Preferring to work from home

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Abstract

What sort of people like to work from home (WFH)? In this study 1185 adults from different sectors and countries completed a work-related personality test (HPTI) and a self-esteem measure as well as indicating their preference for WFH. Correlations showed that those who were less Adjusted, Conscientious, and Risking Taking showed a preference for WFH. The regression suggested the strongest indicator was sex, degree status, and trait Conscientiousness. We split the sample by sex, age and education and reran the six regressions. Conscientiousness was consistently significant, though other personality factors were important for non-graduates. Explanations and implications of this finding are discussed. The limitations of a cross-sectional study using only self-report data is acknowledged.

Keywords Home-working · Choice · Personality · Demography · Conscientiousness

Introduction

Since the start of the millennium, and greatly accelerated by the Covid crisis, there has been a great increase in people working from home (WFH; Antunes et al., 2023; Gifford, 2022). There is now a vast increase in hybrid working, whereby people work from home for part of the week (often 3–5 days). Estimates about how many people can, and indeed do, WFH, and whether their organisations approve or not, is not readily available. It also appears to vary between countries, work sectors and organisations. However, the trend seems clear, such that for various reasons many more people can and will WFH. Obviously, some jobs cannot be done from home (e.g. nurse, taxi-driver, hotel staff). Further, some organisations have clear policies on the issue from complete freedom to choose, to a "blended option" or no choice at all.

Research into WFH or virtual working, which used to be called teleworking, is not new (Bailey & Kurland, 2002;

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Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Hill et al., 2003; Morganson, 2010). Indeed there has been something of an explosion in the literature on the topic (Delany, 2021; Eddleston & Mulki, 2015; Fonner & Roloff, 2010; Gajendran et al., 2015; Golden & Gajendran, 2019; Ivasciuc et al., 2022; Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2021; Morganson et al., 2010; O'Neill et al., 2014; Prodanova & Kocarev, 2021; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012; Tunk & Kumar, 2022; Wang et al., 2021).

A recent review of this area concluded: remote work tends to be cost-effective for the organization, but the cost-effectiveness can vary based on context; remote work comes with trade-offs for most employees, and not all employees will thrive in remote work settings; degree of virtuality is likely an important moderator, regardless of the outcomes of interest; and there is much we do not know about what leads to effective remote work (Grawitch et al., 2023).

There is also continual debate about whether WFH leads to greater or less job productivity and satisfaction, as well as what it does to corporate culture in the long and short run (Allen et al., 2015; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). It seems clear that for many individuals there are both benefits and drawbacks when WFH which is based partly on the type of work that they are doing (Bloom et al., 2015; Breaugh & Farabee, 2012; Rücker et al., 2024).

Similarly, some people, given the option, seem to prefer to WFH while others do not. Many organisations compromise with a "blended" solution of around half (2–3 days a week) spent "in the office" or WFH. Managers have noticed that

there seem to be individual differences in the preference for WFH which is the concern of this study: that is, are there systemic and predictable differences in personal choice to WFH.

There are comparatively few studies on demographic and personality differences in the choice to WFH. In a Latvian study, Gavoille and Hazans (2022) assessed 1700 recent teleworkers and found Conscientiousness and Openness-to-Experience were positively, and Extraversion negatively, associated with a higher preference for, and self-reported productivity, in WFH, especially for females. They noted that "*personality traits matter for changes in productivity when switching to WFH. In particular, individuals with high levels of Conscientiousness are much more likely to report a better productivity from home than from office: a one-unit increase on the Conscientiousness scale leads to a 5.6 p.p. increase in the probability to report a higher productivity at home.*" (p27). In another study, Kawakubo and Arata (2022) tested 198 Japanese workers and found Neuroticism negatively and Openness positively associated with self-reported productivity at home.

In an important recent review Kaiser et al. (2022) noted how many unanswered questions remain in this area such as whether employees whose jobs mean that they cannot work from home must be compensated for this: how increased expectations about home-working might exclude already disadvantaged groups whose housing or domestic arrangements are poorly suited to WFH? Clearly this is an emerging area of research.

Theoretical issues

Perhaps the most important theoretical issue in the WFH studies is the role of autonomy: that is whether and how much people have the "choice" to WFH (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Pink (2009) noted that people particularly valued four types of autonomy at work: When they do it (time); How they do it (technique); Whom they do it with (team): and What they do (task). Thus, WFH can have a powerful effect on job autonomy thought of as a major component of job satisfaction. The idea is that simply being offered the opportunity to WFH is motivational.

Next, there are issues concerning individual differences in demography, personality and motivation and the choice to WFH. There seems some indication of sex, age and education differences in the desire to WFH based on the type of job people do, their level in the organisation and the space they have at home to work. Equally given the extensive literature on the relationship between personality and work it may be expected that WFH preferences are related to personality traits. The literature on personality and work success has highlighted two traits in particular: Conscientiousness and Adjustment (low Neuroticism) which have shown to be consistently related to

many indexes of work satisfaction and productivity. In this study we measured these traits but also two others not often considered in the work psychology literature. The first is Tolerance of Ambiguity which we expect will be related to WFH in that people with high scores would like less the lack of structure from home working. Equally those with a lower Appetite for Risk (Courage) would also less prefer WFH because of less guidance from colleagues and managers.

In this study we aimed to explore the role of demographic, ideological, self-esteem and personality variables on the choice to WFH. We explored the idea that self-esteem may be related to WFH because those with lower self-esteem may feel more intimated in the office than home. We also explored ideological factors, namely religious and political beliefs, because for some people WFH is an ideological issue with workers demanding to WFH while potentially being less productive. As far as we know these two factors have not been explored in studies in this area.

This study

This study concerns the demographic and personality correlates of WFH. We asked about preference not self-reported productivity, which are presumably related, but not in all workers.

In this study, we utilized the High Potential Trait Indicator (HPTI), a work-related, validated trait measure grounded in the Big Five personality framework. The HPTI, referenced in several studies (Furnham & Treglown, 2018, 2021; Teodorescu et al., 2017) shares significant overlap with three traits of the Big Five (FFM) but introduces three additional traits associated with success across various job roles. The measure was devised and validated to assess personality traits relevant to work (MacRae & Furnham, 2020). Indeed, recent studies using the measure have demonstrated how the "non Big Five" traits measured by the HPTI are particularly relevant to a variety of work behaviours (Furnham & Cuppello, 2024; Furnham et al., 2024).

The first and most extensively researched trait, *Conscientiousness*, is marked by self-discipline, organization, and impulse control. The second trait, *Adjustment*, related to low Neuroticism, involves emotional resilience, mood stability, and regulation. The third trait, *Curiosity*, akin to Openness, is characterized by an interest in new ideas, experiences, and situations. The fourth trait assessed by the HPTI is *Ambiguity Acceptance*, sometimes described as Ambiguity Tolerance (AT), which indicates how individuals perceive and process unfamiliarity or incongruence. The fifth trait, *Competitiveness*, which focuses on the adaptive aspects of competitiveness, encompassing self-improvement, a desire for individual and team success, and a propensity for learning.

Lastly, the trait of *Courage*, or *Approach to Risk*, which is the ability to combat or mitigate negative or threat-based emotions and broaden the potential range of responses.

In this study we examined four different possible correlates of WFH. First, we examined classic demographic variables namely sex, age, and class. There are various suggestions that, for instance, older as opposed to younger people prefer WFH due to such factors as the home space available, the desire to interact with colleagues etc. Others have suggested that for a variety of possibly domestic reasons women are more likely to choose to work from home compared to males. Similarly, better educated people many have more "cognitively demanding jobs" and choose to work in the relative peace of their homes.

We looked at two ideological variables namely religious and political beliefs which impact on WFH as this has become a political issue. Third we looked at self-esteem, as confidence may impact on WFH.

However, we were most interested in personality factors and working from home. Based on the literature which suggests that people may choose WFH as a way of being less productive and easily distracted we predicted Conscientious people would choose to WFH. We also predicted that more Adjusted (less Neurotic) people would choose to go to the office, for the many social and emotional benefits that it provides.
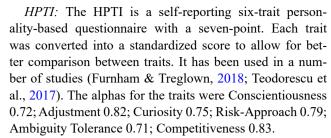
Method

Participants

In all, 1185 individuals acceptably completed the questionnaires, of which 684 (58%) were female and 498 (42%) were male. The sample consisted of respondents from various regions including from Great Britain (53%), South Africa (14%), Canada (10%), USA (8%), Europe (5%), Australia and New Zealand (4%), various Asian countries (4%), and 2% from other regions. The average age of the sample was 46.1 years (SD = 11.4). The youngest respondent was 18 and the oldest 74. Most respondents (66%) indicated having obtained a university degree.

Measures

WFH: "Do you like the idea of spending most of your time working from home?" In all 44% of the participants indicated 'Yes', and 56% 'No'.

Ideology: Two questions were asked: "How religious are you?" (1 = Not at All, to 9 = Very; M = 3.60, SD = 2.64), Political views from (1) Very Conservative to (9) Very Liberal, M = 5.51 (SD = 1.97).

HPTI: The HPTI is a self-reporting six-trait personality-based questionnaire with a seven-point. Each trait was converted into a standardized score to allow for better comparison between traits. It has been used in a number of studies (Furnham & Treglown, 2018; Teodorescu et al., 2017). The alphas for the traits were Conscientiousness 0.72; Adjustment 0.82; Curiosity 0.75; Risk-Approach 0.79; Ambiguity Tolerance 0.71; Competitiveness 0.83.

Self-Esteem (Cuppello et al., 2023) Participants rated themselves on four scales each on a 1-100-point scale: Physical Attractiveness (M = 59.98, SD = 19.35); Physical Health (M = 63.67, SD = 21.09); IQ (M = 75.60, SD = 14.33); and EQ (M = 75.39, SD = 18.81.). This were combined into a single score and the alpha was 0.73.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a pool of individuals who had completed a psychometric assessment provided by test publisher Thomas International. They were located in various countries, predominantly the UK, and acted as a voluntary research pool as many worked in Human Relations or associated fields. They were a convenience sample but large enough to explore various issues. Participants were informed of the study and provided a link to complete it via email if they choose to do so getting feedback on the results as a reward. We also obtained informed consent to analyse and publish the anonymised data. The study was conducted on an online survey platform. The research received approval from the committee LSA/TI/2022. Finally, participants were debriefed, thanked for their time, and provided feedback on their scores.

Results

Table 1 shows the correlation. In all two demographic (sex, education), one ideological (political beliefs) and four personality factors were correlated with the choice to WFH. It indicated that females more than males, graduate rather than non-graduate, left- rather than right wing people who scored lower on traits Adjustment, Conscientiousness, Risk Appetite and Ambiguity Avoidance chose to WFH.

Table 2 show the results of a binary logistic regression. Here, only three factors were important: sex, degree status and trait Conscientiousness.

Because of the size of the population, we then split the sample by sex, age, and degree status. Each subsample had roughly equal splits, the smallest of which were greater than 400 people. In the regression for males only ($N = 498$), two variables were significant: religion ($B = 0.074$, $p < .05$) and political beliefs ($B = 0.112$, $p < .05$). For females ($N = 684$)

Table 1 Mean, standard deviation, and correlation between the variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. WFH preference	0.56	0.50	—											
2. Sex	0.58	0.49	0.11***	—										
3. Age	46.49	18.70	-0.04	-0.04	—									
4. Degree	0.66	0.47	0.10***	0.07*	-0.04	—								
5. Religion	3.60	2.64	0.01	-0.03	0.06*	0.06*	—							
6. Politics	5.51	1.97	0.07*	0.16***	-0.06*	0.12***	-0.19***	—						
7. Self-Esteem	62.35	16.36	-0.03	-0.02	0.13***	0.12***	0.06*	-0.04	—					
8. Conscientiousness	70.41	8.89	-0.12***	0.03	0.08*	0.02	0.11***	-0.08*	0.18***	—				
9. Adjustment	62.78	12.12	-0.12***	-0.06*	0.07*	0.00	-0.02	-0.06	0.25***	0.27***	—			
10. Curiosity	68.25	8.79	-0.02	-0.04	0.01	0.14***	0.07*	0.17***	0.09*	0.32***	0.18***	—		
11. Risk Approach	63.56	9.78	-0.14***	-0.16***	0.10***	0.03	0.09***	-0.08*	0.20***	0.52***	0.51***	0.43***	—	
12. Ambiguity Acceptance	51.14	10.04	-0.07*	-0.06*	0.08***	0.09***	-0.10***	0.04	0.16***	0.20***	0.47***	0.30***	0.48***	—
13. Competitiveness	48.74	11.77	-0.03	-0.11***	-0.08**	0.07*	0.05	-0.15***	0.07*	0.33***	-0.04	0.10***	0.26***	0.07*

WFH preference = Prefer to work from home (1 = Yes, 0 = No), Sex (1 = Female, 0 = Male), Degree (1 = Obtained a degree, 0 = Have not obtained a degree)

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2 Binary logistic regression with WFH as criterion

	B	SE	Wald	p	Exp(B)
Sex	0.38	0.13	9.02	0.00	1.46
Age	0.00	0.00	0.12	0.73	1.00
Degree	0.37	0.13	7.88	0.01	1.44
Religious	0.02	0.02	0.99	0.32	1.02
Politics	0.03	0.03	0.91	0.34	1.03
Self-esteem	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.81	1.00
Conscientiousness	-0.02	0.01	6.94	0.01	0.98
Adjustment	-0.01	0.01	2.08	0.15	0.99
Curiosity	0.01	0.01	1.37	0.24	1.01
Risk Approach	-0.02	0.01	2.61	0.11	0.99
Ambiguity Acceptance	0.00	0.01	0.04	0.84	1.00
Competitiveness	0.00	0.01	0.44	0.51	1.00
Constant	1.85	0.67	7.51	0.01	6.33
χ^2		55.995			
p		< 0.001			
-2 Log Likelihood		1567.100			
Cox & Snell R2		0.046			
Nagelkerke R2		0.046			
Sensitivity		0.765			
Specificity		0.397			
AUC		0.622			

two variables were significant education ($B = 0.449$, $p < .01$) and trait Conscientiousness ($B = -0.030$, $p < 01$). Comparing those with a degree ($N = 785$) to those without ($N = 400$), the former revealed two significant factors: sex ($B = 0.399$, $p < .01$) and trait Conscientiousness ($B = 0.020$, $p < .01$); while for the latter, four were significant factors: age ($B = 0.023$, $p < .05$), and traits Adjustment ($B = -0.027$, $p < .05$), Curiosity ($B = 0.041$, $p < .01$) and Risk Approach ($B = -0.035$, $p < .05$). Comparing younger (under 40yrs; $N = 658$) and older (over 40 years; $N = 527$), results showed five factors significant for the younger group: sex ($B = 0.555$, $p < .05$), degree status ($B = 0.714$ $p < .05$), Conscientiousness ($B = -0.040$, $p < .01$), Adjustment ($B = -0.032$, $p < .001$) and Competitiveness ($B = 0.022$, $p < .05$). For the over 40s only two factors were significant: sex ($B = 0.290$, $p < .05$) and Risk Approach ($B = -0.027$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

In this study we had a big enough sample across gender, age, education, national, and occupational groups to be able to generalise the data across populations. Our results for some variables confirmed earlier findings. For instance, there was a consistent sex difference showing that females showed a stronger preference to work from home compared to males. When the female group was explored, it was found that those who were graduates but less Conscientious preferred to WFH, but age was not significant.

Sex differences in WFH are often complicated by the different sort of work men and women do, but also family responsibilities. Whilst there have been changes in child-care attitudes and behaviours it appears still to be the case that women still the majority of it. For many women then WFH presents an opportunity to both work and do some child-care which then becomes a contentious issue for some managers who may believe they are spending less time working than they would be if they came to the office (Martucci, 2023).

Age was neither significant in either correlations or regression. A further exploration showed that among the younger group it was females, with a degree who were lower on Conscientiousness and Adjustment, but marginally higher on Competitiveness who favoured WFH. This profile suggests an individual who may be difficult to manage and happier being at home. However, we have to acknowledge that our sample were mainly middle-aged professional workers aged 35 to 60 years. It may well be that younger workers in particular (aged 20–35) would have different WFH preferences based on their desire to interact with colleagues and well as being restricted in home space to work.

Graduates more than nongraduates preferred to WFH possibly because of their previous experience and the nature of their job. Education is related to job level, as well as job complexity, both of which could effect WFH.

It is interesting to note that the ideological variables and self-esteem were not strongly related to WFH. However, for the males sample we did find that more politically liberal people with less strong religious beliefs did tend to prefer to WFH. The ideological dimension to WFH is worth exploring.

We assumed that those with higher self-esteem would be happier at work, indeed in all environments and therefore less eager to WFH home given the social benefits of going to work. Again, however our restricted range of these factors in our sample may have led to these non-significant findings.

As noted above our primary interest was on the personality factors. There is an extensive literature on personality and activity preference including work and leisure related variables (Furnham, 2008, 2018). Of the personality variables most consistently related to work issues are Conscientiousness and Neuroticism (low Adjustment). Conscientiousness has consistently been found to be the most powerful and consistent trait predictor of positive work behaviour (Furnham, 2018). This is no surprise as Conscientious people are planful, organized and hard-working. They tend to be achievement oriented and desirable employees. Equally people low of Adjustment tend to be prone to anxiety and depression and frequent absences. In many of the studies using the HPTI such as those associated with management level, we have established that Conscientiousness and Adjustment are associated with higher management levels, suggesting they are in part responsible for promotion (Cuppello et al., 2023, 2024).

While surprising, Evans et al. (2022) found that, when forced to work remotely during the Covid pandemic, Conscientiousness predicted deteriorating job outcomes including performance, engagement, satisfaction, and burnout. Emotionality (Neuroticism), however, negatively predicted burnout when WFH. Evans et al. (2022) proposed that this is due to Conscientious individuals preferring structure, to which WFH does not provide, although this could have captured the initial shock of WFH. However, considering the difficulty of "switching off" when WFH (Felstead & Henseke, 2017), Conscientious individuals may find this even more difficult than less Conscientious individuals.

There may be a number of reasons why Conscientious people, and more Adjusted people preferred not to WFH. First, while some people claim "you can get more done" working from home this usually only refers to a limited range of activities, whereas the workplace usually has better facilities and regular contact with others. Similarly, people with low Adjustment may find travel to, and interaction in, the office potentially stressful and hence happier to work at home. Moreover, the Conscientious and Adjusted people are more likely to be more senior in the organisation and concerned about productivity of those WFH and eager to be a good role model and "go into the office" (Furnham, 2018).

It is interesting to note that these results contradict those of Gavoille and Hazans (2022). In their study they asked respondents "Where are you more productive?" and "Where would you prefer to work post-pandemic?" and found, using the TIPI, that Conscientious people felt more productive at home and therefore chose to work there. Our data suggest the opposite and this requires an explanation. It could be that WFH has, in some work environments, a reputation for "skiving" or working less, which Conscientious people want to avoid. Further, much depends on the work itself.

We also found in the correlational, but not regression results, that Risk-Approach (Courage) and Tolerance of Ambiguity were associated with a preference not to WFH, but to go into the office/workplace. Both of these factors have been related to success in the office as assessed by promotions (Cuppello et al., 2023, 2024). That is, higher Tolerance for Ambiguity and Risk-Approach people seem happier in the office compared to WFH, perhaps because they have a greater sense of what is going on.

Employers and individual managers are often concerned that WFH leads to a reduction in productivity, social cohesion, and corporate culture. Some are happy to set an example and come to work, which they believe is ultimately beneficial for all concerned.

Limitations

The biggest limitation in this study was not having data on the actual experience of WFH. The Covid-19 "crisis" meant that a very many people, who could, had a chance to WFH. Others, because of the nature of their jobs, their employment status, and their personal preferences had had previously the experience of WFH.

Secondly, we did not have data on precisely what work people did. Indeed some jobs cannot be done from home, and although we suspect there were few from this particular group we were unable to identify and eliminate them from the analyses. Clearly some jobs involve a lot of teamwork which is facilitated by environmental propinquity. Others who are much less dependent on teamwork, would probably be happier and more productive WFH. Ideally we would like to have had data on such things as participant job type, industry, and work environment, so that we could either control or look at the role of these variables.

Also, many of our measures were single item measures. Although we note "…most research published on single-item measures shows that they are often as valid and reliable as their multi-item counterparts" (Allen et al., 2022, p4).

We should also acknowledge that, like so many others, this was a cross-sectional study based on self-report with the concomitant limitations of not being able to infer causation, as well as having possible impression management problems in the data.

Finally, though our sample did work in different countries we were not able to explore cultural differences at the national as well as corporate level. The role of corporate culture plays a large part in work productivity and satisfaction (Furnham, 2020). Moreover, there are important cross-national differences in work attitudes and practices which may well play an important role in chosing to WFH.

Practical implications

It is quite clear that the trend in what was called teleworking, and now called WFH, is greatly accelerating. It means that people can and do work in virtual teams, often with people in different countries. Yet there remains a number of issues that need to be confronted by organisations. Furnham (2024) listed a number of these including:.Equipment, bills and breakdown (who pays for all the work equipment?); Health and Safety Rights and Protection;.How to instill or maintain the corporate culture;.How to control, measure and monitor the home worker; How to provide learning opportunities through observation, coaching, mentoring and training; and Family and friends not respecting work time/space.

These are issues, which all those who manage home workers, have to confront.

Declarations

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