

Article

Trade Union Members' Experiences and Attitudes towards Working from Home during the Pandemic

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Abstract: The pandemic increased working from home (WFH) across the world. The implications of such practice for both organisations and employees are not sufficiently clear. This study examines the work-related experiences and attitudes of trade union members WFH in Malta during the first two years of the pandemic and compares them to those of workers not WFH. Data was collected through a mixed-method approach comprising focus groups (11 participants), a survey (340 participants) and interviews (15 participants). The pandemic appears to have affected less the careers of participants WFH than those of their peers. Participants were generally satisfied with their preparedness and productivity when WFH and experienced better work-related attitudes than those not WFH. But since the pandemic started, significant minorities of participants WFH felt lower levels of happiness and higher stress levels and experienced a deterioration in their physical and/or mental health. Participants experienced differential access to WFH according to their demographics and managerial attitudes. This study recommends trade unions to promote blended work whenever possible, as this system was not only favoured by participants WFH but also appeared to carry considerable benefits for both workers and organisations.

Keywords: working from home; working conditions; attitudes; trade unions; COVID-19; pandemic; careers; access; health; wellbeing



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in widespread changes in work organisation, the most visible of which was the expansion of working from home (WFH) arrangements, which significantly increased their importance for work organisation [1,2]. It has been argued that the pandemic eroded employers' negative attitudes, which had been blocking the growth of WFH [3]. Indeed, while "before the pandemic, many employers were hesitant to offer their employees the option of working from home . . . [t]he measure encountered a widespread acceptance and it is likely that the demand for work from home as a flexible work arrangement will persist also after the pandemic has ended" [4] (p. 1). This attitude change has been influenced by the performance gains that many companies accrued with the transition to WFH [5]. Governments have also facilitated the transition to WFH in various ways.

WFH resulted in drastic changes in the way work is structured. The implications of these changes for enterprises and for the occupational health and safety of workers are not sufficiently clear. Besides, the benefits of WFH "may not be distributed equally throughout the workforce" [5] (p. 1). Not only do different groups of workers have varying access to WFH, but they also have different experiences when WFH. In view of this, it has rightly been argued that this period of great change provides "an opportunity for renewed discussion about the way we work" [6] (p. 196).

This study focuses on how the work-related experiences of a specific group of workers, namely trade union members WFH in Malta, developed during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their working conditions, attitudes and perspectives are examined

in comparison to those of their peers, not WFH. By focusing on trade union members, this study aims to provide insights into the specific challenges that are unique to this particular group of workers, who tend to be better protected against the vagaries of the labour market and whose experiences during the pandemic have scantily been investigated. The results of this research may be used to inform policy and practice, helping to ensure that trade union members WFH are given appropriate support and protection. This research can assist trade union strategies and tactics in responding to the changing dynamics of the pandemic and its impact on working conditions.

2. The Context of the Study

Since context may affect working conditions and attitudes towards work, this section outlines some important aspects of the effects of the pandemic on the Maltese labour market and trade unionism in Malta.

2.1. *The Effects of the Pandemic on the Maltese Labour Market*

With a population of about half a million inhabitants, Malta, an archipelago in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, is the smallest member state of the European Union. The initial effects of the pandemic on the Maltese labour market were substantial. Many workers experienced a reduction in their working hours while others were temporarily not working, especially during the lockdowns [7,8]. However, employment among men only decreased by 0.6 percentage points in 2020 when compared to 2019, whereas the share of employed women increased by 1.4 percentage points over the same period [8].

The pandemic brought about changes in the organisation of work in most economic sectors. Analysing EU data, Fana et al. concluded that the employment impact of COVID-19 was asymmetric not only between countries (where countries with already high unemployment rates and precarious employment were more strongly affected) but also within the same countries [9]. Indeed, the changes experienced by Maltese businesses since 2020 varied a lot depending on the sector of employment. The most affected sectors involved human contact, such as hospitality and travel. Aviation continued experiencing great difficulties two years into the pandemic. Total inbound tourists in 2020 decreased by three-fourths when compared to 2019 [8]. In January 2022, inbound tourism only amounted to 40% of the same month in 2020 [10,11].

Government assistance such as the COVID-19 Wage Supplement scheme (which provided workers with a basic wage cover to address the disruption caused by the pandemic) helped to keep tens of thousands of workers in employment [12]. Sectors offering essential services continued operating, albeit with greater difficulties. Operators in various economic sectors who were able to operate online fared relatively well. Businesses that already had the necessary digital infrastructure, such as iGaming, IT Services and banking and finance, found it easier to cope with the disruption. During the last half of March 2020, over a third of workers in Malta were WFH [7]. The more successful companies were those that managed to adapt quickly and comprehensively. Adaptation often involved the reorganisation of work, impacting the working conditions of employees.

By the first quarter of 2022, the Maltese labour market appeared to have weathered the storm. Indeed, at 76.1% and 3.2%, respectively, both the employment and unemployment rates were better than during the same period in 2020, when the employment rate stood at 74.6% and the unemployment rate was 3.3% [13,14]. However, such positive trends do not shed light on the repercussions of the pandemic on workers' experiences and perspectives.

2.2. *Trade Unionism in Malta*

The trade union movement in Malta is in a relatively healthy state. Around 45% of workers are members of trade unions [15]. Nearly all unionised workers are members of unions that form part of one of the three main union blocks in the country, namely the General Workers Union, the Confederation of Malta Trade Unions, or the Forum Unjins Maltin. Collective bargaining coverage is estimated to be about 50% [15]. Unions tend to

be stronger in the public sector and in traditional private sectors such as manufacturing. In line with the megatrend across the European Union, trade union membership rates and collective bargaining coverage are decreasing in Malta, and unions struggle to recruit young members and workers in emerging sectors such as IT, iGaming, and courier services. However, unions still maintain considerable social prestige. Apart from their contributions at an organisational level through collective bargaining and individual assistance, trade unions, especially the larger ones, give substantial contributions to policy-making at a national level.

3. Working from Home (WFH)

Concepts such as WFH, teleworking, and remote working are often used interchangeably [5,6,16–18]. While largely overlapping, slight differences do exist among these concepts. The International Labour Organization defines WFH as “a working arrangement in which a worker fulfils the essential responsibilities of his/her job while remaining at home, using information and communications technology (ICT)” [19] (p. 5). WFH may be viewed as a type of teleworking, which may involve different locations away from the main work site, including WFH [6]. Unlike teleworking, remote working does not necessitate the use of ICT and does not require visits to the workplace [6]. The focus of this study is on WFH, as it reflects more precisely the phenomenon that became widespread during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this study refers to research that uses other terms to refer to the same phenomenon.

The pandemic boosted WFH across the world. According to the OECD, while all countries with comparable data registered increases in the rates of teleworking during the pandemic, the extent of such increases varied considerably from country to country [20]. For instance, while in Australia, France and the United Kingdom, some 47% of employees teleworked during lockdowns in 2020, the figure decreased to 28% in Japan during the first months of the pandemic, where there was no national lockdown [20]. Malta’s utilisation of teleworking is generally low in comparison to the EU, but it grew and reached 33% during the lockdown in the first half of 2020 [21].

During the pandemic, especially throughout the lockdowns, people WFH tended to be viewed as advantaged over other workers [22]. Workers who were unable to work from home were more prone to experience precariousness. For example, workers not WFH in Italy were more likely to earn a low income, become unemployed, or suffer from occupational health and safety problems [23]. Similarly, findings from large UK surveys indicate that workers, not WFH, during the pandemic were “more concerned about their future financial situation” [24] (p. 1635).

Different groups of workers have more or less access to WFH. According to the OECD, teleworking is more likely in highly digitalised industries (such as ICT, professional, scientific and technical services, and financial services), in large firms, among the more highly qualified workers, and among women [20]. But other research indicates that women are less likely to be WFH [4,23]. Indeed, Minkus et al. found that “[f]amily configurations and care obligations are less influential upon the transition to homeworking” than characteristics such as gender composition of occupations, level of education and level of prestige of occupations “even in times of an unprecedented situation of school and daycare closures and increased parental responsibilities for children’s (early) education” [4] (p. 1). Access to WFH might also be particularly limited to young persons, persons in temporary contracts, persons with lower levels of education and in low-prestige occupations, employees with disabilities, and those working in rural areas [3,4,23,25]. Some of the conflicting findings in relation to access to WFH may be due to developments in practices and attitudes over the span of the pandemic. For instance, Abendroth et al. contend “that cultural barriers in organisations to working from home—which were especially prevalent for mothers before the pandemic—have decreased” [26] (p. 1991).

Research on WFH during the pandemic often centred around two themes, namely performance and wellbeing, yielding complex results, e.g., [18,27–31], which will be reviewed in turn.

3.1. Performance

There is no agreement on the extent or direction of the effect of WFH on performance. However, many studies highlight productivity losses when WFH. Examining the subjective productivity of workers in the manufacturing sector in Japan, Kitagawa et al. found that WFH resulted in a reduction in productivity, especially due to poor setups and communication difficulties [32]. Another Japanese study found that WFH resulted in only 60%–70% of productivity levels [27]. The situation was worse among employees and firms that started WFH during the pandemic.

In their investigation of job performance, Qu and Yan distinguished between the quality and productivity of Chinese persons WFH and not WFH [6]. WFH reduced the participants' productivity but enhanced their quality of work. In relation to the quality of work, Jaiswal and Arun found self-initiated "sparks of creativity" towards solving organisational problems among persons WFH within the manufacturing sector in India [28]. Other studies also indicated improvements in the quality of work, including greater focus, less time wasting and more proactivity [16,33].

Various studies noted a reduction in the number of hours worked by those who shifted to WFH during the pandemic. During the first lockdown, workers WFH in the Netherlands spent around 14% less time on paid work, resulting in a productivity decrease of 5.5% [29]. Similarly, an Australian study suggested a "rethinking and reprioritising of values" among most of the respondents who reduced working hours and adopted a more family-centric and self-centric lifestyle [34] (p. 11). In a qualitative study among dual-earning parents in the UK, while "both women and men increased their time on domestic labor . . . women were more likely to reduce their employment hours to 'better' balance caring and housework responsibilities" [35] (p. 1065). However, some other studies associated WFH with increased working time [36].

Leadership is a crucial element for the success of WFH. The pandemic posed considerable difficulties to managers who were required to adapt their leadership style according to the arising needs and dynamics of WFH. Indeed, a study among German public employees concluded that "supervisors have been more challenged by the crisis than their employees" [37] (p. 17). A study carried out in the Netherlands during the pandemic found that while the effectiveness of WFH was hampered when leaders were unable to adapt their leadership behaviours, greater delegation among employees was "associated with increased perceived productivity and higher manager quality" [38] (p. 208).

The reduction of social contact brought about by WFH created considerable communication and coordination challenges within organisations. In a study carried out during the second wave of the pandemic in Slovenia, Kohont and Ignjatović concluded that "[p]hysical distance represented a major change in workplace relationships and affected collaborative forms of work, monitoring of work, lack of certain information, response time in communication, coordination of work with colleagues, and problem solving in organisational processes" [1] (p. 10). Research in other countries resulted in similar findings [33,39]. Maurer et al. concluded "that flat hierarchies and self-managing processes helped team members to mitigate negative effects due to spatial and temporal dispersion in forced working-from-home arrangements" [2] (p. 238). Particular group properties and dynamics, such as "team cohesion, identification with the team, and individuals taking on broker roles" counteracted communication faultlines and assisted team performance [2] (p. 238). On the other hand, professional isolation was related to lower job performance and motivation and higher intention to quit one's job [40]. However, despite the challenges brought about by WFH, a study among software engineers in Sweden, the USA, and the UK, pointed out the improved quality of online meetings and events [41].

WFH requires the divergent competencies of connecting with one's workplace and working autonomously. According to Fischer et al., "the more autonomously employees are able to work, the better they perform while teleworking and the better they are able to cope with a crisis situation" [37] (p. 17). In particular, digital competencies boost the resilience of persons forced to work from home [37]. The transition to WFH may have led to the acquisition or strengthening of particular skills. 42% of respondents in a Slovenian study reported that they had to learn new knowledge and competencies in the use of software [1]. Another study among Finnish higher education employees during compulsory WFH reported that "[p]oor ergonomics at home, low organisational support, high stress, and musculoskeletal pain were associated with non-favourable development of work ability" [42] (p. 1).

Research highlighted the links between productivity and the home environment [5,29,43]. Basing themselves on a study among 304 workers WFH during the pandemic in the United States, Loignon et al. argued that individuals whose home offices indicated higher levels of socioeconomic status reported more control over their environment and higher job performance than other workers [5]. Having a separate office at home is particularly useful [29,44]. Research also pointed out various technical difficulties experienced when WFH, such as poor internet connection, problems accessing data, inadequate workspace and IT equipment, and insufficient IT support [1]. A study among nurses in New Zealand revealed: "significant access issues related to nurses using ICT in their practice: access to information technology systems and resources, access to technical support, access to connectivity . . . and access to patients and colleagues" [45] (p. 62).

Proactivity is another important contributor to productivity when WFH [37], and "perceived productivity at home appears strongly associated with the desire to work at home" [20] (par. 8). At the same time, interviews with managers in Brazil who led teams WFH indicated difficulties "to motivate collaborators in a period when social isolation affect[ed] employee's mental health" [39] (p. 1). Another study showed that employees adjusted better to WFH when this arrangement was planned and they were psychologically prepared for it [46]. Chi et al. found a positive relation between WFH and the level of vigour among management-level hotel employees in Turkey and argued that their motivation might have been improved by the autonomy they acquired during the pandemic [47]. Similarly, a study carried out in Norway found that working partly from home was related to greater control of decisions and organisational commitment [30] (p. 106).

Some research linked WFH productivity to specific employee characteristics. For example, Kawakubo and Arata found that "productivity decreased for workers with high neuroticism and increased for those with high openness or perseverance and passion" [43] (p. 1). Other personal characteristics that might lead to higher productivity when WFH include being highly educated, having a high income, not having young children, being a woman, being older, and being mentally and physically healthy [27,29,44].

3.2. Wellbeing

Research is unclear on the overall effects of WFH on working conditions and wellbeing, with findings pointing towards both benefits and challenges [16,18,30,31,48]. Employee performance and wellbeing are often affected by similar factors.

There is emerging literature on the concept of 'boundary traffic', which deals with the dynamics created by the blurring between work and personal life when WFH [49]. A study among employees WFH during the pandemic in Lithuania found that those "who felt the pressure to overwork were more likely to have a more permeable family boundary . . . and appeared to experience a much higher psychological cost in terms of emotional exhaustion" [50] (p. 705). Haun et al. found that by using temporal boundary tactics, that is putting time aside and planning for leisure time periods, workers achieved greater levels of psychological detachment from work, control during leisure time, and reduced chances of exhaustion [51]. On the other hand, Cropley et al. found that "failing

to take rest breaks throughout the day was associated with an increased risk of reporting psychological fatigue, physical fatigue, and sleep problems" [52] (p. 1).

Examining longitudinal data in France, Italy, Germany, Spain and Sweden covering the period between May and November 2020, Schifano et al. concluded that wellbeing among workers WFH is especially low among "the older, the better-educated, those with young children and those with more crowded housing" [53] (p. 1). Other research emphasised the worse outcomes experienced by women and younger employees, who tended to cancel the boundary between work and private life when WFH [54].

Over 70% of respondents in a study among Australians WFH experienced musculoskeletal pain or discomfort [55]. An analysis of 14 studies concluded that furniture, the work environment and physical activity were major factors associated with musculoskeletal disorders [56]. Age, gender, working hours and psychosocial working conditions may also predict musculoskeletal pain [55]. Several studies indicated that persons WFH during the pandemic, especially those who did so exclusively, tended to be more sedentary and less physically active [36,48,57]. However, persons WFH in the Netherlands during the pandemic reported good health and fewer musculoskeletal disorders than before [48]. Besides, Grubben et al. found WFH to be positively associated with sports participation [58]. On their part, Hallman et al. revealed that workers in Sweden slept more when they worked from home, potentially leading to health benefits [59].

The effects of WFH on mental health are disputed. Chi et al. found that when managers work from home, the relation between job absorption (or the effort they put into their work) and burnout is stronger [47]. Similarly, Pennington et al. reported positive links between the use of work-related video chat and text messaging when WFH and stress levels [60]. Higher anxiety and stress levels when WFH during the pandemic were linked to the following aspects: neuroticism; a history of burnout; pandemic-related fear; having dependants; work–family conflicts; social isolation; environmental noise; inadequacy of facilities; concerns about future careers; lower leadership quality; lack of clarity on work objectives; and job intensity [61–65]. Research also indicated higher levels of distress among younger workers and women who were WFH [63,66].

Despite the above, not all research linked WFH to poor health outcomes. A survey among workers in the USA revealed that those who started WFH during the pandemic had similar mental health outcomes to those whose employment remained the same [67]. Similarly, a Danish study indicated no increase in work-related stress among persons WFH during the pandemic [48]. Kitagawa et al. concluded that the mental health of participants WFH in the manufacturing sector in Japan was better than that of participants not WFH [32]. In another study carried out in Japan, Eguchi et al. concluded that "the association between job demand and psychological distress may be weakened by working from home" [54] (p. 1). Other studies linked hybrid work to better mental health outcomes than exclusive WFH [23,68]. The working conditions experienced by persons WFH may also have evolved during the pandemic. In a Canadian study based on two surveys carried out six months apart during the pandemic, Somasundram et al. reported a decrease in "burnout, stress, general mental health, and job insecurity levels" a reduction in sedentary behaviour, and more assistance from and cohesion with colleagues [69] (p. 1).

Some studies concluded that hybrid work arrangements were preferred by workers during the pandemic [68]. According to Giovanis and Ozdamar, "a balance between WFH and at the employer's premises may provide both financial security and maintain the mental and psychological wellbeing at satisfying levels" [24] (p. 1635). Another study carried out in New Zealand found that "respondents generally had a positive experience while WFH, with 82.6% of respondents that experienced WFH wanting to shift to part- or full-time WFH" [70] (p. 1). On the other hand, a study carried out in Germany reported "that the quality of the working atmosphere with colleagues and the supervisor is a motive for rejecting WFH, more so for people living alone than for couples and families" [71] (p. 469).

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Study Objectives and Design

This study sought to investigate the working conditions and experiences of trade union members WFH in comparison to union members not WFH. More specifically, the following four research questions, developed on the basis of the review of literature, guided this study:

1. Did the pandemic affect the careers of trade union members WFH?
2. Do trade union members WFH have better work-related attitudes than their peers not WFH?
3. What challenges are faced by trade union members WFH?
4. Is access to WFH among trade union members in Malta in line with international trends?

A mixed-method approach was used, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis using focus groups, a survey and interviews. This approach enabled an analysis of the prevalence of the working conditions, attitudes, perceptions and other aspects of interest in this study, while also delving deeper into particular themes.

4.2. Data Collection Procedure, Participants and Instruments

Data was collected between April and September 2022. The three data collection methods were carried out sequentially. Two preliminary focus groups were first carried out in order to explore the effects of the pandemic on union members WFH and not WFH. The focus groups were meant to generate themes to help develop the survey, and also to assist in the explanation of the survey's findings. The focus group discussions centred around the following topics that were inspired by existing literature: 1. The pandemic's effects on jobs (including: changes in employment status and other aspects of work; attitudes and perceptions; long-term effects on careers; concern for pandemic-related health and safety at work); 2. Pandemic-related support at work (including: pandemic planning and protocols; support from management and colleagues; difficulties relating to new ways of working). As can be seen from Table 1, a total of 11 persons including four persons WFH participated in the focus groups.

Table 1. Demographics of focus group participants.

Participant	Gender	Age	WFH	Role	Sector of Employment
F1F	Woman	30+	Yes	Educator	Union
F2M	Man	30+	No	Officer	Armed Forces
F3F	Woman	30+	No	Financial Advisor	Banking and Finance
F4M	Man	30+	Yes	Administrative Officer	Government Authority
F5M	Man	30+	Yes	Building Inspector	Government Authority
F6M	Man	30+	No	Middle Manager	Public Entity
F7M	Man	30+	No	Health Carer	Health Care
F8M	Man	30+	No	Health Carer	Health Care
F9M	Man	30+	No	Middle Manager	Public Entity
F10M	Man	30+	No	Inspector	Public Entity
F11M	Man	30+	Yes	Union official	Union

Note: WFH = working from home; 30+ = 30 years or older.

An online survey was developed on the basis of the review of literature and the results of the focus groups as a second step of the data gathering process. The survey aimed to capture the experiences of a wide selection of union members WFH and not WFH in order to shed light on trends across the sample. The survey focused on the relationship between the pandemic and the nature of work, career prospects, work relations, attitudes towards work, and personal life. The survey also enquired about the participants' attitudes towards the pandemic and WFH. As can be seen from Table 2, 340 individuals participated in the survey, including 131 WFH and 209 not WFH.

Table 2. Survey participants.

		WFH		Not WFH		Total	
		Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Gender	Men	58	44.3	130	62.2	188	55.3
	Women	73	55.7	79	37.8	152	44.7
Age	<30 years	20	15.4	32	15.3	52	15.3
	30+ years	110	84.6	177	84.7	287	84.7
Education	Tertiary	67	51.1	46	22.0	113	33.2
	Lower	64	48.9	163	78.0	227	66.8
Employment sector	Public	85	64.9	119	56.9	204	60.0
	Private	46	35.1	90	43.1	136	40.0
Total		131	100	209	100	340	100

Note: WFH = working from home; <30 years = younger than 30 years; 30+ years = 30 years or older.

As a third step in the data gathering process, 15 in-depth interviews were carried out with workers on salient aspects arising from the survey responses. The interviews were semi-structured and covered similar topics to those of the focus groups. The aim of the interviews was to shed light on potential reasons behind particular trends noticed in the survey. An effort was made to capture the experiences and perspectives of different groups of workers, and so the interviewees included persons WFH and not WFH, women and men, young and old persons, persons with and without disability, and workers in typical and atypical jobs. Atypical workers were defined as those who worked part-time and/or in definite contracts. Table 3 below provides some demographic details of the interviewees.

Table 3. Demographics of interviewees.

Participant	Gender	Age	WFH	Role	Sector of Employment
I1F	Woman	30+	Yes	Educator	Education
I2F	Woman	30+	No	Manual worker	Manufacturing
I3F	Woman	<30	Yes	Union official (main job)	Union (PT: services)
I4M	Man	30+	Yes	Educator	Education
I5M	Man	<30	Yes	Office worker (then Office Manager)	Advisory services
I6F	Woman	<30	Yes	Secretary / PA (then Bank worker)	Public sector (then Banking)
I7M	Man	<30	No	Postal worker (then public officer)	Postal sector (then Public sector)
I8M	Man	<30	Yes	Team leader	Gaming
I9F	Woman	<30	No	Public officer	Public sector
I10M	Man	30+	Yes	IT professional (& services)	IT (then services) (PT: services)
I11F	Woman	30+	Yes	Social work professional	Public sector
I12F	Woman	30+	Yes	Leader	Professional services
I13F	Woman	30+	Yes	Educator	Education
I14F	Woman	<30	Yes	Clerical (Customer Service)	Education (then Entertainment)
I15F	Woman	30+	Yes	Senior officer	Public sector

Note: WFH = working from home; <30 = younger than 30 years; 30+ = 30 years or older; PA = personal assistant; PT = part-time.

The researchers adhered to ethical norms and did not expose participants to any harm throughout the whole research process. Focus group participants and interviewees were explained the nature of the study and were guaranteed confidentiality in their responses. They were told that their session would be recorded and that such recording would be deleted when the study was completed. The participants signed consent forms and were given time to ask questions if required. The survey included an accompanying note which informed participants about the purpose of the study. Participants were guaranteed strict anonymity. Besides, the note included the contact of one of the researchers in case anyone wished to receive further information about the study.

5. Results

5.1. Results from the Quantitative Data Collection

This section contains the descriptive and inferential analysis of the main survey findings divided into three subsections, namely: WFH during the pandemic; careers and working conditions; and work attitudes, perceptions and wellbeing.

5.1.1. WFH during the Pandemic

Two years into the pandemic, only a minority (38.5%) of the participants worked from home at least partly, while the majority (61.5%) did not (see Table 4). Chi Square analysis reveals that women were significantly more likely to have worked from home when compared to men: $X^2(1, N = 340) = 10.468, p = 0.001$. The likelihood of mothers having worked from home was slightly higher than that of other women. Tertiary-educated workers were significantly more likely to have worked from home than workers with lower qualifications: $X^2(1, N = 340) = 30.806, p = 0.000$. On the other hand, atypical workers were less likely to have worked from home than typical workers: $X^2(1, N = 310) = 6.177, p = 0.013$. Age and sector of employment were not significantly related to WFH during the pandemic.

Table 4. Extent of working from home (WFH) since the pandemic started.

		WFH %	Not WFH %	Chi-Square	df	p
Total		38.5	61.5			
Gender	Men	30.9	69.1	10.468	1	0.001
	Women (Mothers)	48.0 (49.5)	52.0 (50.5)			
Age	<30 years	38.5	61.5	0.000	1	0.985
	30+ years	38.3	61.7			
Education	Tertiary	59.3	40.7	30.806	1	0.000
	Lower	28.2	71.8			
Contract	Typical	41.2	58.8	6.177	1	0.013
	Atypical	25.0	75.0			
Sector	Public	41.7	58.3	2.119	1	0.145
	Private	33.8	66.2			

Note: WFH = working from home; df = degrees of freedom; p = significance value; <30 years = younger than 30 years; 30+ years = 30 years or older; Atypical = workers who work part-time and/or in definite contracts.

As can be seen from Table 5, out of those who worked from home, 93.8% reported having the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively, 78.5% had the necessary resources, 82.3% had the right environment, 79.8% received assistance from work when required, 76% felt trusted by their management, and 74% felt more productive when they worked from home.

Table 5. Conditions and outcomes of participants WFH.

	Disagree (%)	Unsure (%)	Agree (%)
I have the necessary resources to work effectively	14.6	6.9	78.5
I have the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively	1.6	4.7	93.8
I have the right environment to work effectively	8.5	9.2	82.3
Assistance from work is available when required	5.4	14.7	79.8
I feel trusted by my management	11.6	12.4	76.0
I am more productive	7.1	18.9	74.0

61.8% of workers who worked from home expressed their preference for a mixture of WFH and from the workplace (see Table 6). A minority preferred WFH (19.8%) or working from their workplace (16.8%) only.

Table 6. WFH vs workplace.

	Total
Working from home (%)	19.8
Working from my workplace (%)	16.8
A mixture of both (%)	61.8
No preference/ Not applicable (%)	1.5
Total (Count)	131

5.1.2. Careers and Working Conditions

Table 7 shows that two years into the pandemic, the large majority of persons WFH had similar working hours, workload, salary and job security to before the pandemic started (81.7%, 58.9%, 89.2%, and 93.8%, respectively). A Mann-Whitney test revealed that persons WFH were significantly less likely to experience changes in their job security when compared to other workers ($U = 11281.0$, $N1 = 128$, $N2 = 197$, $p = 0.014$, two-tailed). On the other hand, persons WFH did not differ significantly on changes in working hours, workload and salary from those who did not work from home.

Table 7. Aspects of work in comparison to pre-pandemic.

		WFH (%)	Not WFR (%)	Mann-Whitney U	N1	N2	<i>p</i>
My working hours	Decreased	3.8	6.4	12,853.0	131	202	0.523
	Remained the same	81.7	79.7				
	Increased	14.5	13.9				
My workload	Decreased	7.0	8.6	11,836.5	129	197	0.240
	Remained the same	58.9	48.7				
	Increased	34.1	42.6				
My salary	Decreased	2.3	12.0	12,042.0	130	200	0.088
	Remained the same	89.2	78.0				
	Increased	8.5	10.0				
My job security	Decreased	4.7	18.8	11,281.0	128	197	0.014
	Remained the same	93.8	76.1				
	Increased	1.6	5.1				
My work schedule (the time when I work)	Changed a lot	12.2	15.8	12,288.5	131	202	0.186
	Changed a little	26.7	13.4				
	Remained the same	61.1	70.8				
The tasks that I do at work	Changed a lot	14.5	24.5	11,932.5	131	200	0.128
	Changed a little	27.5	23.0				
	Remained the same	58.0	52.5				

Note: WFH = working from home; N1 = number of persons WFH; N2 = number of persons not WFH; *p* = significance value.

The work schedule of persons WFH tended to remain the same (61.1%). Similarly, their work tasks tended not to change (58%). Most of those who experienced changes in their work schedule or tasks stated that these only changed a little. There were no significant differences between participants WFH and not WFH on these two variables.

Nearly half of the persons WFH stated that the pandemic did not have long-term effects on their career (48.9%) (see Table 8). A Chi Square test revealed that participants WFH were significantly less likely than those not WFH to believe that the pandemic left long-term effects on their career: $X^2(3, N = 337) = 12.536$, $p = 0.006$.

5.1.3. Work Attitudes, Perceptions and Wellbeing

Table 9 shows that while 37.4% of the participants WFH did not experience higher stress levels at work than before the pandemic started, 35.9% expressed the opposite perspective. 81.7% did not think about leaving their job due to the pandemic, and 57.3%

were generally satisfied with their working conditions. The work satisfaction and work enthusiasm of most persons WFH stayed the same since the pandemic started (71.3% and 63.6%, respectively).

Table 8. Long-term effects of the pandemic on career.

	WFH	Not WFH	Chi-Square	df	<i>p</i>
No (%)	48.9	38.8			
Yes, it had positive effects (%)	13.7	9.7			
Yes, it had negative effects (%)	11.5	27.2	12.536	3	0.006
Unsure/ Don't know (%)	26.0	24.3			
Total (Count)	131	206			

Note: WFH = working from home; df = degrees of freedom; *p* = significance value.

Mann-Whitney tests revealed that participants WFH were less likely to experience higher stress levels in comparison to pre-pandemic than those not WFH ($U = 10,569.5$, $N_1 = 131$, $N_2 = 207$, $p = 0.000$, two-tailed). They also thought less about leaving their job ($U = 11,572.0$, $N_1 = 131$, $N_2 = 206$, $p = 0.004$, two-tailed), were more satisfied with their working conditions ($U = 9851.5$, $N_1 = 131$, $N_2 = 203$, $p = 0.000$, two-tailed), and had relatively higher levels of work satisfaction since the pandemic started ($U = 11,712.5$, $N_1 = 129$, $N_2 = 205$, $p = 0.033$, two-tailed).

When compared to other workers not WFH, participants WFH were significantly less likely to feel at great risk of getting COVID-19 ($U = 8297.0$, $N_1 = 123$, $N_2 = 198$, $p = 0.000$, two-tailed), and less likely to have little control over whether they get infected ($U = 9806.0$, $N_1 = 118$, $N_2 = 198$, $p = 0.008$, two-tailed). The large majority of participants WFH and not WFH feared getting COVID-19 and transmitting it to their loved ones.

Mann-Whitney tests revealed that participants WFH were significantly more likely than those not WFH to feel supported by their colleagues ($U = 9272.5$, $N_1 = 119$, $N_2 = 173$, $p = 0.044$, two-tailed) and their manager ($U = 8961.0$, $N_1 = 120$, $N_2 = 180$, $p = 0.003$, two-tailed) since the pandemic started. They were also significantly more likely to feel that they were treated fairly at work ($U = 9654.0$, $N_1 = 123$, $N_2 = 189$, $p = 0.003$, two-tailed).

When compared to pre-pandemic, most participants WFH did not experience changes in their mental health (55.4%), level of happiness (60.3%) or physical health (55.4%). There was no significant difference between participants WFH and not WFH on any of these variables.

5.2. Results from the Qualitative Data Collection

This section presents the salient results from the focus groups and interviews according to three themes, namely: working conditions, work-related attitudes and wellbeing, and access to WFH.

5.2.1. Working Conditions

Participants who started WFH during the pandemic described the adaptation challenges they faced. Interviewees such as I15F noted the “learning curve” required by those who were not used to WFH. I13F, an educator stated that: “one day I’m working on a whiteboard and the next day I needed to prepare a lesson on PowerPoint . . . Your skills may be somewhat rusty and you need to go back to them. It takes time”. F11M highlighted the difficulties of having more than one person WFH at the same time in the same room, particularly in relation to maintaining confidentiality during calls. Another type of environmental challenge mentioned by participants WFH originated from the relentless thumping of the construction industry, which kept going on even during the peak of the pandemic. Some participants also described persisting workload challenges created at the peak of the pandemic. For example, F3F, who worked in the banking and finance sector, stated that: “we used to have less staff during the peak of the pandemic. The amount of work was too much for the amount of workers. This created an enormous backlog”.

Table 9. Work attitudes, perceptions and wellbeing.

		WFH (%)	Not WFR (%)	Mann-Whitney U	N1	N2	<i>p</i>
Higher stress levels in comparison to pre-pandemic	Disagree	37.4	22.7	10,569.5	131	207	0.000
	Unsure	26.7	21.3				
	Agree	35.9	56.0				
Thinking about leaving job due to the pandemic	Disagree	81.7	68.4	11,572.0	131	206	0.004
	Unsure	17.6	24.8				
	Agree	0.8	6.8				
Overall satisfied with the working conditions	Disagree	9.9	24.6	9851.5	131	203	0.000
	Unsure	32.8	39.9				
	Agree	57.3	35.5				
Since the pandemic started, work satisfaction	Decreased	16.3	25.9	11,712.5	129	205	0.033
	Stayed the same	71.3	65.4				
	Increased	12.4	8.8				
Since the pandemic started, work enthusiasm	Decreased	23.3	29.6	11,746.0	129	203	0.063
	Stayed the same	63.6	63.5				
	Increased	13.2	6.9				
I am at great risk of getting COVID-19	Disagree	35.0	19.2	8297.0	123	198	0.000
	Unsure	33.3	16.7				
	Agree	31.7	64.1				
I have little control over whether I get infected	Disagree	29.7	18.7	9806.0	118	198	0.008
	Unsure	23.7	20.2				
	Agree	46.6	61.1				
I fear getting COVID-19 and transmitting it to my loved ones	Disagree	9.6	13.0	12,036.5	125	200	0.402
	Unsure	6.4	6.5				
	Agree	84.0	80.5				
Since the pandemic started, my colleagues supported me	Disagree	8.4	11.6	9272.5	119	173	0.044
	Unsure	6.7	13.9				
	Agree	84.9	74.6				
Since the pandemic started, my manager supported me	Disagree	11.7	19.4	8961.0	120	180	0.003
	Unsure	11.7	21.1				
	Agree	76.7	59.4				
Since the pandemic started, I was treated fairly at work	Disagree	11.4	22.8	9654.0	123	189	0.003
	Unsure	14.6	19.0				
	Agree	74.0	58.2				
Mental health in comparison to pre-pandemic	Is better	4.6	4.4	13,075.0	130	206	0.676
	The same/ Unsure	55.4	58.3				
	Got worse	40.0	37.4				
Level of happiness in comparison to pre-pandemic	Is better	6.1	4.9	12,202.0	131	205	0.107
	The same/ Unsure	60.3	52.7				
	Got worse	33.6	42.4				
Physical health in comparison to pre-pandemic	Is better	7.7	6.3	13,249.0	130	207	0.786
	The same/ Unsure	55.4	59.4				
	Got worse	36.9	34.3				

Note: WFH = working from home; N1 = number of persons WFH; N2 = number of persons not WFH; *p* = significance value.

Participants also described various communication challenges when WFH. I8M, who worked in gaming during the peak of the pandemic stated that by WFH: “the workload increased . . . time ceased to exist. So usually, when 17.00hrs would arrive, you close your laptop and head home. This changed. You kept going on. Colleagues keep sending you messages, things crop up, then it’s 19.00hrs, 20.00hrs, and you keep going on”. Several

participants mentioned the increased load of organisational communication they had to deal with. I15F remarked that when a team collaboration app was introduced at work, it became more difficult for her to plan her day as the app: “opened up a whole wave of communication which you had to manage to find time to do other things”. Sometimes, important communication got lost amid less relevant information. For example, F2M complained about receiving his roster among a flood of irrelevant messages on an instant messaging app. The increased quantity of communication appears to have been accompanied by a lowered quality. F11M, a union official, stated that: “discussing certain problems with colleagues, being [face-to-face] is one thing, [while] picking up the phone is totally different. The computer helps. But still, that physical thing that is there . . . the expression, the body language”. In the same vein, I15F, a senior officer in the public sector, mentioned that WFH led to a loss of procedural information flow that occurred naturally when everyone worked in the office. Several young participants spoke about increased difficulties in interacting with work colleagues when WFH. I6F disclosed that while she would not think twice about asking for assistance in face-to-face situations, she found it harder to initiate and sustain communication online. Similarly, I8M, a young participant, mentioned that having to conduct online meetings with his 14-member team was the most difficult aspect of WFH. I15F, a senior officer, also mentioned the challenges of maintaining effective communication with and monitoring of junior staff who “are still trying to run themselves in the process, to determine how the system works”.

Despite the challenges, participants often felt more productive when WFH. For I12F, “being at home in peace and quiet, rather than in an open plan office means I can concentrate, I can close the door, I don’t have any distractions”. Not being physically present at the office gave her more control on the amount and type of contact that other workers have with her: “If I don’t have time for you, either I won’t pick up or else I will hang up”. Participants WFH stated that lack of commuting also contributed to productivity. I1F, an educator WFH with mobility issues stated that when he works from the office: “in addition to factoring in the time for the journey, I also need to factor in the time required for parking. I cannot just park anywhere due to my condition, and these practicalities . . . translate into more time used and added stress”.

5.2.2. Work-Related Attitudes and Wellbeing

Participants, especially those not WFH, were united by anxiety and fear during the initial stages of the pandemic. For example, F6M, a middle manager not WFH confessed: “our fear was always that if someone gets sick, we need to replace that team member, someone needs to work more, one 12-hour shift after another. You might even have to sleep at work”. Gradually, participants grew tired and experienced an increased drive to return to normality.

Participants reported mixed attitudes towards working from home. For several, it was a blessing. In the words of I12F: “for me it was a positive experience. I used to spend my life at work, and to be honest it was a relief to work from home. It changed my life essentially”. I5M stated that WFH relieved him from the burden of having constant supervisory pressure that verged on “mental exhaustion”. On the other hand, I11F, stated that while WFH “was convenient due to the flexibility [offered] since we had children at home during that period”, and due to health reasons, she was under greater pressure than usual, as “management expects you’re available 24 hours”. Indeed, mothers were particularly vocal about the stress they experienced in balancing their work duties with their caring responsibilities. As described by I15F: “you either get tired because you need to find a quiet time which is when he’s asleep . . . at night, when you should be asleep too, or else the other way round, you keep on trying to focus while he’s disturbing you and that’s an added stress”.

Apathy and loneliness were among the other mentioned negative effects of the pandemic on participants’ general wellbeing. In the words of F11M, a union official, “if you go out, you change your routine, when you get dressed and go out . . . I used to get out

of bed and went straight to the desk in my pajamas". F11M vividly remembered being in quarantine: "I got crazy at home . . . [due to] the tension I had because I was inside". Several young persons and persons with disabilities mentioned how they coped with loneliness when WFH. I8M, a young team leader, noted how virtual meet-ups with colleagues helped him feel less lonely: "Even just sharing a joke, seeing a smile on people's faces, it helped a lot". In the words of I4M, an educator with a disability: "we were a tightly knit team, so I missed the contact with colleagues at the place of work. This was the biggest disadvantage". To counteract this, I4M used to call his colleagues during the evening for a chat. However, I12F, a leader working in the professional services sector stated that: "there are certain people who draw strength from being with people etc. so it affects them negatively if they aren't around others. On the other hand, I don't draw particular strength from being with people. I am very comfortable in my own skin being alone".

5.2.3. Access to WFH

Participants disclosed their different levels of access to WFH and how they felt about it. For mothers of young children, WFH was essential during the pandemic. For example, I11F, a mother working as a social work professional, vividly explained this situation: "We wanted to be home. We had no other choice. The kids were at home. I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't take them to my mum due to COVID". Participants' access to the necessary resources, made it more or less difficult to work from home. For instance, I14F, a woman employed as a part-time clerical worker stated that when the pandemic started and she shifted to WFH: "I needed to work using my own supplies . . . This was basically due to lack of resources".

Participants described how their access to WFH depended on their management's attitudes, and how the latter's negative attitudes harmed their work satisfaction. F5M, who worked in a government authority, asserted that: "they only gave us permission [to work from home] as they were forced . . . You feel like: 'but I'm performing my work and you still don't . . . trust me?'" . Similarly, F4M said, "when you go back to work [management] expects more than you did from home . . . They act as if you were on holiday: 'now let's keep going'. They don't realise that you are making every effort to convince them that you are doing your job". Interviewee I4M, a teacher with a disability, mentioned the pressures and subtle threats that he received from management to revert from online to in-person teaching as soon as the school he worked in reopened after lockdown. The interviewee felt that going back to teaching in classrooms with the pandemic still raging would risk his health. On the other hand, F3F, a woman employed as a financial advisor in banking and finance, was not permitted to work from home and complained that such option was only provided to a select few: "Those who have children work from home, and the other because he is vulnerable . . . And then we have to carry the work pressure of the front liners. I was discriminated".

Participants suggested different reasons for management's negative attitudes towards WFH. Some stated that this derived from lack of knowledge and skills in managing persons WFH. Supporting this view, F5M stated that younger managers who were more IT oriented, were more permissive towards workers who wished to work from home. But management's lack of trust might also have been the result of bad experiences with WFH. F9M, a man working as a middle manager stated that during the initial stages of the pandemic, most office workers at his organisation were WFH. But the organisation stopped almost all WFH after finding widespread abuse.

6. Analysis and Discussion

The pandemic disrupted the lives of the trade union members researched in this study. Their work, social sphere, routines and certainties were more or less affected. Union membership coupled with the government's assistance to employers and employees provided the participants with a level of security. However, the magnitude of the pandemic's impact on the participants depended to a considerable extent on whether or not they worked

from home. The careers of participants WFH were generally less impacted than those of participants not WFH. The job security of participants WFH was largely unaffected, and in line with Cetrulo et al. [23] and others, it remained considerably higher than that of other workers. Persons WFH were also less likely than others to think about quitting their job due to the pandemic. In the same vein, persons WFH were also less likely to believe that the pandemic would leave long-term effects, especially negative ones, on their careers. Two years into the pandemic, several other aspects of the working lives of persons WFH, namely their working hours, workload, salary, work schedule and work tasks were similar to pre-pandemic levels. There were no significant differences between persons WFH and their peers not WFH on these variables. But most of the persons WFH who indicated changes in these aspects, experienced increases in working hours, workload and salary during the pandemic.

The above findings indicate that the careers of participants WFH tended not to be negatively affected by the pandemic, in contrast to the situation experienced by many of those not WFH. Indeed, the greater organisational reliance on ICT brought about by the pandemic may have strengthened the long-term career prospects of participants WFH in comparison to their peers. The following sections of the discussion revolve around three themes, namely: performance, wellbeing, and access to WFH.

6.1. Performance

6.1.1. Productivity

Participants WFH generally had positive views about their performance, in line with Kohont and Ignjatović [1] and Kawakubo and Arata [43]. Indeed, three-fourths of the participants felt more productive WFH than from the office. Various potential contributors to higher productivity were highlighted through the focus groups and interviews, including avoiding disturbances created in noisy open plans and having greater control over the amount and type of contact with colleagues. Participants also mentioned the reduction of commuting time. Some groups of workers, such as persons with motor disabilities, might have experienced greater benefits in not travelling than others. While employees' perceptions of productivity might not necessarily be totally accurate, they need to be taken seriously, as, among others, they affect their motivation.

6.1.2. Preparedness Levels

Two years into the pandemic, the large majority of the survey participants WFH felt prepared to do so. Almost all believed to have the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively. Delving deeper into this topic and in line with foreign research [1], interviewees who quickly shifted to WFH mentioned the skills-related challenges and learning curve they experienced.

In contrast to some foreign research [45], about four-fifths of participants believed to have the necessary resources to work effectively from home. Despite this, some participants mentioned problems such as poor internet connections or lack of equipment provided by the organisation. About four-fifths of participants WFH also stated that assistance from work was available when required. A number of organisations were particularly proactive in helping their workers to adapt to the new reality, by ensuring the provision of proper IT infrastructure and bandwidth, taking care of security issues of WFH and so on. Four-fifths of survey participants also believed to have the right environment to work effectively. Despite this general trend, environmental challenges when WFH were revealed, such as the need to have an office at home, as highlighted in previous research [29,44]. Some disturbances when WFH might be idiosyncratic to Malta, such as the noise and vibration created by the booming construction industry.

6.1.3. Communication Challenges

Organisational communication provided performance-related challenges to participants WFH, who often complained about communication overload. Participants spoke

about the constant pressure they felt to read emails. The more frequent use of emails appears to have also contributed to red tape, as informal face-to-face or telephone communication started to be replaced by more formal and permanent emails. Work chat groups became more commonly used, and while they kept workers connected during a time when they could not do so physically, they were also disruptive and time-consuming. Another type of difficulty with chat groups derived from their conflating of informal discussion with work. Apart from making it hard for workers to disconnect, sending important work-related instructions on social media platforms increased their risk of getting lost amid a clutter of less important or irrelevant information.

A lowering in the quality of communication was also mentioned by participants. Despite the great improvements in ICT, focus group and interview participants still felt that physical meetings provide a richer and more meaningful interaction than their alternatives. Prolonged lack of physical meetings may lead to procedural errors and friction. These concerns about WFH are in line with research highlighting the inefficiencies of WFH [27,32,38].

Young persons were among those who struggled with organisational communication when WFH. This group of participants reported difficulties in initiating and sustaining online communication. These challenges often appeared to derive from insufficient work experience.

6.2. Wellbeing

6.2.1. Work-Related Attitudes

Despite the challenges that they experienced, participants WFH generally had better work-related attitudes than their peers not WFH. The work satisfaction and enthusiasm of most persons WFH were at pre-pandemic levels. Indeed, they were significantly more satisfied with their working conditions when compared to their peers. Such positive attitudes towards WFH are in line with Briguglio [33] and Mayer and Boston [70] among others.

Contrary to studies linking WFH to stress [28,47], participants WFH were significantly less likely than their peers not WFH to experience increased stress levels during the pandemic. Job security and less commuting probably contributed to lower stress levels. Feeling more protected and in control against COVID-19 also helped. Another element that appears to have reduced stress among some participants WFH was the lowered level of supervision. WFH often provided participants with greater independence or freedom, which research linked to job satisfaction [72]. On the other hand, participants not WFH experienced a range of stresses due to job insecurity and fear of getting infected. Clients not wearing masks in meetings and close contact with coworkers in the back office created a risk of COVID-19 exposure. Isolation and exhaustion were additional stressors for those in essential services.

Despite the generally positive attitudes of participants WFH, over a third suffered from higher stress levels since the pandemic started. Difficulties in keeping boundaries between work and family life was a major theme deriving from the focus groups and interviews. In line with Eguchi et al. [54] and others, the interviewed mothers were particularly vocal about the challenge of balancing both aspects of life when WFH. In a bid to balance work with the taking care of children who could not always go to school, mothers WFH sometimes had to work outside working hours and during the weekends.

6.2.2. General Wellbeing

Most participants WFH declared that the pandemic did not affect their mental health, physical health or happiness. However, over a third felt less happy and/or experienced deterioration in their physical health. According to 40% of persons WFH, their mental health worsened. Some participants disclosed feelings of apathy, deriving from not having to go to the office.

Feelings of loneliness and isolation also appear to have negatively affected participants WFH. Being locked at home during lock down period and quarantines was described

as “house arrest”. Young persons and persons with disability (PWD) were particularly vocal about their feelings of isolation when WFH. Some young participants pointed out that their lack of interaction with colleagues was a major reason for wishing to return to work. Such findings are in line with other research indicating the negative impact of the pandemic on young persons’ social relations [73]. During lockdown, some young persons managed to continue socialising with their work colleagues virtually. Interviewees with disabilities similarly highlighted the challenge of isolation when WFH, in line with Camilleri et al. [74]. The sense of isolation when remaining at home also depended on the individuals’ personality, and some participants did not feel the urge to be among other persons.

6.3. Access to WFH

Most survey participants WFH stated that if given the opportunity, they would like to have blended work, doing some work from home and some from the office. However, the majority of the participants have never worked from home since the pandemic started. While some of these rejected such opportunity, for others this was not possible due to the nature of their job or for other reasons. The following sections delve into the differential access to WFH according to demographics and managerial attitudes.

6.3.1. Demographic Characteristics

In line with foreign studies [4,20,23], the opportunity to work from home was not equally shared across the different groups of trade union members investigated in this study. Women, highly qualified persons and persons on typical contracts were more likely to be WFH and to experience the related benefits and challenges.

The greater likelihood of women to work from home when compared to men reflects the findings of the OECD [20] and may have been partly influenced by their greater propensity to work in services sectors equipped for WFH. But this finding is also attributable to women’s efforts to juggle work with family commitments. Their need to work from home increased significantly during the pandemic, particularly during the lockdown periods, since many women had to take care of their relatives, especially children, when formal school and healthcare services were suspended. Indeed, mothers were even more likely than women in general to be WFH two years into the pandemic. This study does not support research arguing that women are less likely to be WFH during the pandemic [4].

The greater access of tertiary educated participants to WFH reflects various international studies [4,20]. Such workers often had professional jobs that are generally provided with greater autonomy and trust by management, which is a critical factor in accessing WFH. On the other hand, in line with Cetrulo et al. [23], the surveyed atypical workers were less likely to be WFH. The type of work they did could have influenced this result. As indicated by some participants, atypical workers might also not have been prioritised in the allocation of limited organisational resources.

6.3.2. Management’s Attitudes

The challenges faced by management in this pandemic, which have been documented in previous research [37], sometimes translated in negative attitudes of managers towards WFH. Three-fourths of participants WFH were trusted by management, while the rest felt accused of taking advantage of the situation. Several participants disclosed that this offended them deeply.

Some participants spoke about being given the opportunity to work from home very briefly and reluctantly during the lock down. Anecdotal evidence also revealed the pressure that managers sometimes placed on employees to return to their offices as soon as possible, despite significant health risks. Other participants were angered and felt let down by their organisation when they were given no opportunity to work from home. This feeling was aggravated when it was perceived that physical presence at the workplace would have increased the risks of contagion. Managers sometimes only permitted workers to work

from home on the basis of specific personal circumstances, such as motherhood, which led to feelings of unfairness among colleagues.

In line with Stoker et al. [38], who concluded that WFH might be less effective if leaders do not change their behaviours, some participants complained about the mentality of managers, especially older ones, who were unwilling or unable to adapt their managerial style to the evolving needs. Such resistance to change work practices might have been derived from insufficient ICT skills [38]. But management's lack of trust was sometimes also due to bad experiences with WFH.

7. Conclusions

This study shed light on the work-related experiences of trade union members WFH over the span of two years since the pandemic started, in comparison to their peers not WFH. While both groups of workers enjoyed a level of protection through their union membership, overall, the participants WFH experienced less negative career outcomes. They also had relatively more positive work-related attitudes, including higher levels of job satisfaction and lower stress levels.

This study also highlighted various challenges arising from the transformational changes that workers passed through when shifting to WFH. These include difficulties relating to organisational communication, boundary traffic, managerial trust, and loneliness. Besides, the mental and physical health of a significant minority of participants WFH declined during the pandemic. Trade unions need to invest more effort and resources to understand better these emerging challenges and generate solutions to tackle them. These need to be agreed with management and inserted in collective agreements and manuals of procedures.

The experiences and attitudes of participants WFH appear to have developed over time, as they learnt to adjust to the new working circumstances. In many cases, workloads decreased as workers cleared their backlog and learnt how to use ICT more effectively. In a minority of cases, workloads remained higher than pre-pandemic. Most workers WFH felt more productive than working from their office. However, the extent to which this feeling corresponds to objective organisational effectiveness is unknown. Organisational performance depends on a combination of employees' ability and willingness, their home environment, and organisational structure and support, including managerial trust. This study indicated considerable potential for improvement in all these aspects, which could be facilitated through greater collaboration between management and unions. Shop stewards need to be trained to provide regular feedback to management on facilitating WFH, in a bid to reduce the difficulties faced by workers and boost the effectiveness of WFH.

While it is expected that WFH will become always more common, this study confirmed that such type of work is not equally available to all categories of trade union members. In particular, men, lower qualified persons and persons on atypical contracts were less likely to be WFH. Increasing access to different social groups not only boosts fairness and morale, but may also reduce friction and improve organisational cohesion. Thus, trade unions need to strive towards such goal during collective bargaining.

This study showed participants' intent on returning back to 'normality' after enduring two years of pandemic. Trade unions should promote blended work whenever possible as part of this transition to normality. This system was favoured by participants WFH and appears to carry considerable benefits for both workers and organisations.

Notwithstanding its contributions to theory and practice, this study's limitations are worth noting. First of all, the study covered a specific period of time, namely the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may not be enough to fully understand the changing impacts of WFH in the long run. Additionally, the sample size was too small to examine in depth the potentially different experiences of specific demographic groups such as persons with disability and foreign workers. Finally, since the study was conducted among union members in a specific country, its results may not be applicable to union members in other countries.

Future studies could be larger in scale and examine how the COVID-19 ‘experiment’ of WFH evolved over a longer period of time. Studies could compare the effects of WFH on the performance and wellbeing of trade union members in different countries, taking into account differences in culture, practices and labour legislation. Additionally, future studies could investigate how trade unions can better support their members who are WFH, through collective agreements and other means. Future studies could also explore ways to foster more effective communication between employers and their employees WFH. The role of collective agreements and workplace policies to regulate and support individuals WFH could be investigated.

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