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# The Future of Work in the Philippine Public Sector: Learnings from Experiences with Mandatory Telecommuting During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Rowena Paz Gelvezon<sup>1\*</sup>, Cheryl Joy Fernandez-Abila<sup>2</sup>, Duvince Zhalimar Dumpit<sup>3</sup>, Oscar Jinon Jr.<sup>4</sup>, Inaj Mae Abalajon<sup>5</sup>, Mary Ann Sedero<sup>6</sup>, Pearl Gladys Diano<sup>7</sup>, Mary Jane Castromayor<sup>8</sup>, Jhoanne Marsh Gatpatan<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Accounting, College of Management, UP Visayas, [rlgelvezon1@up.edu.ph](mailto:rlgelvezon1@up.edu.ph)

<sup>2</sup>Department of Management, College of Management, UP Visayas, [cjfernandez@up.edu.ph](mailto:cjfernandez@up.edu.ph)

<sup>3</sup>Department of Accounting, College of Management, UP Visayas, [djdumpit@up.edu.ph](mailto:djdumpit@up.edu.ph)

<sup>4</sup>Department of Accounting, College of Management, UP Visayas, [osjinon@up.edu.ph](mailto:osjinon@up.edu.ph)

<sup>5</sup>Division of Humanities, College of Arts and Sciences, UP Visayas, [ipabalajon@up.edu.ph](mailto:ipabalajon@up.edu.ph)

<sup>6</sup>Department of Management, College of Management, UP Visayas, [mtsedero@up.edu.ph](mailto:mtsedero@up.edu.ph)

<sup>7</sup>Department of Accounting, College of Management, UP Visayas, [podiano@up.edu.ph](mailto:podiano@up.edu.ph)

<sup>8</sup>Graduate School, UP Visayas, [mjcastromayor@up.edu.ph](mailto:mjcastromayor@up.edu.ph)

<sup>9</sup>Division of Physical Sciences and Mathematics, College of Arts and Sciences, UP Visayas  
[jcgatpatan@up.edu.ph](mailto:jcgatpatan@up.edu.ph)

This study examines the experiences of Filipino government workers who were required to telecommute during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data were gathered from 31 government workers from various offices nationwide using virtual focus group discussions (FGD). Participants were grouped into three clusters to ensure a fair representation of employee characteristics. The collected data were processed following a protocol and analyzed using thematic analysis. The study revealed that telecommuting has paradoxical effects on individual performance and productivity, professional and social isolation, and work-life balance. Telecommuting is seen as multidimensional and highly situational, hence, a “customized” or “tailored-fit” approach rather than a “one-size-fits-all” approach is recommended. When developing a telecommuting program, it is crucial to consider culture, nature of work, worker characteristics, supervisors’ roles, information and communication technology, and other contexts. Findings from the study will be helpful to government organizations that are considering remote work programs for their employees.

**Keywords:** mandatory telecommuting, public sector telecommuting, work performance and productivity, work-life balance, isolation, ICT, COVID-19 pandemic



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## Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020; Durbarry, 2021). The outbreak was deemed as the worst crisis since World War II because of its extensive and severe consequences for work, the global economy, and the well-being of the societies (International Labour Office, 2020). International and domestic mobility restrictions were imposed, including travel bans and lockdowns, inevitably resulting in a large proportion of the workforce being unable to commute to work (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). As an immediate solution, the public sector in most countries mandated telecommuting (also known as work-from-home or telework) as an alternative work arrangement to ensure the continuity of essential public services while also protecting government employees' welfare (Durbarry, 2021; Edelmann & Millard, 2021; Liebermann et al., 2021). The Philippine government responded by declaring a State of Public Health Emergency and directing all government agencies to provide assistance and mobilize necessary resources to carry out critical, urgent, and appropriate responses and measures to efficiently curb and eliminate the threat (Malacañang Palace, 2020). The Philippine Civil Service Commission (CSC) made alternative work arrangements available to government agencies, including work-from-home, an output-oriented work arrangement where government employees perform their job responsibilities from home or another location other than the office (Civil Service Commission, 2020).

Telecommuting is not a new work arrangement. Nilles et al. (1976) introduced the concept of telecommuting in the early 1970s to alleviate traffic problems and reduce energy consumption (Allen et al., 2015), however, adoption in the public sector was slow (Mele et al., 2023). Asian government organizations hesitated to embrace remote work due to traditional bureaucratic structures, a collectivist organizational culture, and reliance on regulated, predictable, and routine operations (Durbarry, 2021; Kwon & Kim-Goh, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, forced governments around the world to quickly implement telecommuting, prompting Ansell et al. (2021) to refer to the pandemic as a "game changer," given that it has caused the

"dissolution of traditional spatial, temporal, or organizational boundaries of work" (Edelmann & Millard, 2021). Unlike traditional remote work, pandemic-induced telecommuting was a full-time practice with no employee agreement, a sudden implementation with insufficient preparation, and forced home confinement, resulting in professional and personal balance issues (Carillo et al., 2021). Kwon & Kim-Goh (2023) asserts that telework, due to its unconventional nature, should be evaluated separately from conventional telework offered as an alternative work arrangement. Furthermore, Edelmann & Millard (2021) pointed out that this could lead to new insights into how telecommuting impacts the public sector.

The present study contributes to the telecommuting discourse in four ways. Firstly, despite extensive research by scholars from other countries on the experiences of public sector employees during the pandemic, there has been very little research done on the experiences of Filipino public sector employees with mandatory telecommuting. Most Philippine telecommuting studies have focused on the private sector, except for the studies of Parilla et al. (2022) and Mores (2022), which covered both the public and private sectors. Thus, it is essential to direct analysis to the public sector to understand the effect of telecommuting, given that the public sector's goals, structure, stakeholder environment, accountability requirements, managerial autonomy, values, culture, decision-making, and leadership vary from those of the private sector (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000; Tangsgaard et al., 2022). Secondly, there has been conflicting research on telecommuting, with different studies reporting contradictory and paradoxical outcomes (Boulet & Parent-Lamarche, 2022; Nadiv, 2022; Ponnappalli, 2020). As such, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the experiences of Filipino government workers required to telecommute during the pandemic and identify contingencies that may help explain differing outcomes. Thirdly, telecommuting affects government employees differently, and this study focuses on the telecommuting outcomes that Filipino government workers perceive as essential for successful remote work. The findings have significant implications for government organizations considering remote work policies for their employees. Finally, recent studies have indicated that telecommuting and hybrid work arrangements are gaining popularity in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era (Chow et al., 2022; Edelmann & Millard, 2021; Williamson & Colley, 2022). To successfully implement telecommuting as a voluntary and flexible work arrangement in

Philippine government agencies, it is crucial to gather insights from individuals with relevant experiences and those who will be most affected by the policy.

Using thematic analysis, this paper presents three major themes that emerged from Filipino public sector employees' mandatory telecommuting experiences. These include, among others, 1) job performance and productivity, 2) social and professional isolation, and 3) work-life balance.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **Work performance and productivity in telecommuting**

Work productivity refers to a worker's output in quantifiable terms, i.e., quantity of output, cost, or time relative to his or her capacity (Prokopenko, 1987) or perceived effectiveness while working (Baker, 2007). On the other hand, work performance reflects a worker's actions in a role that contributes to achieving organizational goals (Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). Numerous studies investigating the effects of telecommuting on work performance and productivity have surfaced during the pandemic. A private sector study by Criscuolo et al. (2023) found that telecommuting improved employee productivity by allowing them to focus better and make fewer mistakes. These findings are consistent with the work of Wolor et al. (2021), whose respondents from the education sector reported that remote work positively impacted employee performance through work discipline. Another study by Loredana et al. (2021) involving hundreds of IT workers in Romania showed that self-management tactics and the telework environment (including good physical conditions and adequate telework tools) are positively linked to work productivity. Hence, organizational support is essential to achieving work productivity in a telework setting.

Studies on telecommuting in the public sector, which is viewed as improving familial relations (Ezra & Deckman, 1996; Saltzstein et al., 2001), are less common compared to the private sector. A dominant subset of these studies dealt with the effects of telework on employees (Bagley et al., 2021; Bashir Khodaparasti & Bagheri Garbollah, 2023; Filardi et al., 2020) or the organization as a whole (Choi, 2018; Kwon & Jeon, 2020). These studies have conflicting findings, particularly regarding work productivity and performance. Some studies suggest a positive relationship between telecommuting and productivity, while others show adverse effects

such as increased stress levels. For example, Bae & Goodman (2014) discovered that telecommuting boosts female Korean employees' productivity, while Gajendran & Harrison (2007) observed a negative relationship between telecommuting intensity and coworkers' relationships, leading to increased stress levels among telecommuters who overwork or have personal circumstances or health concerns when telecommuting (Henke et al., 2016).

### **Professional and social isolation in telecommuting**

Telecommuters experience isolation on two levels: professional and social. Professional isolation refers to a need for more valuable connections to influential networks, which can limit opportunities for professional advancement and rewards (de Vries et al., 2019; Golden, 2012). Social isolation occurs when employees experience a lack of interaction with colleagues (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). De Vries et al. (2019) posit that remote work increases professional isolation in the government sector however, professional isolation depends on development activities such as interpersonal networking, informal learning, and mentoring (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). Similarly, social isolation is a concern for telecommuters in the public sector because they may not have the chance to interact face-to-face or participate in workplace social activities (Dixon, 2003). However, some individuals who do not value interactions with coworkers to avoid office politics and interruptions might not feel isolated.

Researchers who looked at the effects of telecommuting during the pandemic on public sector workers also found that it can lead to professional and social isolation (De Andres-Sanchez et al., 2023; Even, 2020; Leal Filho et al., 2021). Several factors can increase workers' feelings of isolation, such as perception of work-life imbalance, ICT infrastructure and home environment, organizational support, career advancement opportunities, workloads (De Andres-Sanchez et al., 2023), personality type, job autonomy (Doberstein & Charbonneau, 2022), job outcomes, opportunities to demonstrate competence, knowledge transfer, and leadership capacity (Even, 2020).

### **Telecommuting and work-life balance**

Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska (2019) define work-life balance as successfully integrating work and family responsibilities while minimizing conflict and achieving human fulfillment. The sudden shift to telecommuting during the pandemic has made harder for employees to balance work and personal

life (Adisa et al., 2022). As a result, they must juggle multiple responsibilities, such as attending meetings and caring for the children, all within the confines of their homes, triggering greater work-to-life and life-to-work conflicts, which worsen their work-life balance (Palumbo et al., 2022; Putri & Amran, 2021).

Researchers investigated the effects of telecommuting on work-life balance in the public sector, both before and during the pandemic. However, their findings have sometimes been inconsistent and contradictory (Edelmann & Millard, 2021; Elbaz et al., 2022; Gálvez et al., 2013). According to Cushing et al. (2020), public sector employees understand the benefits (e.g., flexibility, increased productivity, and time spent with family) and drawbacks (e.g., distractions, technological difficulties, and lack of connection with coworkers) of telecommuting. Despite the drawbacks, they view this work mode favorably and express the desire to continue with it after the pandemic. Palumbo (2020) disagreed, claiming that telecommuting can lead to work-life imbalance due to overlapping work and non-work responsibilities. Williamson et al. (2022) suggests that the impact of telecommuting on work-life balance differs based on employee demographics and specific circumstances. They emphasize the importance of acknowledging these differences and adjusting human resource policies to support all employees in achieving a healthy work-life balance.

## Methodology

The study is part of a research project titled "Telecommuting Preferences of Government Workers in the Philippines," which used mixed method design. This paper focuses on analyzing the qualitative data gathered from three virtual focus group discussions (FGD). This general qualitative research is designed to understand telecommuting experiences and has been adopted in some related studies. (Rajbanshi, 2022; Seinsche et al., 2022; Obada-Obieh et al., 2021).

A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was used to collect data from the FGD participants. Using open-ended questions like *"How were you affected by mandatory telecommuting?"* *How has mandatory telecommuting affected your work?* *How do you think mandatory telecommuting has affected your community and the environment?* *How has your family life been impacted?"* were deemed appropriate because they enabled participants to freely express themselves and be heard (McCallum & Howes, 2019).

A total of 31 FGD participants were selected from different offices across the country, including National Government Agencies (NGAs), Government-Owned and -Controlled Corporations (GOCCs), State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), Local Government Units (LGUs), and Local Water Districts (LWDs). The sample size of 31 is considered sufficient to uncover significant issues in qualitative research (Guess et al., 2020; Hennink et al., 2016; Terry et al., 2017). The participants were categorized into three FGD clusters based on their career levels: Career Level 1 (e.g., clerical, trades, crafts, and custodial positions); Career Level 2 (e.g., professional, technical, and scientific positions); and Non-Career (e.g., elected officials, confidential staff, and contractual personnel).

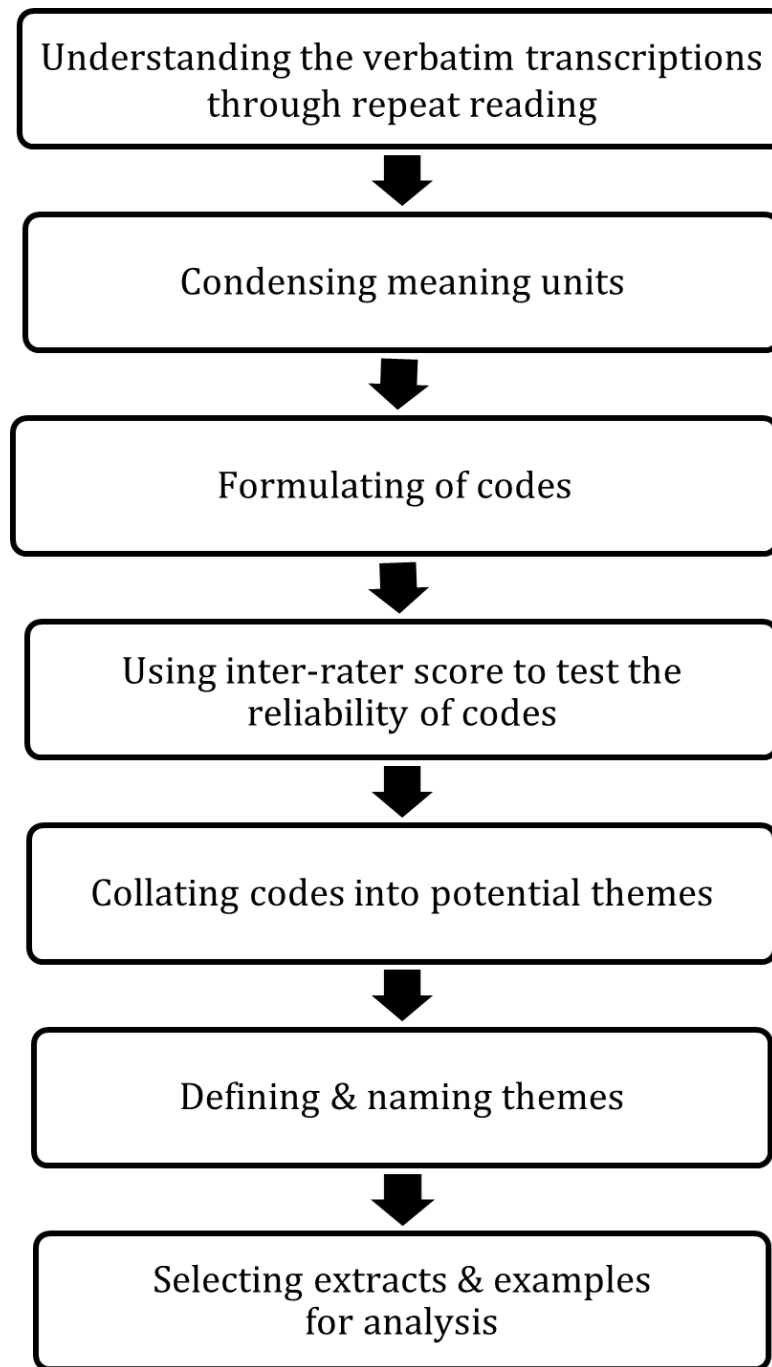
All participants completed an online survey in advance to express their interest in participating in the FGD. During the selection process of FGD participants, the researchers considered both positive and negative telecommuting experiences, as well as work, personal, and household characteristics. Table 1 shows more information about the participants' characteristics.



**Table 1.** Focus group discussion participants' characteristics.

	Focus Group Discussions Cluster					
	Career Level 1 (Cluster 1)		Career Level 2 (Cluster 2)		Career Level 3 (Cluster 3)	
Type of agency	NGA	3	NGA	2	NGA	4
	GOCC	3	GOCC	4	GOCC	3
	SUC	2	SUC	2	SUC	3
	LGU	0	LGU	2	LGU	1
	LWD	1	LWD	1	LWD	0
Sex	Male	3	Male	3	Male	5
	Female	6	Female	8	Female	6
n=31		9		11		11
Average age	39 years old		49 years old		38 years old	
Average household size	5 members		4 members		4 members	
Family member/s with comorbidities n = 31	Yes	6	Yes	3	Yes	1
		3		8		10
	No	9	No	11	No	11
Willingness to telecommute after the pandemic	Yes	6	Yes	3	Yes	1
	No	3	No	8	No	10
n = 31		9		11		11

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the qualitative data, incorporating references such as Braun & Clarke (2006), Erlingsson & Brysiewicz (2017), Kassarian (1977), and Saldaña (2013), as depicted in Figure 1. First, the recordings from the three focus groups were verbatim transcribed. Each transcription was carefully read and reread to gain a better understanding of telecommuting experiences, taking related notes if needed. Second, multiple transcript reviews facilitated the identification of common ideas among the three focus groups and/or across profiles. Third, codes were assigned to recurring patterns and repetitions in the transcriptions, and all relevant data was compiled for each code. Fourth, the researchers worked in pairs to compare and validate the codes, gaining more than 90% reliability. Fifth, similar codes were then combined to generate themes relevant to the research questions. All relevant data for each theme was gathered to preserve its core meaning during categorization.



**Figure 1.** Schematic representation of thematic analysis used in the study.

Sixth, the themes were reviewed and compared. Related themes were combined, and themes lacking sufficient supporting data from the transcriptions were eliminated. Seventh, the story of each theme and its contribution to the overall narrative were reviewed before assigning names to the themes, ensuring they aligned with the research questions. Finally, compelling excerpts and narratives were identified to illustrate the storyline or support the researchers' arguments related to the research objectives. Annex 1 provides examples of codes and themes derived from the narratives of the participants.

## Results

In the three focus groups, individual work productivity and performance emerged as significant themes, with 29 out of 31 participants reporting that telecommuting had a noticeable impact on their productivity and performance. Out of the 29 respondents, 23 workers consistently performed better. They stated that they had more flexibility with their time and were able to concentrate better, whether they were working from home or in other remote spaces such as restaurants, co-working spaces, or community halls. While working from

home resulted in fewer work-related distractions, some participants mentioned that noises from pets, family members, and housework were bothersome. Despite the distractions, a port engineer concluded that participants were generally productive while telecommuting, as expressed below:

*"We conduct inspection; you talk to your peers and your boss through means of communication, which are, I think, more productive now." (Male, 57 years old, Supervisor)*

Participants talked about changes they had experienced in the quality and quantity of their work. One example mentioned was the expansion of online platforms such as social media, which has increased the reach of stakeholders like clients. Additionally, there had been a significant increase in participation in training, seminars, and workshops. A government employee in charge of information and publications quipped:

*"We are more productive now. I also observed this in other departments when their productivity is doing well. We already reached the annual targets set in the 2019 pre-pandemic performance metrics as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the year. We noticed that telecommuting works for us. This arrangement works for us." (Female, 44 years old, Supervisor)*

Of the 29 respondents, only five had difficulties working efficiently while telecommuting. One worker shared that his productivity had decreased as he was constantly distracted while telecommuting from home. Another worker expressed dissatisfaction with the inadequate ICT infrastructure at home, affecting her work performance. The following quote captures her frustration with bringing a bulky desktop computer home:

*"In our case, we brought home our desktop computers. Some were allowed to bring their laptops home, so they were more mobile – they could go to the office and work from home simultaneously with their laptops. However, it becomes more challenging for those who bring their desktop computers home." (Female, 45 years old, Supervisor)*

Twenty-three of the 29 participants maintained that the nature of their tasks, duties, and responsibilities significantly impacted their work productivity. One administrative officer participant explained the challenges of telecommuting, stating that her

colleagues, supervisor, and clients often required her assistance with various tasks and documents. This made working remotely difficult, as she could not access important documents and respond to requests promptly.

*"Being an admin officer, you have to be in the office. Being an admin officer is so difficult, and you're at home. Multiple people - my boss, other staff, and clients need my services. My colleagues will ask, 'Ms. Rose, do we have bond paper?' and my boss will tell me, 'Ms. Rose, we have a report to submit.' Our clients will ask, 'Ms. Rose, where is the letter of Mr...?' When you are at home, and those documents are in the office, you are dead! I will not get anything done!" (Female, 31 years old, Administrative Officer)*

Eleven of the 29 participants encountered difficulties adopting new technology essential for telecommuting, such as the lack of proficiency and an unwillingness to learn. Moreover, they stated that they had limited support services, such as an in-house Management Information System (MIS) or an IT Department to assist them with hardware, software, and network-related issues. Baby boomer workers (born between 1946 and 1964) felt that learning new technology was unnecessary because of their impending retirement. However, due to work necessities and mobility restrictions, they had no choice but to learn new technologies related to work and lifestyle (such as food delivery apps), albeit with marked difficulties. The following quote illustrates the dilemma of senior citizens in adopting new technology:

*"But I'd like to share that some employees, especially baby boomers, cannot adapt to the virtual communication technology. They have difficulty adapting to technology, such as communication technology. Even opening emails, some of them are not accustomed to that." (Female, 39 years old, Principal Engineer)*

Workers who were more knowledgeable and experienced in using computers and other ICT tools reported being burdened with more responsibilities because other employees were not interested or enthusiastic about learning new technologies. Senior colleagues unfamiliar with technology delegated tasks to more tech-savvy workers, particularly when there was limited time to complete the task, causing an uneven workload distribution.

*"For me, some of my colleagues, maybe because of age. Some are not of the same age as mine, but some are not technologically savvy or do not like the burden of knowing how to set up these things. So, some of us who are easily adaptable to technology are overloaded. Senior colleagues would say, 'I am unfamiliar with setting up this or that. Please take charge.' When pressed with time, we eventually do the task instead of evenly distributing it to everyone." (Female, 28 years old, Assistant Professor)*

The FGD participants cited social and professional isolation as another major recurring theme. Twenty-six of 31 government employees shared that because telecommuting was required to reduce virus spread, they had little to no physical contact with their coworkers, resulting in alienation and decreased physical socialization. Participants added that they felt most socially isolated during the first three months of the national lockdown. To cope with social isolation, they initiated non-work activities such as virtual parties, online games, *kamustahan* (or keeping in touch) via social media or messaging/video applications, *bayle* (or dance) sessions, and other online activities.

*"Regarding socialization, we have Zoom Day for virtual meet and greet gatherings. We also have Pizza Day, where everyone will have pizza at home. But these are self-initiated by the employees. We also have regular exercises (e.g., dance sessions) via Zoom." (Female 45, years old, Staff Officer)*

Participants also emphasized the importance of government agencies initiating non-work activities that allow workers to interact with one another and promote their mental and physical well-being. These office-initiated activities included mental health webinars, hobby exchanges, chair yoga, virtual parties, and movie-watching parties.

*"We also have webinars for employees, like Mental Health Awareness, including promoting plantito/plantita (someone who enjoys taking care of plants) for personal development. Our agency ensures that we have activities where we meet and reach out. I am happy that we have those initiatives in our office." (Female, 45 years old, Staff Officer)*

Moreover, participants also expressed gratitude to their agencies for providing ICT tool usage

seminars and skill training, which they found helpful in combating the professional stagnation they felt during the lockdown.

*"As a senior citizen who is not 'techie' (technologically literate), it was challenging to adapt to new technology. I am thankful for the training, coaching, and assistance regarding IT (information technology). It was very helpful for me." (Female, 58 years old, Volunteer Service Officer)*

Participants reported using new technologies such as Zoom, Messenger, and Microsoft Teams to complete tasks. While they valued these online applications, they expressed preference for face-to-face interactions because they felt that technology could not replace the interpersonal dynamics of in-person interactions, as one participant explained:

*"I strongly agree that there's less time for socialization. The socialization part of the academy serves as group support. Let's say you have an idea that you want to share with your officemates informally. Sharing ideas through face-to-face socialization can lead to great projects in the future." (Male, 48 years old, Associate Professor)*

The third recurring theme was work-life balance, with 25 of 31 participants reporting that telecommuting impacted their work-life balance. Seven of the 25 participants reported difficulty managing the boundaries between work and non-work obligations while telecommuting. Unlike in the pre-pandemic era, when work and non-work activities were conducted in separate physical spaces, respondents shared that their family members expected them to attend to the latter's personal needs while working at home. The following quote illustrates conflicts between work and family roles, negatively impacting the participants' work-life balance.

*"I had time with my kid. It's different to see him playing at home. The sad part is that I'm the playmate since he's the only child. Imagine I have to do the report, and he's tugging on my skirt, appealing, 'Mama, let's play.' (Female, 31 years old, Administrative Officer)*

Of the 25 participants, seven stated that their work hours and days became fluid due to telecommuting, and they had difficulty controlling their time. In contrast to pre-pandemic times, when schedules between work and non-work were clearly defined



(i.e., 8 AM to 5 PM), participants maintained that they were expected to be available for work at all times and that their supervisors, coworkers, and clients were insensitive to the fact that they also had personal and family obligations to fulfill after work hours. Below is a sentiment about how a worker's shifting separation between work and non-work time contributed to work-life conflicts.

*"You do not have control over your working time. Some work 8 hours daily, but we work more than that, especially if issues or problems need immediate attention. Sometimes, even at 11 or midnight or early in the morning, you must attend to these issues. Unlike physically reporting to work, you start at 8 in the morning and leave at 5 in the afternoon. In telecommuting, it's any time of the day!" (Female, 61 years old, Officer-in-Charge Assistant City Librarian)*

Of the 25 participants, 18 claimed that telecommuting increased their workload and working hours. They mentioned that a significant portion of their time was spent attending online meetings, phone calls, and overlapping activities like online seminars and webinars, which were both draining and stressful. They also stated that it took much work to maintain good performance due to the intensified workload and unrealistic deadlines. They expressed that work demands often conflicted with their domestic responsibilities. The following quotes illustrate this dilemma:

*"Telecommuting can be a two-edged sword. Because of the flexibility, as I have experienced, sometimes two seminars and a meeting occur simultaneously. So, there are overlapping activities and meetings throughout the day. And sometimes it's overwhelming." (Female, 38 years old, Assistant Professor)*

*"The tendency to multitask increases depending on the agency for which you work. It will impact your performance if you cannot complete tasks because you are doing too many things at once, such as working or attending webinars; if you are at home, you may be caring for children, cooking, or whatever else." (Male, 33 years old, Administrative Assistant Support)*

Despite these challenges, the participants appreciated the flexibility and autonomy that telecommuting provided. They could complete their tasks at their own pace, time, and location, allowing

them to work during their most productive hours and save time and money on their daily commute. The quote below reflects these perspectives.

*"I prefer to work at night except when there are scheduled meetings, Zoom, or webinars in the early morning,... I feel more effective and productive working in the evening." (Female, 53 years old, Director)*

Of the 25 participants who viewed telework positively as a flexible work arrangement promoting an excellent work-life balance, 12 participants maintained that telecommuting allowed them to engage in self-care activities such as exercising, spending time with loved ones, or pursuing personal interests. Similarly, eight participants reported that telecommuting helped them build deeper relationships with their families, leading to a more positive work-life balance. The quotation below illustrates a positive view of the impact of telecommuting on work-life balance.

*"We were able to pursue other interests, which is a positive outcome of working from home. Some went into baking, while others were into gardening. Still others were into crafts." (Female, 44 years old, Supervisor)*

## Discussion

The thematic analysis of Filipino government workers' experiences with mandatory telecommuting during the pandemic revealed three major themes: 1) individual performance and productivity; 2) isolation; and 3) work-life balance. These themes were found to be the most critical concerns of the workers regarding remote work. Interestingly, previous studies on remote work in public organizations also highlighted individual performance, productivity, and work-life balance as the most frequently investigated outcome variables (Mele et al., 2023). However, while professional and social isolation emerged as significant outcomes in this study, these aspects were not commonly emphasized in most remote work studies in the Philippine public sector during the pandemic.

The study highlights the pressing concern of Filipino public sector workers that telecommuting increases the risk of social and professional isolation due to minimal face-to-face interactions with coworkers and supervisors. These findings are consistent with previous research which found that public employees telecommuting during the pandemic were socially

isolated and expressed concern that remote work limited opportunities for advancement and rewards (Doberstein & Charbonneau, 2022). Interestingly, Filipino government worker-initiated interventions lessen feelings of isolation. For instance, they have implemented various interventions such as virtual parties, games, *kamustahan* (or staying in touch), *bayle* (or dance sessions), hobby exchanges, and other non-work-related online activities while on mandatory telecommuting. Government agencies, for their part, initiated non-work activities that allowed workers to interact with one another and promoted their mental and physical well-being, such as mental health webinars, hobby exchanges, chair yoga, virtual parties, and movie-watching parties. These initiatives reflect Philippine cultural values such as *pakikisama* (getting along) and *pakikiramdam* (sensitivity). These cultural traits prioritize harmony in interpersonal relationships through cooperation and compromise (Tablan, 2022). To Filipinos, the quality of relationships with coworkers and a sense of belonging to an organization are essential aspects of their work (Ilagan et al., 2014). This study did not find any issues related to “permanent estrangement,” which may arise when “office-based staff who become accustomed to working and socializing without their remotely working colleagues continue to do so even when teleworkers are back in the office” (Mele et al., 2021). This could be due to the preemptive nature of the cultural values of *pakikisama* and *pakikiramdam*. The importance that Filipino government workers place on isolation as an adverse effect of telecommuting, even though it appears to have received little attention in other countries, can be explained by viewing the varied telecommuting outcomes through a cultural lens.

Most participants reported being more productive and performing better while telecommuting. They attribute this to the flexibility of remote work and claim that they can focus on their work even with some distractions at home. These findings are consistent with previous research, including studies by Chow et al. (2022), Ipsen et al. (2020), Silva & Rosa (2023), and Suhariadi et al. (2023), which found that telecommuting improved productivity and performance in the public sector during the pandemic. Williamson & Colley (2022) explained that positive performance and productivity have been attributed to fewer interruptions and increased autonomy, while Williamson et al. (2022) ascribed them to focusing on outcomes rather than on tasks or time spent at work. However, some workers feel that they are more productive in an office setting due to the nature of their work, which requires in-person interactions and access to necessary records or

data to perform the tasks. The differing opinions on the effect of telecommuting on performance and productivity can be attributed to the concept of “task interdependence,” which refers to the degree to which tasks are interconnected, such that completing the entire task requires each task to rely on the others for information, support, and connection (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Collaboration and communication are necessary when the work involves high levels of interdependence; however, with low interdependence, minimal cooperation and communication are required (Kossen & van der Berg, 2022; Turetken et al., 2011). This raises the possibility that highly interdependent tasks may not be suitable for telecommuting due to the difficulties of effectively collaborating without in-person interactions (Shin et al., 2000; Turetken et al., 2011).

The study is not the first to demonstrate that telecommuting has mixed effects on work-life balance. Similar to the findings of Cannito & Scavarda (2020), this study found that telecommuting can disrupt work priorities, enabling family members to focus on self-care activities and parenting responsibilities. This can help work-focused parents become closer to their families and reprioritize their work-life balance. From a different perspective, the findings of Del Boca et al. (2020) are consistent with this study. They found that staying close to one’s children while telecommuting may not always be beneficial and can make balancing work and family more challenging. The participants’ experiences show how the sudden implementation of telecommuting has created new challenges for government employees in juggling their work and personal lives. The situation has been particularly challenging for government workers, as their supervisors expect them to always be available for work without regard for their personal and family obligations. Supervisors seem unaware of the increased workload and unrealistic deadlines employees are dealing with during these unprecedented times. It is not established, however, whether supervisors are aware of their behaviors’ impact on their employees. Nonetheless, the expressed dilemma of workers highlights the importance of supervisors in helping employees manage their professional and personal domains. In a recent study, Chambel et al. (2023) asserted that supervisors who exhibit family-supportive supervisor behavior (FSSB) can help employees balance their work and personal lives regardless of the intensity of telework. Additionally, Kangas et al. (2023) emphasized the need for employers to customize their work-life programs to suit the varied

needs of their employees, as well as the significant role of supervisors in adjusting their supportive behaviors to align with their employees' work-nonwork boundary preferences and needs.

The findings show that while telecommuting provides employees with much-needed flexibility, it has the paradoxical effect of increasing work intensity. While telecommuting allows workers to complete their tasks at any time and at their own pace, it also means that they are expected to be continuously online, blurring the line between their work and personal lives. Cai et al. (2021) attributed the increase in work intensity to the availability of information and communication technology and online remote work applications, which enable work to be completed at any time from home or other locations (e.g., coffee shops and malls). ICT-enabled access to work has caused employees to work longer hours and accommodate varying schedules, which ultimately jeopardized their work-life balance (Alfanza, 2021; Baruch, 2000; Bathini & Kandathil, 2019; Cai et al., 2021; Dimitrova, 2003; Henson et al., 2002; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Despite this, some workers are willing to take on extra assignments and work beyond their regular office hours. However, it is unclear if the increased dedication and enthusiasm are due to the benefits of flexible work arrangements or other factors related to telecommuting implementation (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010).

The literature supports the findings in this study that access to communication-enhancing technology contributes to a stronger sense of connection and reduces feelings of professional isolation among employees who telecommute (De Andres-Sanchez et al., 2023; Van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2022). However, the participants expressed that technology cannot replace the warmth and dynamics of face-to-face interactions. They desire in-person connections with their colleagues and supervisors in an office setting. Wang et al. (2021) explain that ICT-facilitated interactions tend to focus on work-related tasks and are of poor quality, resulting in less intimate relationships between employees and supervisors as well as with other colleagues. This suggests that technology can only partially replace the value of in-person interactions, lending credence to de Vries et al. (2019) assertion that high-quality leader-member interactions are essential for reducing professional and social isolation.

While ICT can help employees perform their work more efficiently (Mele et al., 2023), some challenges

can affect their performance. For example, the lack of adequate ICT infrastructure at home and limited support services can create difficulties. Participants believed their agencies should have provided adequate ICT support, such as skills training for ICT tools, a helpline or technical support hotline for ICT-related concerns, and financial support for acquiring ICT hardware and software.

Poor internet connectivity in the Philippines exacerbates participants' challenges for successful telecommuting, leading to stress and frustration. This is known as techno-stress, an emerging psychosocial risk closely linked to the widespread use of ICTs in a society where their use is prevalent and jobs with teleworking and new technologies are rising (Elizalde, 2021). Moreover, while being well-versed in ICT tools is advantageous, some participants, particularly baby boomers, perceived learning ICT skills as unnecessary due to their impending retirement. This leads to an uneven workload distribution, with tech-savvy employees shouldering additional tasks to meet deadlines, resulting in techno-overload, a significant contributor to techno-stress (Stankevičiūtė, 2022).

Techno-stress arises when individuals struggle to cope with the evolving ICTs and the changing cognitive and social requirements associated with their use (Tarafdar et al., 2007). Elizalde (2021) asserts that technologies are "neutral," which means that they do not directly cause techno-stress, rather, factors such as age, personal characteristics and skills, employees' attitude toward technology, nature of work, job position, and organizational characteristics all influence how employees adapt to new technologies.

## **Conclusion**

This research is not the first to document varied and conflicting results regarding telecommuting in the public sector. An expanding body of literature reveals inconsistencies in research findings, with telecommuting proving beneficial in some studies but not to others. Instead of viewing telecommuting outcomes as good or bad, the researchers believed it is crucial to delve deeper into specific contexts and conditions that explain the paradoxical outcomes of telecommuting. By gaining a more nuanced understanding of the mandatory telecommuting experience of Filipino government workers, creative solutions can be identified, and previously overlooked action pathways can be considered (Liu et al., 2022). The paper not only discusses the advantages and



disadvantages of mandatory telecommuting as it affected Filipino government employees during the pandemic but also identifies the particular circumstances or contexts that shed light on why they perceive telecommuting experiences favorably or unfavorably. For instance, Filipino government workers' concern about professional and social isolation should be viewed in the light of Filipino culture, which values *pakikisama* and *pakikiramdam* as essential aspects of meaningful work. The varying effects of forced telecommuting on work performance and productivity can be attributed to the type of work and the level of task interdependence. The researchers have also highlighted supervisors' critical role in helping employees attain work-life balance. Additionally, it is essential to exercise caution and prudence when using ICT to balance its paradoxical effects. While ICT can reduce feelings of isolation among telecommuting employees, it cannot replace the warmth and dynamics of face-to-face interactions. Although ICT promotes flexibility, it can intensify work, resulting in techno-stress and a compromise on work-life balance.

## Recommendations

This research has policy and practical implications for remote work in the post-pandemic period. First, telecommuting is multi-faceted and highly situational, so it may only suit some government organizations or specific jobs within a particular government agency. Adopting a customized telecommuting program and strategy rather than a one-size-fits-all approach would be prudent. National policies on telecommuting for the public sector should be sufficiently comprehensive to consider the agency's and its employees' distinctive characteristics and the nature of work. Second, developing comprehensive implementing rules and regulations (IRR) for telecommuting in the Philippine public sector is paramount. These guidelines should include several components, such as evaluating the potential benefits and drawbacks of telecommuting, identifying digitalization and technological requirements; assessing proficiency in information technology (IT) and related security risks; defining administrative aspects of telecommuting; providing financial and non-financial support for telecommuting; and establishing monitoring, evaluating, and reporting procedures. It is essential to have clear and detailed provisions on the role of supervisors in promoting work-life balance and reducing feelings of social and professional isolation. The IRR should also address the issue of techno-stress and provide a clear policy regarding the "right to disconnect" to reduce work intensification,

which can lead to work-life conflicts and adverse effects on work outcomes. Third, creating a formal, structured telecommuting program at the agency level will encourage transparency and clarity on agency-specific IRR. It may be prudent to have a pilot program before rollout to allow the agency to identify problems and evaluate the potential effectiveness of telecommuting.

Further investigation is recommended to evaluate the trade-offs of telecommuting, including its impact on isolation, work-life balance, workload, gender differences, work performance, and productivity. Research on leadership in telecommuting within the hierarchical management structure of government agencies is also relevant. Moreover, it is important to conduct a comparative study on the teleworking experiences of government employees during and after the pandemic, especially in light of the recent guidelines from the Philippines' Civil Service Commission allowing remote work as a flexible option post-pandemic. Lastly, further study is recommended to examine differences in government workers' experiences with mandatory telecommuting based on organizational and individual characteristics.

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## Ethics statements

The authors certify that the research has ethical clearance from the University of the Philippines Visayas Research Ethics Board (UPV-REB). The material presented in the paper had not been published elsewhere before its appearance in the NRCP Research Journal and is not currently under consideration elsewhere. Each author consents to submitting and publishing the manuscript bearing their name.

## Authorship contributions

**Rowena Paz Gelvezon:** conceptualization, data



curation, methodology, investigation, visualization, formal analysis, writing-original draft, writing-review & editing, supervision, funding acquisition, project administration. **Cheryl Joy Fernandez-Abila:** conceptualization, data curation, methodology, investigation, visualization, formal analysis, writing-original draft, writing-review, & editing. **Duvince Zhalimar Dumpit:** data curation, investigation, formal analysis, writing-original draft. **Oscar Jinon Jr.:** data curation, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing-original draft. **Inaj Mae Abalajon:** data curation, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing-original draft. **Mary Ann Seder:** data curation, investigation, formal analysis, writing-original draft. **Pearl Gladys Diano:** data curation, investigation, formal analysis. **Mary Jane Castromayor:** data curation, investigation. **Jhoanne Marsh Gatpatan:** investigation.

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**Annex 1.** Codes, themes, and examples from the interviews.

Themes	Codes	Examples from the interviews
individual work productivity and performance	<p>"increase productivity"</p> <p>"quality of work affected"</p> <p>"Improved work flexibility leads to work productivity but with some challenges"</p> <p>"flexibility in workload/ work assignments"</p>	<p><i>"I perform better if I telecommute"</i></p> <p><i>"...I think improved productivity since you're at home, you are able to accomplish many other tasks."</i></p> <p><i>"In our case, we brought home our desktop computers. Some were allowed to bring their laptops home, so they were more mobile – they could go to the office and work from home simultaneously with their laptops."</i></p>
social and professional isolation	<p>"decreased physical socialization"</p> <p>"coping mechanisms to mitigate isolation"</p> <p>"government support to promote mental and physical well-being"</p> <p>"ICT tools to combat social isolation and professional stagnation"</p> <p>"preference for face-to-face interaction over virtual exchanges"</p>	<p><i>"Regarding socialization, we have Zoom Day for virtual meet and greet gatherings....Our agency ensures that we have activities where we meet and reach out. "</i></p> <p><i>"As a senior citizen who is not 'techie' (technologically literate), it was challenging to adapt to new technology. I am thankful for the training, coaching, and assistance regarding IT."</i></p> <p><i>"I strongly agree that there's less time for socialization. The socialization part of the academy serves as group support....Sharing ideas through face-to-face socialization can lead to great projects in the future."</i></p>
Work-life balance	<p>"no time and space boundaries"</p> <p>"convenience"</p> <p>"heavy workload"</p> <p>"multi-tasking"</p> <p>"health and well-being"</p> <p>"time for family"</p> <p>"discovery of new hobbies"</p>	<p><i>"Because time and space at work are no longer observed. So sometimes there is an emergency meeting. That is ok, but sometimes it feels like it is my... urgent...urgent and you only tell me now. Something like that."</i></p> <p><i>"Less exposure and a huge reduction in fatigue because I don't have to travel to the office. My travel time from home to the office would take more or less 1 hour. It is a significant reduction in fatigue and stress."</i></p>