish to keep remote access in their workplace arrangements post-pandemic? Finally, how can this unique moment in time help clarify potential shifts in US work culture more broadly? We are interested in understanding workers' pandemic-era work experiences in their own words, to explore the specific conditions under which individuals preferred remote or hybrid work arrangements compared to full-time in-person, as they transitioned out of the pandemic, and whether they were willing to change jobs to maintain their workplace preferences.

1.1. Motivation

Despite workers' embrace of remote work during the pandemic, many managers preferred that workers return in-person after the threats to public health waned (Mann 2023; Owusu 2023; Parker et al. 2020). Focused on output during traditional work hours, they perceived that remote work reduced productivity and created issues of coordination and control, even if employees considered the elimination of commuting time as a boost to productivity (Bernstein et al. 2020; Bloom et al. 2023). As companies began mandating returns to the office, workers weighed the benefits of remote work against traditional office culture (Bremen 2023; Casselman 2023). In the tech industry, for example, as the pandemic waned, giants like Google and Meta directed workers in 2023 to return to their offices and monitored attendance, even though smaller tech firms experienced an increase in departures when requiring a return from remote work (Mann 2023). In the post-pandemic era, will remote work, a hallmark of pandemic work arrangements, be sustainable (Bloom 2021; Casselman 2023; Owusu 2023), either full-time or in a hybrid arrangement with some remote work and some work on site?

Existing scholarship has tracked pandemic-era work arrangements through quantitative and mixed-methods work (see, among others, Collins et al. 2021; Fan and Moen 2022; Matthews et al. 2021). Here we offer a detailed understanding from in-depth interviews of remote working parents in the pandemic on the practical and emotional factors motivating their choices to stay remote or return to the office post-pandemic.

1.2. Background

The unprecedented shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic blurred work-life boundaries. Recent studies highlight the impact of remote work arrangements and the role of organizational and individual strategies in shaping these experiences (Barrero et al. 2021; Bernstein et al. 2020; Brynjolfsson et al. 2020; Dingel and Neiman 2020). Remote work was relatively uncommon before the pandemic: Barrero et al. (2021) estimate that remote work accounted for just five percent of paid work hours before the pandemic, compared to about 50 percent between April and December 2020. By April 2020, 35.2% of employed American workers who had been working on site began working remotely from home (Brynjolfsson et al. 2020). Not all jobs can be performed remotely, and remote work is more common for workers with higher education and salary (Barrero et al. 2021; Bernstein et al. 2020; Brynjolfsson et al. 2020; Dingel and Neiman 2020).

Scholars suggested before the onset of the pandemic that remote work could increase worker productivity (Allen et al. 2015; Bloom et al. 2015; Gajendran and Harrison 2007; Gajendran et al. 2015; Noonan and Glass 2012), and studies during the pandemic also found that remote workers were more productive (Barrero et al. 2021; Ozimek 2020). When workers received sufficient support, working from home during the pandemic enhanced well-being and productivity, especially for women and people of color (Fan and Moen 2023). However, some scholars found no change in perceptions of productivity in the shift to remote work (Awada et al. 2021), and one-third of remote managers in one study reported seeing a decrease in their workers' productivity, while one-third did not discern any change and the final third reported more productivity (Parker et al. 2020). Similarly, Italian scholars found that remote workers with autonomy in their jobs and leadership skills increased their productivity, while those remote workers who faced increased social isolation and work-family-conflict decreased their productivity (Galanti et al. 2021).

Even if many remote work arrangements offered an opportunity to increase productivity, some workers—mothers in particular—faced family responsibilities that limited their productivity during the pandemic (Yavorsky et al. 2021). The pandemic simultaneously exacerbated existing gender disparities at work and at home, potentially influencing who desired to continue working remotely instead of returning to the office, especially for women juggling increased caregiving demands (Carlson et al. 2022; Fan and Moen 2022; Lyttelton et al. 2023; Yavorsky et al. 2021). Mothers of young children often stopped working when full-time childcare closed, though fathers' involvement could sometimes

buffer that impact (Petts et al. 2021). For those who continued working, scholars identified similar trends: involved men reduced the burden that otherwise fell on mothers (Calarco et al. 2021; Carlson et al. 2022; Lyttelton et al. 2023). How much these pressures reduced mothers' desire for remote work remains largely unknown.

1.3. The Current Paper

Scholars have argued that remote work will continue in some form (Dua et al. 2022; Ozimek 2020), whether that is fully remote or in a hybrid model, and we contribute to this literature by shedding light on workers' experiences and preferences during the pandemic, in order to frame their goals, expectations, and preferences for the future. We expect that most workers will prefer remote work arrangements (Kossek et al. 2021; Neeley 2020), especially hybrid work models that leverage the flexibility of remote work while retaining the advantages of on-site collaboration (Kagerl and Starzetz 2023; Smite et al. 2023). It is equally important to analyze patterns when remote workers preferred to return to on-site roles, and we theorize that these preferences may occur in three distinct ways: first, some individuals may work in jobs that were poorly suited to remote work. Others whose jobs are well-suited to remote arrangements may nonetheless prefer to work on site—they may be soured to remote work altogether after struggling through pandemic-specific challenges, or they may prefer to work near colleagues or to separate their workplace from their home. Because workers' scheduling preferences will remain increasingly important for hiring and retention, we explore the various factors that drive desires to work remotely, including pandemic experiences with technology, space, and time challenges, as well as their preferred schedule moving forward.

2. Materials and Methods

The data for this study come from in-depth interviews conducted between June 2021 and February 2022 with caregivers who have at least one child aged 18 or younger. Our sample began with a nationally represented online panel used for the National Opinion Research Corporation's AmeriSpeak survey in the fall and winter of 2021, where those with caregiving responsibility (children or elders) were asked whether they would be willing to have a Zoom or phone interview about their experiences during the pandemic. Approximately twenty percent of those eligible responded, giving us well over one hundred interviews; we augmented those with respondent-driven snowball sampling to acquire additional interviews from respondents' referrals, for a total of 127 interviews in our larger sample.

Of the total sample, this paper analyzes 52—20 men and 32 women—who were (1) partnered within a dual-earner couple, and (2) had at least one child in the home aged 18 or under. This subset represents a demographic that faced unique challenges during the pandemic: balancing work and childcare responsibilities while navigating the dynamics of a dual-earner household. We focus on partnered respondents, though our research design limited interviews to only one partner in a couple. Despite efforts to include a diverse range of family structures, we were unable to recruit sufficient non-heterosexual, dual-earner, parenting couples, or couples engaging only in eldercare, to allow for meaningful analysis, so this study predominantly focuses on heterosexual couples caregiving to their children. Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of our respondents.

Our research benefits from the timing of our interviews during the period when many were navigating the return to office work after the pandemic. Thanks to this timing, we captured real-time reactions and evolving workplace dynamics to bring forth a multi-dimensional narrative in the respondents' varied remote work experiences. While this variation limited our ability to harmonize the remote work narrative at a single moment in time, our approach to timing strengthened our research by providing a spectrum of experiences at different stages of transitioning out of mandated remote work. Figure 1 shows the duration of time in which our respondents worked remotely during the pandemic: those who had returned to work within a year could indicate how long their job offered a remote

work arrangement, while those who remained working remotely, permanently, or whose jobs had not developed a post-pandemic return plan continued working from home.

Table 1. Description of respondents by gender in our sample of dual-earner couples.

	Women	**Men**	**Total**
Racial and ethnic groups			
White	21 (66%)	14 (70%)	35 (67%)
Hispanic-origin	4 (12%)	3 (15%)	7 (13%)
Black	5 (16%)	1 (5%)	6 (12%)
Other racial or ethnic group	2 (6%)	2 (10%)	4 (8%)
Age range			
20–29	1 (3%)	1 (5%)	2 (4%)
30–39	19 (59%)	6 (30%)	25 (48%)
40–49	8 (25%)	12 (60%)	20 (38%)
50 or older	4 (13%)	1 (5%)	5 (10%)
Marital status			
Married	30 (94%)	19 (95%)	49 (94%)
Cohabiting	2 (6%)	1 (5%)	3 (6%)
Number of children in home			
1 child	9 (28%)	7 (35%)	16 (31%)
2 children	15 (47%)	11 (55%)	26 (50%)
3 or more children	8 (25%)	2 (10%)	10 (19%)
Age range of children			
All children younger than 6	11 (34%)	7 (35%)	18 (35%)
All children aged 6 or older	11 (34%)	12 (60%)	23 (44%)
Children of varied ages	10 (32%)	1 (5%)	11 (21%)
Educational status			
Less than a college degree	9 (28%)	7 (35%)	16 (30%)
College degree	11 (34%)	7 (35%)	18 (35%)
Graduate degree	12 (38%)	6 (30%)	18 (35%)
Income range, annually			
Less than USD 100,000	15 (47%)	5 (25%)	20 (38%)
USD 100,000–150,000	6 (19%)	8 (40%)	14 (27%)
More than USD 150,000	11 (34%)	6 (30%)	17 (33%)
Refused to disclose	-	1 (5%)	1 (2%)
Total	32 (62%)	20 (38%)	52 (100%)

Interviews were conducted over Zoom and ranged from forty minutes to over two hours, averaging about ninety minutes each. The interview protocol was designed to foster replicability in future research endeavors. The guide underwent a pilot testing phase to refine the questions and create probes to elicit detailed responses. Interviewers asked respondents to detail their current employment arrangement, their employment arrangement in the months before the pandemic, and any transition of work arrangements during the pandemic. Specifically, these questions addressed where, how, and when they completed their work responsibilities, how they felt about their job, to what extent they felt support from employers and co-workers, and how they prefer and expect to work in the future. We asked similar questions about the respondents' partners' jobs, as well as how the respondents managed the combination of their work responsibilities with their responsibilities at home.

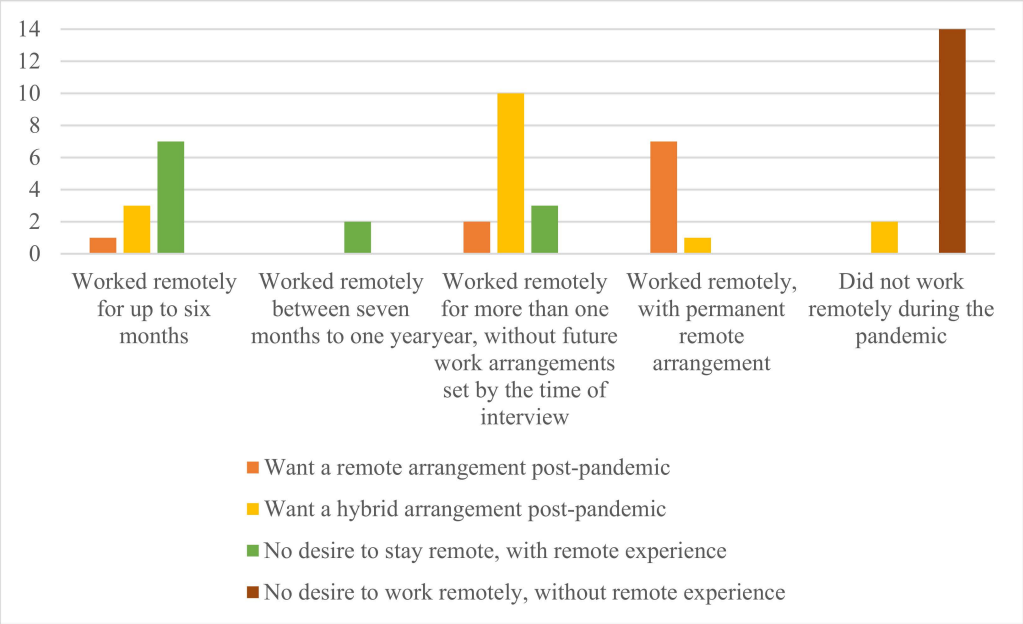


Figure 1. Respondents' duration of remote work in the pandemic and desired future arrangements.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with pseudonyms used and identifying information changed. The researchers coded the interviews using Atlas.ti, a software program for qualitative data analysis. In analyzing the qualitative data derived from the interviews, we employed a flexible coding strategy as conceptualized by Deterding and Waters (2021), where we developed our analysis based on coding on certain themes (including workplace arrangements before, during, and after the pandemic; job roles and productivity; and any benefits, challenges, and satisfaction with workplace arrangements). This approach allowed for an adaptive and iterative process where the coding scheme evolved in tandem with a deepening understanding of the data. Initial codes on workplace arrangements within a couple and sources of satisfaction or dissatisfaction were revisited, and as necessary, revised, merged, or split to better encapsulate emerging patterns and themes. We identified scope conditions within workplace arrangements based on satisfaction and desire to continue through the respondents' household experiences during the pandemic. This dynamic process facilitated a rich and nuanced exploration of the interview narratives, encouraging an openness to unexpected themes and a readiness to refine the coding structure in response to the data's intrinsic patterns and nuances (Deterding and Waters 2021). The quotations excerpted below are from the in-depth interviews and were edited for clarity.

3. Results

3.1. Respondents' Reactions to Experiences of Remote Work

Most respondents who worked from home during the pandemic expressed satisfaction with remote work and indicated a desire to continue. One such respondent was Robert, a 39-year-old Black father of two preschool-aged children. Even though he recognized the benefits of in-person teamwork and collaboration in his finance firm, he preferred to work remotely:

> I love it, I never want to have to go in. [In the office] I like the camaraderie and the team building and the opportunities that we have to . . . solve these problems [together], . . . but . . . now that I've had this new sense of reality, I wouldn't change it if I had the option. . . . I know it's not going to be that way long term, at some point there will be a return to the office, but if I had my way, I would not change the current work situation. It's nice, and it's comfortable.

Likewise, Renee, a 35-year-old white mother of two, reflected on her experience working from home as a university administrator:

> I feel like the pandemic really just showed . . . that there are a lot of opportunities where . . . it benefits [people] to work from home. You can get as much or more out of your employees. It's not just flexible for parents, but if you have to take care of any type of family member, doctor's appointments, maybe your own personal health, there's just so many reasons why this remote work could be super beneficial for many employees across a variety of industries.

But whereas Robert was resigned that his access to remote work would end against his preferences, Renee valued her ability to work from home so highly that when her university returned in person to campus, she changed jobs to a remote position outside of academia.

A few respondents, however, had strong negative reactions to remote work. While some had idiosyncratic reasons, most objected when their jobs were ill-suited to remote work. Even though these respondents *did* conduct their work from home, they explained that their jobs were poorly suited to be performed remotely. For example, Anna, a 47-year-old white fifth-grade teacher and mother of two, described how the personal connection essential to teaching was missing when her class was remote: "That was hard to . . . get them to do work. . . . At school, you can sit by them, and they're going to start working at some point. It was just harder to motivate kids". Remote access prevented Anna from engaging in her work meaningfully, and she expressed relief in returning to her classroom.

> It was good to go back. It's just so much easier to teach your lessons, you have everything you need there. It just feels like it should feel. And at home, it worked fine, but it's a lot harder to teach a math concept and then kind of look on their screens [at] what they're doing, but you can't see it like you can at school. It was good to be back.

Anna, and respondents like her, expressed that the difficulty with remote work came from the nature of their jobs, not personal preferences about working from home. Some jobs require a physical presence in a workplace and cannot be conducted from home; the job tasks and responsibilities in other positions involving direct transfer of skills between humans, like Anna's, can only be nominally conducted remotely; in practice, the nature of the work requires them to be in person with others to achieve their tasks completely. Like those jobs that require a physical presence in a certain workplace, these jobs require a physical presence *with other people* and lose capability when performed remotely.

To evaluate workers' experiences, we considered their desire to continue remotely after the pandemic. Table 2 focuses on those who had remote work experience during the pandemic. Those who worked from home during the pandemic expressed a range of desires for future work arrangements: some wished to stay in a fully remote position permanently, others looked for a hybrid arrangement to capture the best of both approaches, and a vocal minority celebrated their return to in-person work, with no desire to work remotely[1] (see Note). We identify scope conditions of each of these three desires, as well as patterns in job and family attributes. Finally, we consider the extent to which respondents were willing to change jobs to achieve their desired work arrangement.

We found that workers overall valued working from home during the pandemic. The flexibility of remote work allowed for greater productivity and job satisfaction, enabling parents to coordinate with their children's schedules, and encouraging workers to continue working from home in the future, at least in a hybrid format. Respondents also enjoyed the lack of commute and freedom from disruptions and surveillance. However, respondents faced challenges that hindered their satisfaction with remote work, some specific to the pandemic—like complications managing childcare or household responsibilities—and others that will remain part of remote work—such as a lack of social contact with coworkers. Although many workers faced negative life changes during the pandemic, on the whole, respondents supported continuing to work from home, at least for some of their work

hours. Here we analyzed which individual and family characteristics influenced workers' desire to continue remote work arrangements.

Table 2. Description of respondents in our sample with remote work experience by preferred job arrangement after the pandemic.

	Remote	Hybrid	No Desire for Remote Access	Total
Gender				
Women	6 (26%)	8 (35%)	9 (39%)	23 (68%)
Men	4 (36%)	4 (36%)	3 (27%)	11 (32%)
Weekly Hours Worked				
Between 20 and 34 h	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	4 (12%)
Between 35 and 44 h	6 (26%)	10 (43%)	7 (30%)	23 (68%)
At least 45 h	2 (29%)	1 (14%)	4 (57%)	7 (20%)
Duration of Remote Work				
Not more than 6 months	1 (10%)	2 (20%)	7 (70%)	10 (29%)
6 months to 1 year	-	-	2 (100%)	2 (6%)
More than 1 year	2 (14%)	9 (64%)	3 (21%)	14 (41%)
Permanent remote work	7 (88%)	1 (12%)	-	8 (24%)
Household Work Arrangement				
Both partners remote	9 (45%)	8 (40%)	3 (15%)	20 (59%)
As the only remote worker	1 (7%)	4 (29%)	9 (64%)	14 (41%)
Number of children in home				
1 child	1 (10%)	5 (50%)	4 (40%)	10 (29%)
2 children	8 (44%)	4 (22%)	6 (33%)	18 (53%)
3 or more children	1 (17%)	3 (50%)	2 (33%)	6 (18%)
Age range of children				
All children younger than 6	3 (27%)	5 (45%)	3 (27%)	11 (32%)
All children aged 6 or older	6 (40%)	3 (20%)	6 (40%)	15 (44%)
Children of varied ages	1 (13%)	4 (50%)	3 (37%)	8 (24%)
Educational status				
Less than a college degree	3 (33%)	3 (33%)	3 (33%)	9 (26%)
College degree	5 (50%)	1 (10%)	4 (40%)	10 (29%)
Graduate degree	2 (13%)	8 (53%)	5 (33%)	15 (44%)
Income range, annually				
Less than USD 100,000	3 (27%)	2 (18%)	6 (55%)	11 (32%)
USD 100,000–150,000	1 (13%)	3 (37%)	4 (50%)	8 (24%)
More than USD 150,000	5 (36%)	7 (50%)	2 (14%)	14 (41%)
Refused to disclose	1			1 (3%)
Total	10 (29%)	12 (35%)	12 (35%)	34 (100%)

3.2. Desire to Continue Working Remotely

In our sample, 33 respondents (22 women and 11 men) worked from home during the pandemic, and 28 respondents described the experiences of their partners (14 women and 14 men) working from home. Over two-thirds of the respondents in our sample who worked remotely during the pandemic wanted to continue working remotely in some form after the pandemic, with 10 preferring all remote work and 12 preferring a hybrid model of work. An additional four respondents who did not work from home during the pandemic indicated a desire to try a job with that arrangement in the future.

3.2.1. Productivity and Reclaiming Time

Respondents who wanted to continue working remotely often reported feeling more productive at home, attributing their efficiency to the lack of interruptions, increased control over their work schedule, and more time to work that had previously been spent

in a commute. This includes respondents like Robert, who preferred to continue working remotely even as he acknowledged the benefits of in-person collaboration. Less often, respondents said their productivity was unchanged, while fewer still found productivity challenging without in-person interactions and the addition of domestic labor.

Shirley, a 52-year-old white mother of two teenagers, reported that she became more productive during the pandemic. As a paralegal, she increased her work hours from forty before the pandemic to as many as sixty hours a week from home because of the focus she gained working remotely. "At home, it's easy", she explained. "You wake up at 7 AM, it's easy to log on and just start working, so I work longer hours . . . now that I'm home". Her productivity also rose because she had fewer interruptions. "Because I could focus . . . here, I didn't have distractions, . . . I started doing a lot of deeper dives into a lot of different issues". Shirley's supervisors recognized her extra work, despite not working onsite with them, and she was awarded additional responsibilities. As she explained proudly, "My bosses found out about that, and . . . all of a sudden I'm on a committee".

The flexibility of working from home was key for Alice, a 37-year-old Black mother of four who worked long hours as a director in a governmental agency. Her agency allowed workers to indicate times when they would be accessible remotely. "You just let your direct supervisor know, 'I'm going to be unavailable from this time to this time, but I'm working up until this time,'" she explained. "No approval is necessary, you just let them know". Although her agency had not yet returned to in-person work at the time of her interview, Alice had enjoyed working from home long enough to know that she wanted to continue, at least some days each week, in the future.

Joe, a 44-year-old white father of a teenager, also enjoyed newfound flexibility and focus while working from home. He provided IT support remotely for the Navy while his partner worked in person as a part-time massage therapist. He reported greater productivity from the quiet at home, and he appreciated how the flexibility let him be more present in his family's life while also working more:

> I love it. My concentration is better. I'm not interrupted constantly during my day, and [I love] the flexibility. I can take my daughter to practice, take her to school, pick her up, and then come back and continue to work until I meet my work obligation. . . I can concentrate more. . . I think I work slightly more. But that's just because that's my choice, you know?

The flexibility of telework offered opportunities for men like Joe to increase their engagement with childcare while maintaining their work responsibilities.

Remote work also offered relief from the sense of surveillance at work. Miranda, a 42-year-old white architect and mother of two teenagers, appreciated working from home, free from the pre-pandemic "office environment [where] you're constantly under supervision, and everyone's watching what you're doing". From home, she lost the tension of surveillance she felt in her office, yet she maintained enough contact with colleagues to complete her work. She explained, "I just have a lot more freedom. . . .I'd just rather be by myself. I'm more productive, everything's quiet, nobody's bothering me, and if I need someone, I just call them". Shirley felt a different kind of surveillance removed when remote work became standard: her company had allowed remote work one day a week before the pandemic, but she found that difficult, feeling constantly mistrusted when working from home. She feared that her supervisors and coworkers would doubt her diligence: "They might think that I'm not at my desk, or if they called and I was in the bathroom or something, are they going to think that I'm not working?" The global opportunity of working from home led her to feel assured that her employers would trust her to work diligently from home, creating an avenue for remote work in the future without concern.

> So, when we all went home in March, it was a lot easier. I didn't have that anxiety because I was like, "Everybody's in the same position, everybody's home". And since we started going back, I don't have that anxiety anymore. . . . I don't feel like they're judging me, saying "Oh well, she's not working", because we just

> went through two years of proving that everybody could work from home. I don't have that anxiety anymore, which is nice.

Respondents felt more satisfied with their jobs when they no longer spent long periods of time commuting to get there. Remote workers could reclaim the minutes—and sometimes hours—that they previously spent commuting, gaining more control over their time and more opportunities to work, relax, and spend with their families. Tommy, a 39-year-old white father of one, loved working from home as an IT support specialist because the elimination of his commute allowed him to spend more quality time with his family. His newfound appreciation for work-life balance and family time influenced his desire to continue working from home post-pandemic, allowing him to keep focus on family time. He explained:

> The telework has made me actually realize a lot about what's most important . . . Not having my commute got me back an hour and a half out of my day. [That's] an hour and a half I get to spend with my kid.

In the same way, the lack of commute benefitted John, a white 63-year-old insurance salesman with one teenager still at home. He found that he was more efficient in connecting with clients when working from home. Describing two clients located a 50-min drive apart, he explained: "I was able to do them back-to-back in the same day, rather than trying to drive between appointments. So that's a real thing, there are some pluses that came from the whole lockdown". Shirley was also grateful to avoid driving her 2.5 commute to work:

> I relished not having a commute. I relished getting out of bed . . . and logging on at seven o'clock instead of getting in my car and driving for an hour and 15 min. So right away at seven, I'm on my computer.

She used her morning commute time to start working earlier and her evening commute to start household chores, getting ahead of the schedules she followed before the pandemic. Shirley's increased productivity, at home and at work, reduced her stress and led to an increase in job satisfaction. As proud as she was of her professional accomplishments during the pandemic, she was more pleased to avoid her commute: "That was the biggest positive for me, to gain two and a half hours to my day every day". She emphasized several times how much better her job felt without the commute. As the pandemic reshaped the daily routines of many workers, the elimination of commute time emerged to benefit respondents at home by fostering productivity and a deeper appreciation for work-life balance.

3.2.2. Work-Life Balance and Flexibility

When schools and childcare facilities closed during the pandemic, children returned to their family's care, leaving parents responsible for work and childcare simultaneously. Gendered expectations of caregiving made remote work during this time without external childcare particularly challenging for mothers, especially with younger children—even when the mothers maintained productivity at work and had support from their partners. The flexibility of remote work gave them the tools and control to "do it all", combining work and family responsibilities, but it was not easy or preferable. For instance, Dawn, a 36-year-old Latina mother of three children and mid-level manager, experienced increased productivity at work, but she found combining childcare and work while schools were closed to be quite difficult:

> . . . then they want a snack and then they want this and I'm trying to juggle my meetings around their schedule and school breaks. And then our [son] was one at the time, crying non-stop. So, I'm handling a crying one-year-old during meetings, taking turns with my husband. . . That really made it tough on us. We were excited for the school reopening.

Because Dawn recognized that her childcare challenges arose from the pandemic's complications, not from working from home, she still hoped to work remotely in some capacity after the pandemic. Likewise, 44-year-old Iris, a white hospital administrator

with one young child, found so much greater job satisfaction in remote work that she transitioned during the pandemic from a less flexible healthcare management job to a fully remote one. She appreciated her current job's support for her preschool-aged child's care needs:

> There's the flexibility that was lacking in the other [job]. So, for instance, you know, if Mandy needs my attention in the morning, that's fine. I can pick up those hours and do work at the end of the day, instead of during that time.

Consistent with the literature, we found that some fathers took on more childcare when families adapted to new workplace arrangements. Joanna, a 35-year-old white analyst whose husband worked from home even before the pandemic, transitioned to remote work just as their young daughter's daycare facilities closed. Joanna explained that her husband's reduced schedule and remote work flexibility allowed him to take over more of the temporarily-increased childcare tasks while they both worked from home:

> My husband, because he was working fewer hours and his work was less demanding, he pretty much took care of Grace. We would take turns if . . . he had a call. My hours are really flexible, as long as I would get my 40 [hours] in, it was fine, so . . . we just kind of made it work.

Moreover, since both parents were home, Joanna explained how they could work together to cover childcare. "Grace was home, and David would primarily take care of her, but I would help out as well, so I would shuffle my hours a little bit to be able to spend more time with her and help her". Another father spending more time in childcare was Joe, the Navy IT support provider. "I love it", he said of remote work, emphasizing the flexibility this workplace arrangement afforded him:

> They made it easy because they said as long as you work your eight hours you could either start in the morning, drop off to do whatever, and then come back in the afternoon. So, they made flexible work schedules for us because some of us being home, a lot of our kids were not in school either. So, there's a lot of helping them with schoolwork and, and those types of things.

He hoped to maintain a hybrid schedule in which he would not have to work in person more than one day a week, even after schools reopen. Even with complicated childcare arrangements, respondents emphasized repeatedly that they wanted to continue working remotely because they could be more productive, as workers and parents, thanks to the flexibility in remote positions.

Planning for the post-pandemic period, respondents understood the flexibility inherent in remote work would allow them to adapt their work schedule around their children's schedules. Holly, a 30-year-old admissions counselor with two young children, discussed how traditional working hours and inflexible office environments often disadvantaged women, but working from home offered her the flexibility to balance her career aspirations with her family responsibilities.

> We use our time more flexibly, not constrained by the office schedule or commutes. I can work out, hang with the kids, stop work, pick them up at four, go to a park; options not available before. I appreciate the flexibility. . .we determine our priorities.

Working from home allowed Miranda to gain childcare flexibility, avoid constant supervision in an office setting, and enjoy a quieter, more productive work environment. When she began working from home, she felt her efficiency increased and enjoyed the flexibility of working from home so much that she increased her work hours from part-time to full-time. With a strong belief in work-life balance and equal parenting, she enjoyed being more present for her children's activities and found telework beneficial, not just for her but for society's reassessment of traditional work norms:

> I've been working part time and kept out of a bigger career due to commuting and [outdated ideas about] rigid hours from the 1950s . . . Our jobs don't reflect

> the desire for [gender] equality. It doesn't work to have parents working till five or six PM, when school is out at three.

Similarly, working remotely—with the flexibility for family and workplace independence it afforded—led to a remarkable improvement in job satisfaction for Renee.

> I work 100% remote 40 h a week. My direct supervisor said, "I don't care what hours you work, as long as you meet your deadlines and get on most meetings". So, I'm able to get my child on the bus, off the bus, . . . As long as I'm meeting my deadlines and getting my projects done, it's very much autonomy and trust that you are an adult, and you can manage yourself and you can complete your tasks. So that has been amazing for my mental and emotional life, with this shift.

Even if only one partner in a household worked remotely, the flexibility in that arrangement benefitted the partner working in-person as well: having at least one remote worker allowed families to use that flexibility for emergency childcare support after schools reopened. Jack, a white 44-year-old father of two and essential worker at a coal power plant, appreciated the flexibility in his wife Tracey's remote arrangement since he no longer had to use valuable (and limited) vacation days to deal with child care issues:

> Before the pandemic, I would usually take vacation—or sometimes she would, depending on who had more vacation. Now after the pandemic, she can just work from home. Neither one of us needs to take vacation if daycare is not available—a lot of time she worked from home and she can still manage the kids, so it works great.

These narratives underscore how remote work offered a new opportunity for workers to manage time with their families. The pandemic challenged parents to navigate the lack of childcare alongside professional responsibilities, yet remote access offered workers the autonomy to define their work hours, the opportunity for fathers to engage more deeply in childcare, and the elimination of rigid office hours, during the pandemic and thereafter, that often clashed with children's schedules. Individuals like Holly, Miranda, and Renee emphasized the empowerment and satisfaction derived from being able to intertwine their career aspirations with family commitments.

3.2.3. Hybrid

The respondents in our sample who expressed a desire to continue working remotely varied significantly in the schedule of remote work they envisioned for the future. Ten respondents (and eight partners) hoped to stay fully remote after the pandemic, though three of those respondents and six of the partners had worked from home before the pandemic as well. More often, respondents preferred a hybrid arrangement: 17 respondents (and 12 partners) hoped to combine the flexibility and autonomy of remote work with periodic in-person engagements to foster team synergy and maintain social connections. Joanna, for instance, enjoyed the freedom of working from home, remained productive, and collaborated well online. She weighed the pros and cons of returning to her office, settling on a hybrid work structure:

> I think a day or two a week would be really nice to just work from home and be able to focus without any kind of the office distractions. I think I would be more productive. But then in other senses I would miss out on some of the important conversations that happen . . ., but I think it would be a good trade, at least a day or two a week or something.

Ethan, a 33-year-old software engineer with two young children, also favored a hybrid arrangement. He felt less connected to his coworkers while working from home:

> I feel like communication is more difficult in general with my coworkers. And because I don't talk to them randomly as much, if I don't schedule a meeting for something in particular, I don't learn about something, so I just feel like I have less context for what my coworkers are working on in general.

While he was still working from home full time at the time of the interview, he anticipated a hybrid work schedule in the future: "My company is going to start having hybrid work for most people. Three days a week everyone's expected to be in the office, and two days you can choose to be remote". Ethan planned to work from home a few days a week in the future to get more family time, especially from eliminating his daily commute:

> I think I will probably take those two days remote, because I will still get to see my coworkers randomly like I used to in the office during the three days, but during the two days I'm remote, I can help with the kids getting to school and stuff.

Some respondents preferred a less frequent hybrid arrangement. Courtney, a 55-year-old white mother of five who worked in energy efficiency, appreciated the convenience and schedule control of remote work but valued social interactions with her colleagues enough to seek occasional office visits. Thinking through future plans, she explained, "I don't anticipate going in. . . I'd still go in a couple times a month. But that's it". Likewise, Tommy, the IT support specialist, stated: "I would like to be able to go in and do . . . in-person training in a big room with everyone where I can see them and help them figure out the stuff. But that's about the only thing I miss from in person".

Respondents seek hybrid schedules to retain control over their schedules while still benefiting from the spontaneous interactions and team synergy fostered in a physical workspace. While respondents vary in the number of onsite days they want in a hybrid model, based on personal and professional needs, they redefined their workplace arrangements from in-person or wholly remote to include hybrid.

3.3. On-Site Preference

We found that 12 workers in our sample—nine women and three men—worked from home during the pandemic but had no interest in continuing to do so. All but one worked full time. Seven respondents (and two respondents' partners) worked from home in jobs that were poorly suited to remote work, while an additional five respondents (and three partners) worked remotely during the pandemic but did not wish to continue for a variety of other reasons. We consider first those whose jobs were ill-suited to remote work. Unlike the variation in those who preferred to work on site, these workers all had college or graduate degrees and returned in person—or quit —within six months of the start of the pandemic.

3.3.1. Structural Challenges to Remote Work

Workers in jobs that were poorly suited to remote work—and their families—faced a much more difficult pandemic experience than both those whose jobs adapted well to remote work and those who continued to work in-person. Structural challenges in the nature of certain professions impacted the job's adaptability to remote work. A job is not well suited for remote work when (1) it involves the transfer of skills between individuals, like teaching or physical therapy, and (2) the transfer cannot occur fully despite the availability of technological communication with clients or students. Unlike other jobs that require a physical in-person component (like a surgeon or a tow truck operator), these roles could be nominally conducted remotely in emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. These positions ended up being less effective through technology, even when workers expended additional time and effort adapting them. As a result, workers with these jobs experienced stressful, demanding, often overwhelming work responsibilities during the pandemic because they had to complete their work tasks through inadequate technological arrangements when working from home, spending time on work tasks as well as on learning and maneuvering new technological adaptations and approaches.

Respondents facing structural challenges with remote work looked forward to returning to work in person or celebrated when they had returned. Of the respondents and partners working from home in roles poorly suited to remote work, five of the seven respondents, and both partners, returned to work within six months of the start of the

pandemic. While they worked from home because of the pandemic, they stopped trying to maneuver their jobs from home once they could be conducted safely in person. The other two respondents also stopped working from home in jobs that were not compatible with remote work within six months, but instead of returning to work, they quit. For example, Elizabeth, a 37-year-old Latina mother of two young children who worked as a pediatric physical therapist, explained that for the first few months of the pandemic, she worked from home, connecting remotely to meet her physical therapy patients. Though childcare concerns were among her reasons for quitting, the nature of her job made remote work as a physical therapist unreasonable:

> When the pandemic started, we had to go remote, and as a physical therapist it's kind of difficult to do remote. So, I did that for the rest of the school year, and then I decided to quit because, number one, it was too difficult to continue remotely . . .

She was devastated to leave a job she loved and looked forward to returning to work once her family made post-pandemic arrangements. For the short term, however, despite technological access to her patients, her job was not achievable remotely.

Respondents with structural challenges to remote work that made them not want to continue working remotely described very little productivity in their jobs, even though they often worked longer hours from home. Anna recalled the overwhelming feeling in March 2020, "planning out what school would look like, and how often were we going to meet, and just knowing that you couldn't replicate your entire school day on Zoom". Despite the extra time and effort, many workers in jobs that required human skill transfer—and their partners—described logistical challenges getting work online and transferred to a virtual platform, and yet reported that their work was still less effective than it would be in person. Irene, a 39-year-old white lawyer, shared two young children with her husband, Zach, a high school biology teacher. She recalled observing her husband's struggle.

> I remember trying to get the kids up and fed breakfast, and there's us while he was Zooming–because high school starts earlier–and just him staring at a sea of just black boxes, or like when they had to turn on their cameras, they would have all of their cameras just facing the ceiling. And he would try to crack jokes and he's not a morning person, so I saw how hard he was trying to engage with people over a video, so he was really, really trying to knock it out of the park. . . . He's really struggling. I feel like the job for him has gotten harder and harder.

Brian, a white 43-year-old father of three who worked more than forty hours a week as high school history teacher, spoke directly about the inadequacy of teaching remotely: "The online learning that I was able to provide is nowhere near adequate. It's just not". Teaching serves as a prime example of a job that *seems* to accommodate remote work arrangements but, because of the human interaction innate in the job, proved poorly suited to be conducted remotely.

Furthermore, many workers reported enjoying the human interaction element of the job above all and missed working directly with people. Toni, a 43-year-old Black community college instructor and mother of one, explained: "I'm a teacher because I love people, and it was really difficult not to have contact with my students". Adam, a white 50-year-old father of two young teenagers, taught a special education class and also missed the connection with his students while working from home: "That's the toughest thing. You don't get to see them every day and you don't get to be around them every day, and that was the most difficult thing". The lack of personal connections in remote work made working from home ineffective and dissatisfying for those whose jobs depend on in-person interaction for their success.

Respondents with a poorly suited remote job often shouldered the family's temporary increase in childcare as well, taking on this role for their families despite the challenge in their paid work. Irene, the lawyer married to the history teacher, exemplified a partner (often a higher-earning man, though in this case a woman) who simply assumed that the

partner working from home would be responsible for childcare. She expected her husband to oversee their children in addition to teaching remotely when she returned onsite:

> When things started to lift a little bit and we could go in [to courthouses and jails in person], . . . [I knew] he could be here, he could teach from home. That let me be able to go in [to work]. . . . So, Zach was holding it down at home hard, while I was . . . trying to make myself available to go in.

But because respondents with jobs poorly suited to remote work already faced obstacles to conducting their jobs from home, any additional challenges that arose in the pandemic, such as increased childcare responsibilities, had a multiplicative effect. Some, like Anna, stoically took on the family's childcare responsibility, as just another obstacle in an already difficult work experience:

> That was a little bit challenging for me when I was hunting down my own students' work, and then to look and be like, "What? You don't have this done?" and then to get them to get their own things done, too.

For Elizabeth, the complication of childcare made remote work too overwhelming to continue. She and her husband began the pandemic both working from home but found that arrangement "very tricky because we're both on our computers trying to work while our kids are home, too". Not long afterwards, Elizabeth quit to focus on the family's childcare responsibilities. The transformation of the home into a workspace, together with overlapping responsibilities of childcare during the pandemic, made this challenging arrangement unsustainable and deepened the desire to stop working remotely.

Some respondents in a job poorly suited to remote work identified positive aspects to working from home, but not enough that they wanted to keep working remotely any longer than necessary. When Anna listed the positive aspects she found to working from home, she still couched all of her positivity with expressions of dissatisfaction.

> There were good things about it and there were bad things about it. I liked that I could sit on my living room couch and teach, and . . . I liked the flexibility [to] eat lunch at home . . . and that part I really liked. It was really hard, though.

Even the most supportive employers could not make these jobs satisfactory. Toni took a generous view of her administration's efforts during the pandemic:

> Nobody in living memory has experienced anything like this. There were a few things that maybe they could have done differently, but overall, I truly believe—even though I know it's always faculty against administrators, I still think they did the best that they knew how to do.

Respondents whose jobs were ill-suited to remote work faced challenges working from home in the pandemic without physical proximity to their students and clients. Respondents like Brian and Elizabeth depicted the strain and dissatisfaction they felt from the abrupt transition to remote work, grappling with heightened stress levels and a pervasive sense of inadequacy. Even as they acknowledged the minor comforts of home and flexibility, they longed to return to work in-person to foster the human connections central to their roles. They worked remotely only in response to the pandemic, and they transitioned back in person—or quit—within six months.

3.3.2. Preference to Return on Site

Workstyle Preferences Reinforcing on Site Work

Beyond the respondents whose jobs were poorly suited to remote work, another group of five women did not want to keep working remotely after the pandemic, despite jobs that were compatible with remote work, because they did not enjoy that workplace arrangement. None of them returned to work immediately: all of them worked from home for six months or more, with three staying remote for more than a year. One of the first to return in person was Jenny, a 41-year-old Latina mother of one teenager, who appreciated the convenience

of her home-based workspace yet yearned for more professional interactions and struggled with her coworkers' time management.

> People weren't respecting other people's time. When we were having meetings, they weren't showing up, or some people are laying on their sofas. And a lot more was being asked of me from my bosses. I'd receive calls an hour off the clock asking me to redo work I'd sent days earlier. Boundaries were being blurred because we were working from home. So, I tried to keep my work hours, but they weren't being respected.

Jenny wanted to work from her office as soon as she had an option to return. Temporarily back at home at the time of her interview while her office underwent repairs, she was eager to return on site. "I've been working from home . . . and I'm hopefully back in the office tomorrow. So, everything's packed up to take with me back to the office tomorrow, so I'm hoping I'm back tomorrow. . . . I'm ready to go back".

Another respondent, Denise, a Black mother of three, struggled to work remotely for over a year in a social work organization supporting the homeless. Her job was compatible with remote work, and before the pandemic, she thought she would like working from home: "Working full time, [I thought it would] just be easier just to do the type of job that I do from home because I just talk to people on the phone all day". Denise discovered during the pandemic that she preferred to be around her colleagues because her job was emotionally challenging. When asked if she would like to continue working from home after the pandemic, she was certain that she would not:

> No, no, because what I do for work, it's a lot of emotion . . . It's a job where you can't do it by yourself—I learned during the pandemic, I need to be with other adults when I'm doing my work because with my colleagues, you have a little time to vent or talk about other things to get your mind off maybe a sad story you just heard. . . . No, no, no, . . . [working from home] everybody is isolated.

Her preference to work in person reflected her personal work style, collaborating with others, rather than a compromised element of her job.

Unlike the respondents who worked from home during the pandemic, Edith, a 38-year-old white office secretary and mother of four, had the choice whether to work in her office or from home and decided to report to her office. She appreciated that she could stay onsite: "I like what I do. I can't work remotely, I don't have it in me". She understood that remote options benefitted many companies and workers during the pandemic, but she preferred to work in person.

Pandemic-Era Childcare Struggles Reinforcing on Site Work

Others who worked from home found the experience of simultaneously working and providing care for young children during the pandemic so challenging that it colored their perception of remote work going forward, especially if they were alone at home while their partners worked onsite. Delilah, a 34-year-old white woman with two children, worked remotely in sales for an aerospace company while her husband worked in person as a civil engineer. She felt the pressure of being the primary caregiver during work hours, especially without the teamwork that households with two remote workers could share. Before the pandemic, she had negotiated a flexible work arrangement to be present for her daughter's in-home speech and physical therapy, but since transitioning to remote work full time, Delilah found it overwhelming to manage both work and childcare without additional support.

> My newest baby requires a lot of attention. She wants to be held all day. She cries over anything, and she makes it very hard to work, as you can tell. . . . I don't know [how to cope with that], to be honest with you. You just kind of have to deal with it.

Similarly, Denise felt overloaded by her additional childcare requirements because she already had more work responsibilities than usual after transferring to a remote platform:

> [It was] really hectic during the pandemic, actually, because I had to do my job full time at home now and help my youngest child with school more than--I mean, I had to help both kids, but the youngest child needed more attention. I couldn't take time off of work because I was already home. So . . . it was just really challenging.

The requirement to provide childcare during work hours, especially on their own, frustrated these respondents, and even though the lack of childcare was temporary and specific to the pandemic, it shaped their distaste for remote work.

But like those with jobs ill-suited to remote work, even those workers who preferred on-site work felt some positive outcomes to working from home. Jenny cultivated healthier habits: "I [used to work] through my lunch, I'd do the working lunches. So, I'm making it a point when I'm [home], I shut down for my half hour, 45 min lunch". Denise found positive aspects to working from home as well.

> I liked being home. I like that I didn't have to commute anymore. I was . . . making my own coffee, cooking my own food, and things like that, so I did appreciate that. And I spent more time with the family because I was home, I was with my kids all the time, so I did enjoy that aspect of working from home.

Her enjoyment paled in comparison to her challenges when working from home: "There are some days I would cry because it would just be so . . . overwhelming".

3.4. Responses to Post-Pandemic Employer Demands

Since working from home during the pandemic, our respondents identified the autonomy, flexibility, and reclaimed time that remote work offers. However, they also identified blurred boundaries between professional and personal spheres and a sense of isolation from colleagues, as well as heightened childcare responsibilities because of pandemic-era closures. Some respondents already knew their employers' plans for workplace arrangements post-pandemic while others were waiting for a final decision, but all had preferences for whether or not they wanted to work from home going forward. Some respondents learned that their employers' post-pandemic work arrangements aligned with the worker's own preferences. For instance, Joe was relieved that he would not have to return in person.

> I don't want to go back to the office. . . For me, normal is just a lot of stress [and] constant worry about everything I had to get done. . . Once they announced that we could keep this arrangement, it was like, "Okay, great". It just works for me. It just worked for us as a family.

When employers encouraged workers to return in person as soon as possible, other respondents felt they had no option but to acquiesce to protect their jobs. Shirley, the paralegal so pleased to avoid her commute, was required to return in person two days a week after almost two years fully remote. She returned as soon as her company requested, intending to keep working in the same job even if she had to commute. Nonetheless, she found the return to the office "difficult because, after two years, I couldn't figure out how to work at work anymore to get work done. There's chatting going on, and they want that face-to-face collaboration, but I'm like, 'I'm not getting work done!'" Other respondents were similarly frustrated with the double standard when their employers refused remote options after previously requiring them during the pandemic. Joanna was called back to work fourteen months after the pandemic started, once her team was vaccinated:

> I was annoyed by it, I thought that the pandemic will show them that we can be productive working from home. We didn't have to be a butts-in-seats kind of organization, but they prefer that, so it is what it is.

Remote workers in our sample who did their jobs with more productivity and satisfaction and gained flexibility and control were unhappy when called back to the office full time. But conceding to employer demands was not the only solution for workers facing a challenging work arrangement after the pandemic. Michael, a 48-year-old who

worked multiple jobs in person, was married to an office manager called back to the office full time. Rather than concede completely to her employer, his wife negotiated to keep schedule control:

> So, she worked out a deal with her boss where she took a pay cut but leaves the office at two o'clock so she can pick [our son] up–or I can pick him up if I'm not working. . . .And she's like, "This is stupid, I can do exactly the same work from home", . . . but [the return to office policy] is more of a jealousy thing and a control thing.

Some other women quit, rather than maneuver the heightened work-family conflict during the pandemic. Elizabeth quit working altogether, as did the wives of two other respondents. One of those respondents, Ethan, focused more on his wife's inflexible job as an engineer, rather than the impact of childcare, in her decision to quit:

> Yeah, it was a very difficult decision for her. . . . She had a job that was paying pretty well that she could do remotely. She felt really bad about leaving it. But eventually, she decided that she just didn't like the work that she had to do remotely, and it was too difficult to get to work with the kids. . . . I think if pandemic never happened, she would have continued working the job. I don't think it would have been as stressful as it was if she hadn't started to work remotely.

Other respondents made drastic career choices to ensure that they could continue working from home. Renee quit her job and began working for a private company because she did not know, "with the pandemic, the additional stress of the pandemic and how schools were going to be operating, if this was going to be a sustainable job for me because it was inflexible". Describing her workplace as "stressful anxiety", she began looking for a remote job when her child was sick. She debated conceding to her employer's demands before she determined to move forward elsewhere with her career:

> I was told that I was not allowed to work remotely. . . .Originally, it was kind of like, "Well, I don't want to get behind in my work, so I'll just do it", and finally, I was like, "You know what? No. They're getting more from me, and this is not an option. This is what I have to do for my child. You as an employer are not being flexible. I'm not just going to be working for free, essentially". . . .At this point I was furious. I am not the only mom experiencing this inequity, and the patriarchy, and the system that I was working in. I was fired up about this.

Conversely, some of the respondents who experienced remote work but preferred to work in person made career-changing decisions to ensure that they could work onsite. Rather than stay home, Brandon, a 34-year-old Asian father of one who directed an on-campus college program, switched careers to nursing to get back to work in person. Asked about his career transition, he underlined the importance he felt—despite the health risks—in being around others:

> It was nice because you got to see people again, but at the same time though, you're like, 'Ah, people again! Why won't you wear your mask? Please wear your mask.' So, I enjoy getting the community back. That's nice.

Other respondents had *not yet* made a career-changing decision but indicated that they too would prioritize the flexibility of remote work. Miranda was adamant she would work remotely going forward, "or I'll find another job because it's not negotiable for me. . . so I don't have to make sacrifices like that". Flexibility for childcare was a large motivator for mothers considering remote options in the future, even when the mothers would prefer to work in person. Jennifer, a white 32-year-old university administrator and a new mother whose maternity leave ended as the pandemic began, could not fathom working without at least hybrid remote access.

> I go back and forth [between fully remote and hybrid arrangements]. I think if I were in a role that I understood and I didn't need to build a team or feel that

> connection, I think it would depend on that piece, the flexibility. . . .So, I definitely have been exploring what are the options for remote work, but I think I'd also be open to something that was like one or two days in the office. . . .Well, it can be done [fully remotely], it doesn't necessarily mean it's done the best way.

Likewise, Irene explained that the benefits of working from home are too great to ignore. When looking for a job in the future, she will necessarily look for hybrid flexibility:

> It's not my preferred way of working, I don't find myself terribly effective when I'm working from home. That being said, I have to take a job where working from home is sometimes permitted or encouraged, just in case these guys get sick again. . .. I don't feel like I have the option of taking a job where the management isn't comfortable with there being work from home options.

The interest in remote work extended even to several respondents who worked in person during the pandemic, attracted by the flexibility they had learned it offered. For example, Connie, a 33-year-old white mother of one, worked in her son's preschool during the pandemic and, preparing to move to another state, would look first into remote positions for a new job.

> Ideally [I'd be remote], I feel like, just to have that flexibility . . . School's out in June . . .what am I going to do for childcare if my husband's working full time and my kid's no longer in school? . . . What can you do? I mean other than . . . doing something remotely where I can do it at whatever time I have available.

In navigating the post-pandemic work environment, respondents weighed their options, seeking a balance between the newfound autonomy and flexibility of remote work with the tangible and intangible costs of adhering to or resisting employer demands, all while managing personal responsibilities and career trajectories.

4. Discussion

Our study of work experiences during the pandemic among dual-earner families with children reveals that the allure of flexibility, higher productivity, and eliminated commutes motivated the majority of our respondents and their remote working partners to continue remote work in some capacity in the future. The respondents explained that a pivotal determinant of remote work's desirability was the job's intrinsic compatibility with remote technology. The ease or challenge of transitioning to a remote setting influenced whether the experience of working from home was positive or negative. For jobs that seamlessly adapted to a remote environment, participants reported an overall positive experience, underscored by enhanced job satisfaction and productivity. However, for those whose roles were poorly suited to remote work, the experience was challenging.

Another salient theme was the newfound flexibility that remote work brought to respondents' schedules and lives. The ability to mold work schedules around the ebbs and flows of family life was not merely a logistical advantage but also contributed to enhanced job and life satisfaction. The popularity of hybrid work models, which combine in-person and remote work, reflects a growing demand for work arrangements that offer both structured interaction onsite and autonomous flexibility from home.

One of the pandemic challenges of working parents was the closure of childcare and schools. While this complicated the lives of all working parents, most workers did not conflate the difficulty of maneuvering childcare during the pandemic with problems working effectively from home. The influence of pandemic-era school closures caused a small subset of workers to avoid future remote arrangements, but more often, parents valued remote work more because of its potential for flexibility and support for their families in the future.

Finally, eliminating travel time enhanced remote work experiences for many respondents. The absence of stressful commutes saved time, reduced their costs, and allowed for better work–life balance. Without rush-hour travel, workers better integrated their children's routines and personal activities into their work schedule. Overall, eliminating

a traffic-filled commute increased desire for remote work in the future, through either full-time or hybrid models.

The power to choose whether to work in a remote or hybrid arrangement, or to come to a worksite in person, was highly valued by our respondents. While some individuals expressed relief and satisfaction at the prospect of continuing to work from home, others faced the challenge of employers insisting on a return to in-person work. Some workers acquiesced to managers' demands or leveraged their arrangement against other schedule needs, but a significant subgroup found remote work to be non-negotiable. They shared a willingness to take drastic steps to align their work situations with their desired arrangements: several quit or changed transferred jobs to realize their desired work arrangement, and still others indicated that they *would* quit or change careers to maintain workplace control. The narratives revealed a diversity of experiences as the pandemic receded: some fathers and mothers were so attached to their jobs that they would give up remote work at their employers' insistence in order to stay, while others prioritized control of their work location by changing jobs (or threatening to do so) to maintain the ability to work remotely. However, all respondents who reported they left a job or would do so because they considered remote work access as a necessity were mothers. These stronger responses to schedule control and access to remote work among mothers were not defined by the respondent's own income or percentage of household income, but by a combination of personal, household, and caregiving needs that fell disproportionately on mothers.

In the post-pandemic work era, worker preferences will be crucial in developing work environments that are conducive to organizational productivity and supportive of well-being and life satisfaction. These narratives underscore the desirability of work policies that allow schedule flexibility and control, underlined by those willing to quit work or change jobs to find remote or hybrid options.

5. Conclusions

The narratives of individuals who embraced working from home during the pandemic reveal its transformative potential. Remote work increased productivity and job satisfaction, while allowing respondents to spend more quality time with their families due to their flexible schedules and elimination of long commutes. Yet, the pandemic also forced some jobs to be conducted remotely without careful consideration of how to perform them competently from home.

Our study is limited because we collected data from only one partner in each couple, which means our findings offer a single-sided narrative, potentially missing the differing perspectives that might have been captured through dual interviews. Future research could encompass a wider variety of family structures and include perspectives from both partners when present. Another limitation comes from the relatively small sample. Our sample includes respondents of various racial and ethnic groups, but because there was no over-sample, between-group comparisons in this sample were not possible. Further, the small sample limits us in identifying the respondents' occupations that were ill-suited to remote or hybrid work, and we look to future work to assess a broader range of occupations that might be poorly suited to remote or hybrid work arrangements.

Our findings also reflect the influence of gender on the experiences of parents working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within dual-income families, women often bore the brunt of childcare and household responsibilities when working remotely, especially when they were the sole remote worker in the household. Whether this pattern continues now that schools and childcare centers have reopened has become an urgent question, underscoring the need to extend a more gender-focused analysis of remote work in families, and include households with different income-earning arrangements.

Parents found working from home during the pandemic to be a positive experience generally, with the key exception of those who could not access from home the human connection necessary for their job tasks. Most workers whose jobs transferred well to

remote access, however, found remote work to be an effective option for work flexibility, and hope to remain in a remote or hybrid job into the future.

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Note

[1] Four of the respondents who worked on site during the pandemic (only one of whose partners worked from home, partners of the other three also worked on site) expressed interest in a hybrid work arrangement in the future. The remaining fourteen respondents who worked on site (seven of whose partners worked remotely, and seven whose partners worked on site) did not want to work remotely, often because their jobs (like gardening or hospital lab work) required an on-site presence.

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