




Job-crafting amid uncertainty: South African employee experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic



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Orientation: The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic disrupted organisations, requiring employees to adapt their work approaches.

Research purpose: This study examines job-crafting strategies among South African employees during the pandemic, focusing on task, cognitive, and relational crafting, along with associated benefits and challenges.

Motivation for the study: Given the pandemic's impact on South African workplaces, this study explores how employees adapted using job-crafting techniques.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative descriptive approach within the Social Constructivism paradigm was employed. Data were gathered from 15 South African employees working remotely or in hybrid models through online interviews and analysed thematically.

Main findings: Employees used task crafting to redefine roles for remote work, relational crafting to strengthen virtual connections, and cognitive crafting to maintain purpose. Despite challenges, they reported increased productivity, flexibility, and improved work-life balance.

Practical/managerial implications: Recognising job crafting as a coping mechanism in hybrid work models is crucial. Organisations should foster an environment that empowers employees by aligning work with their strengths, offering autonomy, and encouraging proactive adaptation.

Contribution/value-add: This study provides qualitative insights into job crafting during the pandemic, offering a unique perspective on adaptation within South African workplaces.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; employees; hybrid working; job-crafting strategies; remote working; South African workplace.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic led to significant economic disruptions and devastatingly impacted organisations in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2020). The strict lockdown measures resulted in widespread business closures and supply chain disruptions (Sucheran, 2021). Many businesses, particularly in retail, tourism and hospitality, saw sharp revenue declines, leading to layoffs and pay cuts (Cwibi & Mxunyelwa, 2024). Lakemann et al. (2020) found that pandemic restrictions led to a 51% drop in business activity in South Africa, significantly impacting the economy. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa faced considerable challenges during the pandemic, as such organisations often lack the financial resources and resilience to withstand prolonged periods of economic downturn (Le Roux, 2020). Approximately 42% of SMEs in South Africa had to close their doors permanently because of the pandemic (Le Roux, 2020). These closures led to job losses and ripple effects on the economy, as SMEs are significant contributors to employment and economic growth in the country.

As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic forced organisations to shift to remote work, leading to additional expenses for investing in technology infrastructure and collaboration platforms (Battisti et al., 2022). These platforms often come with subscription fees and licensing costs. Moreover, organisations may need to provide training and support to employees to ensure the effective utilisation of these tools (Newman & Ford, 2021). Remote working brings additional non-financial costs to organisations; communication and teamwork were impacted because of limited face-to-face interactions, potentially decreasing productivity and hindering innovation (Fratricová & Kirchmayer, 2018). Remote work has also impacted employee well-being and mental health, as disrupted routines and blurred work-life boundaries have contributed to higher levels of stress and

burnout. This decline in well-being can reduce job satisfaction, engagement and retention, ultimately affecting organisational performance and effectiveness (Halat et al., 2023)

However, job-crafting acts as a preventive coping mechanism, enabling employees to foresee threats to their well-being and take action to avoid negative consequences (Harju et al., 2016; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). The importance of job-crafting nationally has been highlighted by Dhanpat's (2022) systematic review of job-crafting research in the South African context that included an overview of research studies from 2010 to 2020. The authors concluded that studies included in the review all made use of quantitative measures and tested relationships with personality, work engagement, meaning, job satisfaction, turnover intention and psychometric properties. A qualitative study of job-crafting strategies during turbulent times, like a pandemic, offers insights into their types, nature and application, enriching the evidence base and ensuring relevance.

The objective of this research was to explore employees' experiences with job-crafting strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic in South African workplaces. The study aimed to conceptualise job-crafting based on literature, examine employees' working arrangements and responses to organisational communication, explore task, cognitive and relationship-crafting strategies, and identify the benefits and challenges of these strategies. It also provided recommendations for future research and practice.

Literature review

Job-crafting

Job-crafting allows individuals to proactively shape their work to better align with personal motives, strengths and priorities (Radic et al., 2020; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Two main theoretical perspectives on job-crafting prevail. The first approach is based on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, which was developed by Demerouti et al. (2001) and later expanded upon by Zhang and Parker (2019) in the context of job-crafting. This model emphasises balancing job demands and resources to align with employees' needs and capabilities. Tims et al. (2012, 2013) proposed the second perspective on job-crafting. They identified four key dimensions of job-crafting: increasing structural job resources, increasing social job resources, increasing challenging job demands and decreasing hindering job demands. These perspectives contribute to understanding how employees proactively shape their work to enhance well-being and performance.

This approach, supported by quantitative studies, illustrates how employees adapt their environments to enhance resources, enrich tasks and minimise obstacles (Bakker & Demerouti, 2022; Panteli & Urquhart, 2021). Recent empirical studies highlight the dynamic nature of job-crafting in hybrid and remote work settings, demonstrating how employees tailor job resources to maintain engagement and well-being (Demerouti, 2022; Van Wingerden et al., 2021).

Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) approach job-crafting through social constructionism, job design and social identity theory (Zhang & Parker, 2019), defining it as the modifications individuals make to their tasks and relationships at work. Three forms of job-crafting are identified: task-crafting, relational-crafting and cognitive-crafting. Each allows employees to adjust their work experiences to better match their preferences, strengths and goals. This perspective is supported by qualitative studies (Zhang & Parker, 2019).

While the JD-R model emphasises balancing demands and resources to sustain well-being and performance, Wrzesniewski and Dutton's approach focusses on proactive individual agency in shaping job tasks and interactions. The former is rooted in adaptation to external work conditions, whereas the latter underscores an intrinsic, self-directed approach to modifying work roles. The JD-R model primarily examines job-crafting as a reaction to work conditions, while Wrzesniewski and Dutton highlight a proactive, identity-driven process of redefining roles (Tims et al., 2022; Vogt et al., 2023).

Despite these differences, both frameworks contribute to understanding employee outcomes by recognising the importance of autonomy in work design and personalising job roles. Integrating these perspectives can provide a more comprehensive understanding of job-crafting by considering both environmental constraints and individual agency in shaping work experiences (Bakker et al., 2023). This study adopts Wrzesniewski and Dutton's approach to explore how employees actively shape their work experiences – including establishing boundaries between work and non-work – to meet personal needs and aspirations.

Types of job-crafting: Task, relational and cognitive approaches

Task-crafting involves employees modifying job tasks to align with their strengths and interests (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 180). During the COVID-19 pandemic, employees used task-crafting strategies to address challenges like increased workloads and work-life balance issues. For example, some employees took on new tasks to help teams cope with remote work (Ahmad et al., 2022) or developed new skills when previous tasks became monotonous (Hearn, 2021). Others restructured schedules to manage caregiving responsibilities (Travis, 2021).

Relational-crafting occurs when employees change their social interactions at work, such as building new relationships or enhancing existing ones (Hearn, 2021). To combat social isolation and stress, employees used relational-crafting strategies, such as creating virtual coffee breaks to maintain connections (Tran, 2021) and strengthening relationships with supervisors by seeking regular feedback (Mantell et al., 2022).

Cognitive-crafting involves changing one's mindset regarding job tasks to align with personal values and goals (Hearn, 2021). During the pandemic, employees used cognitive-crafting strategies to cope with uncertainty and stress. Examples

include reframing job tasks as opportunities to contribute to society rather than just earn income and focussing on personal growth by acquiring new skills (Kim et al., 2021).

Job-crafting during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped work environments, prompting employees to adapt through job-crafting. Research highlights various strategies used to navigate these changes. In the Netherlands, cognitive-crafting – modifying perceptions of tasks and relationships – helped healthcare workers stay engaged while working remotely, with recommendations for virtual training to support this approach (Van Wingerden et al., 2022).

Long-term studies found job autonomy influenced job-crafting, with greater autonomy fostering engagement and well-being, while employees with less control struggled without organisational support (Tims et al., 2023). In Germany, public service employees adjusted work demands, schedules and social connections to manage remote work effectively (Schmidt & Senderek, 2023).

Mindfulness was also linked to job-crafting, as resilience-building practices helped employees adapt to pandemic challenges (Lomas et al., 2023). Similarly, research on school principals identified distinct job-crafting profiles that influenced adaptability and effectiveness in crisis management (Fischer et al., 2021).

Job-crafting strategies also helped employees manage remote work challenges. Task-crafting involved redefining roles to fit the remote context (Dabak & Mulla, 2022), relational-crafting focussed on strengthening virtual relationships (Petrou et al., 2018) and cognitive-crafting found new meaning in work despite pandemic challenges (Sahay & Dwyer, 2021). Job-crafting in remote work reduced perceived workload stress by 17.53% (Ingusci et al., 2021) and supported productivity in Indonesia's public sector (Suhariadi et al., 2023).

Several studies focussed on job-crafting among South African employees during the pandemic. Hearn (2021) found that job-crafting predicted higher engagement and reduced burnout among primary school teachers. Davies (2022) identified job-crafting as a common coping strategy to reduce workplace stress. Du Toit et al. (2022) found that job-crafting moderated the relationship between perceived organisational support and work performance. Maboeta et al. (2023) highlighted relational-crafting as key to maintaining social connections and support during the pandemic. These studies collectively underscore job-crafting as a vital strategy for enhancing resilience, well-being and performance during times of crisis, specifically in South Africa.

Research design

Research approach

The study followed a qualitative descriptive research approach which aims to understand the meaning of individuals or

groups attached to a specific phenomenon or human interaction through linguistic data analysis (Kranz, 2019). By following this approach, the researcher was able to explore how employees experienced job-crafting strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic in a South African workplace. The primary focus was on understanding the opinions, lived experiences and impacts of using these strategies amid the pandemic.

Social constructivism offers a framework for understanding job-crafting by examining how employees interpret and reshape their work experiences, especially under changing conditions like the pandemic. This paradigm emphasises that knowledge and reality are socially shaped through interactions and subjective meanings (Amineh & Asl, 2015). Through qualitative methods such as interviews and thematic analysis, the study captured the nuances of how employees adapted tasks, relationships and perspectives within their jobs, revealing job-crafting as a dynamic process of interpreting and negotiating work roles (Kim et al., 2016; Maree et al., 2019; Nowell et al., 2017).

Research setting

This research study was conducted among employees currently employed in organisations in South Africa. The researcher identified the various job-crafting strategies employees employed during the COVID-19 pandemic employing semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted online because of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus ensuring accessibility and convenience for all participants. Furthermore, the Zoom platform afforded the researcher the opportunity of studying the participants in their natural setting via a video; this being the participant's home or office space. The research setting was beneficial to this study, as participants were from different backgrounds and had unique experiences that they shared with the researcher.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

Throughout the research study, the researcher fulfilled various roles. The first role was that of the planner, the study was planned and structured. Added to this, a contractor, identifying various organisations where participants could be recruited to ensure the data collection process could take place. Furthermore, the researcher fulfilled the role of data collector when conducting the semi-structured interviews with the participants. A transcriber was coopted when transcribing the interviews. Furthermore, the role of data analyser was adopted. Lastly, the researcher assumed the role of report writer for this study. The researcher compiled the final report and provided and explained the results of the study. Throughout the entire research process, the researcher made her best effort to remain objective.

Research participants and sampling methods

The researcher used convenience sampling to select participants based on specific criteria (Maree et al., 2019). This method was chosen for its accessibility, although it may introduce limitations such as non-random selection and bias (Etikan et al., 2016).

Participants were required to: (1) be employed in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) have worked remotely or in a hybrid model, (3) have Internet access for online interviews, (4) be willing to participate and (5) be proficient in English. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, achieved after 15 participants ($N = 15$) when responses became repetitive and study objectives were met (Table 1).

Participants were mostly aged 26–30 years, with a slight female majority. Most identified as white people, with smaller groups from African, Coloured and Indian backgrounds. Over half were single, and others were legally married, traditionally married or divorced. Nearly half had children. Industries represented included finance, education and medico-legal. Most had 1–5 years with their organisation, with fewer having shorter, longer or 6–10-year tenures. Roles ranged from entry-level to director positions.

Data collection methods

Data for this research study were collected through online semi-structured interviews, using open-ended questions to explore participants' knowledge and social reality regarding the phenomenon from their perspective (Rocha, 2021). Participants were granted the opportunity to participate in this study, by contacting the researcher on LinkedIn or the Human Resource Manager of their organisation. Informed consent was obtained before conducting the scheduled interviews, during which participants were provided with a description of 'Job-crafting' and its various types to ensure reliable information was gathered. The qualitative study used open-ended interviews to explore employees' job-crafting experiences, focussing on changes in work arrangements, tasks, relationships and role perceptions over the past 2 years. Participants discussed whether changes were self-initiated or externally influenced, reflecting on their impacts, including challenges and benefits. Biographical details were collected for descriptive purposes.

Strategies to ensure data quality and integrity

To ensure the study's quality, the researcher adhered to ethical principles of honesty, trustworthiness and objectivity (De Vos et al., 2014). The study followed four key constructs: transferability, credibility, confirmability and dependability. Firstly, *transferability* was ensured through thick description and purposive sampling. The researcher provided detailed explanations of the research process and selected participants with relevant experience in job-crafting during the pandemic, making the findings applicable to similar contexts (Anney, 2014). Secondly, *credibility* was achieved through peer examination, where the researcher sought guidance from an academic supervisor throughout the process to ensure accurate data representation (Anney, 2014). Thirdly, *confirmability* was maintained by minimising researcher bias, as the researcher had no prior relationship with participants, ensuring the findings reflected their experiences rather than personal interests (Maree et al., 2019). Lastly, *dependability* was established through an audit trail and continued peer examination. The researcher documented all research activities and stored data securely, ensuring consistency and stability of findings over time (Bitsch, 2005).

Data analysis

The data for this study were analysed using thematic analysis, which explores how individuals experience and interpret their world by generating themes (Dawadi, 2020). Braun and Clark's (2013) six-step data analysis process was applied. The process followed these steps: first of all, the researchers became familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts. Next, initial codes were generated by identifying and labelling similarities and differences in responses. The researchers did this by breaking down the data into smaller parts relevant to the research questions pertaining to job-crafting and by labelling these as codes. The researchers' aim with this step was to grasp the different elements of the lived experiences of the participants. These codes were then clustered into

TABLE 1: Characteristics of participants ($N = 15$).

Participant	Age (years)	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital status	Dependents	Industry of work	Job title
P1	24	Female	White	Single	None	Recruitment	Researcher
P2	31	Male	Indian	Single	None	Auditing	Trainee Accountant
P3	34	Male	White	Single	None	Agriculture	Insurance Manager
P4	29	Female	African	Married	Yes	Training and Development	Training Specialist
P5	39	Female	White	Married	Yes	Education	HOD of Academics
P6	42	Female	Indian	Married	Yes	Mining	Treasurer
P7	37	Female	African	Single	Yes	Mining	Finance Accountant
P8	24	Male	White	Single	None	Telecoms	Jnr Data Scientist
P9	29	Male	White	Single	None	Automotive	Area Manager
P10	28	Female	White	Married	Yes	Teaching	Snr Phase Teacher
P11	59	Male	White	Married	Yes	Finance	Chief Financial Officer
P12	29	Female	White	Single	None	Medico-Legal	Admin Clerk
P13	34	Female	White	Married	Yes	Medico-Legal	Psychometrist
P14	25	Male	White	Single	None	Software Development	Full stack developer
P15	36	Male	White	Married	Yes	Finance	Accountant

Source: Marx, K. (2024). Exploring employees' experience of job crafting strategies employed during the COVID-19 pandemic in a South African workplace. Unpublished mini-dissertation. North-West University

HOD, Head of Department; Jnr, Junior; Snr, Senior.

sub-themes and overarching themes. Braun and Clark (2013) apply this step as a reflexive process and the researchers followed this practice by narrating the themes and sub-themes to reflect on their assumptions in generating the themes.

The themes were reviewed to ensure they were well-supported by the data and distinct from each other. Subsequently, the researcher defined and named each theme, filtering content to identify key themes and potential sub-themes. Finally, the report was produced to present and justify the analysed data while maintaining neutrality in interpretation.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Economic and Management Sciences Research and Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) at North-West University, receiving ethics approval (reference no.: NWU-00637-22-A4). Following approval, the researcher contacted Human Resource Managers to obtain permissions and promoted the study on LinkedIn and Facebook to recruit remote or hybrid workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researcher contacted participants, obtained their consent and ensured compliance with the *Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA)*. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time without consequence. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly observed. The researcher also offered to share the final dissertation with participants.

Results

The themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 2.

In this study, the analysis of employee experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed seven main themes with multiple sub-themes, which were derived from qualitative data. Each theme was constructed based on recurring patterns and insights from participants, illustrating how job-crafting strategies evolved within the shifting work context.

Themes and sub-themes

Theme 1: Work context and communication changes during COVID-19

Employees were surveyed about their COVID-19 work arrangements, including remote and hybrid models, and how organisations communicated these changes, focussing on transitions and responses to hybrid work communication.

Sub-theme 1: Work context transformation

The first sub-theme, work context transformation, highlights the significant shifts in work arrangements because of the

pandemic. Initially, participants transitioned to remote work, supported by technology to maintain effective communication and collaboration. As one participant put it, 'Technology changed the way we did a lot of things and actually made it easy to work either on a hybrid model or completely on a remote model'. (P3)

Once lockdowns eased, many organisations introduced a hybrid work model, where employees alternated between remote and office work. 'In like, July, August, September, somewhere around there, they let us come back in for those who wanted to' (P1). For some, working from the office or remotely was essential. As one participant explained:

'Being in the agricultural sector, we were essential services. So, we could work both from our offices and remotely ... and that's how we changed the most from eight to five office job, to a completely hybrid model where you measured on your output and not on your input.' (P3)

Another added, 'Sometimes I would have to go in and give training maybe 10%, so it was a hybrid context' (P4). These responses illustrate how employees adapted to the rapid shifts from full remote to hybrid work, navigating new logistics and expectations.

Sub-theme 2: Communicating work changes

The second sub-theme discusses how work context transformations were communicated during the pandemic, focussing on work arrangements, communication methods and decision-making.

Participants highlighted the shift to remote and hybrid models, noting that the communication of these changes was

TABLE 2: Themes and sub-themes obtained.

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Work context and communication changes during COVID-19	1.1 Work context transformation 1.2 Communicating work changes
2. Task-crafting strategies during COVID-19	2.1 Work content changes 2.2 Flexibility and productivity 2.3 Personal development 2.4 Work strategies 2.5 Work-from-home policy and logistics 2.6 Career and environment changes
3. Cognitive-crafting strategies during COVID-19	3.1 Emotional perspectives 3.2 Coping with work demands
4. Relational-crafting strategies during COVID-19	4.1 Open communication 4.2 Relationship changes 4.3 Socialising opportunities 4.4 Managerial support
5. Opportunity for job-crafting	5.1 Organisational control 5.2 Employee job-crafting
6. Challenges in job-crafting	6.1 Adapting to remote work 6.2 Adapting to hybrid work 6.3 Household challenges 6.4 Personal challenges
7. Benefits of job-crafting	7.1 Remote work benefits 7.2 Hybrid work benefits 7.3 Work-life balance

Source: Marx, K. (2024). Exploring employees' experience of job crafting strategies employed during the COVID-19 pandemic in a South African workplace. Unpublished mini-dissertation. North-West University
COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019.

direct. One participant recalled, 'And then when we all have to come back in it, again, it was done through a team's meeting, because some people were still at home' (P1), while another said, 'It was communicated more through email, scheduling the specifics of the arrangements' (P4). To keep everyone informed, organisations use a variety of communication channels. One participant mentioned, 'And we got letters that stated, this is what that pretty much summed up regulation that was in legislation and regulations on COVID-19', (P3), while another shared, 'We had WhatsApp groups that we all communicated on ... It worked quite well' (P5).

Finally, the decision-making process was inclusive, especially among senior management. 'As I am part of senior management, I was also very much involved with the decision-making and planning' (P5), noted one participant. These strategies reflect the adaptive and varied approaches organisations use to maintain communication during a time of rapid change.

Theme 2: Task-crafting strategies during COVID-19

Participants were asked about their perceptions of implementing task-crafting strategies during COVID-19.

Sub-theme 1: Work content changes

The first sub-theme highlights changes in work content during the pandemic, such as increased workloads, greater reliance on technology, shifts in job responsibilities and changes in meeting culture.

As meetings and email volume surged, participants reported longer working hours. One participant shared:

I think in our context, we actually started doing more work ... we'd actually work longer hours, because we had literally nothing else to do ... it became like to a point where it was a norm, and that we would actually just, like work extra, like all the time. (P2)

Job responsibilities also shifted, with some taking on more tasks than before. 'I personally think I took on more responsibilities within the organisation and with my work personally' (P3), said another.

The culture of meetings evolved, shifting from brief in-person chats to more structured online meetings. One participant noted, 'Prior to COVID-19, we'd have a once-a-month meeting. When COVID-19 started ... we moved to a weekly meeting' (P5). This increase in meeting frequency was coupled with the need for more communication to ensure alignment among team members.

Sub-theme 2: Flexibility and productivity

The second sub-theme, flexibility and productivity, reveals how employees adapted their daily routines and independently structured their workdays to maintain productivity.

With no direct supervision, participants enjoyed the flexibility to work during their most productive hours and take breaks when needed. One participant shared:

'So now instead of waking up at five in the morning, I woke up at ten to eight ... And in the afternoon, I didn't have any work ... So I did everything I had to do in the morning and was really productive in the morning, and in the afternoon I relaxed.' (P1)

This self-structuring allowed employees to align work with their natural productivity peaks, demonstrating a form of task-crafting that fostered greater efficiency and personal well-being.

Sub-theme 3: Personal development

The third sub-theme focussed on the importance of personal development for employees. Many participants highlighted the need to pursue personal growth outside of working hours. One participant stated:

'So I mean, like, personal development, I think, yeah, we had to like basically do that on our own, like work after hours on like, personal things. Seek out like, if we had, for example, like ITC exams, or APC, we had to do that in our own personal time.' (P2)

This emphasis on self-driven development allowed employees to align their tasks with personal growth goals, a crucial aspect of task-crafting that motivated individuals to enhance their skills and knowledge independently.

Sub-theme 4: Work strategies

The fourth sub-theme examines how individuals approach work, prioritise tasks, manage time, maintain self-discipline and adjust their attitudes, particularly in a remote work environment.

Some participants emphasised their strategies for task prioritisation. One shared, 'I like to tackle the hard things first, and then when I hit a stumbling block, then I'd like to switch into something easier' (P2). Others found value in structuring their day with specific times for tasks, saying:

'Like I had, like set times, like this time would be admin, this time would be like LinkedIn searches, this time would be phone calls, in this time would be lunch, and I'll do like a gym workout.' (P6)

Time management was crucial, especially when balancing multiple projects. 'I could structure more in a day for my business, but emotionally, it was draining, so I had to block in time to do different things to stay sane' (P12), explained one participant. They highlighted the importance of self-discipline while working from home, noting, 'No, I think it's more just self-discipline. So because you work from home, you need to make sure that you do the work properly and things and you spend your time doing the.' (P11)

Finally, working from home shifted attitudes towards work. One participant appreciated the lack of stress from commuting, stating, 'And because like it's not stressful like

travelling anywhere or anything I just walk to the kitchen or if I need to do like some tasks or like anything that requires me to like leave the house' (P14). These approaches reflect task-crafting strategies, as participants restructured their work to manage tasks effectively and reduce stress.

Work approaches and strategies supported task-crafting by promoting efficient task prioritisation, time management and individualised work methods. This emphasis on proactive organisation and task management reflects the purposeful reorganisation of work that is central to task-crafting approaches.

Sub-theme 5: Work-from-home policy and logistics

The fifth sub-theme focussed on the development of work-from-home policies and the logistics of remote work. As the pandemic unfolded, some companies quickly implemented work-from-home policies to support employees. One participant explained, 'We immediately looked at all the services within the company to draft a work-from-home policy, and we kind of immediately implemented it.'

The shift also brought about increased reliance on technology. Tools such as Teams, Zoom and virtual private networks (VPNs) became essential for remote communication and collaboration. 'We conducted all our work over Teams, Zoom, and VPN we had installed on our computers for the systems', (P3), one participant shared. Additionally, some companies adapted their performance evaluation strategies, emphasising output over the number of hours worked.

Sub-theme 6: Career and environment changes

The final sub-theme, changing career paths and work environments, highlights how the pandemic triggered significant shifts in careers and work environments for many participants. The disruption forced individuals to reassess their career paths, leading to changes in their professional focus. One participant noted, 'Because of COVID-19, everything closed down and the entire industry closed. So I had to make a complete change career-wise and go into a different field' (P12). This period of reflection allowed individuals to realign their tasks and career ambitions, crafting work around newly realised values and long-term goal.

Theme 3: Cognitive-crafting strategies during COVID-19

Participants were asked about their use of cognitive-crafting strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic to understand their perceptions of these strategies in response to its challenges.

Sub-theme 1: Emotional perspectives

The first sub-theme, employees' emotional perspective, centres on feelings of gratitude, motivation, trust, recognition, fulfilment and the importance of work during the pandemic. Many participants expressed gratitude for having a job, especially during such uncertain times. As one participant

shared, 'I was so grateful that I had a job because most people have lost their jobs ... and some of them took a salary cut' (P7). Others highlighted their intrinsic motivation and commitment, even in a remote work environment: 'For me, I naturally have that drive ... I don't feel like because I'm at home I won't do it' (P6).

Trust and recognition played a crucial role, with some noting how trust helped alleviate the need for constant supervision: 'There are trust relationships, people know you're busy with your work. And it's not like anyone has to play police person' (P5). Fulfilment also emerged as a significant theme, with one participant reflecting, 'I actually enjoyed it at that time because just before the pandemic, I actually had a discussion with my boss to say to her that I'm bored, and I want a new challenge and I want something different' (P13). Finally, the importance of having a job during the pandemic was underscored: 'Well, that my job was still a necessity, even though COVID-19 was still there, they still going to need us, so we would have to go back somewhere' (P10). These emotional responses illustrate how cognitive-crafting can foster a positive outlook, even during difficult work conditions.

Sub-theme 2: Coping with work demands

The second sub-theme focusses on employees' mental approaches to handling work demands, emphasising positivity, adaptability and self-care. Many participants discussed the importance of maintaining a positive mindset, with one saying:

'I think mostly it's once again, your own character, being the person, you are ... you stay positive and you just keep on running basically ... if you give your best output and something happens and you can hold your head up high, then still you have nothing to be ashamed of, if you might lose your job, if you become irrelevant.' (P3)

Embracing change was also highlighted as essential, with one participant explaining, 'I believe if you really put your mindset into something, you can make it work, and we'll make those changes to really work' (P2).

To manage stress, some sought professional help, as one participant shared, 'I went to see my doctor, and she gave me some medication to help me feel better' (P5). Additionally, social activities played a key role in coping, with one participant noting, 'So like, I would go out of my way to maybe gym, skip, exercise, or go see my friends, because I think it came more of a place of being lonely' (P1). These strategies reflect employees' proactive efforts to maintain well-being during challenging times. These examples show how cognitive-crafting helped employees align work demands with personal growth and well-being.

Theme 4: Relational-crafting strategies during COVID-19

Participants were asked how they applied relational-crafting strategies during COVID-19 to explore their perceptions of these strategies throughout the pandemic.

Sub-theme 1: Open communication

The first sub-theme highlights the importance of open communication with colleagues, managers and supervisors. One participant shared, 'Our supervisor was really supportive. She definitely gave us an open line' (P9), emphasising the direct support and frequent check-ins with supervisors. Additionally, WhatsApp served as an informal communication tool, with one participant noting, 'During the week, we would chat on WhatsApp about anything, whether work-related or just casual messages' (P7). These examples show how relational-crafting strategies helped maintain strong work relationships, keeping employees engaged and supported while working remotely.

Sub-theme 2: Relationship changes

The second sub-theme focusses on the change in relationships with colleagues during remote work. Participants reported seeking support and guidance from colleagues, often bonding over shared frustrations. One participant noted, 'We were able to bond over that, especially the frustrations ... we definitely did seek out each other more than we used to do before' (P4).

Pre-existing relationships also played a significant role, with some participants maintaining strong connections formed before COVID-19. As one said, 'The social relationships you had with your colleagues during that time were built pre-COVID-19, and I still think those old relationships continued to be genuine' (P3). Additionally, improved communication led to increased support, with colleagues regularly checking in on each other's well-being. 'So yes, then we spoke more over the phone and that type of thing. So I guess in the sense, you got a little bit more support' (P9).

Lastly, the pandemic encouraged delegation and trust in colleagues' abilities. One participant shared, 'I realised ... I could train her [*personal assistant*] to take over ... I had to learn how to trust that people in my department are capable' (P5). These examples reflect relational-crafting strategies, where employees intentionally shaped and deepened their relationships to maintain support and collaboration.

Sub-theme 3: Socialising opportunities

The third sub-theme focusses on socialising opportunities during remote and hybrid work models. Initially, during remote work, participants found meaningful connections through mentors and regular check-ins. One participant shared, 'I think that was actually a meaningful relationship that I built with my mentor ... we just jump back into, like, where we left off' (P2). Additionally, check-ins with colleagues and supervisors helped maintain strong relationships, with one noting:

'So the more regular I would see someone I think the better that trust relationship would become there were some that didn't check in as regularly with as with others...It was easier for me to gauge where they are emotionally and how well they were doing.' (P3)

As the hybrid work model emerged, socialising opportunities increased. Employees reported enjoying face-to-face interactions, such as lunch together and attending social events. One participant observed:

'So working, switching over to remote or to hybrid system actually improved my relationship with my colleagues and co-workers. Because I can actually spend time in person with them, like I can take lunch together.' (P8)

These examples reflect relational-crafting strategies, where employees intentionally nurture relationships to create a supportive and collaborative work environment.

Sub-theme 4: Managerial support

The fourth sub-theme, managerial support, highlighted how managers adapted their strategies to provide social support and guidance during the pandemic. Managers emphasised offering increased social support, including breakfast meetings and visits to employees' homes. One participant noted, 'We did try our best to give them enough social support ... sometimes we would have breakfast meetings ... or would go to their place' (P4).

Frequent feedback also became a key aspect of managerial support. Managers not only received more feedback but also increased their own feedback to employees. As one participant described:

'So I think in our organisation, and the people reporting to me, and even me reporting up, my input on feedback definitely improved. And there was definitely more of that.' (P3)

Managers also engaged in team-building activities to foster connections and reduce stress. 'When we had those fun activities, it was fun ... you really walked away, feeling a little bit better, energised, and seeing that everybody is actually in the same boat' (P9).

Lastly, managers took on the role of providing comfort during challenging times and reassuring employees about company protocols. One participant shared, 'I think definitely I was relevant ... giving them the comfort that we are adhering to regulations, the company is doing what we should do' (P3). These strategies illustrate relational-crafting as managers adapted to maintain connections and support their teams during the pandemic.

Theme 5: Opportunity for job-crafting

Participants were asked if job-crafting strategies were self-initiated or driven by their organisation to understand their perceptions of control during COVID-19.

Sub-theme 1: Organisational control

The first sub-theme, organisational control and decision-making, illustrates how decision-making was influenced by group discussions, expert input and hierarchical structures, leaving little room for individual autonomy. Participants described a collective decision-making process, with one

stating, 'So definitely that would have been group discussions and not the individual making the choices on the way forward' (P3).

However, participants also expressed a sense of powerlessness, feeling as though their voices were limited in shaping outcomes. 'We didn't have control over anything that was going to occur at that point in time' (P1), and 'Later on, also feeling like we were getting blocked because we wanted to innovate' (P13), were comments that highlighted the constraints they faced. The organisational influence on decision-making was noted, with one participant saying, 'Because I work in such a structured environment, I think it makes it difficult for me to make changes' (P10). Another participant added, 'We were assigned new tasks from their side', (P13), reflecting a sense of limited opportunity for autonomy. These examples show how hierarchical and structured decision-making restricted opportunities for individual job-crafting.

Sub-theme 2: Employee job-crafting

The second sub-theme highlights employees' ability to implement job-crafting strategies. Participants shared how they contributed to decision-making and exercised autonomy in their roles. One participant explained:

'As I mentioned earlier, I was also very much involved with, with with the decisions that were made and also when we brought in a hybrid model ... so I was involved and consulted in that and part of the decision-making.' (P5)

This demonstrates their involvement in decision-making despite hierarchical constraints. Some employees had the authority to delegate tasks, with one noting, 'The additional tasks I allocated to her was decisions I could make so I have that authority to delegate and to make certain changes in the way that I manage our department' (P5). Flexibility also played a role in job-crafting, as one employee reflected, 'I have a little bit more freedom ... I can come and go basically, as I please' (P5), highlighting the importance of flexible work arrangements.

The individual agency was another key aspect, with one participant observing, 'We are all productive in different ways' (P4), and another adding, 'I think it's important for obviously, all employees like to stand up like for something if it's like concerning life and death' (P2). These examples illustrate how employees could adapt their roles through autonomy in decision-making, task delegation and flexible schedules.

Theme 6: Challenges in job-crafting

Participants were asked about the challenges they faced when implementing job-crafting strategies during COVID-19.

Sub-theme 1: Adapting to remote work

The first sub-theme captures employees' adaptation to a remote work model, highlighting several challenges. Initially,

participants struggled with routine and productivity. One shared:

'The first stage, obviously, didn't have any control over it sort of just had to adapt to working from home but then I sort of got into my own routine.' (P1)

Convincing others to embrace technology was another challenge, particularly among older employees, as one participant noted:

'[G]etting people's mindsets to adapt, because you have, your more conservative, older people in every organisation that doesn't like technology that doesn't embrace technology. So that was a challenge.' (P3)

Communication also proved difficult, with distractions impacting focus during virtual meetings: 'There were so many distractions already, just on that, never mind going into other apps and started working on other stuff, like you could very easily be distracted' (P9). Building trust and accountability was vital while working remotely, as one participant stated:

'I think a lot of people saw this as an opportunity to say, "You can trust me to work from home. And you can trust me to work on a hybrid model."' (P3)

Finally, online fatigue became a real issue as employees faced the strain of constant screen time:

'People were dying, like, because you spent a lot of time on the computer now to do something fun. Hey, guess what, you have to be on the computer again.' (P9)

These examples reflect the key challenges of adapting to a remote work model, from establishing a routine to managing trust and online fatigue.

Sub-theme 2: Adapting to hybrid work

Regarding the second sub-theme of adapting to a hybrid work model, participants highlighted the lack of flexibility as a major challenge. One participant expressed frustration with rigid schedules: 'And then when we went back in, I didn't like not having that flexibility ... I wasn't allowed to leave until half past five ...' (P1). This lack of flexibility made it difficult for participants to balance work and other personal responsibilities.

Sub-theme 3: Household challenges

The third sub-theme, household responsibilities and challenges, highlights the struggles participants faced with distractions, increased household tasks and work environment adjustments while working from home. One participant described the distractions at home: 'My mom was in my dining room ... I could hear her team's meetings ... my dog was at my door scratching' (P1). Additionally, managing household duties added pressure: 'There's more responsibility ... mostly, honestly, all of that would be done weekends' (P4).

The importance of a suitable work environment was also noted, with one participant mentioning the need for a proper chair: 'I didn't actually have a good enough chair that supported my back. So I had to actually go and get a proper chair' (P6). Lastly, the challenge of sharing workspace with family members led to a reorganisation of their home: 'We all literally work from the dining room ... So we just moved to different sections in the house so that it's a bit more comfortable for everybody' (P6). These examples reflect the significant impact household dynamics had on work productivity and comfort during the remote work transition.

Sub-theme 4: Personal challenges

The final sub-theme, personal challenges, highlights the difficulties employees face in managing social isolation, anxiety, relationships at home and the blending of work and personal life. One participant struggled with being alone during lunch:

'I was eating lunch alone because my parents don't eat lunch. So it was more like now sitting in my room watching Netflix eating lunch and sort of chatting to people. So that's the part that I struggled with the most.' (P1)

Anxiety was another major issue:

'I mentioned the beginning of COVID-19, you try to put in extra work because you want to prove you know, that you're productive. And you're, you know, you're doing your part. So I think I put a lot of pressure on myself, but also it was an adjustment having to cope with schoolwork.' (P5)

Participants also faced relationship challenges at home, particularly with a partner: 'My husband is an extrovert ... I'm his only conversation and as it is, I'm already drained' (P5). Lastly, the blending of work and personal life was challenging: 'I felt that that cost me like my personal life ... working literally Monday to Sunday without having a break' (P2). These challenges reflect the complex balance employees had to strike between their personal and professional lives during the remote work transition.

Theme 7: Benefits of job-crafting

Participants were asked about the benefits of implementing job-crafting strategies during COVID-19.

Sub-theme 1: Remote work benefits

The first sub-theme, the benefits of a remote work model, reflects increased productivity, improved soft skills and a catalyst for innovation. One participant highlighted that working from home minimised distractions, leading to better focus: 'I think working alone from home gives you the opportunity to not be disturbed that much less distraction, so I think you are more focused' (P11). Working remotely also enhanced skill development: 'It improved your soft skills of working. It improved your professional personality, just made you a better person in the office' (P8).

Additionally, remote work encouraged innovation, with one participant noting the transition to a paperless organisation:

'Literally move to a paperless organisation with the help of COVID-19 because everything's saved electronically. And we've now just, that's the new way of working. So, we've just moving forward with that as opposed to regressing.' (P6)

Finally, the hybrid model provided more time, with one participant noting: 'I could sleep an hour later every day ... the benefits for me were mainly the time I just had more time' (P5). These benefits underscore the positive changes employees experienced in adapting to remote work.

Sub-theme 2: Hybrid work benefits

The second sub-theme, benefits of a hybrid work model, emphasises the flexibility and change of environment that employees experienced. One participant highlighted the appeal of having varied workspaces:

'It was nice because I could then have a change of environments ... I was now in the office talking to other people ... but then I could go home the next day and focus solely on work.' (P1)

This shift allowed individuals to experience a balance of social interaction and focussed productivity, enhancing their overall work experience.

Sub-theme 3: Work-life balance

The last sub-theme, improved work-life balance, highlights several benefits of remote work, such as financial savings, a more relaxed lifestyle and better health. Participants noted the financial advantages, saving on commuting, lunch and coffee costs: 'You save on your expenses, you don't incur fuel costs, and you don't spend money on lunch at the office' (P2). Remote work also allowed for a more relaxed lifestyle, with one participant mentioning, 'As time went on, I got more relaxed ... I could spend that time that I would spend in traffic either sleeping an hour later or doing some gardening' (P5).

Improved health was another benefit, with participants finding more time for physical activity: 'It's helped me a lot in terms of my mental health and physical health because I could even go to the gym more' (P7). Increased quality time with children also stood out: 'It was nice in the sense to have my daughter around more...you know I could help her with everything' (P15). Finally, focussing on hobbies and self-care was crucial for maintaining well-being: 'That was what kept me sane, spending more time with your hobbies' (P9).

Discussion

Summary of findings

The study's first objective was to explore employees' work arrangements and organisational communication during COVID-19, focussing on the shift from office-based to remote and hybrid models. Key sub-themes included work context transformation (remote work, hybrid models and essential services) and communication strategies

(arrangement updates, information sharing, methods and decision-making). Remote work became standard during the pandemic (Dingel & Neiman, 2020), and as restrictions eased, hybrid models offered flexibility while supporting collaboration (Feser, 2023; Nolden, 2023). Organisations effectively transitioned to remote work, emphasising adaptability and collaborative planning.

Communication was vital during the pandemic for keeping employees informed about COVID-19 updates. Organisations used channels such as email, meetings, WhatsApp and calls (Karl et al., 2021). Effective communication supported decision-making on remote work, safety and regulatory changes (Taylor et al., 2021). This study reinforced that clear communication empowered employees to adapt and return to work safely.

The second objective of this study was to explore the experiences of employees, regarding task-crafting strategies employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following sub-themes emerged from this study: changes in work content; flexibility and productivity; importance of personal development; work approach and strategies; work-from-home policy and logistics; and changing career paths and work environments. Employees implemented various task-crafting strategies in response to changes in their work content and environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, changes such as increased workloads, longer working hours, technology usage, additional job responsibilities and a shift in meeting culture (Al-Habaibeh et al., 2021; Chafi et al., 2021). Remote work led to notable changes in participants' daily routines, resulting in higher productivity levels because of the flexibility of working at preferred times and locations (Atoko, 2021). Participants and organisations prioritised employee development, emphasising relevant courses and studies to enhance soft skills (Nyamande-Pitso, 2023). To optimise productivity while working from home, participants emphasised time management, scheduling tasks and practising self-discipline to maintain work quality and efficient time utilisation (Alhasani et al., 2022). The shift to remote work positively influenced participants' attitudes, reducing stress and enhancing work-life balance (Ng et al., 2022).

Organisations adapted to remote work by implementing work-from-home policies, providing necessary equipment and establishing clear guidelines for secure remote access (Ng et al., 2022). The pandemic acted as a catalyst for career shifts, with some participants switching to different fields or industries because of the impact of COVID-19 on their previous jobs (Benaraba et al., 2022). This adaptation allowed employees to explore alternative opportunities and adjust to new work environments (Zheng et al., 2022). As confirmed in previous studies, individuals in this study also employed diverse task-crafting approaches, including workload adjustments, technology adoption and a focus on personal growth. These strategies resulted in heightened productivity,

improved work-life balance, and notable changes in career trajectories and work settings.

The third objective of this study was to explore the experiences of employees, regarding cognitive-crafting strategies employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following sub-themes emerged from this study: Employees' emotional perspective and mental approach to work demands. In this study, it was found that participants during the COVID-19 pandemic utilised cognitive-crafting strategies, which included expressing gratitude for their employment, displaying intrinsic motivation and commitment, embracing fresh challenges, maintaining a positive mindset, seeking professional assistance and participating in social activities. These results confirm what was found by previous researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic (King, 2021).

Furthermore, finding fulfilment in their work was crucial for employees' resilience during the pandemic. Embracing new challenges and growth opportunities provided enjoyment and satisfaction, aligning with their desires for personal and professional development (Jung et al., 2023). To cope effectively, employees focussed on building mental and emotional resilience, adopting a day-by-day approach, setting achievable goals and maintaining a positive mindset (Renfrew, 2021). This positive outlook allowed them to navigate uncertainties, manage stress, and seek professional help and engage in self-care activities such as exercise and socialising (Tsabedze et al., 2023). These strategies resulted in heightened job satisfaction, enhanced resilience and effective coping mechanisms for managing uncertainties and work-related demands.

The study's fourth objective explored employees' relational-crafting strategies during COVID-19, highlighting sub-themes like open communication, changing colleague relationships, social opportunities and managerial support. Employees used relational strategies to adapt to remote work and maintain connections (Rubens, 2021). Open communication fostered trust and peer support (Men et al., 2021) through platforms such as Teams and WhatsApp (Nadan et al., 2020). Participants emphasised transparent communication, social interactions and managerial backing. Experienced colleagues provided crucial guidance (Houston, 2023), while mutual support improved relationships (Tsabedze et al., 2023). Hybrid work models introduced community-building activities like office meetups and social gatherings (Stoyanchev, 2023).

Managers played a crucial role in adapting their social support strategies during the pandemic, organising breakfast meetings, making in-person visits and maintaining regular check-ins to offer personalised support and maintain connections (Mendy et al., 2020). Frequent feedback was emphasised making employees feel valued and engaged (Einwiller et al., 2021). Team-building activities were conducted to promote connections, reduce stress and foster a sense of togetherness among team members (Reinwald et al.,

2021). As a result, these efforts contributed to the enhancement of relationships, an increase in trust, and improved well-being in both remote and hybrid work settings.

The fifth objective of this study was to explore the opportunity for employees to implement job-crafting strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following sub-themes emerged from this study: Organisational control and decision-making; and employee ability to implement job-crafting strategies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, employees were afforded opportunities to implement job-crafting strategies, despite facing challenges related to decision-making processes and hierarchical structures. Collaborative decision-making within the organisation, considering inputs from various experts and external entities, have all played a significant role in facilitating the implementation of job-crafting strategies (Wählin-Jacobsen, 2018). However, employees have expressed feelings of limited control and powerlessness as organisational decisions are predominantly driven by the organisation, leading to a sense of being replaceable and lacking autonomy in shaping outcomes (Kinowska & Sienkiewicz, 2022).

In the study, participants noted that, although they encountered obstacles linked to organisational control and hierarchical decision-making frameworks, certain individuals were provided with chances to apply job-crafting strategies throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaborative decision-making procedures, individual contributions in meetings, the ability to delegate tasks and personal empowerment played vital roles in shaping their work setups and promoting job-crafting behaviours (Hummels & Nullens, 2022). The authority to delegate tasks and make changes within their departments has been granted, providing employees with a degree of flexibility and adaptability in their work arrangements and fostering opportunities for job-crafting behaviours (Kallio & Carlsson, 2023). Furthermore, the individual agency has emerged as a crucial factor in successful job-crafting implementation, empowering employees to make decisions based on their specific circumstances and communicate their needs effectively (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021).

The study's sixth objective examined the challenges and benefits of job-crafting strategies during COVID-19. Challenges included adapting to remote and hybrid work models, managing household and personal responsibilities and overcoming resistance to new technology (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020; Sandoval-Reyes et al., 2023). Remote workers faced communication hurdles, distractions and online fatigue (Döring et al., 2022), needing to build trust and demonstrate accountability (Daniel, 2020). Benefits included improved work-life balance and flexibility in remote and hybrid models.

Furthermore, the transition to a hybrid work model presented unique challenges, as participants expressed dissatisfaction with rigid schedules (Will, 2021). Balancing work and other

responsibilities became a challenge that impacted job-crafting efforts (Nissinen et al., 2022)

Moreover, adapting to remote work during the pandemic resulted in household-related challenges. Distractions from family members and pets at home disrupted participants' focus and productivity (Scholtz, 2022). Finding suitable workspaces posed difficulties and increased responsibilities such as childcare and domestic tasks added demands on individuals, potentially hindering their ability to be proactive in their work (Adisa et al., 2022). The significance of an ergonomic work environment, including a supportive chair for back health, was emphasised by participants to enhance their job-crafting experiences (Ting et al., 2019).

Implementing job-crafting strategies posed personal challenges, including social isolation, disconnection from office interactions (School of Public Health, 2020), anxiety and pressure to balance productivity with family responsibilities (Elahi et al., 2022). The blurred boundaries between work and personal life led to constant work mode, complicating job-crafting (Prajapati & Rathod, 2013). Despite these hurdles, participants reported significant benefits, noting the positive impact of job-crafting on their work experiences.

Employees who implemented job-crafting strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in remote work models, experienced numerous benefits. They reported increased productivity in a distraction-free and comfortable environment, which allowed them to focus more effectively on tasks (Hargreaves, 2021). Working remotely also provided opportunities for skill development, learning and a more relaxed work atmosphere, leading to improved confidence and motivation (Henke et al., 2022). Participants were able to diversify their tasks and expand their knowledge, fostering innovation and adaptation to new technologies (Bachmann & Frutos-Bencze, 2022). This facilitated the transformation of work processes and the adoption of digital solutions, such as transitioning to a paperless organisation (Cartledge, 2023). The study found that despite facing challenges such as adapting to remote and hybrid work models, managing household responsibilities and dealing with personal hurdles, participants who implemented job-crafting strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced numerous benefits. Similarly, employees who employed job-crafting strategies in a hybrid work model enjoyed the benefit of flexibility. The option to switch between different environments and interact with others in the office enhanced their work experience and contributed to a more engaging and fulfilling work environment (Wooddell, 2023).

Implementing job-crafting strategies in remote work offered several benefits, enhancing work-life balance. Participants highlighted financial savings on commuting (Beno, 2021) and a more relaxed lifestyle, which allowed time for activities like gardening and reduced commute stress, improving mental and physical health (Tronco Hernández et al., 2021). Remote work

also enabled more family time (Zhu et al., 2021) and increased productivity, flexibility, soft skills and self-care, contributing to a better overall work-life balance (Memon et al., 2023).

Practical implications

Job-crafting allows employees to adjust their roles, tasks and work environments to better align with their personal strengths, interests and well-being. In remote and hybrid work models, organisations must take proactive steps to support job-crafting to enhance employee satisfaction, engagement and productivity. Organisations should invest in robust technological tools that support remote and hybrid work, such as communication platforms, collaborative software and project management tools. Ensuring that employees have access to reliable technology and sufficient training can help eliminate technological barriers and enable employees to modify tasks and roles more effectively (Bloom et al., 2015; Dingel & Neiman, 2020).

Transparent communication channels are essential. Regular check-ins, video calls and messaging apps help maintain clear communication, reduce misunderstandings and provide opportunities for employees to modify how they communicate with colleagues and managers (Karl et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021). Supervisors should foster a supportive environment to encourage collaboration and allow employees to manage their roles based on their preferences and needs. Rigid hybrid work schedules can hinder job-crafting. Offering more flexible arrangements can help employees balance their professional and personal responsibilities, giving them the autonomy to craft their own work-life balance (Nissinen et al., 2022; Will, 2021). This flexibility allows employees to better manage their tasks, modify their workflows, and take on roles that suit their strengths and aspirations.

Organisations should prioritise employee well-being by encouraging regular breaks, providing access to mental health resources and fostering a positive work environment. This enables employees to adjust their roles and tasks to maintain productivity while caring for their mental health (Döring et al., 2022; Renfrew, 2021). Additionally, a supportive environment allows employees to feel empowered to shape their work to improve job satisfaction and reduce stress (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021; Hummels & Nullens, 2022).

Virtual team-building activities, regular check-ins and social events such as 'virtual coffee breaks' can help foster stronger relationships among colleagues and supervisors. These efforts can strengthen team cohesion and provide employees with opportunities to craft their interactions, improving their sense of connection and support (Men et al., 2021; Stoyanchev, 2023). Organisations should facilitate mentorship programmes and peer support networks to encourage relational-crafting. This includes providing employees with access to mentors who can guide them and offer feedback on their roles, which helps

them better align their work relationships with personal values and career aspirations (Petrou et al., 2018).

Organisations should encourage employees to reframe their roles by emphasising the broader purpose of their work, connecting individual tasks to larger organisational goals. By fostering a work environment that emphasises meaning and purpose, organisations can help employees align their work with their values (Baburaj & Marathe 2023; Sahay & Dwyer, 2021). Providing opportunities for personal development through training programmes, professional growth sessions and skill-building workshops allows employees to adjust their perceptions of their work, increasing motivation and resilience (Tims et al., 2013).

Organisations should cultivate a culture of psychological safety and trust, where employees feel comfortable sharing challenges, seeking support, and redefining their roles to meet personal and professional needs. When employees perceive their work as meaningful and feel supported in their efforts, they are more likely to engage in cognitive-crafting (Tims et al., 2013).

Limitations and recommendations

While the study provides valuable insights into job-crafting strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The small sample size ($N = 15$) limits the generalisability of the results. Although the study's qualitative nature does not aim for generalisation, a larger sample could offer a broader range of perspectives on job-crafting strategies across different sectors and demographics, allowing for a more nuanced understanding (Guest et al., 2020).

The use of online interviews, although practical, may have introduced selection bias by restricting participation to those with reliable Internet access and familiarity with digital tools. This could have excluded participants less comfortable with technology. A mixed-methods approach, incorporating both in-person and online interviews, would help capture a more diverse range of experiences (Archibald et al., 2021).

Some participants struggled to identify the job-crafting strategies they employed, suggesting that these strategies are often subconscious. This highlights the need for clearer prompts to help participants reflect on and articulate their job-crafting, enhancing the depth of data collected (Tims et al., 2013). Additionally, the data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of heightened stress and uncertainty. This context may have influenced participants' responses, particularly regarding job satisfaction and motivation. Research conducted outside of such crises could provide a clearer picture of job-crafting in more stable environments (Ng et al., 2022).

Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample size and exploring job-crafting across various organisational settings. A longitudinal study could also

assess the long-term impact of job-crafting on employee well-being and performance, offering deeper insights into its effectiveness over time.

For practice, organisations should regularly measure the effectiveness of job-crafting interventions through feedback, surveys and performance metrics. This can help refine initiatives to better meet employee needs (Van Wingerden et al., 2017). Organisations should also invest in training programmes that educate employees about job-crafting, providing tools and resources for adjusting tasks, relationships and work perceptions. Facilitating task-crafting can be supported by offering skill development, flexible work arrangements and work-life balance initiatives (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021; Tims et al., 2013).

For relational-crafting, organisations should foster open communication and create spaces for feedback and social interactions. Social activities and mentorship programmes can strengthen relationships within teams (Men et al., 2021; Stoyanchev, 2023). In terms of cognitive-crafting, organisations should encourage employees to find meaning in their work, particularly during challenging times. Providing resources like mindfulness programmes and resilience training can support employees' mental and emotional well-being (Baburaj & Marathe 2023).

At the organisational level, policies should support job-crafting by offering flexible work arrangements and professional development opportunities, alongside a culture of trust. Decision-makers should ensure that employees have the autonomy to adjust their tasks and work environments, leading to improved productivity and employee well-being (Hummels & Nullens, 2022; Ng et al., 2022). Additionally, addressing issues such as online fatigue, mental health and work-life balance can enhance job-crafting and employee satisfaction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this research study indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic led employees in a South African workplace to implement various job-crafting strategies to adapt to the changing work conditions. Task-crafting involved redefining roles and responsibilities to accommodate remote work, while relational-crafting focussed on strengthening relationships through virtual communication channels. Cognitive-crafting strategies assisted employees in finding new meaning in their work and coping with uncertainty. Despite challenges, such as adapting to remote and hybrid work models, employees demonstrated resilience and employed task-crafting to shape their job tasks. Open communication, changes in relationships, socialising opportunities and managerial support were crucial for implementing relational-crafting. Limited autonomy and perceived replaceability hindered job-crafting, but employees had decision-making power within their departments. Challenges included adapting to remote and hybrid work models, household responsibilities and personal difficulties, while benefits included improved work-life balance. Overall,

job-crafting strategies proved valuable in enhancing employee well-being and productivity during the pandemic.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

K.M. conducted the conceptualisation, formal analysis, and writing of the original draft, as well as gathered resources. M.J. and C.J. contributed by writing, reviewing and supervising the study.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.J., upon reasonable request.

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