

Examining Employee Engagement Amid a Crisis: Reactions to Mandatory Stay-at-Home Orders During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of employee' attitudes toward their managers and organizations during early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 after businesses transitioned to work from home (WFH). Ninety-two participants across the U.S. completed an online survey on personality, job demands (hindrances and challenges), and job resources (organizational, manager, and technology support and empowerment) and their impact on engagement, job performance, and intention to leave. Participants came from various size organizations, industries, and locations. Multiple regression shows that the primary predictors of engagement are conscientiousness, challenge stress, and empowerment (adjusted $R^2 = .63$). Regression analysis also reveals that hindrance stress and employee engagement are the strongest predictors of intention to leave, providing continued support for the pivotal role of engagement in retention (adjusted $R^2 = .49$). Content analysis of the biggest challenges and successes during the transition to WFH highlights the number of work-focused successes that resulted from the transition. This study provides insights into working U.S. adult's attitudes

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toward work during the earliest phase of the COVID-19 pandemic and the drastic transition to WFH. Compared with prior research on employee engagement, a slightly different pattern of predictors emerged suggesting that during a time of crisis employees were focused on the most critical work; for many, it was challenging but meaningful. They are most motivated when they are empowered to make decisions and get their work done when and how they can.

Keywords: employee engagement, COVID-19, retention, employee attitudes, empowerment

The COVID-19 global pandemic has caused unprecedented changes in how and where employees work. In many organizations prior to 2020, working remotely was a privilege that employees earned through performance and engendering trust (Allen et al., 2015; Makarius & Larson, 2017). Prior to 2020, many corporations reduced or eliminated the work from home (WFH) option (Sander, 2019). In 2013, Marissa Mayer (then Chief Executive Officer [CEO] of Yahoo) famously recalled remote employees back to the office, and others followed her lead, including Bank of America and IBM (Sander, 2019). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported that less than 25% of the workforce worked from home prior to COVID-19 (BLS U.S., 2020). In an analysis of the American Community Service data set, 5 million employees, or less than 4% of the U.S. employee workforce, worked from home 50% or more of their time (Global Workforce Analytics, 2020). During June 2020, shortly after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, stay-at-home orders were issued and the number of employees WFH swelled to between 35 and 42% of the U.S. labor force, accounting for more than two-thirds of the economic activity in the U.S. (Bloom, 2020; Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). The dramatic and immediate transition during COVID-19 meant that employers had no time to select those who were *allowed* to WFH. This may have caused managers, instinctively, to over monitor employees, leading employees to feel distrusted, less empowered, and disengaged from work.

The challenges to the new reality of working in a virtual environment are many. Issues include social isolation, communication challenges, maintaining motivation and focus, and lack of access to resources and information (Allen et al., 2015; Makarius & Larson, 2017). These challenges are well established but were only experienced by those who worked remotely full or part time (Allen et al., 2015). Today, there are a much greater percentage of employees confronting these challenges and managers who need to support, lead, and continue to engage employees in a remote environment. The goal of the present study is to examine employee attitudes toward work and their organizations shortly after the abrupt transition to WFH in response to the global pandemic during June of 2020. We explore how organizations and managers supported their employees through this transition, how employees completed their work and examine if employee engagement remained possible when experiencing such an abrupt change to work.

More than 20 years of research supports the robust relationship between employee engagement, job performance, and other important organizational outcomes such as customer loyalty and satisfaction, employee productivity, and financial profits (Harter et al., 2002; Heskett et al., 2008). Regardless of which employee engagement model is used, consistent evidence shows that characteristics of work and of employees predict employee engagement, which impacts employee, team, and organizational performance (Albrecht et al., 2015; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Harter et al., 2002; Macey & Schneider, 2008). The strength of these collective relationships has motivated organizations to focus on employee engagement and employee attitudes as a measure of well-being and provides feedback to leaders about employee concerns and needs (Di Fabio, 2017; Gong et al., 2020; Judge et al., 2017; Warr, 2007). Harter (2020) reported a 20 year high in U.S. employee engagement of 38% in March 2020 followed by a sharp drop to 31% by June 2020 based on Gallup data. We believe that measuring engagement along with manager and organizational support will help us determine if employees remained motivated (as assessed through engagement) and what might support that engagement during a time of crisis.

Employee Engagement Linked to Better Performance and Stronger Organizational Citizenship

Encouraged by the positive connection to employee and business outcomes, organizations have focused on employee engagement for more than 20 years (Albrecht et al., 2015; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Harter et al., 2002; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Kahn (1990) defined employee engagement as the motivation to engage physically, mentally, and emotionally with work. The foundation of engagement is when individuals are interested in and connected to the work itself (Christian et al., 2011).

Macey and Schneider (2008) suggest that engagement is conceptually distinct from other job attitudes such as satisfaction, commitment, and involvement because there is a more significant investment of energy in engagement, which could be cognitive, physical, or emotional. This was supported through empirical assessment. A meta-analysis by Christian et al. (2011) showed that employee engagement explained an additional 19% of the variance of task performance (performance of primary job duties) and an additional 16% of the variance of contextual performance (behavior supporting the organizations socially or psychologically) *beyond* job satisfaction, organizational commitment, or job involvement. Rich et al. (2010) provided similar results, showing that Kahn's three aspects of engagement were related to job involvement, job satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and engagement leading to higher task

performance and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). However, engagement was the only significant predictor of task and conceptual performance in the meta-analysis (Christian et al., 2011). These results indicate that engagement, while similar to job satisfaction and job involvement, measures attitudes that are separate and distinct from these. Furthermore, they suggest that not only do engaged employees focus on the main tasks of their jobs, but also support the organization in other ways such as being helpful, courteous, and involved in social matters, which create a supportive organizational culture.

This evidence suggests monitoring employee engagement will help organizations retain employees, maintain employee performance, and a positive culture. This is especially critical during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when organizations have been under pressure to remain in business despite severe business restrictions, disruptions to the supply chain, and individual employee stress. Data from multiple sources indicate that U.S. adults experienced higher stress levels in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, March–May of 2020. According to a survey by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020), 78% of U.S. adults reported the pandemic is a significant source of stress. In a survey of life satisfaction of U.S. adults conducted in April 2020, Witters and Harter (2020) reported the lowest levels of life satisfaction since the recession of 2008 based on Gallup polling. At the same time, however, Gallup reported a bimodal distribution for employee engagement, with 38% of U.S. workers engaged, as of May 2020, notably, the highest level since the organization started tracking data in 2000 (Harter, 2020). Simultaneously 13% of employees reported they were actively *disengaged*, defined as being miserable or unhappy at work, and who share their misery with others. At the early stage of the pandemic, in April of 2020, the U.S. unemployment rate reached 14.8%, but slowly began to recover. The unemployment rate dropped to 6.7% by December 2020, and 4.6% as of October 2021 (BLS US, 2021). However, there has also been a large increase in job resignations in 2021, with the highest reported rate for midcareer employees (30–45), who have an average *increase* in resignations of 20% or greater from 2020 to 2021 (Cook, 2021; Hsu, 2021). Perhaps some of the disengaged employees have subsequently left their jobs in this resignation shift. This study, therefore, is focused on examining employee engagement and known predictors of engagement to help explore how employees feel during this unprecedented situation. Using a well-established framework of employee engagement amid a crisis allows a comparison to prior research to help understand employee motivation amid a crisis.

Personal Attributes and Work Characteristics Connect to Engagement

Just as important as understanding the unique connection between engagement and performance, theoretical and empirical work has a solid foundation to

determine what factors lead to engagement. Kahn (1990) described job engagement as a multifaceted motivational concept involving physical, emotional, and cognitive effort toward work. To achieve this motivation, Kahn suggested three psychological aspects have a direct impact on engagement including meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability. Meaningfulness is determined through an assessment of the overall purpose of an organization and the employee's role in it. Psychological safety includes perceptions of the social system in the organization including support to employees. Safety allows employees to commit themselves to the work without fear of negative consequences and is often realized through interactions and relationships with supervisors and colleagues. The third aspect, psychological availability, reflects self-evaluation of confidence, ability, personality, and readiness to do the job.

Christian et al. (2011) summarized over 200 articles on engagement and defined antecedents of engagement, including job characteristics, leadership, and personal dispositions, largely based on job characteristics theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and the job demands–resources theory (JD-R; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job characteristics theory proposed that features of work facilitate motivation, and the JD-R builds on this, suggesting that a combination of job characteristics and personal resources predict engagement and job performance. The JD-R focuses on how individuals use personal and job resources to overcome and address job demands to achieve work goals. Job demands and job resources include physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects of work, consistent with Kahn (1990) notion of engagement, such that individuals must have a positive self-evaluation to be able to handle the tasks of the job, be interested in the work in a meaningful way, and then be supported by the organization, manager, and colleagues to create the psychological safety often needed to make difficult decisions or direct behavior. Research suggests that employees who have more job resources can handle the demands of the job better (Albrecht et al., 2015; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In the following sections, we examine several types of job resources that support employees in their work, which we expect to be critical in a crisis period as experienced in the transition to WFH.

Supporting Employees in the Transition to WFH Through Transparency, Trust and Empowerment as Specific Types of Job Resources

Trust Through Organizational Support and Transparency

Historically, business leaders' primary concern about employees who WFH has been the quality and quantity of their work (Greenbaum, 2019; Sander, 2019). Managers frequently evaluate employees' contributions,

whether merited or not, based on how often they see employees, how busy they look, and hours worked. Without these visual cues, managers have difficulty evaluating the quality and quantity of work (Greenbaum, 2019). Managers who trust their employees to seek help when needed have more positive employee outcomes than managers who lack trust in their employees. Effective WFH arrangements consistently report strong levels of trust between managers and remote employees (Allen et al., 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Makarius & Larson, 2017). Makarius and Larson reported that remote employees build trust early on by providing consistent results, active participation, and prompt responses. Meta-analysis showed a positive relationship between telecommuters and their supervisor, regardless of the frequency of remote work (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

Additionally, research consistently shows that trust for managers and from managers leads to more positive employee attitudes such as job satisfaction (which is one aspect of engagement) and organizational commitment and more positive outcomes such as task performance and citizenship behavior, as well as less counterproductive behavior and intention to leave (Brower et al., 2009; Colquitt et al., 2012, Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Trust is a foundational element in effective work relationships and functions in two ways: to enhance the social exchange or reciprocity employees feel toward managers and to reduce uncertainty at work (Colquitt et al., 2012; van den Bos, 2001). In a study of hospital employees, Colquitt et al. (2012) found that both affect-based trust (we care about you) and cognition-based trust (belief in the competence of the other) increased job performance through a commitment/exchange mechanism as well as by reducing uncertainty.

Cognitive-based trust establishes reliability through consistency and transparency of communications, a sense of *we are here for you* and provides employees confidence when thinking about the future. During the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing shutdown, there has been a tremendous amount of uncertainty; about the economy, our health, our children and families, as well as our work (APA, 2020). When organizations and managers provide frequent communications and clarity of expectations for work, this is one method to increase certainty at work and foster trust in the organization (Colquitt et al., 2012; van den Bos, 2001). The present study examines *organizational support* through questions related to organizational communication frequency, transparency, and clarity of purpose.

Trust Through Manager Support

Affect-based trust is focused on the relationship between employee and manager (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). This is heavily

influenced by social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), such that individuals feel obliged to reciprocate to others when receiving goods or services. In the employment context, this interaction manifests through continued and expanding mutual investments in the relationship between the manager and employee and vice versa. McAllister (1995) provided evidence of the importance of emotional support in relationships at work and suggested that managers develop emotional support through mutual sharing of ideas, work-related challenges, and a sense of caring. With these dynamics established, employees and managers may trust each other more and show increased commitment to each other (Colquitt et al., 2012; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Brower et al. (2009) found that when managers and employees trust each other, this leads to higher levels of employee performance, OCB, and less intention to quit. When the manager did not trust the employee, there was no impact on OCB. However, when the manager trusted the subordinate, it led to greater discretion in the subordinates' work and resources from the manager and therefore, higher individual-directed OCB behavior. The present study examines *manager support* through questions about trust, role expectations, and understanding.

Trust Is Manifested Through Empowerment

When managers trust their employees, they are more likely to empower them, literally to *give power to* employees. It is another form of social exchange where the manager (presumably with greater discretion or power) enables employees to do their job, not simply delegating to them (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Conger and Kanungo (1988) emphasized the motivational aspect of empowerment which enables employees to do their work better, not just through delegation but based on employee capability. When managers remove barriers and boundaries, allowing employees more freedom in their tasks, decisions, and processes, it increases the employees' belief in her own ability to do her job effectively. In this sense, empowerment strengthens motivation because it enhances work-related self-efficacy, developing a sense of mastery in their performance and *can-do* attitude. Mone and London (2010) provided evidence that empowering behaviors had a direct impact on employee engagement, such as providing control over the quality of work, providing resources and decision-making authority, encouraging improvement to work processes, and listening to and acting on needs and concerns. We believe that when managers not only support their employees but empower them during this time of uncertainty in the transition to WFH, this will sustain employee motivation and engagement in their work. Therefore, empowerment is the behavioral manifestation of trust which can build

strong relationships between manager and employee. *Empowerment* is explored in relation to employee engagement in the present study.

Engagement and Personal Resources

Personal dispositions of conscientiousness and positive affect, along with task variety and significance were significant predictors of engagement (Albrecht et al., 2015; Christian et al., 2011; Mone & London, 2010). The relationship between employee conscientiousness and job performance has been well established (Viswesvaran et al., 2005), and there is also a positive relationship documented between conscientiousness and employee engagement (Christian et al., 2011; Inceoglu & Warr, 2011). Those who have a stronger sense of responsibility are more likely to be connected to their work and responsibilities. In addition, those who have a positive affect overall are more motivated in their job, have greater enthusiasm, and therefore commit more of their energy to their work (Christian et al., 2011; Inceoglu & Warr, 2011; Macey & Schneider, 2008). These two aspects of personal dispositions are measured in this study to determine if these traits remain connected to engagement in a stressful environment such as that experienced during the transition to WFH early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Job Demands

One impact of the global pandemic is a general increase in fear and anxiety across the U.S. APA has called it a national health crisis in October of 2020 after reviewing the results of their annual survey; 78% of U.S. adults reported the pandemic as a significant source of stress (APA, 2020). Multiple stressors were reported, including uncertainty of the future, needing more emotional support and disruption of work and education (APA, 2020). The stress of job stability increased to 56% in 2020 compared with 50% in 2019 (APA, 2020). Nearly 70% reported their job was negatively impacted by the pandemic. Issues related to work include reduced hours, balancing household responsibilities and work, being laid off, or decreased productivity.

How employees interpret their stress at work impacts their emotions and attitudes, and therefore their motivation toward work (LePine et al., 2005; May et al., 2004). Cavanaugh et al. (2000) defined two types of work stress for components of work that provide positive feelings when they are challenging yet rewarding (challenge stress) and components of the job that are perceived as hassles or annoyances (hindrance stress). These categories are influenced by

stress and coping research, which established that everyday hassles are negatively evaluated when they annoy or make people upset or angry; events that are positively evaluated make people feel good or satisfied (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Hindrance stress at work is induced when politics are involved more than performance when job expectations are unclear when there is considerable red tape, perceived lack of job security, and when one's career seems stalled. Challenge stress occurs based on the volume of work, the amount of work, time pressure, considerable job responsibility, and the number of projects or assignments at work. Cavanaugh et al. (2000) found that hindrance stress was negatively related to job satisfaction and positively related to job search activities, and challenge stress was positively related to job satisfaction and negatively related to job search activities. Such stressors were interpreted in similar ways regardless of employee level, such that hindrances were negatively rated while challenges were positively rated (Boswell et al., 2004; Cavanaugh et al., 2000; LePine et al., 2005).

In a meta-analysis Crawford et al. (2010) provided evidence that challenge demands were positively related to engagement while hindrance demands were negatively related to engagement. This work helped to distinguish among a broad interpretation of job demands and how they impact engagement by parsing these demands into aspects of work that are perceived as either hindrances or challenges and therefore impact employee's emotional response, which impacts behavior. We, therefore, believe that measuring *challenge and hindrance stress* as two specific types of job demands will provide additional understanding of how employees are reacting to the transition to WHF arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the Transition to WFH: How to Ensure Employees Have the Technology They Need?

In June of 2020, 94% of business leaders reported that technology problems impacted business and employees in the transition to remote work (Zielinski, 2020). The most frequent problems included disconnection from corporate networks, slow file downloads, poor quality of video, and long response times (Zielinski, 2020). Furthermore, with the use of new and different technology solutions for work, employees need support to learn new tools and set guidelines on usage. Historically, one positive aspect of telecommuting related to job satisfaction included technology support (Baker et al., 2007). In their review of virtual work, Makarius and Larson (2017) discussed the importance of using technology to facilitate interactions, reduce time zone limitations, and eliminate outdated technology. Therefore, we included questions about *technology support* since this was a critical challenge

identified for employees in the transition, and when done well, it has been shown to support WFH interactions.

Employee Engagement in a Context of High Stress and Uncertainty

In sum, over 20 years of research provides evidence that employee engagement is a critical factor for business success (Christian et al., 2011; Harter et al., 2002; Mone & London, 2010). We know that job features, including resources and demands, as well as personal resources (dispositions), have an impact on employee engagement and that engagement is related to job performance and organizational effectiveness (Christian et al., 2011; Harter et al., 2002; Mone & London, 2010; Rich et al., 2010). We also know that trust has been a critical part of success for individuals who WFH (Allen et al., 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Makarius & Larson, 2017) and is also related to job performance and employee engagement (Brower et al., 2009; Colquitt et al., 2012). Furthermore, employee trust in employers can be fostered through empowerment (Brower et al., 2009).

However, we do not know how employee engagement and job characteristics will be affected during a major health and economic crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent reviews of employee engagement research have suggested more research on engagement during different events or situations (Albrecht et al., 2015; Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; Judge et al., 2017). There is broad and consistent recognition that the economic and business context has an impact on employee behavior (Carsten & Spector, 1987; Judge et al., 2017). Based on the results of a meta-analysis, Carsten and Spector (1987) found that employees tend to leave organizations more frequently during times of economic prosperity than during times of economic hardship. The COVID-19 pandemic was a unique situation across the world, creating disruptions in normal business processes, and interactions and great uncertainty for individuals and organizations alike. This study adds to the research on employee engagement through the contextual element of collecting data in the immediate aftermath of global stay-at-home orders.

The present study uses an overarching model of employee engagement (Albrecht et al., 2015; Christian et al., 2011; Macey & Schneider, 2008) to examine employee attitudes toward their organization. We did not explore the facets of the job itself, including task variety or task significance, as presumably, they remained unchanged.

Specifically, this research examines the impact of personal resources (personal dispositions), job demands (challenge and hindrance stress), and

job resources (organizational support, manager support, technology support, and empowerment) on engagement, job performance, and intention to remain during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, shortly after the major U.S. businesses transitioned to WFH in June of 2020.

The following specific hypotheses are examined.

Personal Resources

Hypothesis 1: Employees' personal dispositions (conscientiousness and positive affect) are positively related to engagement and job performance and negatively related to turnover intentions.

Job Demands

Hypothesis 2a: There is a positive relationship between challenge stress and engagement.

Hypothesis 2b: There is a positive relationship between challenge stress and job performance.

Hypothesis 2c: There is a negative relationship between challenge stress and turnover intentions.

Hypothesis 3a: There is a negative relationship between hindrance stress and engagement.

Hypothesis 3b: There is a negative relationship between hindrance stress and job performance.

Hypothesis 3c: There is a positive relationship between hindrance stress and turnover intentions.

Job Resources

Hypothesis 4: Employees who report better manager support, better organizational support, better technology support, and more empowerment are more engaged in work, have better job performance, and less intention to leave.

Predicting Job Outcomes

Hypothesis 5: Personal resources, job demands, and job resources predict engagement.

Hypothesis 6: Personal resources, job demands, job resources, and engagement predict job performance as well as intention to leave.

Method

Design

The present study uses a mixed-methods design using both quantitative and qualitative analysis of online survey results, conducted late May to mid-June 2020. Participants were asked about their attitudes toward work, their managers, and different aspects of work. Predictor variables include personal resources, job demands, and job resources, and outcome variables include employee engagement, performance, and intent to remain. The survey was conducted through SurveyMonkey, after being reviewed and approved by institutional Institutional Research Board (IRB). The sample was collected via social media (Facebook and LinkedIn) and described as a study about attitudes toward work.

Participants

Participants include 93 white-collar employees working full or part-time more than 26 hr/week. One participant was dropped due to partial responses (less than 30% of the survey completed), yielding 92 usable surveys. Participants were recruited from various industries (Table 1). Respondents were 61% female, and ages ranged from 18 to over 65.

Materials

Participants completed the following measures. All questions used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) unless otherwise noted.

Job Stress

Job stress was measured using the Cavanaugh et al. (2000) challenge and hindrance stress scales. Challenge stress, components of work that provide

Table 1
Respondent Demographics

Location		Size of organization (#EE)		Industry	
NY	55% (51)	25,000+	14% (13)	Professional and business services	23% (21)
CT	5% (5)	10,001–25,000	10% (9)	Finance, banking, insurance	20% (18)
MA	5% (5)	5001–10,000	7% (6)	Education—administrative	20% (18)
PA	5% (5)	1001–5,000	12% (11)	Healthcare, mental health, nonprofit	20% (18)
MN	3% (3)	501–1,000	4% (4)	Education—teaching	9% (8)
SC	3% (3)	251–500	13% (12)	Manufacturing, construction, utility	7% (6)
VA	3% (3)	101–250	13% (12)	Entertainment	3% (3)
CA	2% (2)	51–100	8% (7)		
FL	2% (2)	10–50	15% (14)		
IL	2% (2)				
NC	2% (2)				
AL, AZ, CO, IA, MD, MO, NE, SD, TX	1% each				

Work status		Age		Gender identify as		Has children	
Full time	90% (83)	18–24	1% (1)	Female	60% (55)	Yes—has children	68% (63)
Part time	10% (9)	25–34	9% (8)	Male	40% (35)	No children	32% (29)
		35–44	42% (39)			<i>Of those with children, kids < 18</i>	
		45–54	38% (35)				92% (58)
		55–64	7% (6)				
		65+	1% (1)				
		Missing	2% (2)				

positive feelings when they are challenging yet rewarding, is assessed with six items; hindrance stress, components of the job that are perceived as hassles or annoyances with five items. Participants rated the degree to which each item causes them stress; responses are on a 5-point scale (1 = *no stress at all* to 5 = *a great deal of stress*); $\alpha = .89$ for challenge stress and $\alpha = .76$ for hindrance stress.

Personal Resources

Conscientiousness and positive affect (extraversion) were the two aspects of personal dispositions measured using the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) scales; each has 10 items (Goldberg, 1992, 1999). Internal reliability is strong, ($\alpha = .85$) for conscientiousness and ($\alpha = .91$) for extraversion. Personal dispositions of conscientiousness and positive affect were significant predictors of engagement in the Christian et al. (2011) meta-analysis; therefore, we focus on these two aspects of personal dispositions in the present study.

Job Resources

Four aspects of job resources are assessed: Organizational support, manager support, technology support, and empowerment.

Organizational, Manager, and Technology Support. Support to employees is measured in three ways, with questions about the organizational, manager, and technology support. Questions are based on measures used by Mone and London (2010). However, several questions were added that directly measure aspects of organizational, manager and technology support during the COVID-19 crisis and transition to WFH.

Organizational Support is measured with four questions. Two are from Mone and London (2010), related to *company communications helping employees understand the company's strategy, vision, and direction* and that *leaders act with the best interest of employees in mind*. Two questions were combined with this, based on Mone and London's model of predicted relationships between performance management activities and engagement. The two questions added are as follows: *My company provided clear communications about their plans for work as stay-at-home orders were issued*, and *My company communicated frequently about the overall health of the company*. Both questions are directed at the company as the target of the question and are consistent with "building a climate of trust" with employees through clear communications.

Manager support is measured with three questions. The first is directly from Mone and London (2010): *My manager is someone I can trust*. The two additional questions were modified from questions used by Mone and London, but modified for the current crisis: *My manager provided clear communications*

about expectations for my job during this time, and My manager has been understanding about other demands on my time during the crisis.

Technology support is measured by three questions pertaining to meeting hardware and software needs as well as training to learn any new software or technology tools. These questions were developed specifically to measure and reflect needs that developed as employees transitioned to WFH during the COVID-19 mandatory stay-at-home orders.

Four subject matter experts reviewed the item's wording independently, including one technology executive, and revised for clarity, showing strong face validity. In addition, a principal component analysis confirmed three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, $\chi^2(18) = 33.24$, $p < .05$. Reliability across these three scales are strong, $\alpha = .84$, $\alpha = .83$, $\alpha = .72$, indicating strong internal consistency.

Empowerment. This is assessed with seven questions from [Mone and London \(2010\)](#); respondents indicated their level of agreement for each statement about control over work, decision-making authority, ways to improve work processes, valuing ideas and opinions, being able to challenge how things are done, able to get the information needed and have resources needed to do job; $\alpha = .86$.

Outcome Variables

Engagement. The present study uses the 10-item scale developed by [Mone and London \(2010\)](#) to assess employee purpose and energy based on personal initiative, effort, persistence, adaptability, and meaningfulness in work; $\alpha = .89$.

Turnover Intentions. This is assessed with two items validated by [Spencer et al. \(1983\)](#), *I often think about quitting this organization*, and *I intend to search for a position with another employer within the next year* $\alpha = .91$, for the items combined.

Job Performance. Participants rated their own job performance based on six aspects (and 10 items), originally designed and validated by [Viswesvaran et al. \(2005\)](#), including the quality of work, administrative and communication competence, productivity, job knowledge, and overall effectiveness. The ten items represent an overall measure of job performance; $\alpha = .84$.

Challenges and Success

In addition to the attitude and opinion questions with Likert scales, participants were asked to complete two open-ended questions about the transition to WFH. *What was the biggest work-related challenge*, and *What was the biggest work-related success?*

Procedure

Participants received an email or viewed an online posting for the survey on social media (Facebook and LinkedIn). A full explanation was provided at the start of the survey with purpose and design and clear instructions that participation could stop at any time. If participants agreed to continue, this indicated their consent in the study. We did not collect names on the original survey; they were only collected in a separate and distinct survey after completion to enter information to receive a \$10 gift card, which was deleted within 30 days of gift card processing.

Results

Participants worked full-time (90%) or part-time (26+ hr) a week (8%). Sixty percent of respondents were female, and 68% reported having children. Nearly 40% of respondents worked at their company 10+ years, 25% between 5 and 10 years, and approximately 5.5% worked 12 months or less. Participants work across 20 states, and various industries. See [Table 1](#), for full demographic data.

Employee Transition to WFH

The majority of participants indicated that their work location changed in response to the COVID-19 crisis (80%). Respondents never reported WFH (23%) prior to COVID-19, and 36% WFH only in an emergency. Others reported WFH periodically; 12% indicated once a month, 9% indicated 2–3 times a month. Roughly 20% report having worked from home frequently (14% 1–2 days/week, 3% 3–4 days/week, and 3% WFH full time).

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Based on the correlational analysis, there is no relationship between extraversion and any of the three outcome variables of engagement, job performance, or intention to leave ([Table 2](#)). Conscientiousness is positively related to job performance only; hypothesis one is only partially supported. Hypotheses 2a–c are not supported since there are no significant relationships between challenge stress and any of the three outcome variables. Hypotheses 3a and c are supported; hindrance stress is negatively related to engagement and

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between Variables

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Extraversion	91	30.58	3.00	—										
2. Conscientiousness	91	31.75	2.75	-.21*	—									
3. Challenge stress	92	3.18	0.72	0.01	-.20	—								
4. Hindrance stress	92	2.42	0.78	0.10	-.07	0.11	—							
5. Manager support	92	4.07	0.87	-.20	-.04	-.02	-.48**	—						
6. Organizational support	92	3.73	0.95	-.02	-.14	-.05	-.53**	.59**	—					
7. Empowerment	91	3.75	0.70	-.05	-.08	-.16	-.66**	.55**	.67**	—				
8. Technology support	91	3.90	0.81	0.01	-.16	-.07	-.38**	.39**	.47**	.36**	—			
9. Engagement	91	3.92	0.67	-.04	0.01	0.01	-.57**	.42**	.60**	.76**	.43**	—		
10. Job performance	90	4.33	0.39	0.09	.25*	-.11	0.01	0.04	0.06	0.07	-.012	0.18*	—	
11. Intention to leave	91	2.49	1.19	0.18	-.16	0.12	.62**	-.41**	-.43**	-.60**	-.36**	-.64**	-.01	—

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level. ** correlation is significant at < .001 level.

positively related to intention to leave (as predicted) but is not related to job performance (H3b). Hypothesis 4 is partially supported since manager support, organizational support, technology support, and empowerment are all positively related to engagement, with correlations above $r = .40$. None of these variables are related to job performance, and all four are negatively related to intention to leave, with correlations from $-.36$ to $-.60$.

Job Outcomes

Before conducting the multiple regression, we verified the data met the assumptions for the analysis. An examination of the predicted probability plot of the predictors and residuals shows the data are normally distributed, since these variables follow the normality line. To check for homoscedasticity, a visual review of the predictor and residual plot shows no discernable pattern in the data. A correlation between the predicted values and the absolute values of the residuals is not significant, suggesting the variances across the residuals are equal, and the regression equation will work for all participants. Finally, a review of the correlation matrix (Table 2) shows that none of the variables have a correlation of .80 or higher, suggesting no concerns for multicollinearity.

Regression analysis shows that Hypothesis 5 is partially supported. When the eight personal and work variables are combined to predict employee engagement, only three are significant predictors; conscientiousness, challenge stress, and empowerment, $F(8, 81) = 19.69, p < .001$ (Table 3). The adjusted $R^2 = .63$ indicates a strong effect size for this prediction equation (Cohen, 1988), with 63% of the variance in engagement accounted for by these three variables.

Hypothesis 6 is also partially supported. The multiple regression equation predicting job performance is not significant. However, the multiple regression shows that hindrance stress, empowerment, and engagement each predict intention to leave, $F(9, 80) = 10.82, p < .001$ (Table 3), with adjusted $R^2 = .49$, accounting for 49% of the variance of intention to leave.

Biggest Challenge and Successes of Transition to WFH

When asked what the biggest work-related success was, 76 participants responded, many with multiple answers for a total of 108 individual comments. When asked what the biggest work-related challenge was, 77 participants responded, many with multiple answers for a total of 98 individual comments. Three individual investigators (subject matter experts) read and categorized the comments for content analysis. An original set of categories were established

Table 3
Results of Regression Analysis for Employee Engagement, Job Performance, and Intent to Leave

Variable	Engagement		Job performance		Intent to leave	
	Standard beta β	Semipartial correlation	Standard beta β	Semipartial correlation	Standard beta β	Semipartial correlation
Individual/personal resources						
Extraversion	.00	.00	.16	.15	.10	.09
Conscientiousness	.14*	.13	.23*	.21	-.12	-.10
Job demands						
Challenge stress	.18**	.17	-.12	-.11	.05	.05
Hindrance stress	-.06	-.04	.15	.11	.30**	-.21
Job resources/characteristics						
Manager support	-.12	-.09	.11	.08	-.06	-.05
Organizational support	.16	.11	.05	.04	.10	.07
Technology support	.17	.14	-.22	-.18	-.08	-.07
Empowerment	.66***	.42	-.13	.07	-.11	-.06
Engagement			.39*	.23	-.38**	-.22
R^2	.66		.17		.55	
Adjusted R^2	.63		.08		.49	
SE	.41		.38		.83	
F (df)	19.69 (8,81)***		1.90 (9,79)		10.82 (9,80)***	

Note. Standardized regression coefficients shown, $n = 90$.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

for each question, and then the reviewers categorized all comments independently. The first round of coding yielded 78% agreement (interrater reliability: # agree/total comments) on the comments. The researchers then discussed disagreements, refined several definitions, and added several additional categories to each question. After a second round of coding, based on the revised definitions, agreement or interrater reliability reached 96%. Final discussion alleviated differences in ratings on comments.

Eleven themes emerged about work-related challenges (Table 4). The top three most frequently listed challenges are work–family balance (23%), work- or task-related issues (15%) and technology-related issues (12%). Thirteen themes emerged regarding the biggest success of the transition to WFH. The top most frequently reported successes are no commute hassle (18%), increased productivity (15%), and more personal time (11%). See Table 5, for themes and sample comments.

Discussion

These results provide interesting information about employee attitudes during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, employees in this sample are engaged with a mean of 3.92 out of five on the engagement scale. In prior research, personal dispositions, in terms of extraversion and conscientiousness predicted engagement, job performance, and intention to leave (Christian et al., 2011, Mone & London, 2010; Rich et al., 2010). In the present study, the pattern of correlations indicates that the four categories of job resources (manager, organizational and technical support, and empowerment) are related to engagement and intent to leave, although not job performance. When these variables are combined in a multiple regression along with personal resources and job demands, only conscientiousness, challenge stress, and empowerment remain as significant predictors of engagement. The R^2 of .63 indicates that 63% of the variance in predicting engagement is accounted for by this combination of variables. When the semipartial correlations are squared for each variable, we see that 18% of the variance is accounted for uniquely by empowerment, 2.9% from challenge stress, and 1.7% by conscientiousness. The remaining 43.5% of the variance is accounted for by shared variance among the variables. Much of this shared variance likely reflects some of the additional variables that were significantly related to engagement, such as hindrance stress, manager support, organizational climate, and technology support, but are now being accounted for through shared variance with empowerment.

These results indicate that in this time of crisis, employees remain challenged and committed to the work. The fact that hindrance stress is not related to engagement suggests that the bureaucracy or hassles at work have

Table 4
Biggest Challenge of Transition to WFH

Theme	N	%	Sample comments
Work/family balance	23	23	Parenting young children while trying to fulfill professional obligations simultaneously. Having additional people in the house, while trying to work. When you must negotiate two adults on conference calls and an elementary aged child on school Google video meetings, it's hard, because sounds travel through walls and closed doors.
Work-/task-related issues	15	15	Too many back-to-back meetings that run all day long, thus making it difficult to get actual work done.
Technology-related issues (software, hardware and connection)	12	12	Keeping direct reports on task as much as possible while they are also dealing with the crisis. Since our call center staff had to be setup to WFH in a short period of time, we have been having issues with their technology setup. We are conducting virtual training sessions, and the audio is not working which makes training inconsistent and unreliable.
Value of working in person with others	8	8	WiFi, entire family working/schooling at same time. Loss of energy and lack of focus. I get energized by others and feel that loss when I'm home—and video calls aren't the same. There is a great deal of value for my team in working physically close together. There is a lot of coaching and training that takes place by overhearing each other's conversations with customers and carriers. While we communicate regularly by phone, instant message, and video call, there is no way we've found yet to replicate working closely together.
Communication challenges	8	8	The absence of face-to-face communication has been the biggest hurdle because our work environment was conducive to a more collaborative setting. IM/Skype/Teams has also always been available to us, so that hasn't been insurmountable.
Home office setup (environment and space)	8	8	Not already being set up with a desk and larger monitor. Finding a quiet place to work.
Motivation	6	6	Staying motivated and focused on the work that matters.
It created more work	5	5	Not having all information at my fingertips. Working remotely requires more investigation. I miss not having all the information in my file cabinet.
Creating boundaries between work and home	5	5	Establishing work and home boundaries—sticking with scheduled work times and not spending all my time on work.
Manager/organization issues	5	5	Manager doesn't tolerate unplugged time at home. Speaks about balance but doesn't support with his actions.
Uncertainty and financial stress	3	3	The uncertainty of when we will return to the office.
	98		

Note. WFH = work from home.

Table 5
Biggest Success of WFH

Theme	N	%	Sample comments
No commute hassle	19	18	Being able to use what would have been my commuting time for wrapping up my day. Not commuting in traffic.
Increased productivity and less interruptions	16	15	Work-related success was the abundance of material created for our sales team- so many learning sessions were generated. I am able to better concentrate on my ad writing responsibilities and am able to complete them much faster than previously. I actually get more work done at home and in less time because I do not have to deal with the unnecessary from the office. Increased productivity during times that would be used for commuting.
More personal time	12	11	Elimination of my commute has been the biggest success, saving me almost 20 hr a week and several hundred dollars. More time to exercise since I don't have a long commute.
Work-related benefits	11	10	New partnerships with other companies. Time to consider leads for business that I would not have thought of in a busier environment.
Learning new ways to work	10	9	I redesigned how I interact with new employees that join out of state, how to ship them product. I learned new software, how to hold online meetings which will help me to provide instruction to absent students. Forced to think more creatively and innovate new ways of doing things, which might not have been inspired otherwise.
More time with family	9	8	Family meals, family walks, overall family time!
Remote work can be effective!	6	6	Work transitioning from office to home was surprisingly easy! All administrative positions where we only need our computers and phones to perform our tasks, has proven what we have said for many years that this was possible and more civilized. Most office capabilities are achievable at home. Now all my coworkers are remote too, so not just me, so it helps reinforce how effective remote work can be.
Strong connections with others/ team support/Manager support	6	6	The support from team members. Everyone was incredibly supportive of allowing me to take the time to do what I needed to in order to stay grounded and refreshed to be successful. Having management who supports the juggling act we are all performing.

(table continues)

Table 5 (continued)

Theme	N	%	Sample comments
Increased work life balance and flexibility	6	6	Team bonds are still in place, being nurtured through additional team meetings, 1on1s and team game day events (i.e., Team Bingo, etc). Work-life balance is easier, and while jumping on a computer to address something out of hours is more frequent, it requires less effort.
Good/effective use of technology	4	4	I believe it has created an opportunity for the company to be more flexible with WFH options. All the technology working exactly as needed.
High quality of work	3	3	We obtained technology that we've been asking for for years, (zoom). Still being able to complete quality work.
Less stress	3	3	My team has been effective at continuing activities in a remote fashion. LESS stress WFH! The difficult people that I am forced to interact with daily basis are not a trigger for anxiety or anger.
Saves \$\$ (no commute)	3	3	I much prefer WFH! Saves time, hassle, and money. Elimination of my commute has been the biggest success, saving me almost 20 hr a week and several hundred dollars.
	108		

Note. WFH = work from home.

been reduced during this time period with organizations and managers focusing on the most critical elements of the job and how to support employees to complete work rather than how tasks are accomplished. The strong link between empowerment and engagement further supports this critical relationship, indicating that during a stressful time, trusting employees to do their job as they believe is best, allowing them to make decisions, and complete their work on their terms worked well for employees during the transition to WFH in early 2020. The combination of correlations, such that manager support and organizational support are significantly correlated to engagement and negatively related to intention to leave but are not significant regression coefficients, suggests that the trust between managers and employees and support from the organization is accounted for in this sample through empowerment. As prior research shows, empowerment is a strong predictor of motivation because it strengthens employees' belief in their ability to do their job effectively (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Mone & London, 2010). Empowerment enhances self-efficacy in the job, therefore, allowing employees to engage fully in their work with their managers' confidence.

There are very few relationships between the predictor variables and job performance. This may be related to the high average on self-rated job performance ($M = 4.34$) and small standard deviation ($SD = .39$), acting as a ceiling effect, reducing the ability to differentially predict performance. Of note, conscientiousness remained positively related to job performance, consistent with prior research.

All four of the job resources are related to intention to leave; however, when entered into the regression equation, the variance in predicting this outcome is taken up by engagement and hindrance stress, suggesting that these are mediating factors in predicting intent to leave. The squared semipartial correlations show that engagement contributes 5% of the unique variance and hindrance stress 4.6% of unique variance in predicting intent to leave, with the remaining 45.4% of variance predicted by shared variance across variables. Consistent with prior research (Crawford et al., 2010), hindrance stress is positively related to intent to leave, while engagement is negatively related to intent to leave, indicating that when employees are engaged and are not experiencing too much bureaucracy, politics, or hassles, they are more likely to remain with the organization. The adjusted R^2 shows a strong effect size in predicting intent to leave, with 49% of the variance predicted by engagement and hindrance stress. Overall, these results suggest that a period of high-stress engagement will help keep employees with the organization, which is experienced through a combination of empowering employees as well as reducing the amount of politics and red tape that employees must negotiate.

The comment analyses support the regression results, highlighting employees' concerns about getting the most critical tasks done and how best to do that (Tables 4 and 5). For example, some of the biggest challenges specifically

mention lack of technology hardware or software from home or not having “files” and other materials at their disposal as easily accessible as they are in the office. A few respondents indicated that WFH “created more work” precisely because they needed to devise workarounds. However, this was a very small percentage of respondents. In fact, there were more comments (108) about successes compared to challenges (98). The successes overwhelmingly focused on less stress/hassles related to commuting, and many focused on increased productivity, the high quality of work that has been accomplished, learning new ways to work, and additional work-related benefits such as forming new partnerships with companies, and time to consider new business leads. When combining direct work-related success themes (increased productivity, remote work can be effective, work-related benefits, high quality of work, learning new ways to work, and effective use of technology), they make up more than 40% of the comments showcasing the range of the positive impact that WFH had on work for this sample, even as early as June 2020.

Several comments about success of the transition referenced strong connection to others, including teammates and managers as well as more personal time and more time with family. In the challenge themes, we differentiated comments that referenced the balance between work and family and creating boundaries between work and home. The comments categorized under work/family balance referenced the challenges with balancing these two roles. Many indicated this was especially difficult with schools closed and children learning from home while employees needed to continue their demanding jobs at the same time. It is not surprising that these challenges comprised nearly one-quarter of the comments. Boundaries between work and home were more specifically about how to “limit” work time and creating boundaries for when it was “acceptable” to not respond to others about work. Other challenges referenced logistical issues such as lack of a “home office” space, finding places to work quietly or feeling that managers were not supporting them during this dramatic change in work routine. On the opposite side, when employees were able to make a change to a workflow, process, or have fewer interruptions, they were excited to share that as a success.

Contributions to Engagement Literature

Recent reviews of employee engagement research have called for examining employee engagement during various situations (Albrecht et al., 2015; Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; Judge et al., 2017), and there is consistent recognition that the economic and business context has an impact on employee behavior (Carsten & Spector, 1987; Judge et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health crisis unlike anything experienced in the past

century. The primary contribution of the present study is the investigation of known predictors and outcomes of employee engagement during the early phase of the pandemic, specifically, with employee attitudes measured during May and June of 2020, within a 90-day period of when U.S. state and the federal government issued mandatory stay-at-home orders in March of 2020. Results show that some relationships established in prior research remained as significant predictors of engagement, including conscientiousness, challenge stress, and empowerment. Hindrance stress, which is generally a measure of bureaucracy, seems to be less prevalent during the early phase of the pandemic.

Suggestions for Future Research

Surveys provide a snapshot at one point in time. This study is helpful because it captured employee attitudes at such a pivotal point in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. There should be an ongoing assessment of employee attitudes to see how they change as the nature of work continues to evolve. Some organizations have employees back in the office full time, while others have various iterations of hybrid work arrangements. However, it is not just the physical location of the work that is important, but the relationships among and between managers, employees, and organizational leadership that helps organizations and managers understand how to support their employees. It would be interesting to examine differences between employees who remain highly engaged and those who are resigning or moving to different jobs or industries (Cook, 2021; Hsu, 2021). Further research should focus on why various groups of employees are leaving organizations; is it as a reaction to burn-out, or are they attracted to aspects of other jobs, industries or greater flexibility in when and where they work?

Limitations

This is a small sample, with less than 100 respondents, which limits the analysis to correlation and regressions since there is not enough power to conduct a path analysis. However, the strength of the effect sizes, despite the small n , suggest that these relationships are real, and not due to chance. Using a snowball sample of data gathered partially through social media may bias respondents to individuals who are connected to the author, which may yield a bias in Socio Economic Status; SES (based on author's zip code), job type, or industry. However, a review of the demographics shows that respondents represent different industries, sizes of organizations, and geographic locations across the U.S., suggesting this bias may be limited.

Implications

This study provides an understanding of how one cross-sectional sample of employees perceived their organizations as they transitioned to WFH during June 2020, a time when most of the U.S. remained locked down due to local stay-at-home orders (Global Workforce Analytics, 2020). This study should help managers and organizations recognize that employees remain engaged with their work especially when they are provided with support through empowerment. Sixty-three percent of the variability in engagement is predicted by empowerment, challenge stress, and conscientiousness, and empowerment uniquely accounted for nearly 20% of the variance. Employees remain engaged when their work is challenging, but employees also value the ability to make decisions, set priorities, manage their processes, and have resources to get the job done. Being honest, transparent, and communicating clearly are important, but the most critical aspect of trust is through the empowerment of employees. In many ways, the combination of results (quantitative and qualitative) suggests that employees generally know what they are doing. During the early stages of the WFH transition employees mentioned how much they value periods of concentrated time to do their work and the freedom to figure out new ways to do their work; both sustained their motivation toward work. Managers who show their employees trust specifically by allowing them to take the lead on determining processes, setting priorities, and supporting how they get their work done will benefit the employees and the organization. Employees value being trusted to do what they know is best. These results also show that job performance and intention to leave continue to be strongly related to employee engagement, suggesting that focusing on this type of motivation will benefit employee performance and their commitment to the organization.

Conclusion

Recent reviews of employee engagement research have called for a focus on engagement during different events or situations (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; Judge et al., 2017). The present study focused on measuring existing and established relationships in the middle of an ongoing and evolving social, economic, and health crisis unparalleled in current times. The fact that many relationships between engagement and personal resources, job demands, and job resources were not found provides evidence that these aspects of work may be more relevant during *noncrisis* times. These results suggest that this evolving situation of how employees work and how managers support their employers during a crisis event is important. The most critical aspect which emerged to support employee engagement is the empowerment of employees;

it accounted for a large component of the variance predicting engagement. There is a strong behavioral aspect of empowerment, which enables employees to have control over their work, make decisions, and determine importance of tasks and processes to complete their work.

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