

**Perspectives of Working Mothers in the Ontario Public Service
on Hybrid Work Arrangements**

By: Melodie De Marinis

Introduction

Remote and hybrid work has remained an important topic for many employees in Canada since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent survey by Robert Half Canada Inc. confirmed that eighty-five per cent of Canadian employees are interested in positions that have the option of hybrid or remote work (Benefits Canada, 2023), while the results of a recent Cisco Canada survey confirmed that eighty-one per cent of employees indicated that their employers' policies around flexible work impact their desire to remain in their positions (Cisco, 2023). However, according to a recent survey by Colliers Canada, only sixty-two per cent of employers within Canada continue to use a hybrid work model, with just forty-nine per cent of employers confirming they have finalized their policy moving forward concerning hybrid or remote work (Benefits Canada, 2023).

Most public service workers in Canada have been engaged in a combination of fully remote and hybrid work since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. In the 2021 Ontario Public Service (OPS) Employee Experience Survey, the most recent publicly available survey, sixty-nine per cent of the 38,000 respondents were still teleworking. The survey asked: "Looking towards the future post-COVID-19, if given the option to work remotely, what is your preferred option for telework?" Out of 34,000 respondents, eighty-two per cent of OPS workers advised that their preference was two days in the office or fewer, and thirty-seven per cent confirmed they would prefer to report to the office only when necessary. It is unclear if there are differences in the preferences of women compared to men because the results of this survey do not provide a breakdown of the responses by gender (Province of Ontario, 2021).

In March 2022, the Secretary of the Cabinet advised the OPS in an internal memo of a mandatory partial return to in-person work effective April 4, 2022 (Jackson, 2022). The memo confirmed that the hybrid work model, which required all workers to attend the office at least three days a week, was a temporary arrangement. More recently, in a statement on the AMAPCEO union website on February 9, 2023, AMAPCEO Vice-President Cynthia Watt stated: "The Employer hasn't indicated when their pandemic plan will wind down, and their long-promised hybrid work plan is months overdue" (AMAPCEO, 2023). Much of the public sector within Canada remains at an inflection point as it awaits a decision on their permanent hybrid work model moving forward.

The circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting changes in how work is accomplished have opened up a research opportunity to examine the impact of these changes on public service workers engaged in hybrid work. While the 2021 OPS survey does ask questions about flexible work arrangements, the results do not provide a breakdown by either gender or parental status. Given the large cohort of OPS workers who remain engaged in hybrid work, it is worthwhile gaining a deeper understanding of their experiences and opinions beyond that which a survey can provide.

This exploratory qualitative study focuses on working mothers in the OPS. The following research question will be explored in this paper: How have hybrid work arrangements impacted working moms in the Ontario Public Service? In addition, the thesis put forth is that hybrid work has had an overall negative impact on OPS mothers in the work sphere but a positive impact on OPS moms in the domestic sphere.

Background: The Canadian Public Sector and Hybrid Work

The recent shift to hybrid work is the most disruptive change within the public sector in Canada in decades (May, 2022). In December 2022, envisioning the future of work post-COVID-19, the Canadian federal government announced its hybrid work model moving forward. The president of the Treasury Board of Canada confirmed that those working in the federal public service must attend the office at least two or three days per week starting in early 2023 (Balsara, 2022). The Public Service Alliance of Canada, which represents 165,000 public service workers across Canada, disputes this new hybrid work arrangement, noting that changes in their members' work conditions must be a part of collective bargaining (Balsara, 2022). The Canadian government confirms that its approach is consistent with other provincial and territorial governments across Canada. (Government of Canada, 2023).

According to Lori Turnbull, the director of public administration at Dalhousie University, the shift to remote work that public sector employees have experienced over the past few years has led to increased freedom in their personal lives, and the government will face challenges trying to “put that genie back in the bottle” (May, 2022). May (2022) further notes that public sector employees who work for the federal government protest that the return to in-person work strategy has been imposed top-down by the leadership with no rationale. Furthermore, May’s article notes that hybrid work will remain a principal issue for unions at the bargaining table.

While some surveys have been conducted to understand the public service’s engagement throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the publicly available survey data either pre-dates or reflects an earlier phase of the pandemic. The most recent

public service engagement survey available in Alberta is from 2018 (Alberta Government, 2018), and the most recent available in Nova Scotia is from 2019 (Nova Scotia Public Service Commission, 2019). While Manitoba has published employee engagement survey results from 2021, which confirmed that sixty-five per cent of employees agree that they have support at work to balance their work and personal lives, the survey does not address the issue of hybrid or flexible work arrangements (Province of Manitoba, 2021). While Ontario's Employee Engagement Survey does reference the OPS's hybrid and remote work preferences, as noted in the introduction, there is no breakdown of the responses by gender (Province of Ontario, 2021).

In a 2022 survey, seventy-four per cent of British Columbia public service workers agreed that their workplace supports flexible work arrangements, including working from home. In addition, sixty-nine per cent of respondents confirm that their workplace supports balancing work and personal life. A breakdown of these responses by gender could not be located (B.C. Stats, 2022). British Columbia has also advised that its public service employees confirmed they wished to continue with hybrid or remote work arrangements. The British Columbia government supported continuing remote work and other flexible work arrangements in situations that benefit the employer and employee. In addition, the government confirmed that the availability of flexible work arrangements would depend on both the employee's particular situation and the government's operational requirements (British Columbia, 2023).

The most recent publicly available survey of the Canadian federal public sector is from 2020 (Government of Canada, n.d.). Only fifty-five per cent of supervisors who manage teleworking employees confirmed that they strongly or somewhat agree they

have been provided adequate training to manage a remote team during the pandemic in 2020. This survey does provide a breakdown of responses by gender, confirming that fifty-three per cent of female employees strongly agree that their immediate supervisors supported their use of flexible work arrangements compared with fifty-one per cent of men. In addition, sixty per cent of men confirmed that balancing work and caregiving responsibilities caused them some level of stress, while sixty-two per cent of women agree with this statement. Furthermore, forty-five per cent of females felt that their career progress had been adversely affected to some extent due to conflict between their work and family or personal obligations, compared to forty-four per cent of men. Lastly, twenty-three per cent of women confirmed they had experienced discrimination due to family status compared to thirteen per cent of men.

A review of the Canadian federal and provincial government websites makes it clear that there are very few publicly available surveys of the opinions of Canadian public sector employees within the past three years that address the issue of either remote or hybrid work. Even more challenging, aside from the federal government's survey noted above, there is a lack of available data on the differential impact of remote or hybrid work on men and women in the public service sector in Canada.

Literature Review

The literature on work and gender explores numerous themes, both in the professional and domestic spheres, as well as the tension between the two. This literature review will examine some classic and contemporary theories that remain relevant in today's flexible workplace and the common themes and resulting disparate findings and opinions that repeatedly arose in the literature.

Career Progression

Siebert's (1974) role accumulation theory takes a favourable position on the multiple roles that individuals encounter in the workplace and how they affect career progression. In his classic theory, Siebert notes positive outcomes, including role privilege, where the greater number of roles an individual holds generally corresponds with more institutionalized privileges and overall status security, where individuals holding multiple roles can fall back on other relationships to compensate for any failure. Siebert concludes by examining the circumstances of working mothers, noting they seek role accumulation to increase role privilege, resources, and a sense of their personal worth.

Similar to Siebert, Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2016) take the position that increased experience in family roles leads to increased family-to-work enrichment, which can lead to an improved perception of workplace promotability. In their study of registered nurses with families, the authors found that family involvement was positively associated with family-to-work enrichment, which was positively associated with perceived promotability. In contrast to Siebert (1974) and Paustian-Underdahl et al.'s (2016) position that experience in family roles enriches work life, Cheese (2020) found that when parents find positions with the needed flexibility, they tend to remain in those positions, thus resulting in limited promotability and career progression.

Workplace Communication, Connection, and Teamwork

Ashforth and Mael's (1989) social identity theory has made a resurgence in popularity in the literature on organizational culture. The authors posit that people classify themselves and others into social categories, including organization

membership. This classification provides order within the social environment, allowing individuals to define themselves and others systematically and permitting comparison between various categories. The authors also explore the consequences of organizational identity, which include increased support and commitment to the organization, increased cohesion, cooperation, and altruism within the group, and favourable evaluations of the group. It can also lead to similar behaviours and attitudes amongst group members and increase the likelihood of conformity to group norms. Ashforth and Mael further point out that most individuals hold multiple identities and move between identities very easily; role conflict only appears when disparities between the roles are made apparent.

Kossen and van der Berg (2022) use social identity theory in their recent study examining the impact of remote work on workers' feelings of social and professional isolation and sense of belonging within their organizations. Expanding on Ashforth and Mael's (1989) theory, Kossen and van der Berg found that as an individual's telework increases, their identification with their organization decreases. The authors note that these individuals feel a loss of connection due to missing the structure that the office provides and the decreased interaction with colleagues. This sense of social isolation will lead to workers focusing on identities outside of their organization to fulfill their social needs, resulting in further isolation from their work colleagues.

Two additional recent articles on remote work further address the theme of workplace connection and communication. In his chapter discussing the pros and cons of remote work, Cheese (2020) stresses the importance of organizational culture in addressing the challenges associated with telework, including working longer hours and

feeling disconnected from colleagues. In addition, Haas' (2022) recent article notes that teleworking women are less able to access formal or informal mentoring and sponsorship relationships and face increased challenges speaking up in the workplace.

Boundaries and Work-life Balance

A final more contemporary theory that has increased in relevance since the rise of remote work is Ashforth et al.'s (2000) boundary theory. The authors note that transitions between roles act as boundary crossing and involve exiting and entering roles, focusing on micro transitions that occur in everyday life. The authors observe that people vary in how firm their boundaries are between their various roles, with a continuum between a preference for segmentation (stronger boundaries) versus integration (weaker boundaries). The authors confirm that in recent years, organizations are moving more towards flexible work arrangements, including flex time and telework, which can involve more role integration between work and home life.

Utilizing Ashforth et al.'s (2000) boundary theory, Allen et al. (2021) examine the issue of boundary management between work and non-work amongst employees who transitioned to telework during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors note that remote work alters the traditional boundaries that separate work and non-work. Employing Ashforth et al.'s (2000) continuum between integration and segmentation, the authors found that those with a stronger segmentation preference perceive more balance between the work and non-work spheres than integrators.

In contrast, Kerman et al. (2022) found that an individual's preference for segmentation did not act as a moderator between violations of home or work boundaries and home or work satisfaction. The findings of Kerman et al. (2022)

contradict Ashforth et al.'s (2000) boundary theory, which posits that these violations would be more disruptive for those with a preference for segmentation.

Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al. (2022) explore the role gender plays in men and women's experiences teleworking with and without children during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of boundary theory. The study examined typical boundaries that are in place between work and non-work, the strategies that participants used to separate them, as well as how frequently the boundaries are violated between the two spheres. The study found no significant difference in interruptions experienced during work by workers with children and those without, or between men with children compared to women with children. The study did find that workers without children in the home experienced telework more positively than workers with children at home. However, there was no difference between mothers and fathers in how positively they experienced telework. A significant limitation of this study is that the authors could not compare the age of the children in the households based on the collected data, as the children's age is likely to play a role in how workers experience telework.

In Gimenez-Nadal et al.'s recent (2019) study, the researchers examine work-life balance, telecommuting, and gender. The authors found that teleworkers spent less time on paid work than commuters during traditional working hours, and they spent more time on unpaid work (such as childcare) and leisure activities. In addition, teleworkers work more non-standard hours. The researchers further found that teleworkers were more likely to engage in childcare duties during typical work hours, which they conclude provides evidence that teleworking can result in more work-life balance.

Worker Productivity

Another important theme within the literature was how worker productivity was affected by teleworking. The chapter by Cheese (2020) on flexible work discusses how technology is changing when and where people work and how it leads to both increased productivity and stress levels. He notes that one compelling reason to look at flexible work is that increased physical and mental well-being results in increased productivity. The Government of Canada's (2016) survey on flexible work concurs with this position, noting that the main benefits of flexible work are a more engaged and productive, inclusive, and healthy workforce.

However, the benefits of telework are not distributed equally: Feng and Savani's (2020) article examines the role of the COVID-19 pandemic on perceived work productivity for dual-career opposite-sex teleworking parents. The authors found support for their hypothesis of a gender gap in productivity for parents with at least one child at home and no available childcare during the initial phase of the pandemic. Feng and Savani conclude that their study demonstrates the unintended consequences of teleworking for women in dual-career families, particularly working mothers. Power (2020) also touches on the extra care burden placed on women, noting that while flexible work is often touted as the solution to the challenge of work-life conflict, studies from different countries have indicated that flexible work arrangements can merely enforce the unequal status quo. The COVID-19 pandemic eliminated the existing arrangement for many couples to outsource childcare, resulting in the caregiving burden falling to women, thus leading to reduced productivity, which could impact their careers long term.

Job Satisfaction

Spilker and Breugh's study (2021) focuses on how feelings of professional isolation impact job satisfaction and performance levels for the employee. Frequency of telework, length of time teleworking, and whether or not telework was the respondent's choice were all predictors of feelings of isolation. The researchers found these predictors accounted for fourteen per cent of the variance in feelings of professional isolation and, in addition, found correlations between feelings of isolation and work satisfaction levels.

Looking at work satisfaction from a qualitative perspective, Lero and Korabik's (2017) chapter on the work-family interface in Canada cites the results of six focus groups comprised of women and men with working partners and at least one child between the age of one and fifteen. Many participants expressed satisfaction with work and family life but challenges with balancing the two. In addition, Kerman et al.'s (2022) study also examines satisfaction levels and balance when they examined teleworkers' work and home life satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Ashforth et al.'s boundary theory (2000). Regarding work satisfaction, the authors found that violations of work boundaries negatively affected work satisfaction levels. However, they did not find that violations of home boundaries affected work satisfaction levels. Lastly, regarding job satisfaction levels and gender, Feng and Savani's (2020) article examines job satisfaction levels in teleworking parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors found a gender gap in job satisfaction levels amongst dual-career opposite-sex teleworking couples with at least one child and no childcare.

Domestic Labour

A final theme explored frequently in the literature on gender and work was how working couples handle domestic responsibilities, including caregiving and housework. The Government of Canada (2016) released a report outlining the results of their research into flexible work arrangements. Almost all of the 1,260 responses received to the survey and the results of stakeholder input noted how important flex work is for employees with caregiving responsibilities; childcare and elder care were among the top reasons for requesting flex work. In Lero and Korabik's (2017) article exploring the work-family interface in Canada, most participants in their qualitative study felt that family did not interfere with work, but that work interfered with family. However, frequent family demands could sometimes impact their jobs, such as their children's extra-curricular activities. Many respondents sought ways to reduce work-family conflict, which included flexible work arrangements for some, and for others, it meant reducing their workload or setting realistic limits. Some participants sought to reduce family demands, such as limiting housework or sharing childcare obligations with their partners. In addition, Leineweber et al.'s (2018) study examined the time use of men versus women in workplace flexibility and found that parents with higher flexibility levels spent more time on children's activities. In terms of household duties, high workplace flexibility led to more time spent on such duties for men, but women still spent more time on household chores regardless of flexibility level.

According to Power (2020), traditional gender roles and the less traditional ways that women participate in the paid economy led to childcare falling to women to manage during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The study by Dunatchik et al. (2021) confirms Power's

position. Dunatchik et al. examined the changes that occurred at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic concerning both the work and domestic spheres and their resulting impact on gender inequality. The authors examined how the shift to remote work altered parents' domestic responsibilities during the initial stage of the pandemic. While parents, in general, indicated an increase in domestic responsibility during the spring of 2020, mothers were more likely to confirm an increase in housework compared to fathers, while both confirmed an increase in childcare. The authors note that while both mothers and fathers employed in remote work situations report an increase in time spent on domestic duties, the increase is such that the pre-existing gender gap remains unchanged; seventy-seven per cent of teleworking mothers confirmed they were responsible for childcare compared with their teleworking partner, while only thirty-three per cent of teleworking fathers felt primarily responsible for childcare.

In conclusion, there was limited literature regarding hybrid work and the Canadian perspective, both within the public sector and the general Canadian workforce. However, the main themes arising from a broader literature review on gender and flexible work include career progression and satisfaction, workplace communication and teamwork, division of domestic responsibilities, and examination of the boundaries and balance between the work and home life spheres. While the findings and opinions varied, the literature overall indicated that women's telework resulted in increased challenges in the areas of career progression, satisfaction, and workplace communication. Conversely, the literature generally found that teleworking helped women manage their many responsibilities within the domestic sphere. The subject of boundaries and work-life balance for women engaged in remote work resulted in mixed

findings and depended on various factors, such as their segmentation preference and the telework status of the women's domestic partner.

Methodology

Study design

This project is a qualitative exploratory study in which OPS working mothers in non-managerial positions with children aged seventeen or under participated in focus groups. Participants were asked a series of sequenced open-ended questions to understand their perceptions on the topic of hybrid work. Appendix A contains a copy of the questioning route used during the focus group interviews. The focus groups included two groups of six participants and two groups of five participants, for a total of twenty-two participants. The focus groups were not organized according to the age of the children; each group contained mothers with children of every age between 18 months and seventeen years. One group consisted entirely of lawyers. Each focus group session lasted between sixty and ninety minutes.

Sampling technique

Some prospective participants were previously known to the researcher/facilitator from prior positions while working in the OPS. Using a snowball sampling technique, the researcher asked these participants if they knew of other moms (in a non-managerial/executive position) in the OPS who would be interested in participating in the study.

Privacy/confidentiality

The focus groups occurred via the Zoom platform. Participants were asked only to share their first names during the focus group and had the option of turning their

video on or off. The focus group participants were asked to share the age of their child/children. However, they were not asked for identifying information about themselves, including the Ministry or branch where they worked, their full name, or their age. Once the interviews were complete, they were transcribed, and the participants' first names were removed and replaced with Alpha-numeric codes (e.g., 1A = interview 1, participant A).

Content and Thematic Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed, the researcher undertook the qualitative content analysis process outlined by Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017). Following an initial overview of the interview transcripts, the second stage involved a line-by-line analysis of each interview. First, the researcher divided each interview into meaning units, in which the text was pulled directly from the interviews. This exercise aims to pull as many meaning units as possible from the text. Next, the researcher shortened the meaning units while retaining the core meaning through a process called condensation (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). The researcher then proceeded to code each condensed meaning unit. The researcher used an inductive approach when coding, in which the codes were derived directly from condensed meaning units (Roberge, 2023). The researcher then calculated the number of times each code appeared within the data, establishing the frequency patterns. The researcher then categorized the codes that pertained to the same issue or concern (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Once the categories were established, the researcher was able to undertake thematic analysis by examining the categories and deriving the broader themes within the data (Roberge, 2023). The researcher reviewed the data numerous times to check reliability by

ensuring consistency in how codes were applied within the interviews. While this particular analysis method is both time and labour-intensive, it was utilized to avoid inserting any of the researcher's unconscious biases into the analysis.

Limitations

One major methodological limitation was time constraints, which was a frequent issue during the organization of the focus groups, both in terms of the condensed timeline for the project as well as the availability of the participants to attend the individual focus groups, which ultimately limited the length of the focus group meetings. The researcher's original plan was to organize the focus groups based on the age of the participants' children. However, this arrangement was not possible due to the above-noted time constraints. In addition, there was a risk of the participants knowing each other, which can lead to concerns regarding both a biased sample and participant confidentiality. The researcher attempted to mitigate this concern by placing individuals from the same prior workplace into different focus groups. In addition, during the focus group interviews, the participants were reminded to keep the discussion confidential.

Another limitation in undertaking content analysis is that dividing up the text into short meaning units can lead to fragmentation (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017); however, the researcher determined the risk of fragmentation outweighed the more significant risk of the researcher's own bias inserting itself into the analysis, and the subsequent thematic analysis further mitigated the risk of fragmentation. In addition, another limitation is that the researcher coded the data alone, which can lead to concerns related to reliability; if a co-researcher was available to code the data, would they obtain the

same results? The researcher attempted to address this particular concern by reviewing the data and subsequent coding multiple times.

Data Results

The data was derived from transcripts of the focus group interviews using the content and thematic analysis approach discussed in the methodology section. A summary of the data, including the codes, categories, and themes, is attached as Appendix B. The codes that pertained to the same issue or subject matter were then placed into 17 different categories. From the categories, the data were examined using thematic analysis, which involves the identification of patterns/themes within the collected qualitative data to interpret and make sense of the information provided by the focus group participants. A total of six themes were identified from the data.

The most frequently occurring category within the data was self-care, which appeared 126 times. This category includes codes for mental health, physical health, stress, sick/vacation, self-care, safety, and impact on health. The most frequently occurring codes within the self-care category include stress (33), mental health (29), and physical health (25). The second most frequently occurring category within the data is workplace connection which appeared 112 times and includes codes for connection, work culture, networking, socializing, and conscious social interaction. By far, the most frequently occurring code in the workplace connection category was connection at 63 times, followed by socializing (15) and networking (13). The third most frequently occurring category within the data is balance, which appears 108 times. The most frequently occurring codes within the balance category include distraction (39), work-life balance (32), and competing priorities (18). The categories which appeared the least

frequently in the data were continuous education (10) under connection, communication, and teamwork category, domestic relations (15) under the care category, family time (27) under the self-care category, and career progression (28) under career progression.

In terms of frequently occurring codes, the most frequently occurring code was childcare at 79 under the care category, followed by physical workspace (68) under worker productivity and satisfaction category, connection (63) under connection, communication, and teamwork category, boundaries (51) under boundaries and work-life balance category and commute/travel (48) under the movement category.

The top three themes identified during the analysis were workplace productivity and satisfaction, where the related codes appear 297 times; boundaries & work-life balance, where the related codes appear 286 times; and self-care, where the codes appear 213 times (see Appendix C).

Analysis and Discussion

This qualitative study posed the research question of how hybrid work arrangements have impacted working mothers within the Ontario Public Service. The literature review indicated that remote work has resulted in increased challenges in career progression, satisfaction, and workplace communication for working mothers. Conversely, the literature found that remote work helped mothers manage their many responsibilities within the domestic sphere. Accordingly, the thesis put forth in this paper is that, overall, hybrid work has had a negative impact on moms in the work sphere but a positive impact on moms in the domestic sphere.

Some themes derived from the data analysis were similar to those found in the literature review. These themes included workplace productivity and satisfaction, which was the most frequently raised theme, followed by boundaries and work-life balance. Other themes in the literature review that were also raised during the interviews include workplace connection, communication & teamwork, and domestic labour. While career progression was noted as a theme in the data, it was by far the least cited theme, with codes related to career progression appearing less than a tenth as frequently as codes related to workplace productivity and satisfaction. However, some themes derived from the data were not as evident in the literature review. One such theme was self-care, which included mental health, physical health, stress, sick/vacation, self-care, and impact on health. Of note, a code that was not raised at all during any of the four interviews was career earnings.

All four focus groups that participated in the research project were very engaged and eager to discuss their experiences with hybrid work. Only four interviewees engaged in some form of hybrid work before the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, most participants transitioned from working in the office five days a week to working fully remotely for the first year or two of the pandemic. In examining the impact of hybrid work in the professional and domestic spheres, participants' experiences can be divided into two phases: the initial COVID-19 lockdown and the present time.

Phase 1: Initial COVID-19 Lockdown

During the initial COVID-19 lockdown, the participants' domestic and professional lives were intertwined, making it difficult to assess the impact of remote work on the two spheres at that stage. The codes that were raised frequently during the discussion of

the challenges of the early stages of the pandemic when schools were closed to in-person learning included stress, mental health, distraction, and boundary challenges:

I think some of the challenges personally was the divided attention. I was pulled in different directions. I didn't anticipate it – I didn't anticipate how much it was going to be with the homeschooling.

But it's just like as a mom just - I mean you're just trying to do everything, and I felt, especially during the beginning of Covid. I was like "So then I'm just going to fail". I'm just failing everything here. I felt like everything in my work, life and my home life and my marriage, like, everything was just - you just kind of felt like a failure on all fronts, and you couldn't do it all.

Because the fully 100% remote work from home when childcare was closed and school was closed and all of that, I was the default because I could do my job from home, and he couldn't. I love the hybrid. I love the flexibility, but I have scars from 2020 of working with an 18-month-old at home.

However, not every aspect of the participants' professional and personal lives was negative during the early phase of the pandemic. Two codes raised frequently during the discussion of the benefits of the early part of the pandemic included saving time and money due to not having to commute/travel and accomplishing household tasks while on break time:

So, some anticipated benefits working remotely was, for me, the biggest thing was saving time. Travelling time. So, it would normally take in a workday two hours to get to work and two hours to come home. So, you know, that's four hours in a day that is spent travelling. So, I, you know, working remotely, anticipated I'm going to be saving four hours in a day.

In addition, with respect to being able to do domestic chores during my break hours and lunch hours, put in – throw in laundry, or, you know, start making like a healthy dinner. So, this way, I, you know, just time manage myself accordingly, so that I wouldn't be rushed at the end of the day.

While the participants have outlined many challenges and some benefits to their intertwined professional and domestic lives during the initial COVID-19 lockdown, it is difficult to determine where remote work fits into the picture since society underwent so

much upheaval at that time, including the closure of daycares, the shift to online school, the cancellation of all activities, all underscored by the threat of a looming pandemic.

Phase 2: Present Time

Most interviewees gradually shifted from remote to hybrid work over the past year or two, which brings us to the present time, with most participants attending the office two or three days per week. Two interviewees remain fully remote due to accommodation, and two remain remote due to job requirements.

Once their children returned to school and employees returned to the office, the benefits and challenges of remote work shifted. While the interviewees mentioned the challenge of distractions and competing priorities at home during the initial lockdown, now the interviewees find the distractions stem from their in-office time. In contrast, their work at home is more productive, leading to increased work-life balance and higher levels of productivity and satisfaction concerning their jobs:

So, I find although it was a challenge at the beginning of the pandemic to figure out how to balance the work that I did do when I was at home, I now find that I'm producing better work at home than when I'm in the office. I chitchat more in the office. I always take my lunch in the office, like if I'm just going for a walk, or maybe running an errand or something, whereas at home I do sometimes will work through it if I need to get something done.

I feel like I focus more when I'm at home than I do at the office. I feel like the office is kind of distracting for me. I do have a job that is overwhelmingly busy at times. So, I do enjoy the quiet when I'm at home being able to get that kind of work done every day.

Under the theme of boundaries and work-life balance, the second most frequent code mentioned was commute/travel. The interviewees find that their current hybrid work arrangements do provide them with more balance, as they do not have to

commute to the office as frequently and can engage both in activities with their families after work and also in their own self-care:

One of the benefits I guess I'm going to mention is my son is 7, so he is really picking up on the sports and that sort of thing. One of the things we've been able to do is allow him to do those extra-curricular activities, which we may not have done before.

But just being able to like well, you have half an hour between meetings to like, go for a quick run. Or even to this day, I often do like a morning walk, and often I'll do a call during it. But I think that was a huge benefit.

A theme that remains a consistent challenge both during the early COVID-19 lockdown phase and the present time is connection, communication, and teamwork. The analysis confirmed that the dominant code in the data was connection, followed by socializing and networking. Though the participants have been engaged in remote or hybrid work for over three years at this point, the challenge of effectively connecting with colleagues while engaged in remote work remains a live issue:

It's nice to be on the computer, but when you are in person, there is connection. You feel like you are cut off from the world. When you go into the office and you talk to people, you feel like you connect, like you are alive.

One of the, I guess, unanticipated or maybe I just never thought about it, disadvantage I would say would be loss of networking opportunities... access to senior management, just bumping into people in the kitchen, really getting to know people, just doesn't happen.

Another challenge or benefit, depending on one's perspective, is related to boundaries, the most frequently mentioned code under the theme of boundaries and work-life balance. Several of the interviewees confirmed the challenge of the work sphere creeping into the domestic sphere when they are engaged in remote work, and there is no definitive end to the workday:

But yeah, there was a lot more of the day just inches longer and longer and longer when there is no clear "I have to hit the road now" to make it home in time to be able to do everything in my life that needs to get done.

Because we solely work from home, I'm finding if somebody has just a quick question, we have to schedule a meeting, so it's like that's taking up more time. And my days are meetings all day long and then it's like, well, when are you doing the work that's being coming out of these meetings? So often times that's now bleeding into my personal time in order to get the work done,

The contrary perspective raised by some of the participants is that more flexible boundaries increase their availability to attend meetings, which ultimately benefits them professionally:

Being able to work remotely preserves my capacity to attend meetings late or earlier... if I weren't able to take those calls from home, I would have to make special arrangements, and I don't have the benefit of other family members. I might have to find someone else to cover that appearance for me...and that's just professionally not something I like to do.

If someone had a meeting at four, if I was in the office, when I am in the office, I decline it and reject it, and, you know, I have a hard stop. But if I'm at home, it's a little bit more – I have more wiggle room that I can just get my husband to pick up the kids or whatnot.

Once daycare and in-person school resumed, one of the significant benefits of hybrid work for many of the interviewees is in the domestic labour sphere, where the overwhelmingly dominant code within the data was childcare, followed by housework, which was mentioned less than a third as frequently:

So, I'm more present because I kind of have already done that stuff throughout the day. For the first time in my life, I am able to pick up my kids from school. I've never been able to do that. So that for me is one of the big bonuses.

Definitely not having to travel has really for work has been a real relief in terms of childcare.

Domestically, my house has never been cleaner (laughs). I'm able to be more present for my kids when they're home because for me I utilize my

lunch breaks to clean up, to do groceries, to do household chores, to throw in a load of laundry, kind of all the things I would be doing when the kids arrived home.

In addition, another topic raised in all of the interviews is the return to an in-person work plan, which falls under the theme of job satisfaction. Two terms that frequently appeared in the data were "choice" and "forced," and interviewees had a lot to say on the topic of choosing to work in person or remotely, particularly since the Ontario Public Service is still awaiting a permanent hybrid work model moving forward. One point raised in every interview was the desire for the time in the office to be purposeful, focused, and productive. Participants raised counterexamples of this, including physical workspaces where they were working at hoteling stations separate from their teams, working in a remote office near home with none of their work colleagues present, or attending the office to log into virtual meetings all day. Participants brought forth many opinions and ideas on how to make their in-office time worthwhile:

I think everyone at one point in this conversation has used the words "forced back". And this idea that there's no rationale behind it. So, if you think about it from a hybrid perspective where there is actually a reason for us to be in the office. This is the day your team gets together, this is the day you collaborate, this is the day you focus.

I think that if we're going into the office, make it purposeful. Make it like we're going in for a reason. I'm tired of going into the office for literally no reason. I'm not meeting anyone, like there's nothing productive happening. That's all. Just make it purposeful and intentional.

In Phase 2, as participants settled into their hybrid work arrangements, the benefits in the domestic sphere became even more apparent than during the initial lockdown. In addition, the distractions at home while working remotely during Phase 1 have shifted to their in-person office time during Phase 2. Participants have reported

increased productivity and satisfaction with their time working remotely but continue to struggle with communicating effectively with their work colleagues and express a desire for their in-office time to be purposeful. Lastly, participants hold differing views on whether or not the boundaries or lack thereof while engaging in remote work can be considered a challenge or a benefit.

Conclusion

In answer to the research question, hybrid work has impacted working mothers in the OPS differently depending on what phase of hybrid work is being discussed. During the initial COVID-19 lockdown phase, the participants faced different challenges from those they currently face.

Concerning the first part of the thesis statement that hybrid work impacts mothers negatively in the work sphere, the study's findings are mixed. During the initial COVID-19 lockdown, when the participants were dealing with the distraction of their children at home while school was remote or daycares were closed, they faced challenges while working remotely; however, it is difficult to ascertain if telework was the source of those difficulties, given the many challenges co-occurring at that time. Currently, the answer is more nuanced; many participants feel their remote work is more focused, which has increased their work productivity and satisfaction levels, while their in-office time is more distracting, leading to a desire for their in-office time to be more purposeful and focused. Participants also report that they continue to face challenges when connecting with colleagues remotely. The overall perspective on boundaries between work and home life was blurrier; some participants appreciate the flexibility of working extended hours, while others are concerned about the meshing of work and personal lives. In the current

phase, participants enjoy the balance provided by hybrid work and the resulting benefits concerning family time and self-care. The findings of this study support the second part of the thesis statement, where most interviewees confirm that hybrid work has positively impacted their lives in the domestic sphere.

As this is a small-scale qualitative research project, an important caveat is that the results cannot be generalized to the broader population. However, this exploratory study does provide insight into the effects of the hybrid-work trend on working mothers in the OPS. It offers possible avenues for further targeted or larger-scale Canadian research projects. Flexible work has become a critical issue between governments within Canada and their corresponding public service unions. The availability of research related to public service and hybrid work increases the likelihood that the workers' needs are accurately reflected within the collective bargaining process. Examined through an equity lens, this research may also lead to future policy changes within the government to address the challenges that are present in current hybrid work arrangements.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Questioning Route

1. Prior to the pandemic, did your workplace offer a hybrid work arrangement? If so, what was your arrangement?
2. If you had the option of a hybrid work arrangement prior to the pandemic, what personal and professional factors contributed to your decision to agree or not to agree to hybrid work?
3. Did domestic responsibilities factor into your decision to agree or not to agree to hybrid work? If so, how?
4. Did you engage in a hybrid work or fully remote work arrangement during the pandemic?

Follow-up: If so, what was the arrangement?

5. What were some of the anticipated and unanticipated benefits to your hybrid or fully remote arrangement both in terms of work and your personal life?

Follow-up/prompt: Can you share an example of a benefit specifically pertaining to your personal life or domestic responsibilities?

Follow-up/prompt: Can you share an example of a benefit specifically pertaining to your professional life or work responsibilities?

6. What were some of the anticipated and unanticipated challenges to your hybrid or fully remote arrangement both in terms of work and your personal life?

Follow-up: Can you share an example of a challenge specifically pertaining to your personal life or caregiving responsibilities?

Follow-up/prompt: Can you share an example of a challenge specifically pertaining to your professional life or work responsibilities?

7. I want to turn now to your physical workspace. Can you please provide a description of your workspaces, both at home and in the office? (Prompt: Do you have your own office, is it a shared workspace, is it a hoteling situation?)

Follow-up: What impact has your physical workspace had on your productivity, both at work and at home?

Follow-up (if not addressed): Do you have partners who are also engaged in hybrid work? How does that impact your own work?

8. What is your current arrangement with respect to hybrid work?

Follow-up: How does your current hybrid work arrangement impact your domestic and professional responsibilities?

9. If you could choose an ideal arrangement for hybrid work, what would that look like?

Follow-up: How close or far from ideal is your current hybrid work arrangement?

10. How would your ideal hybrid work arrangement impact your caregiving responsibilities?

Follow-up: How would your ideal hybrid work arrangement impact your professional life or work responsibilities?

Appendix B: Data Frequency Table

Theme	Category	Codes	Frequency of Codes per Category	Frequency of codes per theme
Boundaries & Work-Life Balance	Boundaries	Boundaries, overtime, burnout, working continuously	78	286
	Balance	Distraction, competing priorities, privacy, work-life balance, routine	108	
	Adaptation	Flexibility, transition/change, accommodation, alternative work arrangements	49	
	Movement	Commute, travel, continuously moving	51	
Domestic Labour	Care	Childcare, eldercare, maternity leave, breastfeeding	92	131
	Housework	Housework, dishes, laundry, cooking, groceries, meal prep	24	
	Domestic Relations	Gender differences, default parent, dual role	15	
Workplace Productivity & Satisfaction	Job Performance	Productivity, technology/resources, concentration/focus, efficiency	93	297
	Return to In Person Work	“choice” vs “forced”, purposeful, return to in person workplan, perks, surveillance, check box	63	
	Workspace	Physical workspace, partner’s workspace, neighbourhood workspace, depersonalization	94	
	Job Satisfaction	Satisfaction, increased expectations, support, ambivalence, workload	47	
Connection, Communication & Teamwork	Workplace Connection	Connection, work culture, networking, socializing, conscious social interaction	112	122
	Continuous Education	Training, learning	10	
Self-Care	Health	Mental health, physical health, stress, sick/vacation, self-care, safety, impact on health	126	213
	Savings	Saving time, saving money, saving energy	60	
	Family	Family time	27	
Career Earnings & Progression	Career Progression	New position, secondment, recruitment, demotion	28	28

Appendix C: Data Frequency Pie Chart

