

RE-ESTABLISHING HOME AND WORK BOUNDARIES BY PSEUDO-COMMUTING WHILST WORKING FROM HOME

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Abstract

Over the past decade, modern collaborative tools and technologies have changed the way we think about e-work. Suddenly, this kind of work was not just a perk but a necessity for almost everybody. The pandemic has accelerated the interaction between social life and e-work. E-work has become extremely popular. The purpose of this study is to find out whether "pseudo-commuting" can pave the way to a work-from-home balance and increase productivity. Special attention is paid to the e-workforce, workers who are experienced in choosing their route to work and the place for work and have implemented various post-pandemic routines. Interviews were conducted with eight workers from different European Union countries to collect primary data for this study. On the basis of these data, a pseudo-commute (an imaginary commute) can help re-establish the work-home boundaries. Overall, this means setting boundaries between those two elements by going through, in one's mind, the thoughts, events and experiences associated with a commute. All respondents noticed a general sense of increased well-being. In short, this modern commuting mode is an opportunity to remix the old commute with new rituals. It creates a feeling of taking back what has been removed by the pandemic. Pseudo-commuting is probably here to stay.

Implications for a Central European audience: Pre-pandemic morning routines have a massive impact on physical and mental well-being. Before the pandemic, an average commute was less than 30 minutes. When the workforce is not able to detach from work, there is a risk of exhaustion and burnout. Pseudo-commuting, however, can pave the way to a work-from-home balance and increase productivity. This qualitative study may serve as a tool for remixing the old commute with new rituals in the modern working environment.

Keywords: pseudo-commute; work from home; productivity; balance between work and home; European Union

JEL Classification: J22, R23, R40

Introduction

The trend towards e-working received an enormous boost with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. E-work became a necessity for almost all employees. The pandemic has changed the way we work.

It has been noted recently that e-working has more positive than negative consequences (Beño, 2021). Generally, one of the benefits of working remotely is the elimination of time spent travelling to and from the office every day. According to Beño (2022), commuting is a necessary but usually disliked daily routine. In the majority of European countries, employees commuted close to 30 minutes a day in 2019 (Eurostat, 2022). Work from home (WFH) may generate new sources of conflict and stress at home (Song & Gao, 2019). A reasonable commute to work is determined by time and distance. Factors that drive e-working include long commuting times (Beno & Hvorecky, 2021) because of the negative impact on physical and mental health, the environment and work productivity (Halonen et al., 2019). Another study found that each extra minute of commuting time reduces both job and leisure time satisfaction, increases strain and harms mental health (Chatterjee et al., 2017).

Some studies, however, suggest that commuting enables people to transition from their home roles to their work roles (Gino et al., 2017; Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009). Correspondingly, Clark (2000) stated that the workforce is required to cross the border between the work and the family domain. The outcome denotes the work-family balance, which refers to "satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with a minimum of role conflict" (Clark, 2000, p. 751). Modern technology helps take the strain out of the daily commute. The widespread mobile phone use indicates that the commute is often used for socialising with friends and family (Bissel, 2015). Gino et al. (2017) highlighted that spending some time to think about and plan the day and week while commuting is associated with better preparation, positivity and productivity at work. Interestingly, commuting by public transport has physical benefits (Batista-Ferrer et al., 2018; Flint et al., 2016).

Until COVID-19, WFH was rare. As a result of the pandemic, WFH became necessary for most of the workforce and was convenient for those who were able to work from home. Globally, the WFH mode has been widely adopted. As a result of the pandemic, lockdowns and restricted mobility, WFH has become a widespread practice. Mergener and Mansfeld (2021) found a positive link between WFH and company-home distance. This offers a possibility to evaluate the current scenario of WFH and carry out an analysis. However, among those being sent home because of the pandemic restrictions, a certain amount of commuting is required. The reason for this is that they are dealing with more meetings (DeFilippis et al., 2020), static collaboration and an increase in asynchronous communication (Yang et al., 2021). According to a recent study, about 30% of employees reported that their work and private lives had worsened, while about 10% reported improvements in their work and 13% in their private lives (Tušl et al., 2021). Nikolaeva et al. (2022) further added that commuting is seen simultaneously as a tiresome burden and as a key source of interaction with the outside world.

The present paper, therefore, concentrates on the real e-workforce, workers who are experienced when choosing their route to work and the place for work and have implemented various post-pandemic routines of pseudo-commuting. Authors understand pseudo-commute as a concept of finding effective tools/habits to decrease the feeling of WFH fatigue and re-establish the boundaries that have been blurred by WFH. It can be explained in simple terms as a method to help e-workers start and end their working day, or as imagining oneself going somewhere to get to work.

Qualitative research is optimally used for "research problems in which you do not know the variables and need to explore" (Creswell, 2005, p. 45). This author further added that the

research questions "narrow the purpose statement to specific questions that researchers seek to answer" (p. 117). According to Bradley (2001, p. 574), good research questions "are stated clearly, are researchable, and involve some concept related to either theory or an applied context". With a small number of respondents, the research can be done quickly. Therefore, research questions can be asked in a relatively short time. For this reason, a qualitative approach was applied for solving the following research questions: (1) Why do e-workers prefer a pseudo-commute?, (2) Can introducing a pseudo-commute help decrease work-from-home fatigue?, (3) Is a pseudo-commute an effective tool to balance work and home? Data for the research were collected by means of semi-structured interviews. An interview guide with open-ended questions was prepared.

1 Methodology

WhatsApp, being a free-of-charge medium, was selected for collecting data. With over 2 billion active users globally (Ruby, 2022), WhatsApp is one of the most effective tools for in-person interviewing. Manji et al. (2021) stressed that WhatsApp Messenger provides new and affordable opportunities for research across time and place. WhatsApp is more immediate and spontaneous than other tools (Boulos et al., 2016; Mars & Scott, 2016). The size of the sample may be limited by respondents possibly not having a WhatsApp account and/or adequate mobile data. The main data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview.

1.1 Sampling

E-workers with a full home office model who regularly pseudo-commute and speak English fluently were specifically asked to participate in this investigation. Two of the participants were sought through personal contact with the author, while the remaining six were obtained through social media. The sample included eight participants from various countries from across the service sector. In the pre-COVID period, the occurrence of e-working in the European Union was relatively steady with little variation in its consequences, but now e-working has various effects. The European Union combines several exclusive features with regard to the development and occurrence of e-work. A comparison of selected European countries, therefore, reveals how e-work can develop depending on its occurrence and social and economic factors. A specifically selected sample was used for a practical reason, such as pseudo-commuting experience. The selection of the countries was based on characteristics that were relevant to the results of the study, that is, to create a condition for theoretical innovation, generalisation and contextualisation of findings and explanations.

The sample consisted of four females (E-H) and four males (A-D) with ages ranging from 38 to 48 (see Table 1).

Table 1 | Breakdown of sample participants

Country	Participants	Gender	Age
Austria	A	M	38
Slovakia	B	M	48
Germany	C	M	41
Italy	D	M	42
Czech Republic	E	F	39
Netherlands	F	F	44
Sweden	G	F	47
France	H	F	40

Source: Author

1.2 Data collection

The selected participants were contacted via WhatsApp after an email invitation, and their indicated timeslot was confirmed. Consequently, a pilot interview was conducted with one e-worker to redefine the questions. Each respondent was interviewed via the social media tool for about 60 minutes. Respondents were asked to give their feedback on the following questions:

1. What is pseudo-commute?
2. Think about this: What do you miss about commuting? What aspects of commuting were good for you?
3. How do you create a pseudo-commute?
4. What are the benefits?
5. What are some tips on how to incorporate a WFH pseudo-commute?

1.3 Data analysis

In this study, a constant comparative method was applied (Glaser, 1965). This means that two investigators working individually with qualitative data will not acquire the same data. Through comparison, researchers create and refine categories and analytic themes (Tesch, 2013). Data or thematic saturation focuses on assessing the sample size (Hennink et al., 2017). Small sample sizes are effective for qualitative research, and they make it possible to reach saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Reaching saturation makes data collection robust and solid (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013).

Data analysis was conducted following Dey's idea (Dey, 1993, p. 55): "With categories we impute meanings, with coding we compute them". Once a common theme was identified, it was given a code, and each coded category was subsequently examined. In our qualitative study, inductive coding was applied. In other words, we started with no codes and developed the coding as the dataset was analysed. In the same way as the title of a book or song captures its primary content and essence, so we arranged the ideas in a systematic order to make the individual thoughts part of a system or classification; that is, so as to categorise.

A two-level coding scheme (Table 2) was developed by standardising the textual units in order to organise and make sense of the qualitative data derived from the interviews. The first level comprised "pseudo-commute"; the second level further distinguished: (1) terminology, (2) commute upsides, (3) design, (4) rewards and (5) tips.

Table 2 | Two-level coding scheme

Code level 1	Code level 2	Items
Pseudo-commute	Terminology	Disconnecting, pretending, setting route, habits, ritual, pause
	Commute upsides	Physically leave, unwinding, mental preparation, planning, letting go, break, me time
	Design	Biking, walking, stretching, meditation, transition, the act of drinking, walking the dog, getting dressed, no screen zone, simulate
	Rewards	Sleep, getting out of the house, reducing feelings of anxiety and stress, being active, motivation, creating routines, fresh air, sunshine
	Tips	Ritual, habit, timing, consistency, family, switch off, starting and ending the day

Source: Author

1.4 Ethical considerations

All participants were informed about the aim of the investigation, with participation entirely voluntary. A consent form was issued before the interview was conducted. All contact data were then encoded. The accuracy and validity of the data collection were strengthened by the coding.

2 Results

This paper draws on findings from interviews conducted in the period extending from the second-last week of 2022 to the first week of January 2023.

2.1 Terminology

As the name suggests, pseudo-commute is a way of pretending to commute. Working remotely means a major change in various day-to-day activities. Generally, not having a daily commute seems to be the most striking, and respondents miss the clear separation between home and work that the commute provides.

What is pseudo-commute, according to the respondents? "I can journey on my own terms, choosing where to go, when, how long and the mode," interviewee A said. Respondent B explained it as follows: "Habit giving my brain a bit of pause". This is similar to participant C, who highlighted "the physical and mental pause of the day". Another pseudo-commuter (D) simply said that "pseudo-commuting is a good reason to get out of the flat". Interviewee E agreed with this by confirming that "it helps to leave the house". Interestingly, pseudo-commuter F compared working from home to a "sense of living at work, so set intention for

the day in the morning and reflection in the evening". Very often, WFH is seen as an image of relaxation, almost like a "pyjama party". Pseudo-commuting relates to this; as pseudo-commuter G said, "I have a reason to get dressed in the morning". Respondent H concluded that "this tool helps you decrease home and work life blurring because when working from home I am stuck on a cycle of walking around my own house". Simply stated, we understand the pseudo-commute as a habit that e-workers do before the start, and at the end of the working day.

2.2 Commute upsides

In pre-COVID times, many employees were not satisfied with their commutes for many reasons. The pandemic changed the commuting style by liberating and providing extra time daily with WFH, but not for everyone. Our data emphasise that workers miss the opportunity to unwind after the working day. Similarly, the worker loses the chance of "being prepared before starting to work".

"I used my commute to be mentally prepared for the workday," respondent A explained. The next answerer (B) had the same idea and described it as "a mental pause". "Oh, I remember well, waking up early, getting dressed and schlepping to the office and back, it was my time to do anything I wanted," was the way respondent C described it. Interviewee D used the time for planning: "going over a to-do list, checking emails, appointments, getting ready to the work mode transition". For E, a cyclist, the "daily commute was a chance to exercise and unwind". Respondent F lamented, "I miss my morning coffee latte". Almost identically, interviewee G said, "as a friend, my regular commute always featured a latte and croissant". H concluded that "the act of getting dressed, getting on public transport, buying and reading newspapers and coffee helped my mind and body prepare for a full day of work".

2.3 Design

Replacing the commute ritual with a pseudo-commute at the beginning and at the end of the day is helpful for one's well-being. It is clear that work-life balance (WLB) is much harder when working from home. Before the pandemic, it was a time to compartmentalise the work week, but COVID-19 made commute rituals disappear. Based on the interview results, creating a route by departing from one place and arriving at another is helpful.

"I simulate that I am going to and leaving from work, getting dressed, taking breakfast as I did before," respondent A stressed. Interviewee B talked about maintaining a commute pattern: "I had a 35-minute commute to work (by car and by public transport), so I keep the same time for my pseudo-commute." The quality of "me time" is more important than quantity, participant C said, and added, "listening to podcasts or audiobooks, meditation, daily yoga, stretching... It's about 35 minutes before taking a shower." Creating a neutral zone helped interviewee D to set up his own pseudo-commute model: "I pack up my workstation and take a tram, underground, the same route as before the pandemic." "15 km morning ride, that's become my favourite. I am just sort of away," E said. "The beauty is that I explore my local area, I love to be active," E added. Creating an act of drinking is part of the pseudo-commute, as respondent F explained: "Making a coffee ritual always signaled the beginning of my work day. So I created my own act of drinking coffee, including washing up ... the best time to switch my gears." Also, grabbing a coffee seems to be very effective. Respondent G highlighted: "I walk, about 15 minutes to a coffee shop most mornings before I start my

workday. It adds a more human aspect by talking to the barista and other people I meet on my way.” “I include my family,” explained H. “Because my kids are learning in hybrid mode, we walk all together for a while so that they can socialise too, it’s our new ‘family time’.”

2.4 Rewards

“Overslept, tired, late, exhausted,” are typical commuter laments. It seems that the commute may be the miserable part of the work day. Long commutes are responsible for lower well-being. During the pandemic, many people were liberated from the commute and are in WFH mode. However, we still live in a world of commuters. Commuting is about time. This study shows that the appearance of the pseudo-commute is worthwhile. Respondents talked about moments of solace during a transition from home to work mode, and vice versa.

“There is something in pseudo-commute, a mental process that goes on in planning for the day and letting go of the day,” interviewee A responded. Answerer B responded: “As an e-worker, I really have problems falling asleep at the end of the day, but a pseudo-commute with its clear slots helps me to lie down and fall asleep.” Participant C also mentioned that a “pseudo-commute is vital for helping to regulate my mood, energy, focus and much more for optimising my sleep qualities, simply falling asleep with ease”. Notably, “reducing feelings of anxiety and stress through the short amount of time outdoors” was reported by respondent D. According to interviewee E, “it helps you to leave the house ... kind of feeling more refreshed”. The pseudo-commute was seen by respondent F as a proactive approach to boost productivity. “Morning routines are a boost to productivity. Anything you can do to stop and think about what you are about to do,” F explained. This is similar to participant G’s answer that “it boosts my mood and possibly my productivity ... the main difference is my general sense of well-being”. H concluded with noting the following benefits: “(1) a routine when days often blur into each other, (2) you have a reason to get dressed, (3) increased vitamin D (outdoors), fresh air, increased endorphins through exercise, and (4) enhanced mental health”.

2.5 Tips

According to interviewees, starting a pseudo-commute requires good time management and willingness to do it in the mornings and evenings. Then one must find the activities which will be used as a way to ease into and out of the working day and to maintain a balance between work and home.

To create a wall between work and home, the following small changes are needed, according to interviewee A: “(1) find a space that best fits your schedule and comfort, (2) take work breaks, (3) add small transitions about how you would commute, (4) design commute: timing, method, possibilities with a scale ranking, and (5) stretch before, during and after work (even simple desk stretches)”. Participant B said one must remember the fact that “without commute, there is no time to decompress”. “Walking is accessible for most of us and being able to get outside, get fresh air and sunshine is good,” interviewee C highlighted. Answerer D summarised three general tips as follows: “(1) start a routine and remain consistent, (2) find pockets of your time during the day, and (3) set SMART goals: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based.” Respondent E believed the pseudo-commute “is just what the doctor ordered”. Respondent F stressed that “you have to make sure that you get out of the house and create routines because morning routines are a boost to productivity”.

For this reason, participant G said that “you have to make sure that you get out of the house and create routines. For instance: go for a walk; go out for a coffee or enjoy a drink; enjoy your drink outdoors; do activities to allow your brain to transit from non-work to work; make a list of tasks; turn off the tech devices, turn off the room lights, put away your pen, calendar, notebook.” “When you are done with your walk and re-enter your home, just pretend you are back from the office, saying ‘Baby, I am home.’ I found myself being lazy and wanted to break a pattern which felt like a cycle of just walking around my house,” interviewee H said.

3 Discussion

Does pseudo-commuting work? According to the interviews, it helps e-workers get into a work mindset in the morning and into a home mindset in the evening. In simple terms, it is a method that helps start and end the working day. As the respondents stated, WFH makes it hard to recognise when work ends, and home life begins. This statement does not align with the existing literature, which argues that WFH allows the workforce to spend more time with their families, manage household chores and reduce commuting time among other things and to improve WLB (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001; Savić, 2020). Our findings align with those of Hilbrecht et al. (2008), who stated that WFH negatively affects WLB by allocating the time saved by WFH to more work or household chores. However, Rupietta and Beckmann (2016) found that employees who work from home more frequently show a higher work effort than employees who only stay at home very infrequently or always stay in the office. Sullivan’s (2012) study demonstrated that WFH could improve WLB without reducing productivity in certain circumstances. Pseudo-commuting may be a vital part of this change. According to the interviewees’ statements, pseudo-commuting is effective and works well. This is in the vein of Fell’s (2000) statement that commuting can transition between the home and work and can provide the opportunity for some quiet time alone. Commuting takes time; in fact, as stated by Burd et al. (2021), it takes up a significant portion of one’s day. The Institute of Transportation Studies at UC Davis calculated an average commute time of 16 minutes (Fell, 2000).

Individuals, including the respondents in this study, create, maintain or change boundaries between work and non-work roles (Ashforth et al., 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Voydanoff & Nippert-Eng, 1998). Just like the data of Nikolaeva et al. (2022), our respondents demonstrated that the commute demarcates a transition between work and home; without commuting this separation has vanished. Pindek et al. (2022) emphasised that the commute may have positive aspects, which is similar to the interviewees’ statements about “me time”. The quality of “me time” is more important than quantity, as participant C stated. Greater job autonomy and self-leadership could have led to higher individual productivity (Galanti et al., 2021). Commuting time saved as a result of WFH is devoted to work-related activities, which may increase productivity (Barrero et al., 2021). As reported in this study, the pseudo-commute may also increase productivity. The pseudo-commute was seen by respondent F as a proactive approach to boost productivity. This is similar to participant G’s answer that “it boosts my mood and possibly my productivity ... the main difference is my general sense of well-being”.

Interviewees’ answers correspond with the finding of Nikolaeva et al. (2022) that commuting is seen simultaneously as a tiresome burden and as a key source of interaction with the wider

world, which is important in sustaining people's sense of daily balance. It is, as respondent B put it in simple terms, "a mental pause".

Conclusion

For those working from home, separating work life from home life and vice versa has been particularly difficult during the pandemic. Commutes that formerly lasted hours now consisted of only a few short steps. This seemed to be an enjoyable change until employees found that the boundaries between work and home life were becoming blurred. The pandemic upended old routines by creating new ones such as pseudo-commuting.

This qualitative study was an attempt to find answers to the following research questions:

1) Why do e-workers prefer a pseudo-commute?

Human beings make and keep routines. As specified in this study, respondents suggest that in the present circumstances, the old commute patterns can be mixed with new ones. WFH allows more flexibility and a more comfortable (non-existent) commute. A pseudo-commute helps e-workers adopt a work mindset in the morning and a home mindset in the evening.

2) Can introducing a pseudo-commute help decrease work-from-home fatigue?

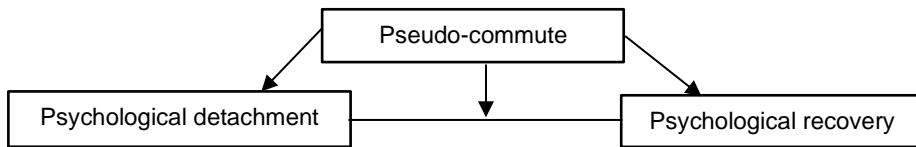
This study demonstrates that the disappearance of the commute in the traditional sense is not all positive. Pseudo-commuting adds structure and separates work life from home life and vice versa.

3) Is a pseudo-commute an effective tool to balance work and home?

The views expressed in the interview data are strongly in favour of the pseudo-commute. It provides vital mental and physical benefits. The pseudo-commute as a tool creates a valuable transition between on and off hours and makes life more meaningful.

This study has threefold practical implications, namely for e-workers, for employers and for society. With regard to workers' benefits, the pseudo-commute can be used to satisfy one or more of e-workers' basic physiological and psychological needs. It helps to increase work-life balance, reclaim precious transition time and, by separating work from home life, re-establish the boundaries blurred by working remotely. Regardless of the mode, creating a routine of pseudo-commuting is recommended. Employers will obviously benefit indirectly from e-workers' pseudo-commute, as the outcomes will spill over into other dimensions, especially in work engagement. Societal implications include e-workers' recovery from stress and burnout by overall increased happiness and health. This means a healthier, happier and more productive society. The data demonstrate a possible way for the e-workforce to obtain protection against the negative effects of e-work and to prevent burnout. The findings suggest that e-workers may benefit from creating their own forms of commute for psychological detachment (switching off from work duties) and psychological recovery (regaining energy used during the working day), as demonstrated in the figure 1.

Figure 1 | Graphical representation of implications



Source: Author's own compilation

The key strength of the present study is its reproducibility. The main difficulty faced in doing research on the pseudo-commute is its novelty. Secondly, there is the issue of characterising and justifying sample size with pseudo-commuting experience and excellent English skills. Another problem was that the qualitative study is time-consuming. A particular problem could go unnoticed (Bowen, 2006). Additionally, author interpretations were limited. Finally, personal experiences and knowledge influence the observations and conclusions.

An area of future research that can be encouraged would be to examine the productivity of partners of e-workers who implement pseudo-commute. Additionally, COVID-19 has forced a rethinking of flexibility (e.g., a triple working model: on-site, hybrid and WFH) and the role of the traditional commute; therefore, future investigation into commuting methods is needed.

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