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Mandated but willing? Preferences and expectations among mandatory work from home employees

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Abstract

The turbulent COVID-19 pandemic offered the opportunity to examine employees who are required to work from home (WFH), which can provide significant implications given that some companies have adopted full-time remote work even after COVID-19 restrictions have lifted. The current study draws on psychological contract theory and HR differentiation theory to examine the interactive effects of WFH preferences and relational organizational practices such as perceived support, feedback, and information sharing in predicting burnout and turnover intentions. Multi-wave, U.S. study results demonstrate that higher WFH preference employees are particularly responsive to these practices; they experience greater well-being when they receive them, but they also seek alternative employment when they do not. Our findings provide insight into the full-time WFH dynamics and suggest that fully remote organizations should consider not only effective management of employees, but also organizational practices that match employee preferences in times of turbulence.

KEYWORDS
homeworking, psychological contract, turnover, well-being

Abbreviations: CFA, confirmatory factor analysis; HR, human resources; HTMT, heterotrait-monotrait; POS, perceived organizational support; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root mean square residual; TLI, Tucker-Lewis index; US, United States; WFH, work from home.

Practitioner notes

What is currently known?

- Virtual work has benefits including lower stress, fewer absences, and better job performance.
- COVID-19 changed perspectives about virtual work and some organizations continue to adopt fully virtual work modalities even after health restrictions have been lifted.
- Understanding employee preferences in the work-from-home (WFH) work modality are important for predicting appropriate organizational practices and desirable outcomes.

What this paper adds?

- Identification of work-from-home preference as an important individual difference that impacts employee reactions to organizational practices.
- Integration of HR differentiation and psychological contract theories to understand why employees with varying levels of WFH preference experience differing attitudes in response to perceived organizational practices.
- Explanation of why specific, relational organizational practices in the fully WFH context may be expected by employees with a high WFH preference.

The implications for practitioners

- WFH preferences must be considered by practitioners when considering HR differentiation practices in a fully WFH context.
- Manager knowledge sharing, feedback, and organizational support are particularly vital organizational practices to reduce burnout and turnover intentions among WFH employees with higher WFH preferences.
- HR practitioners need to consider what practices are best for the specific work modality, as the COVID-19 pandemic has led to more variety in work contexts such as fully remote, hybrid models, and digital nomad arrangements.

When COVID-19 first swept the world, it rapidly changed many employees' working conditions from physical to virtual. With little time for advanced planning, employees had to upend well-rehearsed routines to transition to an entirely new work modality. Although virtual work resistance before COVID-19 was common, the pandemic forced changes in perspectives and HR practices, with some organizations continuing to adopt full-time WFH even after restrictions have been lifted (Arneson, 2021; Baker, 2020; Rooney, 2020). Mass-scale adoption of virtual work is not surprising considering its many benefits such as reduced operational costs, fewer absences, lower stress, better job performance, less commuting time, and access to larger labor pools (Allen et al., 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). While some companies have returned to in-person work, others around the world are extending fully remote work arrangements that were implemented due to COVID-19 (Arneson, 2021; Telford, 2022). For instance, only 23% of U.S. employees are predicted to be fully in person through the end of 2022 (Wigert, 2022). It appears that organizations value the additional resiliency that remote work arrangements provide during emergencies such as those arising from public health, natural disaster, or climate change causes (Sarnosky et al., 2022).

However, not much is known about organizational practices that are most effective when employees are forced to work fully from home (Allen et al., 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Wang et al., 2020). The current article examines employees who rarely worked virtually before the pandemic began and were suddenly mandated to do so full-time. We apply psychological contract theory and HR differentiation theory to explore virtual work preferences and how they interact with organizational practices. Specifically, we argue that those with a preference for WFH may have higher expectations for relevant organizational resources when forced to WFH, and they may experience greater burnout and turnover intentions when these resources are not provided; however, those without a preference for

WFH may have lower expectations, resulting in less burnout and turnover intentions when these resources are not provided. As some organizations continue to enact fully remote work beyond the immediate COVID-19 health emergency, the current article identifies theory to detail the mutual adaptation and adjustment of fully WFH employees and changing organizational practices.

We contribute to the current literature first by increasing our understanding of employee preferences vital for the selection and management of fully virtual employees. Second, we extend psychological contract theory and HR differentiation theory by investigating how employee outcomes vary based on the interaction between preferences and organizational practices. Little is known about psychological contracts and HR differentiation in mandatory, fully remote work and our results can therefore better inform organizations about employee preferences and attitudes in this context. Finally, we contribute to the nascent research on employees who WFH full-time and detail how organizations can best support these workers.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Virtual work and work from home (WFH)

Virtual work has been referred to as telework, remote work, distributed work, flexible work, distance work, and work from home (Allen et al., 2015). Despite varying labels, all definitions specify that employees are geographically dispersed, rely on technology, and can work in numerous locations such as co-working spaces or cafes (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; O'Leary & Cummings, 2007; Raghuram et al., 2019). We refer to virtual work as work from home (WFH), similar to researchers studying the same phenomenon (e.g., Kniffin et al., 2020), as COVID-19 limited options due to infection risks in public spaces.

Several studies have touted positive benefits of virtual work such as enhanced morale, productivity, and job satisfaction, along with reduced stress and turnover intentions (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Martin & MacDonnell, 2012). Others have found negative outcomes such as strained working relationships, isolation, and stalled career progression (Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Golden et al., 2008; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). Possible explanations for these conflicting findings include the extent of virtual work, the comparison of virtual workers to traditional workers, and the distinct context of mandatory virtual work. We consider all three possibilities by solely examining employees who were mandated to work fully virtually and comparing these workers to each other instead of to in-person or hybrid employees (elaborated upon below).

Researchers have long argued that prolonged virtual workers are a unique population deserving of study (Allen et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2020). Virtual work consequences appear to be time-dependent, with studies reporting negative effects when employees work virtually more than 3 days per week (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Neufeld & Fang, 2005). Golden and Veiga (2005) posit that virtual work is most beneficial when practiced to a moderate degree, finding that increased job satisfaction from virtual work plateaus at approximately 15 h per week. Pre-COVID-19 research, however, has been largely limited to occasional or infrequent virtual work (Wang et al., 2020) and our paper therefore seeks to clarify previous findings by examining workers who work fully virtually.

In the limited research on fully virtual workers, these employees are mostly compared to in-person employees, emphasizing differences in productivity (e.g., Allen et al., 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). This overlooks differences among virtual workers themselves. For example, Wiesenfeld et al. (2001) found virtual workers differed in their organizational identification depending on their need for affiliation. By comparing virtual workers to each other, organizations can better understand how to support and improve their attitudes and performance.

Previous studies may be further subject to sampling bias due to the historically voluntary nature of virtual work (Peretz et al., 2018; Tietze & Nadin, 2011). Mandatory virtual work is fundamentally distinct, and it is unclear whether benefits remain when individual choice is removed (Kaduk et al., 2019). Before COVID-19, most benefits resulted from a social exchange perspective where employees perceived virtual opportunities as signals of employer trust

(Casper & Harris, 2008; Redman et al., 2009). When choice is removed, individuals who would have not chosen virtual work may experience resentment (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). As fully WFH arrangements were rare before COVID-19, research on this population is scarce, and the pandemic provided an opportunity to investigate dynamics not previously observable (Kniffin et al., 2020). Our study addresses calls in HR research (e.g., Kim et al., 2020) by examining mandatory, fully virtual WFH employees and organizational practices that enable their success.

2.2 | COVID-19 and the psychological contract

The wide-scale change to virtual work during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in high employee uncertainty which was amplified by the loss of informal feedback and information sharing opportunities typically found in traditional office settings (Bilotta et al., 2021). Drastic change and uncertainty can trigger disruption to psychological contracts (Conway et al., 2014; Farmer & Fedor, 1999). Psychological contracts consist of employee beliefs about reciprocal obligations between themselves and their employers (Rousseau, 1995; Shore & Tetrick, 1994). The nature of these obligations are sharply reexamined when exogenous events make them salient, such as economic downturns, layoffs, work changes, and/or new HR policies. Such events redefine the contract through revisions to schemas about how people work, the terms of exchange, and idiosyncratic negotiations for flexible arrangements (Rousseau, 1998, 2011).

The COVID-19 context brought about many of these triggering events described above, motivating employees to reevaluate whether their organization was fulfilling perceived obligations (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Tietze & Nadin, 2011). For example, the onset of the pandemic led to most employees having expectations of more flexible HR accommodations (Min et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021) with CEOs being judged by how well they protected employee health and safety (Steinbach et al., 2021). With the shift to full-time WFH, employees may have developed expectations that organizational resources would be provided to support this newfound work context. When employees perceive that their organization fails to meet obligations associated with new terms and conditions of employment, they may experience contract breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Contract breaches are more common during organizational change and uncertainty as rules tend to be rewritten and renegotiated given new situational constraints and these breaches can lead to negative employee attitudes (Howard & Frink, 1996; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Turnley & Feldman, 1998).

2.3 | WFH preference and HR differentiation

Psychological contracts and contract breaches, however, are subjectively defined and individual preferences can impact whether employees perceive the organization's obligations as fulfilled (Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004; Lopez & Fuiks, 2021). Organizations therefore need to understand these expectations to gain insight into appropriate policies and reduce breach perceptions (Lopez & Fuiks, 2021). This notion is supported by HR differentiation theory, which is the deliberate implementation of practices that differ between employees to account for preferences, often resulting in improved employee and organizational outcomes (Lepak & Snell, 1999; Marescaux et al., 2021). Marescaux et al. (2021) posited that HR differentiation should address employees' differing work needs, but employees also vary in their reactions to HR differentiation (Rofcanin et al., 2019). We advance this notion by examining whether an individual preference, WFH preference specifically, interacts with organizational practices to predict employee attitudes when mandated to WFH. An employee has a higher preference to WFH when he/she desires to WFH or would choose to do so given the option (Green, 2019). Prior research has also stressed the importance of contextual factors that might influence reactions to HR differentiation, and we examine employee reactions in the macro context of the work modality (fully WFH) and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rofcanin et al., 2019).

We integrate psychological contract theory and HR differentiation theory by focusing on the joint effects of preferences and organizational practices on employee attitudes. Psychological contracts are fulfilled when employees

receive resources that match their expectations, but perceptions of whether psychological contracts are fulfilled vary as a function of valued resources (Chaundhry et al., 2009). Employees with a higher WFH preference value the ability to WFH and likely expect that the organization will provide the resources necessary to institutionalize this work modality. The alignment between WFH preference and mandatory virtual work may lead employees to expect more relational obligations from their employers. Relational expectations are focused on maintaining the employee-employer relationship, and a greater emphasis is placed on socio-emotional resources such as support, information sharing, and feedback (Harris & Kacmar, 2018; Millward & Hopkins, 1998). However, employees with a lower WFH preference have different values from the modality they are forced to work in, which may lead to a more transactional employee-employer relationship. Transactional relationships consist of employees meeting minimum requirements to obtain compensation and maintain employment (Shore & Barksdale, 1998), and these employees might not respond to or even perceive relational resources as wanted or necessary (Garcia et al., 2021). That is, because these employees do not care to WFH, they may not develop expectations for relational obligations.

We examine burnout as a critical outcome of these dynamics. Burnout is the experience of exhaustion where individuals question their value and abilities (Maslach et al., 1996). This outcome is dangerous for both employees and employers, leading to illnesses, reduced job performance, and absenteeism (Maslach, 2003; Schaufeli et al., 2009). If employees perceive incongruence between expectations and organizational responses, perceptions of unfairness and stress can result (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Employees may conclude that the organization does not value their needs when this incongruence occurs, leading to burnout (Robinson, 1995; Rousseau, 1995). Also, burnout may be more common among fully WFH employees as these employees can have fewer natural work breaks, intensified work demands, new work methods, and changing rules and regulations—all of which exacerbate stress (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Hu et al., 2016; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). In other work modalities, employees may have the option to return to the office or select a hybrid schedule to reduce burnout. Within a fully remote context, however, employees have limited alternatives, exacerbating burnout.

We also examine turnover intentions. Uncertainty surrounding shifting expectations, rights, and entitlements can cause stress leading to turnover (Shore & Tetrick, 1994). Fulfillment of employee expectations signals that an organization is willing to address employee needs, thus lessening stress and resistance to change. However, breach perceptions lead employees to lose their sense of obligation to the employer and turnover occurs (Robinson et al., 1994).

2.4 | Hypothesis development

As argued, employees with a higher WFH preference likely expect more organizational resources needed to work autonomously from afar. These employees may be more relational and empowering in nature, as they focus on maintaining a high level of interpersonal connection while also seeking agency to solve their own problems. Such resources that allow them to do so may include support, knowledge sharing, and feedback. These resources are focused on maintaining the long-term employee-employer relationship and are often seen as vital for fulfilling employee perceptions of exchange relationships (Guest & Conway, 2002).

2.4.1 | Perceived organizational support

Perceived organizational support (POS) is the degree to which employees believe the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1997). POS not only leads to successful virtual work but also the acceptance and adoption of virtual work (Sardeshmukh et al., 2012; Taskin & Bridoux, 2010). Fully WFH employees experience more isolation than traditional office workers, reducing support opportunities and increasing the importance of POS (Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004).

POS can lead to feelings of psychological contract fulfillment as it can buffer the adverse effects of stress created by the pandemic and mandatory WFH work (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Kossek et al., 2011). Higher WFH preference employees may expect more POS because it signals that the organization views them as a valuable partner which affords a sense of control and security (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). Conversely, when employees prefer to WFH but feel unvalued in the process, they may experience a breach in their expectations of support, thus producing greater stress and withdrawal. However, those with a lower WFH preference do not desire this modality, are unlikely to have high expectations of socioemotional support, and will be less sensitive to psychological contract or breach perceptions (Carver et al., 1989).

H 1. POS moderates the relationship between WFH preference and burnout such that burnout is lowest when WFH preference is higher and POS is higher.
H 2. POS moderates the relationship between WFH preference and turnover intentions, such that turnover intentions are lowest when WFH preference is higher and POS is higher.

2.4.2 | Knowledge sharing and feedback

Psychological contracts become more salient during uncertain times and employees desire accurate and useful information to evaluate whether the employer is upholding expectations (Guest & Conway, 2002; Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Accurate information helps employees make sense of shifting organizational assumptions, performance standards, and HR practices (Den Hartog et al., 2013; Kernan & Hanges, 2002). The need for information is also amplified under fully virtual work conditions due to the lack of in-person information gathering (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Donnelly & Johns, 2021; Sole & Edmondson, 2002).

We anticipate that those with lower WFH preference view mandatory WFH as more transactional, something simply necessary for continued employment. These employees may therefore not hold high expectations for organizational communication. Conversely, those with higher WFH preference likely have more relational expectations of the employer and information gathered from knowledge sharing and feedback can clarify organizational responses and meet these socio-emotional expectations (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Robinson et al., 1994). Two organizational practices can provide this expected information: knowledge sharing and feedback.

Knowledge sharing is the process by which individual experiences become integrated through collective understandings, mutual adjustments, and interactive systems to enable adaption and innovation (Taskin & Bridoux, 2010). Without knowledge sharing, employees are less likely to solve complex problems, be creative, and perform effectively (van der Meulen et al., 2019; Wang & Noe, 2010). As social interaction and shared experiences are critical for knowledge diffusion, it is unsurprising that the lack of such exchanges impedes work in virtual environments (Donnelly & Johns, 2021) and leads to turnover ideations (Scott et al., 1999). Employees with a higher WFH preference may hold higher expectations for knowledge sharing so that they can be kept updated on important decisions, access organizational resources, and continue to share, clarify, refine, and develop their expertise from afar. Higher WFH preference employees may see this access as psychological contract fulfillment, whereas lower WFH preference employees seek to resume their role as traditionally implemented, making them potentially less sensitive to relational actions such as managerial knowledge sharing.

H 3. Manager knowledge sharing moderates the relationship between WFH preference and burnout such that burnout is lowest when WFH preference is higher and manager knowledge sharing is higher.
H 4. Manager knowledge sharing moderates the relationship between WFH preference and turnover intentions, such that turnover intentions are lowest when WFH preference is higher and manager knowledge sharing is higher.

Beyond general knowledge, fully WFH employees may also require more performance feedback. Employees away from the office can benefit from varied information which can guide and reinforce performance since virtual environments restrict opportunities for regular feedback (Golden et al., 2008; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). Multiple interventions show the benefits of performance feedback (Geister et al., 2006; Hertel et al., 2005) because it shows employees the indispensability of their efforts (i.e. instrumentality), promotes a sense of capability to virtually fulfill tasks (i.e. self-efficacy), and raises shared trust by holding everyone accountable for their fair share (Geister et al., 2006). Personal and job-related feedback around clear criteria is essential for effective psychological contract management by building mutual understanding around what is procedurally fair for fully virtual arrangements (Guest & Conway, 2002; Raghuram et al., 2001). Without feedback, those preferring to WFH may feel inequitably treated and find the organization unwilling to fulfill their needs. Employees with a lower WFH preference may develop a more transactional relationship with the employer where socio-emotional actions, such as feedback, are unvalued and unwanted (Garcia et al., 2021). We examine two sources of feedback, feedback that employees receive from the job itself (job feedback) and feedback that employees receive from managers or coworkers (other feedback).

H 5. Job feedback moderates the relationship between WFH preference and burnout such that burnout is lowest when WFH preference and job feedback are higher.
H 6. Job feedback moderates the relationship between WFH preference and turnover intentions, such that turnover intentions are lowest when WFH preference and job feedback are higher.
H 7. Other feedback moderates the relationship between WFH preference and burnout such that burnout is lowest when WFH preference and other feedback are higher.
H 8. Other feedback moderates the relationship between WFH preference and turnover intentions, such that turnover intentions are lowest when WFH preference and other feedback are higher.

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Participants

The current study included 305 participants (53% male, Age_{mean} = 35, Age_{SD} = 9.2, $Tenure_{mean}$ = 5 years, $Tenure_{SD}$ = 5.5 years) who completed all procedures (detailed below). All participants worked from home every day at the time of data collection, and they did so before COVID-19 less than 1 day a week. Participants resided in the U.S. and were employed full-time, whereas part-time employees, students, and self-employed participants were ineligible. The top industries of participants' employment included business/financial operations (17%), computer/mathematical (15.7%), educational instruction/library (13.4%), and office/admin support (11%). The sample parameters satisfied our objectives, as it included employees who were forced to transition to WFH and was broadly representative of employees forced to do so.

3.2 | Procedures

Participants were recruited using Prolific (prolific.co), and they were invited to immediately complete the first survey. Participants were then invited to complete a second survey 1 week later, and they were invited to complete a third survey 1 week after the second survey. A time separated design was utilized to obtain the proposed temporal order of variables as well as partially address concerns with common method bias. Several quality control measures were taken. Participants with duplicate IP addresses were removed, state-level coordinates were checked against self-reported locations, and eligibility criteria were repeated within the survey. If any criteria questions were failed,

participants were removed. After these measures were implemented, 337 participants completed the Time 1 survey, 310 participants completed the Time 2 survey, and 305 participants completed the Time 3 survey.

3.3 | Measures

Unless otherwise noted, participants answered all items on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

3.3.1 | Time 1 measure

WFH preference

WFH preference was measured using a 10-item scale (Green, 2019) (Cronbach's α = 0.90). Sample items are, "I would be satisfied if my position were made fully remote permanently" and "I enjoy working from home."

3.3.2 | Time 2 measures

Organizational support

We used eight items (Eisenberger et al., 1986) to measure organizational support (Cronbach's α = 0.94). A sample item is, "Help is available from the organization when I have a problem," and participants answered on a 7-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Manager knowledge sharing

We used a five item scale used in previous studies (Connelly et al., 2012, van Dierendonck, 2011) (Cronbach's α = 0.92). A sample item is, "My manager tells employees exactly what they need to know."

Job feedback

The Job Feedback subscale from the Work Design Questionnaire (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006) was used (Cronbach's α = 0.90). A sample item is, "The job itself provides me with information about my performance."

Other feedback

The Feedback from Others subscale from the Work Design Questionnaire (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006) was used (Cronbach's α = 0.90). A sample item is, "I receive a great deal of information from my manager and coworkers about my job performance."

3.3.3 | Time 3 measures

Burnout

Burnout was measured using the 12 item scale from Kristensen et al. (2005). A sample item is, "How often do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?" Participants responded on a 5-point scale from almost never to a very low degree (Cronbach's α = 0.94).

Turnover intentions

Turnover intentions were measured using a four item scale (Tett & Meyer, 1993). A sample item is, "I often think of quitting this job," and participants answered on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Cronbach's α = 0.92).

4 | RESULTS

Before conducting our primary analyses, we assessed our measures' psychometric properties. We first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), wherein each item for our seven constructs loaded onto their respective latent factor and each latent factor was covaried. We covaried four pairs of error terms with extreme modification indices (≥40), as their respective items loaded onto common factors and the items were nearly synonymous. Covarying error terms is appropriate when their conceptual association can be justified (Brown, 2015; Harrington, 2009). Resultant model fit indices (CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, SRMR = 0.06, RMSEA = 0.05, χ^2/df = 1.78)[1] met or closely approached standard cutoffs for CFA (CFI ≥ 0.95, TLI ≥ 0.92, SRMR ≤ 0.05, RMSEA ≤ 0.05, χ^2/df ≤ 2) (Brown, 2015; Jackson et al., 2009). Most items produced very strong factor loadings (>0.60), but three produced notably smaller loadings (0.34, 0.31, and 0.08). Model fit did not notably improve with removal of any of these items. For this reason, we retained all items for our primary analyses, whereas Supplemental Material S1 includes a reanalysis of our results without the third item. All inferences were consistent, supporting the robustness of our results. We also calculated heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios to assess discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2018; Henseler et al., 2015) and Harman's one-factor test to assess common method bias. The upper range of the highest HTMT ratio 95% confidence interval was 0.71. As this was well below 1, discriminant validity of our measures was supported. When analyzed via an unrotated exploratory factor analysis (principal axis factoring), the first factor accounted for only 29% of the variance in our indicators, well below the common cutoff of 50% and indicating that common method bias is not a significant concern with our results.

Descriptive statistics and correlations are included in Table 1, whereas regression results are in Tables 2–5. To calculate our regressions, we mean-centered our variables and created our interaction term by multiplying the relevant mean-centered variables. All variance inflation factor (VIF) values were well below the conservative cutoff of two in our regression analyses, indicating that multicolinearity was not an issue in our analyses. To probe any significant moderating effects, we performed simple slopes analyses that differentiated the moderator at ±1 standard deviation around the mean, as recommended by prior authors (Dawson, 2014). Our conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1 and visual representations of significant moderating effects are included in Supplemental Material S2.

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities among study variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1. WFH preference	3.87	0.82	(0.90)						
2. POS	4.76	1.24	−0.13*	(0.94)					
3. Manager knowledge sharing	3.57	0.89	−0.05	0.55**	(0.92)				
4. Job feedback	3.59	0.89	−0.01	0.38**	0.35**	(0.90)			
5. Other feedback	3.41	0.97	−0.03	0.58**	0.46**	0.55**	(0.90)		
6. Burnout	2.75	0.86	−0.01	−0.38**	−0.31**	−0.27**	−0.29**	(0.94)	
7. Turnover	3.31	1.85	0.14*	−0.55**	−0.40**	−0.22**	−0.30**	0.39**	(0.92)

Note: *N* = 305. Cronbach's alpha shown on the diagonals.

Abbreviations: POS, perceived organizational support; WFH, work from home.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

TABLE 2 Moderation effects of perceived organizational support on burnout and turnover.

	Burnout			Turnover		
Step	**1**	**2**	**3**	**1**	**2**	**3**
Constant	2.75** (0.05)	2.75** (0.05)	2.73** (0.05)	3.31** (0.11)	3.31** (0.09)	3.29** (0.09)
WFH preference	−0.014 (0.06)	−0.07 (0.06)	−0.05 (0.06)	0.32* (0.13)	0.15 (0.11)	0.17 (0.11)
POS		−0.27** (0.04)	−0.25** (0.04)		−0.81** (0.07)	−0.79** (0.08)
WFH preference × POS			−0.11* (0.05)			−0.10 (0.09)
R^2	0.00	0.15	0.16	0.02	0.30	0.31
ΔR^2		0.15**	0.01*		0.28**	0.00

Note: N = 305. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Abbreviations: POS, perceived organizational support; WFH, work from home.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

TABLE 3 Moderation effects of manager knowledge sharing on burnout and turnover.

	Burnout			Turnover		
Step	**1**	**2**	**3**	**1**	**2**	**3**
Constant	2.75** (0.05)	2.75** (0.05)	2.74** (0.05)	3.31** (0.11)	3.31** (0.10)	3.30** (0.10)
WFH preference	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.03 (0.06)	−0.04 (0.06)	0.32* (0.13)	0.27* (0.12)	0.26* (0.12)
Manager knowledge sharing		−0.30** (0.05)	−0.28** (0.05)		−0.81** (0.11)	−0.78** (0.11)
WFH preference × manager knowledge sharing			−0.19** (0.06)			−0.30* (0.12)
R^2	0.00	0.10	0.13	0.02	0.17	0.19
ΔR^2		0.10**	0.03**		0.15**	0.02*

Note: N = 305. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Abbreviation: WFH, work from home.

*p < 0.05. **p < 0.01.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that POS moderates the relationship between WFH preference and burnout, and a significant interaction was found (B = −0.11, SE = 0.05, p < 0.05). Simple slopes analyses found that, while the lower POS slope is not significant (SS = 0.09, p > 0.05), the higher POS slope is significantly negative (SS = −0.19, p < 0.05), indicating that burnout decreases as WFH preference and POS both increase. Hypothesis 1 was supported. Hypothesis 2 predicted the same effect for turnover, but the interaction was not significant (B = −0.10, SE = 0.09, p > 0.05). Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 posited that manager knowledge sharing moderates the relationship between WFH preference and burnout such that burnout is lowest when WFH preference and manager knowledge sharing are higher. A significant interaction was found (B = −0.19, SE = 0.06, p < 0.01). The lower manager knowledge sharing slope is not significant (SS = 0.13, p > 0.05) but the higher manager knowledge sharing slope is (SS = −0.21, p < 0.01). This suggests that, as employees with higher WFH preference perceive greater manager knowledge sharing, burnout decreases. Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted the same interaction between manager knowledge sharing and WFH preference on turnover intentions. Although a significant interaction was found (B = −0.30, SE = 0.12, p < 0.05), the shape did not support our hypothesis. When manager sharing is higher, WFH preference does not affect turnover intentions.

TABLE 4 Moderation effects of job feedback on burnout and turnover.

	Burnout			Turnover		
Step	**1**	**2**	**3**	**1**	**2**	**3**
Constant	2.75** (0.05)	2.75** (0.05)	2.75** (0.05)	3.31** (0.11)	3.31** (0.10)	3.31** (0.10)
WFH preference	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.02 (0.06)	−0.02 (0.06)	0.32* (0.13)	0.31* (0.13)	0.31* (0.13)
Job feedback		−0.26** (0.05)	−0.25** (0.05)		−0.46** (0.12)	−0.43** (0.12)
WFH preference × job feedback			−0.10 (0.07)			−0.29* (0.14)
R^2	0.00	0.07	0.08	0.02	0.07	0.08
ΔR^2		0.07**	0.01		0.05**	0.01*

Note: N = 305. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Abbreviation: WFH, work from home.

*p < 0.05. **p < 0.01.

TABLE 5 Moderation effects of other feedback on burnout and turnover.

	Burnout			Turnover		
Step	**1**	**2**	**3**	**1**	**2**	**3**
Constant	2.75** (0.05)	2.75** (0.05)	2.74** (0.05)	3.31** (0.11)	3.31** (0.10)	3.30** (0.10)
WFH preference	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.02 (0.06)	−0.02 (0.06)	0.32* (0.13)	0.30* (0.12)	0.29* (0.12)
Other feedback		−0.25** (0.05)	−0.24** (0.05)		−0.57** (0.10)	−0.55** (0.10)
WFH preference × other feedback			−0.17** (0.06)			−0.27* (0.13)
R^2	0.00	0.08	0.11	0.02	0.11	0.12
ΔR^2		0.08**	0.03**		0.09**	0.01*

Note: N = 305. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Abbreviation: WFH, work from home.

*p < 0.05. **p < 0.01.

However, when manager sharing is lower, higher WFH preference increases turnover intentions more than those lower in WFH preference (SS = 0.53, p < 0.01), consistent with psychological contract theory and breach perceptions.

Hypothesis 5 stated that job feedback moderates the relationship between WFH preference and burnout such that burnout is lowest when WFH preference and job feedback are higher. This interaction was not significant (B = −0.10, SE = 0.07, p > 0.05), and Hypothesis 5 is therefore not supported. Hypothesis 6 posited the same moderated relationship for turnover and a significant interaction was found (B = −0.29, SE = 0.14, p < 0.05) but the shape does not support our hypothesis. When job feedback is higher, turnover is virtually the same regardless of WFH preference. However, similar to manager knowledge sharing, the simple slope for lower job feedback was significant and positive (SS = 0.57, p < 0.01), indicating that turnover increases as employees experience higher WFH preference and lower job feedback. Although our hypothesis was unsupported, this finding is consistent with psychological contract theory and breach perceptions.

Hypothesis 7 similarly stated that other feedback moderates the relationship between WFH preference and burnout such that burnout is lowest when WFH preference and other feedback are higher. The interaction was significant (B = −0.17, SE = 0.06, p < 0.01). The higher other feedback slope is significant and negative (SS = −0.19, p < 0.05) and the lower other feedback slope is not significant (SS = 0.14, p > 0.05). This supports the notion that employees with higher WFH preferences view feedback as a vital HR practice and, when they receive it, they experience lower

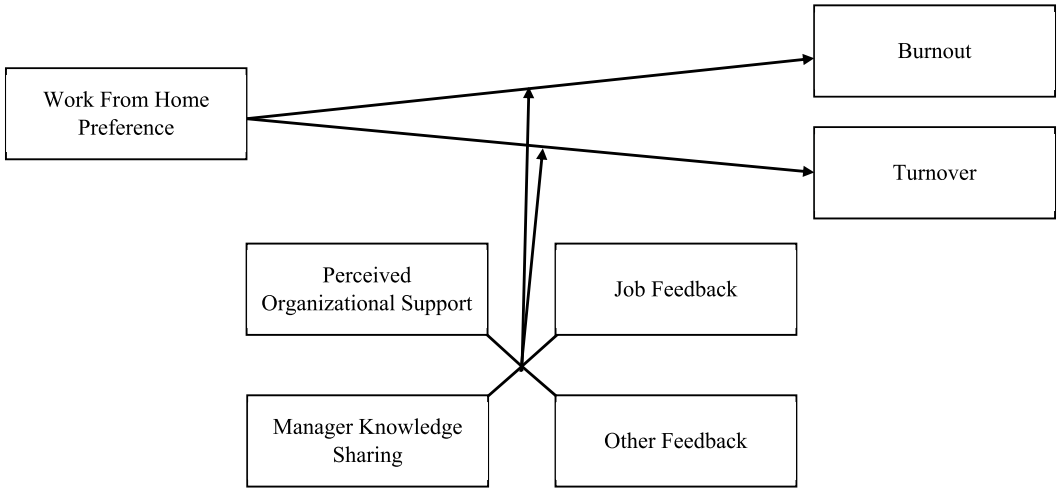

FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework.

burnout. When they do not receive it, they experience even higher burnout than employees with lower WFH preferences. Hypothesis 7 was supported.

Hypothesis 8 expected the same moderated relationship on turnover and a significant interaction was found (B = −0.27, SE = 0.13, p < 0.05). However, employees with higher WFH preference do not differ from employees with lower WFH preference who are also experiencing higher other feedback, as the simple slope for higher other feedback was not significant (SS = 0.03, p > 0.05). This does not support Hypothesis 8. The simple slope for lower other feedback, however, is significant (SS = 0.56, p < 0.01) and employees who have higher WFH preference but receive lower feedback from others have the highest turnover intentions, supporting psychological contract theory and breach perceptions.

We recognize that COVID-19 severity in participants' locations may have influenced our results. In a reanalysis, we therefore controlled for state case status (Supplemental Material S3). All inferences were consistent between these analyses and our primary analyses. Likewise, we recognize that certain control variables may impact our findings. We reanalyzed our results while controlling for age, gender, tenure, socioeconomic status, and industry (Supplemental Material S4). Again all inferences were consistent between these analyses and our primary analyses. Therefore, these supplemental analyses supported the robustness of our results.

5 | DISCUSSION

Psychological contract theory and HR differentiation theory were applied to understand how organizational practices affect burnout and turnover intentions in mandated, fully WFH employees. Consistent with our hypotheses, employees who had a higher WFH preference and experienced perceived fulfillment of relational resources necessary for the WFH modality (support, manager knowledge sharing, and other feedback) experienced lower burnout, more so than employees with lower WFH preference who may not have had the same employer expectations. Our results also consistently showed that, when higher WFH preference employees perceived lower manager knowledge sharing, job feedback, or other feedback, they had greater turnover intentions, possibly resulting from perceived psychological contract breach. Lower WFH preference employees were unaffected by these resources, as the disconnect between their preferences and the work modality led to lower expectations for socio-emotional resources.

We hypothesized effects of fulfilled expectations (higher WFH preference and higher perceptions of relational practices) for all organizational actions and outcomes we studied. Our results largely support these effects when

examining burnout, suggesting that fulfillment of a changing psychological contract can buffer the effects of stress and uncertainty resulting from mandatory WFH, especially with the added pandemic turbulence. However, turnover intentions are often a response to negative work events (Lum et al., 1998; Spector et al., 2006) and breach of expectations leads employees to feel less inclined to meet organizational obligations (Bilotta et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 1994). Higher WFH preference employees were particularly susceptible to perceptions of lower manager knowledge sharing, job feedback, and other feedback, and had the highest turnover intentions when these relational resources were perceived as lacking. This indicates that breached psychological contract perceptions had more of an impact on turnover intentions than fulfillment. Organizations need to be mindful of providing higher WFH preference employees with the relational resources they need to reduce turnover.

We did not find a significant interaction between WFH preference and POS predicting turnover intentions. This indicates that information and feedback are more vital for avoiding breach perceptions than generalized feelings of organizational support. POS did reduce burnout, possibly buffering uncertainty from mandatory WFH work, but the lack of POS was not enough to motivate turnover intentions. Lastly, we found no significant interaction between WFH preference and job feedback in predicting burnout. Feedback from the job does not buffer stress or uncertainty as effectively as relational practices such as manager and co-worker feedback.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

Our results extend our understanding of psychological contract theory in two primary manners. We provide nuance to the manners that psychological contracts can be both fulfilled and breached by studying four different types of organizational resources. Our results show that all four types of organizational resources can indeed fulfill psychological contracts, but their effects are also not identical. Resources intended to satisfy the same contract may function differently depending on employee preferences and expectations. We also supported very different effects for three types of psychological contract effects: benefits of fulfillment, detriments of breach, and relatively neutral effects of not having a contract. Much research on psychological contracts is largely focused on breach (Conway & Briner, 2009; Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019), but our research highlights the need to theorize and investigate all three possibilities.

Our results also extend HR differentiation theory (Marescaux et al., 2013, 2021) as we consistently found that WFH preference is an important individual difference in evaluating HR practices and influencing whether the outcomes of HR differentiation actions may be positive or negative. The alignment between employee preferences and work modality likely leads to higher expectations of organizational relational resources and the consequences of these unmet expectations are damaging. Employees are disengaged when practices do not match preferences (Siegall & McDonald, 2004), and turnover intentions were greater among higher WFH-preference-employees who did not receive expected resources than those with a lower desire to WFH to begin with. HR researchers and practitioners may automatically assume that those mandated to WFH who did not originally desire to do so would experience the worst outcomes. However, our results demonstrate that employee preferences are important for understanding the evaluations employees might ascribe to HR differentiation practices and how these evaluations might consequently affect workplace outcomes.

Our results further extend HR differentiation theory by also showing that, not only do practices need to be tailored to preferences, but these preferences may change with work context turbulence. Previous research has identified various contextual factors that may influence the consequences of HR differentiation (Rofcanin et al., 2019) but has not considered more macro-level factors such as the overall work modality or events such as a global health emergency. Our research demonstrates that these macro-level factors can greatly impact employee preferences and outcomes and should be considered in order to fully understand organizational phenomena.

Recent discussions of HR differentiation theory (e.g., Marescaux et al., 2021; Rofcanin et al., 2019) also detail how it may backfire when employees view unequal practices as unjust or unfair. We add that researchers should first consider whether practices are valued by all employees. Employees with lower WFH preference did not experience

significant attitude changes when the relational practices we studied were applied. These employees may not have valued these practices and therefore disregarded them. Our empirical research supports and extends the notion that employees' evaluations of HR differentiation practices are important for understanding organizational outcomes (Marescaux et al., 2013; Rofcanin et al., 2019).

5.2 | Practical implications

As many companies intend to continue mandatory WFH policies beyond the pandemic (Arneson, 2021; Heater, 2020), it is important for practitioners to understand characteristics of employees and practices that support them. Few companies mandated fully WFH arrangements prior to COVID-19, and our paper contributes to the nascent research on these workers by showing that reducing stress and uncertainty through relational practices of manager knowledge sharing, feedback, and organizational support is vital. The effects of WFH preference and organizational practices remained the same even after controlling for age, gender, tenure, socioeconomic status, and industry, highlighting the importance of employee preferences and organizational practices. If expected resources are not provided and psychological contract breach is perceived, employees may withhold their contributions (Robinson & Morrison, 1995).

When employees are mandated to fully WFH, they do not have the option to change their work modality. This may leave employees with no recourse when perceptions of psychological contract breach occur, creating a persistent turnover problem (Clinton & Guest, 2014). For employees with a higher WFH preference, providing support and sharing information and feedback can address this issue. Those with a lower WFH preference who work fully from home, however, experience a disconnect between their preference and the work context, likely leading to more transactional expectations. Fully remote companies seeking to retain top talent of lower WFH preference individuals should therefore provide more transactional benefits, such as vacation time or compressed workweeks, to reduce burnout and turnover among this population.

Our work can further explain inconsistencies in previous virtual work recommendations. For example, virtual work has been related to both increased and decreased turnover (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Golden et al., 2008; Kaduk et al., 2019). Our study shows that the relationship between WFH preference and practices can help explain attitudes, as it is an interactive effect that determines outcomes—not one or the other. When organizations mandate fully WFH policies, they may attempt to implement interventions to improve WFH preference. However, this approach alone will not result in reduced burnout and turnover intentions. Practitioners should be mindful of developing policies that address employee characteristics and employer actions in tandem.

HR practitioners should also periodically reevaluate employee preferences to ensure that personalized practices remain relevant with changes in employee life cycle, job design, or job context. WFH preference was irrelevant before COVID-19, however, under fully virtual work, this context-related preference and resulting organizational expectations significantly impacted burnout and turnover intentions. WFH research and HR policies should also consider this preference as an emerging form of human capital leading to greater outcomes, given congruent practices.

5.3 | Limitations and future research

We utilized a time-lagged design unlike previous cross-sectional studies in HR (Kooij & Boon, 2018), but it was a single-source design which has rater bias concerns (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We also measured perceptions of organizational practices. Although perceptions are more strongly related to attitudes and behaviors (Den Hartog et al., 2013; Liao et al., 2009), they may differ from actual practices. Future research should replicate our results with more objective measures (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii & Wright, 2008). For instance, researchers should obtain managers' reported practices as well as stated guidelines in organizations' human resource manuals to determine whether these relate to employee-reported outcomes.

Further, our sample included employees from various relevant industries, but consisted solely of U.S. employees. Future researchers should test whether WFH preference and our studied practices demonstrate the same relationship in other cultures. Particularly, the U.S. is considered an individualistic culture, and U.S. citizens may be more open to working from home than those in collectivistic cultures (Hill et al., 2010). Interesting and important theoretical advancements to the study of work could be achieved by studying our model in a collectivistic culture. Also, we were unable to measure individuals' WFH preference prior to COVID-19, so we cannot make conclusions about how these shifts may have influenced WFH preferences. Burnout and turnover intentions may have increased due to the pandemic, and we are unable to partial out this difference in our outcomes. Perhaps archival datasets could be utilized to assess such changes, which could provide inferences into how well results before the COVID-19 pandemic may generalize to the world after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although some organizations have returned to operating fully in-person, the macro-context has permanently shifted the way that employees will work in the future. In 2022, an estimated 39% of organizations are fully remote in the U.S. and 24% are estimated to continue fully remote work permanently, with similar trends in the U.K. (Turtis, 2022; Wigert, 2022). Our paper not only contributes important insights about fully remote workers but also highlights the need to examine work context. For example, researchers and practitioners need to understand which organizational practices are effective in fully in-person, fully remote, hybrid models, or even digital nomad contexts. While our findings regarding WFH preferences and expectations can inform organizational practices with hybrid employees, future research should replicate our results and explore how organizations can best support employees in these various work modalities. In other words, our results should be replicated and contrasted across samples of employees working in differing work modalities.

6 | CONCLUSION

Our paper is one of the first to examine WFH preferences among mandatory, fully WFH employees. Our results support HR differentiation theory and demonstrate that psychological contract perceptions are important for those with a higher WFH preference. These employees are particularly sensitive to a lack of relational practices and experience lower burnout when preferences are matched and higher turnover intentions when they are not. For employers who continue fully remote work, organizational practices must match employee expectations and consider the work context for higher firm performance and retention to be achieved.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTE

[1] We also assessed model fit when removing the lowest loading item of the four pairs with large modification indices, rather than covarying their error terms. Model fit was very similar (CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.05, χ^2/df = 1.81), indicating that satisfactory fit is not driven by error covariances.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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