

# Employee withdrawal behavior during forced remote work: the roles of perceived organizational support and meaningful work

Employee  
withdrawal  
behavior and  
remote work

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Received 27 January 2023

Revised 4 August 2023

Accepted 9 February 2024

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Employee withdrawal behavior can be costly for an organization. Referring to the job demands-resources (JD-R) model, this study assessed employee withdrawal behavior during forced remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Job demands in the recent crisis tend to be high, resulting in the use of job resources, that is, perceived organizational support (POS) during remote work and meaningful work. Thus, the study aimed to examine the roles of POS and meaningful work toward employee withdrawal behavior during forced remote work.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Self-report questionnaires were received from 320 Thai forced remote employees in various industries. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted, followed by structural equation model to test hypotheses.

**Findings** – The full mediating role of meaningful work between POS during remote work and employee withdrawal behavior was detected, emphasizing its significance as an intrinsic motivator to lessen the likelihood of withdrawal behavior.

**Originality/value** – Existing knowledge of remote work is questioned in terms of how it applies to a forced remote situation. This study also confirmed the JD-R model in an unfamiliar scenario, contributing to our knowledge of remote work as a future of work.

**Keywords** Employee withdrawal behavior, POS during remote work, Meaningful work, Forced remote work, JD-R model

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound effects on both organizations and individuals (Cooke *et al.*, 2021; Malhotra, 2021). Organizations were forced to create a new way of work. Forced remote work suddenly increased, creating challenges for organizations and employees (Becker *et al.*, 2022; Chong *et al.*, 2020; Turesky *et al.*, 2020). Although prior studies revealed the benefits of remote work, these positive results were related to employees who voluntarily chose this mode of work and in the past, remote work was a privilege for some employees/jobs (Bilotta *et al.*, 2021; Shockley *et al.*, 2021). In contrast, recent studies reported positive and negative aspects of forced remote work (Elbaz *et al.*, 2023; Meyer *et al.*, 2021; Vu *et al.*, 2022).

For example, research reported an ongoing risk of workplace loneliness, work-family conflicts and mental health issues negatively affecting employee well-being among forced remote employees (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020; Green *et al.*, 2020; Mousa and Samara, 2022). In contrast, some organizations reported on the positive aspects of remote work, as employees can handle their work more efficiently and save time with commuting (Hicks, 2020). As such, further studies examining the effect of a mandatory and sudden shift to remote work, and



how to manage remote employee performance are required (Chang *et al.*, 2022; Lian *et al.*, 2022; Torres and Orhan, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021).

Like many countries, Thailand was severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as it had heavily relied on tourism (Kaendera and Leigh, 2021). Although the number of remote workers in Thailand before the COVID-19 pandemic was not officially reported, it is assumed that with a less digitalized economy, remote work in Thailand was unusual for most Thai employees (Hicks, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic compelled businesses to adopt mandatory remote work, transforming it from a luxury reserved for a privileged few into a necessity. Thus, this study took place in Thailand to investigate attitudes and behaviors of Thai employees who had been forced to remote work because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Individual employee performance can impact organizational performance; thus, employees who intentionally reduce their interest in work and/or decrease their effort, that is, employee withdrawal behavior, can produce harm for an organization (Sliter *et al.*, 2012; Swider and Zimmerman, 2014; Tian *et al.*, 2021). Employee withdrawal behavior during forced remote work raises concerns within organizations. Employees find themselves carrying out their work in isolated environments, lacking the necessary resources, support and supervisory monitoring typically available in office settings. Previous studies, for example, reported that feelings of workplace loneliness and emotional exhaustion can contribute to employees' inclination to leave an organization, as observed among employees working in traditional office spaces (Çiftçi, 2021). This emphasizes the importance of social relations in normal time when people can physically attend social activities.

Yet, given special regulations to reduce pandemic transmission, employees were forced to work from home with most of the usual social activities cancelled. Additionally, because daycares/schools closed with a government order, remote employees must supervise their dependents while completing work assignments with limited equipment and their home conditions might not allow them to fully focus on their work. This situation negatively affected employees. Thus, extra support from an organization during remote work may be necessary, particularly technological tools and supportive work procedures (Green *et al.*, 2020) to reduce employee stress.

Although supervisors can use technological performance management tools to assess performance of remote employees, previous research reported that employees tend to react negatively with stress and withdrawal behavior to electronic monitoring (Nyberg *et al.*, 2021). Importantly, employee withdrawal behavior is difficult to detect because it can happen either physically or psychologically without others noticing, highlighting the significance of the problem during forced remote work because most remote employees and organizations are not ready for this new challenge (Syrek *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, employee withdrawal behavior can negatively relate to an individual's overall future performance (Swider and Zimmerman, 2014). It is critical to understand this behavior with forced remote work, such that a practical approach can be implemented to prepare for other unanticipated situations.

Meaningful work is an answer for engaging employees; those who perceive work as meaningful tend to be more motivated and perform better (Fürstenberg *et al.*, 2021; Goh and Baum, 2021; Han *et al.*, 2021; Turnipseed and VandeWaa, 2020). Organizations can foster meaningful work by maintaining a supportive work environment as well as effective leaders, who can cultivate these perceptions (Lysova *et al.*, 2019). Given forced remote work, supervisors cannot observe employee performance and whether remote employees can retain their work motivation is of interest to organizations (Toscano and Zappalà, 2021). Applying the job demands-resources (JD-R) model, this study expected that organizational support during remote work and meaningful work could be solutions encouraging remote employees to stay focused.

This study examined employee withdrawal behavior among those forced to become remote employees in Thailand, during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Although the

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literature reported that organizational conditions and employee attitudes can affect employee withdrawal behavior (Kanungo and Mendonca, 2002; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2007), this study reemphasized the significance of perceived organizational support (POS) and meaningful work through the lens of a crisis. It was hypothesized that POS and meaningful work can lessen employee withdrawal behaviors during forced remote work and a significant mediating role of meaningful work was expected.

This study contributes to the literature by offering evidence about the link between employee perception of work and the organization and employee performance in crises, especially from Thailand, where limited studies about the effect of forced remote work have been conducted. The study's significance is twofold. It provides a theoretical understanding of the JD-R model in unusual situations, and guides the organization to manage employee performance in a remote work environment which is the anticipated future of work. The following section presents the literature review, research method, results and discussion.

## Literature review

A broad range of literature was reviewed to frame this study and construct the conceptual framework. The sections below review literature related to the key constructs under investigation in this study.

### *Job demands-resources model*

The job demands-resources model (JD-R model) is an underpinning theory in this study. It classified two factors for relevant occupations: job demands and job resources, referring to "physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job" (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, p. 312). Job demands can create a strain on employees, as they must continuously respond, whereas job resources facilitate goals by motivating individuals to reach a higher level of engagement and excellent performance (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

During the period of forced remote work, employees are confronted with various levels of professional and personal stress, necessitating adaptation. For some employees, special technology support, such as IT helpdesk, and technology equipment are needed (Vaziri *et al.*, 2020). The impact is more pronounced among young employees, female employees and those living with household members, especially children (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Syrek *et al.*, 2022). The demands of their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic had been particularly burdensome, resulting in an increased need for job resources (Britt *et al.*, 2021; Chong *et al.*, 2020). In this study, job resources are POS aimed at facilitating employees' effective transition to sudden forced remote work and a sense of meaningful work to help remote employees remain focused. The literature of these concepts, namely employee withdrawal behavior, POS and meaningful work, is reviewed and presented in the following section.

### *Employee withdrawal behavior*

Employee withdrawal behavior refers to avoiding or disengaging, physically and/or psychologically, from work and the organization, even if employees continue to maintain their organizational membership (Carpenter and Berry, 2017; Rurkkhum, 2018; Yi and Wang, 2015). Examples of these behaviors involved being late, daydreaming, lessened effort and excuses to get out of work (Carpenter and Berry, 2017). Employee withdrawal behavior is likely to progress from less to more severe, that is, along with an intention to leave an organization (Rurkkhum, 2018). Organizations must deal with employee withdrawal behavior to decrease its negative effects (Sliter *et al.*, 2012; Swider and Zimmerman, 2014; Tian *et al.*, 2021).

Those who had been compelled to transition to remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic experienced significant stress and heightened job demands. These demands include factors such as role ambiguity, increased workload, a lack of social support, work-family conflicts and the need to adapt to a new way of performing remote work (Bilotta *et al.*, 2021; Syrek *et al.*, 2022). Such high job demands can lead to mental health strains, resulting in employees disengaging from their work either psychologically or physically. Consequently, job resources play a crucial role. In this study, job resources are considered invaluable supports that assist forced remote workers in accomplishing their tasks and the perception of meaningful work to intrinsically motivate them.

#### *Perceived organizational support during remote work*

Perceived organizational support (POS) during remote work is defined as employee perception that the organization will assist them in effectively transitioning to forced remote work by providing the essential resources and support needed for telework (Chong *et al.*, 2020). By aiding remote employees in adapting to their new circumstances, the organization can alleviate strains and enhance the prospects of successful remote work. For instance, effective communication between supervisors and employees becomes crucial during remote work (Shockley *et al.*, 2021), in addition to a high level of technological support and extra support from the organization, such as providing social support and adapting rules to facilitate remote work (Carillo *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2021). As per social exchange theory, POS prompts employees to reciprocate positive treatment from an organization, with benefits emerging for both (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002).

Referring to the JD-R model, an organization that offers additional support, including essential devices for remote work and psychological assistance to aid employees in a seamless transition is perceived as providing job resources. Recent studies highlighted that a lack of perceived trust and support from employers during forced remote work adversely affects employees' physical and psychological well-being (Islam, 2021; Monsay *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, organizations must implement supportive policies and practices that encompass both structural and social support during remote work and other emerging forms of work in the future (Awada *et al.*, 2021; Donovan, 2022; Ihl *et al.*, 2020; Kossek *et al.*, 2021). A meta-analysis showed a negative association between POS and employee withdrawal behavior (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002) during the normal situations. This study hypothesized a similar effect of POS during remote work on employee withdrawal behavior. Thus, the following hypothesis was developed.

*H1. POS during remote work is negatively related to employee withdrawal behavior.*

#### *Meaningful work*

Several terms describe meaningful work, such as meaningfulness, meaning of work and meaning in work, which refers to the purposeful and significance of work to fulfill human life (Allan *et al.*, 2019; You *et al.*, 2021). The concept of meaningful work recognizes the importance of work as a core domain of modern life and addresses a variety of individual needs, as opposed to only financial needs (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Chen *et al.*, 2018). Prior studies revealed positive outcomes of meaningful work (Fairlie, 2011; Fürstenberg *et al.*, 2021; Goh and Baum, 2021; Han *et al.*, 2021; Jung and Yoon, 2016), stressing its importance in today's organizations.

Meaningful work is cultivated through various factors, such as job design, employee roles and interactions with stakeholders, particularly leaders (Lysova *et al.*, 2019; Mousa and Samara, 2022; Popaitoon, 2022; Sjöblom *et al.*, 2022). For example, Mousa and Samara (2022) found that during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees valued meaningful work as necessary resources helping them deal with limitations and stresses. As representatives of

the organization, leaders can play a vital role in fostering a sense of meaningfulness among employees, especially during prolonged crises. They can achieve this by highlighting the significance of the work being done and by promoting psychological empowerment within the workforce (Chen *et al.*, 2018; Frieder *et al.*, 2018; Jiang, 2021; Kim and Beehr, 2018; Turnipseed and VandeWaa, 2020). It was hypothesized that employee perception of organizational support during forced remote work could contribute to their experience of meaningful work. When employees perceive special support from the organization during remote work, it enhances their level of interaction with the organization. Furthermore, this support serves as a signal to employees that the organization trusts and supports them not only during normal circumstances but also during challenging times. Thus, the following hypothesis was developed.

*H2. POS during remote work is positively related to meaningful work.*

Employees who find their work meaningful are more likely to exhibit enthusiasm in their performance, which in turn has positive effects on the organization. This holds true both in normal situations and during times of crisis (Fürstenberg *et al.*, 2021; Goh and Baum, 2021; Jiang, 2021; Jung and Yoon, 2016; Sjöblom *et al.*, 2022). Previous studies revealed that experiencing a sense of meaningfulness can drive engagement among crowdworkers (Ihl *et al.*, 2020) and influence the desire to continue working, even among aging employees (Wallin *et al.*, 2022). However, it is important to note that during remote work, an excessive focus on meaningfulness can lead to negative consequences, particularly for workaholics, due to the potential blurring of boundaries between work and personal life (Magrizos *et al.*, 2023). A meta-analysis reported negative connections between meaningful work and employee withdrawal behavior (Allan *et al.*, 2019) during the normal situations. Incorporating the results of a meta-analysis, this study hypothesized a similar effect of meaningful work on employee withdrawal behavior during remote work. In this way, employees are expected to engage less in withdrawal behavior while dealing with their remote work. Thus, the following hypothesis was developed.

*H3. Meaningful work is negatively related to employee withdrawal behavior.*

An organization can help employees smoothly transition to forced remote work by providing sufficient job resources. Job resources send signals to employees about an organization's willingness to help them manage difficulties which reduces the likelihood of withdrawal behavior. Simultaneously, the employees who perceived this support are aware of meaningful work through increased interactions from an organization which facilitates their performance in an unfamiliar environment (Ihl *et al.*, 2020; Magrizos *et al.*, 2023). Previous studies additionally highlighted the mediating effect of meaningful work, which can amplify positive behaviors and alleviate emotional exhaustion among employees (Chen *et al.*, 2018; Kim and Beehr, 2018; Singh *et al.*, 2021). For instance, employees who perceive transformative leadership are more likely to exhibit voice behaviors, that is, expressing their opinions and ideas, as a result of experiencing meaningful work (Chen *et al.*, 2018). Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed.

*H4. Meaningful work mediates the relationship between POS during remote work and employee withdrawal behavior.*

## Method

### Sample

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand began in March 2020. With restricted government regulations, the number of the COVID-19 cases remained low even though such

rules negatively affected the country's economic growth. Unfortunately, the number of the COVID-19 cases surged during the second and third quarters of 2021 with emerging new variants ([World Bank, 2021](#)). This study collected data from forced remote employees, regardless of the industry, organization and position in Thailand from November 2021 to February 2022 (the first wave of the worrisome Omicron variant in Thailand). In other words, this study collected data from forced remote employees when they had become more familiar with remote work.

To recruit participants, an online survey link was initially distributed through the personal networks and social media of the researchers and a research assistant. To facilitate data collection during the lockdown period, a snowball sampling method was employed, whereby participants were asked to share the online survey link with others. This approach has been commonly used in studies investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employees ([Awada et al., 2021](#); [Chong et al., 2020](#); [Clark et al., 2021](#); [Donovan, 2022](#); [Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya, 2020](#)). Notably, in this study, efforts were made to recruit diverse participants by distributing the survey link through multiple research team networks rather than relying solely on a single personal network. This approach reduced the likelihood of participants being too similar to each other, as often encountered in snowball sampling. Moreover, the participants included individuals employed in various organizations; thus, expanding the scope of previous research findings that have predominantly focused on specific organizations or professions ([Magrizos et al., 2023](#)). Participants must meet the selection criteria to participate the research. First, participants did not experience voluntary remote work before the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, they were full-time forced remote employees with more than a month of forced remote work experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The self-report instrument was employed because it was appropriate due to the nature of the study to investigate individual employees' perceptions and behavior. The sample was reported on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) - *Note: the employee withdrawal behavior scale range from 1 (never) to 5 (always)* -, and asked to provide their basic demographic data at the end of the instrument. The instrument was initially tested among a small sample of 15 forced remote employees and a minor revision of unclear language was detected. A total of 399 respondents participated in the online survey; yet, only 320 surveys were completed and useable.

#### *Instrumentation*

POS during remote work was measured by adapting four items from Chong and colleagues' (2020) work about perceived organizational telework task support and the concept of trust within the organization, which is necessary to facilitate employee adaptation ([Sousa-Lima et al., 2013](#)). A sample item was "My organization takes a personal interest in whether I have all the work tools and resources that I need to work well at home during forced remote work".

Meaningful work was measured by adapting three items of an inspirational component from [Lips-Wiersma et al. \(2018\)](#) work. A sample item was "The vision my organization collectively work towards inspires me".

Employee withdrawal behavior during forced remote work may vary from normal withdrawal behavior. In this study, employee withdrawal behavior was measured with adapted three items from Chong and colleague's (2020) and [Rurkkhum's \(2018\)](#) works. A sample item was "I join online/call meetings late without permission during forced remote work".

#### *Data analysis techniques*

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted followed by a structural equation model. The results of the analyses are presented below.



## Results

Of the 320 respondents, 221 were female (69.10%). Most respondents worked with private organizations ( $n = 232$ , 72.50%), followed by government organizations ( $n = 65$ , 20.31%). The average age was 37.23 years, while the average tenure at the current organization was 9.02 years. Descriptive statistics of variables were reported as follows: POS (mean = 3.603,  $SD = 0.774$ ), meaningful work (mean = 4.043,  $SD = 0.653$ ) and employee withdrawal behavior (mean = 2.335,  $SD = 0.863$ ). Skewness and kurtosis of variables ranged from  $-0.543$  to  $0.807$ , and  $0.158$  to  $1.048$ , respectively, confirming normality with the range of  $-2$  to  $2$  (Garson, 2012). All variables showed correlation values that ranged from  $-0.190$  to  $0.266$ , less than the suggested value of  $0.90$ , confirming that multicollinearity is not found in the data set (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Common method bias (CMB) tested by Harman's single factor was reported at the 33.12% total variance value, below the recommended value at 50%, confirming that CMB was not a problem (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

An independent *t*-test was conducted to examine the difference in mean scores between male and female forced remote workers. The statistical analysis revealed no significant differences in scores for POS and meaningful work. However, a significant difference was found in employee withdrawal behavior ( $t = -0.1999^*$ ,  $p = 0.047$ ). Male employees reported a higher level of withdrawal behavior (mean = 2.483,  $SD = 0.933$ ), compared to female counterparts (mean = 2.262,  $SD = 0.824$ ).

Table 1 shows the results of the measurement model by using CFA. All factor loadings were significant, and the construct reliability (CR) ranged from  $0.72$  to  $0.84$ , higher than the accepted value of  $0.70$ . The average variance extracted (AVE) was reported at  $0.48$  (employee withdrawal behavior),  $0.58$  (POS during remote work) and  $0.61$  (meaningful work). Although the suggested value of AVE was higher than  $0.50$ , convergent validity of the construct was still adequate if the CR was more than  $0.60$  (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The CR of the employee withdrawal behavior scale was reported at  $0.72$ . Thus, the CR and AVE results supported convergent validity of the measurement items. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from  $0.70$  to  $0.83$ , exceed the suggested value of  $0.70$ . Table 2 presents the result of

Variables	CR	AVE	Cronbach's alpha
1. POS during remote work (Factor loadings ranged from 0.557 to 0.898)	0.84	0.58	0.83
2. Meaningful work (Factor loadings ranged from 0.735 to 0.801)	0.82	0.61	0.82
3. Employee withdrawal behavior (Factor loadings ranged from 0.490 to 0.828)	0.72	0.48	0.70

Source(s): Authors work

**Table 1.**  
Results of  
measurement model

Variables	POS during remote work	Meaningful work	Employee withdrawal behavior
POS during remote work	0.58		
Meaningful work	0.07	0.61	
Employee withdrawal behavior	0.02	0.05	0.48

Source(s): Authors work

**Table 2.**  
Discriminant validity

discriminant validity of the AVE for each variable was larger than squared correlations between the variable itself and other variables in the model (Hair *et al.*, 2010).

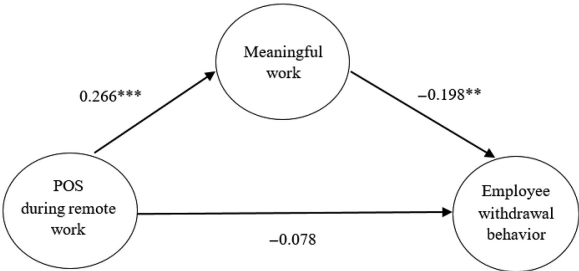
Results for the structural model assessment are presented here by using Mplus version 7.4. The fit indices fell within an acceptable range ( $\chi^2/df = 2.285$ ,  $CFI = 0.965$ ,  $TLI = 0.950$ ,  $SRMR = 0.054$  and  $RMSEA = 0.063$ ) (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Table 3 and Figure 1 show results of the study: meaningful work fully mediates the relationship between POS during remote work and employee withdrawal behavior. Specifically, POS during remote work negatively affects employee withdrawal behavior, but was not statistically significant (standardized path coefficient =  $-0.078$ ,  $Z$ -value =  $-1.123$ ,  $p = 0.261$ ), leading to rejection of the first hypothesis. POS during remote work statistically positively affects meaningful work (standardized path coefficient =  $0.266^{***}$ ,  $Z$ -value =  $4.277$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), supporting the second hypothesis. Meaningful work also statistically negatively affects employee withdrawal behavior (standardized path coefficient =  $-0.198^{**}$ ,  $Z$ -value =  $-2.724$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ), supporting the third hypothesis. The last hypothesis is supported by the mediated effect of meaningful work in the relationship between POS during remote work and employee withdrawal behavior (standardized path coefficient =  $-0.053^*$ ,  $Z$ -value =  $-2.286$ ,  $p = 0.022$ ). In other words, the direct effect of POS during remote work on employee withdrawal behavior is not noted; only the indirect effect of POS during remote work through meaningful work is detected, relating to employee withdrawal behavior. It means POS during remote work creates meaningful work, which in turn lessens employee withdrawal behavior.

**Table 3.**  
Results of full  
mediation effect

Research hypothesis	Std. Coefficient	Std Error	Z-value	p-Value
<i>Direct effect</i>				
POS during remote work → Employee withdrawal behavior	-0.078	0.069	-1.123	0.261
POS during remote work → Meaningful work	0.266***	0.062	4.277	0.000
Meaningful work → Employee withdrawal behavior	-0.198**	0.073	-2.724	0.006
<i>Indirect effect</i>				
POS during remote work → Meaningful work → Employee withdrawal behavior	-0.053*	0.023	-2.286	0.022

**Note(s):** \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$   
**Source(s):** Authors work

**Figure 1.**  
Results of the  
structural  
equation model



Indirect effect =  $-0.053^*$   
**Note(s):** \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$   
**Source(s):** Authors work



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## Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created changes throughout the world, including the relationships between an organization and employees. Although previous studies examined remote work, the present remote work shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic requires additional understanding and human resource departments are expected to respond appropriately to this human crisis (Collings *et al.*, 2021; Nyberg *et al.*, 2021; Torres and Orhan, 2022). Rurkkhum (2023), for example, found that during forced remote work, human resource practices can impact employee well-being and employee resilience. Employees value their well-being and resilient employees are necessary for today's organizations. Thus, human resource departments can play a vital role to support an organization and employees. Although the head of the World Health Organization indicated that the end of the COVID-19 pandemic is in sight (United Nation News, 2022), remote work or hybrid work is predicted to be the next normal (Mortensen and Haas, 2021). Thus, there is a need for understanding these new challenges, calling for further research. The present study responds to this call.

Referring to the JD-R model, this study examined employee withdrawal behavior with forced remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand. Results revealed the full mediation of meaningful work on the link between POS during remote work and employee withdrawal behavior. POS aims to help employees transition to forced remote work and fosters meaningful work for employees, thus lessening employee withdrawal behavior.

The literature emphasized the significance of POS during normal situations and crises (Bilotta *et al.*, 2021; Chong *et al.*, 2020; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). To perform their remote work well, employees must have a supportive home environment, especially the availability of space, and sufficient tools with a technological infrastructure (Torres and Orhan, 2022). Although organizations cannot overview employees' home conditions, it is imperative to find resources that meet the needs of forced remote workers. Another challenge is the development of digital and related skills to help employees complete their remote work (Cooke *et al.*, 2021). Thus, the results of the study supported this point by examining POS during remote work.

Yet, this study found that POS during remote work was negatively related to employee withdrawal, but the direct effect of POS during remote work was not observed, only its indirect effect through meaningful work. POS in a difficult situation is not enough to lessen employee withdrawal behavior. Employees need a sense of meaningful work to keep them focused. These findings highlight the importance of meaningful work. In other words, during a crisis, an organization must fulfill employees' basic needs (though these needs may differ from those under normal conditions) by providing sufficient support and encourage their work motivation by focusing on meaningfulness of work. This reemphasizes the significance of motivational theory. According to the Herzberg's two-factor theory, hygiene factors and motivators are needed to simultaneously eliminate employee dissatisfaction and drive a high level of motivation and satisfaction (Daft, 2022).

The average age of participants was 37.23 years, reflecting an aged society in Thailand with the current median age at 39 years (Central Intelligence Agency, 2022). The literature reported that young generations are likely to value work in providing meaning to their lives (Goh and Baum, 2021; Popaitoon, 2022). However, this study provided empirical results to support meaningful work as an important driver for most employees, regardless of age.

Work plays an important role in life. Perceived meaningful work plays a crucial role in fostering employee performance and benefiting the organization as a whole. Therefore, it is essential to cultivate an environment where employees perceive their work as meaningful (Fairlie, 2011; You *et al.*, 2021). This can be achieved through various human resource practices. Offering continuous learning and development opportunities, for instance, is vital in enhancing employees' capabilities, enabling them to take on more challenging assignments (You *et al.*, 2021) and fostering a sense of meaningfulness in their work. In addition, leaders can reinforce the perception of meaningful work by employing effective communication, promoting

psychological empowerment and building trust (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Frieder *et al.*, 2018; Jiang, 2021; Turnipseed and Vandewaa, 2020). Cultivating a compelling vision, providing a supportive work environment, sharing information and offering coaching (Fürstenberg *et al.*, 2021; Turesky *et al.*, 2020) are additional ways in which leaders can contribute to cultivating meaningful work. Job design is also theoretically and empirically related to meaningful work (Lysova *et al.*, 2019). For instance, Popaitoon (2022) reported that skill variety, autonomy and task significance were characteristics of meaningful work in young employees.

While the significance of meaningful work for existing employees is widely acknowledged, further studies are needed to explore its importance as a crucial aspect of the future of work. Certain organizations, particularly Big Tech companies, have implemented programs that allocate slack time to employees, allowing them to step away from the demands of their core work (Malhotra, 2021). This provision enables employees to focus on generating innovative ideas, thereby enhancing their perception of the meaningfulness of their work. Moreover, the next generation of workers seeks slack time as an opportunity to make a social impact through their work, further amplifying their sense of meaningfulness. Hence, organizations need to establish boundaries for slack time to assist employees in balancing the requirements of their core work while continuing to find value in their current responsibilities (Malhotra, 2021). Furthermore, future studies should delve into strategies for enhancing employee perception of meaningful work to effectively respond to evolving work environments (Ihl *et al.*, 2020). These suggestions underscore practical approaches for nurturing meaningful work among both current and future employees.

#### *Theoretical and practical implications*

This study responded to the call for future studies about more complete understanding of meaningful work (Allan *et al.*, 2019; Jiang, 2021) and caution about transferring research evidence conducted under the normal circumstances to the recent pandemic (Rigotti *et al.*, 2021). Although previous studies investigated the effects of increased challenges in a relatively stable environment, this study contributes to the literature by using the JD-R model under uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study findings indicated that male forced remote workers reported a higher level of withdrawal behavior compared to their female counterparts. Previous studies, however, suggested that female employees, particularly those with childcare responsibilities, may experience an increase in domestic work, leading to a significant level of burnout during remote work (Arenas *et al.*, 2022; Clark *et al.*, 2021; Fares *et al.*, 2021; Monsay *et al.*, 2023). The unequal division of labor based on gender can harm women's professional lives due to employers' attitudes. This situation raises concerns, especially as remote work is expected to become a prevalent mode of work after the pandemic (Fares *et al.*, 2021), particularly for Asian women, given traditional cultural norms (Hung *et al.*, 2022). Contrary to the existing literature, the current study's results empirically demonstrated that during remote work, costly withdrawal behaviors could be reduced if employees perceive support from the organization and recognize the meaningfulness of their work. Notably, the majority of participants in this study were female employees (69.10%), highlighting the fact that although female employees may experience high levels of stress during remote work, their productivity is not necessarily negatively impacted when the organization provides appropriate interventions.

An organization can assist employees to smoothly transition to unanticipated situations by implementing several methods discussed above. Practices in managing crises, covering both preparing and responding to them are also suggested (Lian *et al.*, 2022; Vaziri *et al.*, 2020). Appropriate policies and practices should be developed in advance (Chang *et al.*, 2022) and special support in a crisis must be available as reported in the present study. However, many human resource departments are criticized for not preparing to manage

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crises (Becker *et al.*, 2022), despite that the current status of HR functions in an organization seems to be perceived positively (Paukert *et al.*, 2021). This criticism highlights the importance of increased understanding of how a new way of work can affect employees and organizations, and how human resource departments can help employees deal with these difficulties (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020; Hamouche, 2021). Employee individual differences must be also considered in crises, questioning the appropriateness of the traditional one-size-fits-all human resource management approach (Becker *et al.*, 2022; Meyer *et al.*, 2021; Toscano and Zappalà, 2021). Today's organizations should give due consideration to the significance of human resource practices that cater to generational differences (Deschênes, 2021). Additionally, there is a growing need for increased managerial support in achieving work-life balance (Monsay *et al.*, 2023). These issues emphasize the challenging roles of human resource departments and human resource scholars in the future.

### *Limitations and future research*

Single-source data was one limitation of this study even though there was no evidence suggesting that CMB was a problem here. The cross-sectional study design was also a possible limit in explaining the causality relationship. However, the study results demonstrated the robustness of the analysis and the inclusion of a diverse group of participants adds value to the existing literature by expanding upon previous findings, which have predominantly focused on specific organizational or professional contexts (Magrizos *et al.*, 2023). While the inclusion of diverse participants enables the representation of remote employees across various types of organizations, it is important to note that the generalizability of the findings is limited. These limitations suggest future research, an alternative research design, particularly an experimental design and longitudinal study. Nyberg *et al.* (2021) suggested that longitudinal research is needed to explore the long-term impacts of the new way of work and how an organization can manage these challenges.

This study showed the importance of meaningful work; however, too much meaningful work can cause negative effects (Magrizos *et al.*, 2023). Further studies to explore an appropriateness level of meaningful work for remote employees are necessary. Another suggestion for future studies is related to the remote employee withdrawal behavior scale. Even though initial results showed an acceptable value, further development is needed. Additionally, post COVID-19 working conditions and increased remote work or hybrid work demand further studies to examine these issues. This calls for a high understanding of remote employee management.

### **Conclusion**

This study coincided with other studies that assess forced remote work in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contradictory findings from the literature highlight a need for further research to assess remote work as a function of the pandemic and more constructively dealing with this work model. The current study collected data from 320 Thai remote employees who never experienced this kind of situation. The results showed that meaningful work is a full mediator in the relationship between POS during remote work and employee withdrawal behavior. Several managerial efforts can be implemented to encourage employees to perceive meaningfulness of their work, especially during unfamiliar situations, because it can keep employees stay focused on remote work.

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