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From travel to virtual work: The transitional experiences of global workers during Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has transformed how global work is conducted in multinational enterprises. There has been a rapid and forced shift from global mobility to global virtual work. Taking a transition perspective and drawing on event system theory, this paper examines the transitional working experiences of global workers amid a global health pandemic. Through 32 in-depth interviews (pre- and in-Covid-19), our findings reveal how this exogenous event has transformed previously unquestioned and enshrined global work routines. By unpacking the transition process, we find that global workers were challenged to reconfigure the structural and relational dimensions of their global work. We disentangle the strategic and sustainable lessons learnt on the future of global working for multinational enterprises.

1. Introduction

Covid-19 has brought national lockdowns, quarantine regulations, travel bans, and wider restrictions on taken-for-granted civil liberties. This exogenous crisis event is transforming the world of global mobility in multinational enterprises (MNEs) and has forced individuals to transition to new or unfamiliar ways of carrying out their global work (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, Zimmermann, 2020; Jackowska & Lauring, 2021). In the context of MNEs, global virtual work (GVW) has become fundamental to how firms coordinate and control cross-border activities (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2020; Selmer, Dickmann, Froese, Reiche, Shaffer, 2022). MNEs have had to eradicate or, at a minimum, severely reduce global travel that was previously used to establish 'spaces of collocation' and face-to-face interaction for global workers across country borders (Faulconbridge, Jones, Anable, Marsden, 2020; Reiche, Lee, & Allen, 2019). In effect, the pandemic is challenging the relevance and feasibility of global mobility in MNEs as well as the classification of those workers that engaged in extensive global travel who have been forced to conduct their global work for the first time in an exclusively virtual context, void of physical propinquity (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

Coordinating the activities of MNEs through global mobility relies heavily on the movement of people across borders in order to establish temporary and permanent collocation (Nurmi & Hinds, 2020; Reiche et al., 2019; Tung, 2016). The extant literature has identified a multiplicity of arrangements of global work which can be defined as 'situations in which employees who are collaborating with each other are culturally diverse and often also geographically distant from one another and thus embedded in different national contexts' (Reiche et al., 2019: 360). Most prominently, this includes various forms of expatriation (e.g., Brewster, Suutari, & Waxin, 2021; McNulty & Brewster, 2017) and a set of flexible global working arrangements (e.g., Jooss, McDonnell, & Conroy, 2021; Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, Bolino, 2012). Global travel – the focus of this paper alongside GVW – is a particularly established form of flexible global work that creates temporary collocation, generally lasting between a few days and up to three weeks per business trip (Shaffer et al., 2012). A commonly adopted set of boundary conditions of global travel relates to global workers being abroad; engaged in organisationally employed work; staying temporarily in a travel destination; having non-citizen status; and requiring limited legal compliance in terms of cross-border permits (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). Importantly, the physical, cognitive, and social proximity that global travel harvests may augment the synchronicity of spatially distributed workers (Chai & Freeman, 2019). This travel has been viewed as central to overcoming distance and establishing proximity within a globally dispersed and geographically fragmented network (Andersson et al., 2019; Narula & Santangelo, 2009). This relates to the dominant assumption in global mobility studies that face-to-face

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exchanges are ultimately a more effective way to coordinate meaningful collaboration, share rich knowledge, and produce deep learning between globally disconnected actors (c.f. Hooijberg & Watkins, 2021).

Covid-19 has demanded that global workers engaged in extensive travel routines abruptly end any collocated situations and transition to a GVW environment (Selmer et al., 2022). This pandemic presents a new and unique research context for international business scholars (Caligiuri et al., 2020), and challenges individuals and MNEs to rethink their approach to global work, and in particular the heavy reliance on travel. We define GVW as situations where employees virtually engage in working internationally as part of their substantive role. Thus, GVW entails interactions that are not conducted in person (Makarius & Larson, 2017) but mediated entirely by technology (Hinds, Liu, & Lyon, 2012). This not only requires new forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities, and confidence in utilising different technologies to carry out tasks in different ways (Raghuram, Tuertscher, & Garud, 2010) but also managing spatial, temporal, cultural, and linguistical distances (Nurmi & Hinds, 2016) which may impact their critical global roles in MNEs (Conroy, McDonnell, & Jooss, 2020).

Studies have shown how geographic dispersion, as is the case with GVW, can limit collaboration and coordination efforts and have several negative effects on individuals (Hooijberg & Watkins, 2021). Such adverse consequences include reduced job satisfaction and commitment, feelings of isolation, breakdown of trust, role ambiguity, power struggles, inefficiencies in knowledge sharing, misunderstandings in communication, and increased stress levels (e.g., Jimenez et al., 2017; Magnusson, Schuster, & Taras, 2014). Transition challenges may lead to workers creating unnecessary interdependencies with virtual colleagues leading to time pressures, a loss of informality, and decline in productivity (Raghuram et al., 2010). Moreover, global workers who are used to interacting with dispersed colleagues and clients in collocated settings may find it difficult to do so virtually on a routine basis, particularly when these stakeholder relationships have not yet been constructed (Faulconbridge et al., 2020). On the other hand, several potential opportunities exist including greater flexibility with respect to geography and timing, increased diversity in the workforce, and a positively challenging work environment (Jimenez et al., 2017). This may enable global workers to learn and develop, leading to enhanced motivation, particularly for those thriving when managing complex, ambiguous situations (Nurmi & Hinds, 2016). For example, GVW may 'free' individuals from their structured workday to work asynchronously and enhance interconnectivity with a multitude of stakeholders across various time zones; this, however, could also lead to pressures in never 'turning off' resulting in work overload (Schinoff, Ashforth, & Corley, 2020).

This paper responds to recent calls, in leading management and international business journals, for more phenomenon-based research (e.g., Doh, 2015; Ployhart & Bartunek, 2019) through addressing the following research question: *How have global workers been transitioning to a virtual working context amidst the Covid-19 pandemic?* Drawing from event system theory (Morgeson, Mitchell, & Liu, 2015), we argue that a global macro event such as Covid-19 represents discontinuity, prompting an unanticipated change in commonly accepted, yet anachronistic, circumstances (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). This theory explains how events affect behaviours or features of organisational entities (Morgeson et al., 2015). Events may originate within or outside an organisation and can be defined as constituting observable actions or circumstances that presents significant disruption, novelty, and criticality (McFarland, Reeves, Porr, Ployhart, 2020). Specifically, we take a transition perspective (Bliese, Adler, & Flynn, 2017) and assert that events will likely impose 'meaningful transitions' for individuals, organisations, and societies.

Covid-19 as a major macro event presented a unique opportunity to collect data that elucidates the transitional experiences of global workers in MNEs. We had collected interview data in a pre-pandemic context with a focus on the significance of global travel, the complex role of those high-level global managers engaged in extensive travel, and the value of these collocated mobility arrangements for MNEs. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, we took the opportunity to interview the same global workers to understand how they experienced their changed way of working and how they adapted to their GVW setting. This matched interview approach represents a key strength in illuminating transitional experiences following an exogenous shock (Malik & Sanders, 2021), and its impact on the future of work within MNEs.

The paper provides two primary contributions to the global work literature. First, taking a transition perspective (Bliese et al., 2017), we shed light on the transition process of global workers during a global macro event. Specifically, we illuminate the pre-onset, transition, and post-transition periods of this process. In doing so, we respond to the recent call by Cerar, Nell, and Reiche (2021) for more empirical micro-level considerations that emphasise the challenges for individuals in international business studies. Notably, we challenge the general assumption that transition processes are marked by a lead-up period (Adler & Castro, 2019) and we examine how global workers adapt their work in such an ad hoc environment. In this context, we are able to identify the way that routinised rules and expectations for global workers are highly contingent on circumstances outside of their control rather than solely shaped by norms that are stable over time. While many global workers have noted the need to adjust to increased relational interconnectivity and structural complexity, the transitional experiences as part of this adjustment were mixed which reiterates the need for individual-level considerations when making decisions about global work in MNEs.

Second, we propose an alternative way to think about the functioning of globally distributed workforces in MNEs (Nurmi & Hinds, 2020; Reiche et al., 2019). Our study challenges the traditional wisdom that global travel and the establishment of collocated spaces (Hinds & Cramton, 2014) is a necessity for global work. Moreover, in contrast to traditional classifications of global work arrangements, we posit that the future is likely to be more fluid and porous in nature, increasing the frequency of transitions that global workers go through as part of their dynamic role. In doing so, our research advances knowledge of existing classifications of global work (e.g., Jooss et al., 2021; Reiche et al., 2019), and we call for more research on hybrid forms of global work. We conclude with a range of future research questions which emphasise the critical role of MNEs in analysing these learnings further and making decisions on how global work will be conducted for individuals going forward.

2. A transition perspective using Event System Theory

Event system theory centres around how events require attention and influence a wide range of organisational entities (Morgeson et al., 2015). Events may originate inside or outside an organisation, 'constitute observable actions or circumstances', and impact individual and collective behaviours, features of work, and subsequent events (Morgeson et al., 2015: 520). Events often represent some form of discontinuity as there is a key 'change in circumstances' (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996: 31) and therefore closely relate to transitions from one temporary state to another (Adler & Castro, 2019). As events are time and space bounded (Morgeson et al., 2015), they have a beginning (onset), and create a transition period between the introduction of the event and a post-transition period (Bliese et al., 2017). While micro-transitions are relatively minor and common (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000), 'meaningful transitions' are those that prompt significant change in individuals' lives as a result of, for example, a significant global macro event (Adler & Castro, 2019). Following Bliese et al. (2017), we argue that acute events inadvertently involve transitioning processes and that event system theory allows us to better understand such events. Yet, empirically, with the exception of McFarland et al. (2020) who examined the impact of Covid-19 on job search behaviour using an event transition perspective, there is a dearth of research, combining event

system theory and transition perspectives.

In our study, we conceptualise Covid-19 as a global macro event given its *strength* which refers to an event's novelty, disruption, and criticality (McFarland et al., 2020; Morgeson et al., 2015). *Novelty* reflects the extent to which an event differs from current circumstances and represents a new or unexpected context. Novel events trigger in-depth interpretation and organisational entities initiate change as a response to a new situation. The Covid-19 pandemic has been an unanticipated global crisis which forced MNEs and individuals to abruptly pivot from institutionally accepted routines to new ways of working and operating across borders. Thus, event novelty is particularly high in this context. *Disruption* reflects the extent of change in the environment, leading to major discontinuity. Disruptive events render routines obsolete and thus require deliberate changes to existing behaviours, skills, and structures. During Covid-19, lockdowns and travel restrictions did not allow for collocated work in many countries and therefore significantly disrupted how global workers collaborated and coordinated with stakeholders. *Criticality* reflects the 'degree to which an event is important, essential, or a priority' to an organisational entity (Morgeson & DeRue, 2006: 273). Particularly crisis contexts, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, can threaten fundamental strategies and objectives in organisations (Weick, 1988) and require attention and action by all organisational entities.

Research has shown that macro environmental events can have a direct effect on and lead to transitions across organisational entities (Morgeson et al., 2015). These transitions might be planned if the event was anticipated, for example, mergers and acquisitions, or they might be on an ad hoc basis if they follow unanticipated and shock events, for example, terror attacks or a pandemic (Tilcsik & Marquis, 2013). Adler and Castro (2019) articulate five fundamental assumptions around transitions in a work context. We propose that, in the context of global work transitions, these five assumptions hold largely true. First, transitions are inevitable. Given the unanticipated nature of the pandemic and the forced transition, workers had no choice but to transition to a new work context. Second, transitions are artificial. While Covid-19 is classified as a concrete event in our study, transitions are not easily defined by time and often include subsequent adjustment and prolonged effects. Workers may continue to change their behaviour post pandemic or reappraise and revert back to pre-pandemic patterns. Notably, we propose that the commonly referred to lead-up period (anticipation) to an event will not be observable in our study given the novel and unexpected nature of the event. Third, transitions are an opportunity. While the Covid-19 pandemic is a global health crisis affecting individuals, organisations, and societies, some transitions experienced during this challenging time may be an opportunity. Global workers may find some silver lining in their new work context. Fourth, transitions occur at various levels including the individual, team, organisation, and the environment (Morgeson et al., 2015). As an 'event effect', transitions can take place at the level at which the event occurred, at a different level, or across multiple levels (Adler & Castro, 2019). Specifically, Morgeson et al. (2015) distinguish between single-level, top-down, and bottom-up effects. Research has shown that significant macro environmental events can trigger transitions at an organisational level (top--down) from fairly stable routines to new approaches (Tilcsik & Marquis, 2013). These effects may also be observed at an individual level, which, in turn, may trigger changes at higher levels (bottom-up) (Morgeson et al., 2015). For example, Covid-19 may likely impact a multitude of levels including the organisation, teams, and individuals given its event strength. Notably, the focus of our study relates to transition processes of global workers, i.e., an individual level of analysis. Fifth, transitions present the various organisational entities with a paradox. On the one hand, entities like predictability, and on the other hand, they commonly dislike stagnation. In our context, global workers are likely to deal with a lot of uncertainty given the abrupt and unplanned transition to GVW. Individuals might embrace their new work context and be overwhelmed or threatened given the disruption to daily routines.

During the transition an adjustment process takes place as part of which individuals integrate changes into their working life (Adler & Castro, 2019). Drawing on seminal work from Raghuram et al. (2001), we propose that individuals may adjust structural and relational dimensions of their global work. Raghuram and colleagues (2001) argue that, as part of virtual work adjustment, the inherent challenge relates to the dispersion of virtual workers, and both structural and relational mechanisms can facilitate overcoming such distances. Given the need for global workers to connect and coordinate across various boundaries, a broad work design perspective (Grant & Parker, 2009) not only considers structural factors that enable effective coordination but also the social characteristics of global work. Structural factors might encompass patterns around tasks, work goals, and responsibilities, temporal coordination tactics through scheduling, and communication practices (e.g., Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013; Cummings, Espinosa, & Pickering, 2009). Relational factors could include etiquette in social interactions, management styles, or maintaining trust, which are all central to establishing interconnectivity (e.g., Glikson & Erez, 2020; Hafermalz & Riemer, 2020). Both factors are likely to be addressed differently in a virtual versus a collocated setting because of the 'effects of virtuality' (Wilson, Crisp, & Mortensen, 2013). For example, in addition to technological and other distractions that can occur in a GVW setting, project structures and deliverables are likely to be revisited (Makarius & Larson, 2017), particularly as many organisations are faced with other economic restraints and challenges as a result of the pandemic.

Ultimately, global workers may thrive or falter under the unfamiliar conditions that disruptive events bring, resulting in positive or negative health and performance outcomes (Adler & Castro, 2019). To better understand the transitional experiences following such events, this research study aims to unpack how global workers have transitioned to a virtual working context amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, and, in doing so, shed light on potentially changing views on global work.

3. Methods

3.1. Research context

Our qualitative research seeks to garner rich insights into how global workers managed their forced transition from global travel to their new and unexpected GVW setting during Covid-19. We recruited global workers through a number of personal contacts who acted as gatekeepers. We targeted individuals with extensive experience of travelling internationally as part of their role, representing the cohort of pre-Covid 'international business travellers' in MNEs. The participants were employed within the Irish subsidiaries of four large US-headquartered MNEs operating in the Life Science industry which has been central to the global collaboration efforts to produce solutions to the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, the MNEs were leading organisations in the field of medical devices which ranges from diagnostics to medical surgery, neurotechnology, orthopaedics, and therapies. While some segments of their businesses slowed down due to the pandemic, overall the firms reported stable or increased revenues in 2020 and 2021. A major reason for this was that these firms pivoted to modifying products and producing new equipment essential to tackling the effects of the pandemic. When global travel stopped abruptly in spring 2020, the MNEs invested in technology and virtual work equipment. This was critical as global workers continued to be involved in cross-border collaboration and coordination throughout the pandemic. However, as we were interested in the transitional experiences of global workers, our study focused on the individual level of analysis rather than the organisations.

As an unanticipated event, Covid-19 provided us with a unique opportunity to draw on and compare findings from two data collection phases to address our research question. First, data was collected in a pre-pandemic context in summer 2019. We carried out 16 face-to-face interviews with highly mobile workers engaged in extensive global

travel. Most global workers had travelled a minimum of 25% of their working time and up to a maximum of 75% of their working time. All participants had travelled to multiple destinations and trips ranged from a few days to up to three weeks (Shaffer et al., 2012). Second, data was also collected in the midst of the pandemic in August 2020. We returned to the same global workers, carrying out 16 virtual interviews. Combined, we carried out 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 9 male and 7 female global managers (see Table 1 for interviewee profiles). These individuals had high-level roles in the MNEs, charged with global responsibilities in leading and coordinating cross-border activities in their respective functions. Interviewees were mostly directors across functions such as R&D, HR, Supply Planning, Innovation, Sales, and Quality. Their global work involved building relationships, channelling information, interfacing with colleagues and clients, and solving complex problems in the intermediary 'space between' globally dispersed colleagues.

3.2. Data collection

The first data collection phase explored the dynamics and complexity of global travel and how such global work could be effectively managed. Our interview questions focused on the nature, extent, and expectations of global travel, the recruitment for business trips, the experiences of global travel, and the boundary spanning nature of such work within the organisational setting. For example, we asked: What usually is the purpose of these trips? What is seen as a valuable trip for you? We also asked whether the family situation impacted global travel, what type of support individuals received, and how they managed the various demands associated with global travel. While the focus was on global travel, we also explored critically whether all this travel was necessary. For example, we asked: What would happen if you did not travel? Would Skype not be as useful as travel? During this phase we maintained close contact with participants after the interviews, following up, if necessary, to ensure clarity in responses. As the pandemic continued, we became aware that these individuals had been forced to abandon global travel and operate in a GVW environment. We returned to these interviewees to explore their transitional experiences.

Table 1
Interviewee profiles.

Position	Gender	Age	Firm	Experience (years)	Travel (%) pre-Covid-19
Advanced Quality Manager	F	30–39	B	10	10
Business Development Executive 1	F	30–39	A	1	25
Business Development Executive 2	M	30–39	A	2	25
Corporate Travel Supervisor	F	30–39	C	6	50
Director Global Regulatory Affairs	F	40–49	C	11	75
Director Supply Planning	F	40–49	B	6	25
European Sales Manager	M	40–49	C	7	70
Global Benefits Manager	F	30–39	D	4	10
Global Business Manager	M	20–29	A	3	25
Global Manager	M	40–49	A	6	50
International Business Manager	F	20–29	A	3	25
Medical Advisor	F	40–49	C	2	40
Programme Manager	F	40–49	B	5	50
R&D Director	M	30–39	B	8	20
Senior Engineer	F	40–49	B	4	25
Senior R&D Manager	M	40–49	B	8	25

The second data collection phase focused on the impact of Covid-19 on individuals' global work, changes to global travel, and the use of GVW. We were particularly interested in ways in which individuals transitioned to an exclusively virtual setting, the challenges for individuals in not being able to conduct their global work with the same level of collocated interaction, and the advantages of this 'new' form of work. Event system theory (Morgeson et al., 2015) and a transition perspective (Bliese et al., 2017) provided complementary theoretical approaches to inform our questions and to allow us to develop a temporal perspective to the interviews. For example, we asked: How have things changed in terms of global work since Covid-19? What have travel restrictions due to Covid-19 meant for you? What have you gained/lost from not being able to travel? How have you found doing your global work virtually? To address the role of context, interviewees were challenged on the significance of the exogenous event and the changing way of work due to the pandemic, including both personal and work challenges. We also asked them to reflect on the views they provided in the first data collection phase as we sought to compare pre-onset and post-transition perspectives. For example, we enquired: Has there been a change in perspective on global work since the onset of the pandemic? To generate richer reflections on their transitional experiences, we also probed interviewees with some of their responses to initial questions posed in 2019 such as the amount of travel they told us they engaged in and the specific challenges they faced because of this.

3.3. Data analysis

All interviews lasted on average 50 min and were transcribed verbatim. We applied reflexive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, & Hayfield, 2022) as a highly inductive, data-driven approach. First, we thoroughly familiarised ourselves with the data and started to explore initial codes with coding being treated as an organic exercise (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We then built initial themes from these codes which was a process that saw us review initial themes against the coded data and entire data-sets. For example, some initial themes emerging from brainstorming exercises as a research team related to the different ways of working as global travellers or global virtual workers, the adjustment needed in the new work environment, and the experiences and reflections of this adjustment. We went through a number of iterations (Locke, Feldman, & Golden-Biddle, 2022) which saw us going 'backward and forward between steps' (Eisenhardt, 1989: 546) and between the two data sets, before having developed our final first order codes, second order categories (which are categories encompassing a number of first order codes), and three overarching themes (see Table 2 for coding structure). To establish our second-order categories, we drew on Raghuram et al. (2001) who distinguished between structural and relational factors contributing to virtual work adjustment. We also adopted Makarius and Mukherjee's (2020) approach who differentiate between well-being and effectiveness outcomes when conducting global business during a crisis. Finally, our themes were crafted as follows: Rather than being simple 'domain summaries' (i.e., a summary of an area of the data or everything that was said by an individual in relation to a topic or question), we generate 'fully realised themes' (i.e., conceptualised patterns of shared meaning which are underpinned by a central organising concept) (Clarke, Braun, Terry & Hayfield, 2019). In our study, the central organising concept refers to *the transition process* (Bliese et al., 2017) and our developed themes tell a story (Clarke et al., 2019) around how global workers transitioned to GVW amidst Covid-19. Our findings section is structured around the three periods of the transition process: pre-onset, transition, and post-transition.

4. Findings

4.1. Pre-onset period: the 'old normal'

All participants were global workers who travelled extensively.

Table 2
Coding structure for global workers' transition process.

Guiding logic: transition process	Aggregate dimensions	Second order categories	First order codes
Pre-onset period	Pre-pandemic context for global workers	Dependence on collocation for global work	• Travel 25–75% of their time • Build interpersonal bonds, extract valuable information, and foster deeper learning • Read non-verbal cues, have informal conversations, and socialise on-site • Have full schedules, stretched days, and intense meetings while on-site
Transition period	Pivoting from global travel to GVW	Relational interconnectivity	• Establish and practice communication etiquette and norms • Develop ability-based and relational trust • Consider personality differences and cultural backgrounds • Be aware of Covid-19 related stressors including isolation and working from home
		Structural complexity	• Communicate work goals, objectives, and deliverables • Develop innovative solutions • Organise and schedule daily routines • Use media • Coordinate information • Navigate temporal variation • Manage increasing workloads
Post-transition period	Lessons learnt for a post-pandemic context	Well-being and effectiveness outcomes	• Reduces the physical demands of travel and allows for more time with family • Alters the network position levelling the playing field • Reduces strategic relationship building capacity • Hinders informal check-ins • Limits creative group dynamics and process efficiency
		Re-assessment of global work and travel dependence	• Reflect on global work approaches • Consider changes in practices and policies • Identify core areas of travel need • Consider individual preferences and organisational culture

Significant physical, psychological, and social demands were reported by interviewees as a result of substantial global travel with increased stress levels and work-life balance issues among the most cited. Participants detailed how travel allowed them to construct temporary collocation which was viewed as an integral part of their global work (see Table 4 column 1). For example, one interviewee suggested, '*if you are in this job, the travel expectation is not negotiable*' (International Business Development Manager). It was noted that temporary collocation through travel was important for three main reasons, namely: building interpersonal bonds, extracting valuable information, and fostering deeper learning. Interviewees stressed that none of these objectives could be garnered as profoundly through virtual interactions as they could be through travel, particularly in certain key markets, where it was '*important to be visible and show support*' (Director Global Regulatory Affairs).

It became clear that respondents organised their global travel around central structural and relational routines. Structural routines were concentrated around the travel period, with some follow-up reports mentioned. While on-site, full schedules, stretched days, and intense meetings and workshops which could run over multiple days were common. Relational routines were facilitated through travel as people were able to read non-verbal cues, have informal on-site conversations, and socialise when being abroad which helped building relationships and trust; so while these routines were casual, they were considered key for networking purposes as illustrated in the following example:

> 'For me my job is about relationships, so unless I go and look people in the eye and talk to them it does not work, that is why we have been successful, because it is a very relationship kind of company as well' (Director Supply Planning).

Ultimately, when we asked all interviewees whether they could conduct their global work without engaging in travel there was a resounding consensus that this was not possible. It was clear from the first stage of interviews that despite the significant challenges and adverse consequences, individuals had established an unhealthy and somewhat unfounded dependence on global travel as a routinised and commonly accepted way of carrying out their global work.

4.2. Transition period

When Covid-19 hit, interviewees had to abandon all travel and rapidly adapt to a virtual work setting which was initially a major shock and '*caused a huge amount of uncertainty*' (Programme Manager). For the first time, '*people had a taster of what it is like not to travel*' for business (International Business Development Manager) but weaning themselves off this collocation dependence and making the abrupt and exclusive transition to GVW was a real challenge. While some individuals reported that after the initial distrust and concern they had transitioned '*pretty quickly and remarkably well*' (Programme Manager), others referred to management being reluctant to having people work virtually at the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. As individuals realised that a quick return to travel was not possible they organised and participated in remote working training sessions, familiarised themselves with the IT infrastructure, and thought about ways to immerse themselves more effectively in a new virtual work setting. The vast majority of individuals spoke positively about the organisational support received and highlighted the focus on health and safety of global workers by their organisations which positively impacted the transitional experiences of participants.

We found that the transition period involved reconfiguring the structural and relational routines that respondents were already familiar with. They noted the importance of adjusting to increased relational interconnectivity and structural complexity. Table 3 evidences data on the positive and negative transitional experiences. We found three central contingencies that help to explain the varying and sometimes seemingly contradictory transitional experiences: These contingencies relate to individuals' (1) level of confidence in being able to do their job virtually and maintain their performance; (2) extent of travel pre-Covid and previous engagement with GVW; and (3) personal circumstances and personality. Those individuals with greater confidence in sustaining

Table 3
Global workers' transitional experiences.

Interviewee	Positive transitional experiences	Negative transitional experiences
Advanced Quality Manager	'We were able to have the support team from the supplier company essentially almost like they were present with us…I think in many cases, our teams learnt a lot as a result and it has kind of **strengthened the relationship**.'	'We are quite **interactive in how we work**, and we will have a lot of meetings where everyone is on their feet doing something; to **translate that into a virtual meeting** is not that easy.'
Business Development Executive 1	'People in the wider team would never have seen the other people, so they have definitely benefited from virtual meetings and are **feeling a bit more connected**.'	'There is **lost opportunity for growth**. I would not say we have lost. Sales are up. The opportunity for growth and diversifying different parts of our business is not there. We have not developed a lot of business outside of Covid-19.'
Business Development Executive 2	'Our **relationships with colleagues have improved** significantly since Covid. I have met and interacted with ten times more of my colleagues than I normally would have if I was sitting in an office. You are now associated with lots of different groups and lots of conversations going on.'	'People had signed up for face-to-face learning in five-star accommodation. I am trying to convince them to move to our virtual courses. We have not offered any courses virtually before Covid, so my role primarily is to **deal with delegates** and tell them all the benefits about virtual just **get their buy-in**.'
Corporate Travel Supervisor	'There would have been **huge costs savings**. I could not tell you exactly now but I would say maybe we are at 5% or 10% of where we were last year…I think a lot of that GVW is definitely an eye opener.'	'Where are these people coming from, what are the flights, what time can they get in, what time can we start and finish the event so that people can get in and out in one day? **A lot of work, coordination, and planning**.'
Director Global Regulatory Affairs	'I think for some people definitely it **has opened a few doors**…it has made them more visible to people because we are trying to do a lot more updates; **people feel connected and not isolated**.'	'**You miss that face-to-face interaction.** We have kind of put some things on hold that we do need to sit in a room with people and process map. We have tried to do some of that virtually. It has been tough.'
Director Supply Planning	'I have built a lot of good relationships…we are doing the budget for next year and **for the first time these global workers are going to be really part of it**, before they were a bit excluded.'	'I like **meeting people unexpectantly;** things happen and ideas come up and you start working on things that way that you would not even expect, so **I do miss that interaction**.'
European Sales Manager	'Because people travelled so much, 50% of the team could be on the call at any given time. Now we have a call every week and all are generally on that call. We have been able to **see changes that we would not have done previously** because there was such flux.'	'We had **brainstorming meetings** and they are definitely **not as impactful** as face-to-face. If you want to deal with the big issue or create a big change, doing so virtually is difficult. **People get distracted.** It is terribly difficult to hold concentration over a virtual call.'
Global Benefits Manager	'We would have had four days together, and that would have been it. But now we have a call every two weeks…we have had a **much longer connectivity** than we probably would have had face-to-face.'	'There are definitely a few leaders that **I need to see face-to-face**. Because I do not have that relationship with them. So that does need to be worked on. That would help me be more effective in my role, for sure.'
Global Business Manager	'Not having to travel has been quite a relief. In terms of using technology, it helped to **build a team relationship**. Before I had collective meetings maybe once a month and I have maintained them now, twice per week.'	'**Building relationships** with customers and distributors is definitely easier face-to-face and it is something that we have always put a big emphasis on as the competitive advantage to **be in front of customers** a lot.'
Global Manager	'**We are not missing out on anything.** I was travelling to meet internal teams for a day or two to do some management consulting. We are now just doing that on WebEx. It is more pre-work rather than getting there and doing the work on-site. It is more organised in terms of tasks and roles.'	'If the project has clearly defined objectives and is more empirical where we want just yes or no's and just direct questions, then it is the same, but if it is the pure exploratory phase where we know nothing about an area or a topic and we want to understand more, you probably **lose that ability to explore** alright.'
International Business Manager	'I would say that **global workers are delighted,** particularly at the time when everybody thought that this was only going to last maybe three weeks or a month.'	'The lack of the travel could have **tainted some relationships** that have been built. I am probably going to bump into a few more people or you might introduce me to a few more people who will expand my network.'
Medical Advisor	'I can spend more time to learn exactly how regulatory works, besides, I want to know why they ask me questions and what is behind the scenes; that I have learnt quite a lot. I can also spend more time with my family, I am very happy with that.'	'There are more meetings every day. You got a series of meetings. Like before probably, 3 or 4 would be the maximum. But now we got a weekly meeting. I cannot catch up with every single meeting because my calendar is full.'
Programme Manager	'Immediately I felt, wow, this is fabulous because it **levels the playing field** for the first time. In my team, I am the only one who is not in the US, so if there is a big project, they are always going to want somebody local to take it, so I always felt at a slight disadvantage, but when this happened, I thought listen, it does not matter where I am, we are **all in the same boat** now.'	'My **work life balance is terrible**. I was travelling two weeks out of every four, it meant that my day overlapped with them. I always felt it was reasonable to work until 8 pm my time which is noon on the West Coast. That is still pretty late for me but I would start a little bit later. I might start around 10, work until 8, depending on what was going on. That is gone now; now it is until 11 pm.'
R&D Director	'I would say the biggest gain has been, the **time that global workers can spend with their families**. I was gone either between Sunday to Friday or Monday to Friday. Now without that travel is a real positive. Also, I may have been the only person dialling in whereas everybody else was physically together in the US; with everyone dialling in virtually, it **levels the playing field**. As a caller, you are not forgotten.'	'The process of staying on extended calls for let us say 8 h a day, seated in a singular position is challenging; being able to read the room or sense the reactions, discussions have perhaps become less open. I think people may find it hard to share a point or discuss something if they are not together; just the accessibility of people, because everyone is now on calls, trying to get people is more challenging.'
Senior Engineer	'Definitely one element is the whole relationship side of it which you cannot underestimate and even on the communication front, I was really surprised, so we use Teams which has been really, really good, so **you are getting a form of facetime**.'	'Trying to **get accounts and contracts approved** by the hospitals is much **more difficult and slower.** I find if you go over and spend two or three days, you will get through an awful lot faster and get through the bulk of issues and questions and answers much faster.'

(*continued on next page*)

Table 3 (*continued*)

Interviewee	Positive transitional experiences	Negative transitional experiences
Senior R&D Manager	'It is great, to be honest. We have little kids, so it just takes that problem out of the equation where, you know, you have to leave for a week, you know, when there are little **kids at home**, it is not so straightforward.'	'The biggest challenge is probably **time zones**; it is **getting significant chunks of time with a group or individual,** it is not so easy to get significant things done. The access is still there virtually but some of the in-person forums that were quite important have moved online and they are much less influential.'

their performance tended to have more positive transitional experiences. Global workers with very high travel demands of travel pre-Covid also highlighted the positive experiences due to less physical and psychological strains. This was particularly the case where individuals had family or other social commitments which they were able to dedicate more time to working virtually.

4.2.1. Relational interconnectivity

In this new virtual world, online interactions were not as formalised as they were in collocated spaces, and most managers were now '*quite hands-off*' (Global Business Manager). Some initial conflicts were reported as things can be taken out of context and direct communication might upset some colleagues. Some interviewees established more '*one-on-ones acting like a referee*' to manage disputes (Programme Manager).

> 'Someone will read an email and it might have been written in a rush and the person reading that could either just jump to a certain conclusion or assume positive intent and ask the question. Asking the question is the biggest challenge rather than jumping to a conclusion' (Manager Advanced Quality).

Developing trust was viewed as a core challenge in a virtual context. '*My whole philosophy is built on having a good rapport*' (Business Development Executive 1). Participants were challenged to develop trust with direct reports that they had never met and also show to their superiors that they could still bring value; '*I wanted to show that it did not matter that I was 6000 miles away*' (Programme Manager). This also helped to '*keep yourself relevant and visible so that they know who you are*' (Director Supply Planning). In addition, participants flagged the importance of being conscious of different personalities, for example, some colleagues were very data oriented, quiet mannered, and subservient, but this was more difficult to identify and manage virtually. Interviewees reported that some individuals have adapted significantly better than others to this new virtual context and raised concerns that these differences were not adequately addressed:

> 'It is because we have been told as society or business, that this is better. It might work better for some, but not for all. And it very much feels like it could be forced upon individuals who may not be comfortable doing it' (Global Benefits Manager).

For example, some participants reported that introverted colleagues may not feel comfortable turning on their camera in a virtual meeting and for them it can be quite exhausting. Giving introverted individuals gradual exposure to others was one way of reconfiguring this relational challenge. Cultural backgrounds mainly played a role in relation to differences in communication, for example, Italians were described as using more expressions and hand gestures which can be hard to grasp in a virtual setting, and Germans and Dutch were seen as much more blunt in their virtual communication compared to others.

Awareness of Covid-19 related stressors that individuals might face was essential in reconfiguring the relational dimension of interviewees' global work. Some managers tried *'to make sure you never sound stressed or grumpy, people are stressed enough'* (Global Benefits Manager) while others would have a lot of one-to-one meetings; *'I take about half of meetings to talk about how they are doing. I have become more than a therapist than I ever was'* (Programme Manager). Most cited stressors included blurring lines of work and life, isolation at home, and working from home. Participants reported that these issues were often internalised by people and emphasised that a lot of staff did not really realise the challenges that different people were going through, for example, caring for elderly parents or children which increased individuals' stress when trying to cope midst pandemic.

Overall, participants reported increased internal interactions with some stating they spent 30–35 h a week on calls, met with ten times more colleagues than normal, and were associated with lots of different groups. Organisations experimented with informal virtual gatherings with mixed perceptions among attendees; for example, virtual happy hours were described as '*one of the most depressing events I have ever dialled into*' and it seemed to be done '*for the sake of doing it*' (R&D Director) while others had a much more positive view:

> 'APAC might join us for virtual breakfast and the Americas might join us for happy hour. We would have never done that before…they are good fun. Other regions are communicating more with us than they would have done previously' (Global Manager).

4.2.2. Structural complexity

Individuals noted how patterns for accomplishing global work tasks had to be reconfigured to suit the virtual context. For projects, there was approved funding and head count and goals would trickle down all levels, in addition to objectives set by individuals and specific problem solving required. For tasks that were traditionally done on-site due to their complexity such as assisting surgeons with brain surgeries or installing new equipment, interviewees were forced to develop alternative solutions. For example, talking people through manuals and showing them videos instead of sending an engineer; or having employees sit in their cars just outside a hospital watching surgeries on their phone so that they could at least intervene in an emergency case. While far from ideal, these innovative approaches were seen as quite positive in that interviewees had shown creativity in overcoming the obstacles faced in the pandemic.

To avoid misunderstandings in a GVW context, participants developed routines to break down tasks, offer support, give clear deadlines, get everything confirmed, and follow up (Global Benefits Manager). For example, bigger projects which were meant to be discussed in a 3-day on-site workshop, were reduced to chunks, 2–3 h, and calls focused on specific items to get through as you could not keep participants' interest for longer periods. As everything was bite size, a key challenge was getting significant chunks of time with any given group or individual and participants reported an increase in pre-work and follow-up calls linked to any scheduled meeting; '*I find myself continually preparing. At any one time, I have three or four PowerPoints open feeding them as information comes in*' (European Sales Manager). PowerPoints were used as visual cues in meetings during which the organisers sought feedback and updates in a clockwise direction. As one interviewee noted, a one-hour lunch period was booked out and became an absolute zero tolerance of any meeting. Some participants stated that there are more meetings every day, sometimes double booked which saw them struggling to catch up with every single meeting; '*I have to prioritise which meetings are important*' (Medical Advisor). Others saw the GVW context as an opportunity to connect with people and make changes which they would not have done otherwise.

> 'We used to have bi-weekly calls, but because people were travelling so much, 50% could be on the call. So you might only speak to some people once a month or once every six weeks. Now we have a call every week and all are generally on that call because they are not

travelling, so we have been able to push through some changes' (European Sales Manager).

Responses in relation to using media and coordinating information were largely positive with many praising the opportunities that their core platforms had. Participants experimented with change to their status, notification settings, and additional tools. Video was found to be much better than any other content. Issues included poor Internet signals, not being able to disconnect, and inappropriate communication treating the firms' platform as '*if they were on WhatsApp with their mates*' (Global Business Manager). Some participants spoke about the increased real-time information available at the touch of a button instead of traditional email chains while others described some delays waiting for replies if colleagues could not be reached on the phone.

A major challenge for some involved increased temporal variation in a GVW context, which led to stretched days including early mornings and late evenings. Interestingly, most participants did not see this as an issue stating that their colleagues were around the globe which meant this was the nature of the job, which they signed up for, and *'that is what you get for a global role'* (Global Benefits Manager). Participants stated that they had to reconfigure their schedules to accommodate global clients and work around the senior leaders at the headquarters. While these global workers had autonomy in scheduling and deciding to join meetings, many saw it as a necessity to practice their job effectively:

'I work regularly until 11 pm because I work with the US west coast. I cannot leave at 8 pm because I have said goodbye then to 50% of my opportunity to work with people. Nobody asked me to do it, but they are really glad that I am doing it' (Programme Manager).

'I could get a call opt in for 2,3,4 am and then I go on and I say, hi, I am based in Ireland…I choose it, I volunteer. I knew that for that call with Japan and the US the only way to get that call together was for me do it as a night call' (Global Benefits Manager).

Managing time zone differences and navigating Covid-19 led to a significant increase in workload. The latter was the result of a substantial amount of people being furloughed and due to individuals struggling with the blurred lines of working from home, which some saw as an opportunity to '*squeeze in an extra half an hour*' instead of commuting, resulting in being '*switched on until the last minute*' (Director Supply Planning).

4.3. Post-transition period: The 'new normal'

When we conducted the interviews in summer 2020, most respondents had been working exclusively in a GVW context for approximately five months. During this post-transition period, individuals noted how they had reflected on lessons learnt in relation to well-being and effectiveness in their new GVW setting. In particular they re-evaluated the need for such excessive travel and the future of global work in a post-pandemic context. A comparison of pre-onset and post-transition views on global mobility is presented in Table 4. We found variation in the extent to which participants were willing to return to travelling. This largely depended on individuals' (1) role, i.e., their function, (2) markets operating in, (3) state of relationships and team compositions, and (4) personal circumstances and personality. We found a higher perception of travel need for externally focused roles and when operating in markets where face-to-face engagement was viewed as critical, e.g., in some Asian countries. Findings also show that a higher need for travel was expressed if strong relationships were not yet established or if individuals felt that they were more in an outsider position within a team. In addition, global workers' family situation and general interest in travel impacted their view on personal global mobility post Covid-19. For example, those global workers with young children and elderly parents were less willing to return to higher levels of travel. In contrast, individuals without caring responsibilities and an eagerness to explore diverse cultures did not mind returning to an

Table 4
Global workers' pre-onset and post-transition views on global work.

Interviewee	Pre-onset views on global work	Post-transition views on global work
Advanced Quality Manager	'It is definitely a disadvantage when you are not travelling because you are **not foremost in people's mind**. People may forget to include you in things or **you miss out** on certain opportunities or just even the learning and development side of things.'	'Everyone is realising that while travel and face-to-face contact is great for building relationships, etc., **it is not totally necessary** …but we will not continue to thrive if we cannot get back to seeing each other face-to-face…there might be **a little bit less travel**, but I think **it will very much creep back** in because people would fear the relationship side. I hope that that we might be able to do a bit more virtually.'
Business Development Executive 1	'Travel can be tough but **we know what we signed up for** and it is one of the reasons why I joined the company.'	'There is a **bit of an acceptance** that we can **work a bit smarter** and be successful…however, I never thought of the day I would say that I miss getting on a plane but I do.'
Business Development Executive 2	'**Every month, I was going somewhere**…if you are not prepared to travel, we will have to terminate your contract.'	'I think I would not be opposed to travelling again personally. I think everybody is waiting to **see what everybody else is doing**. I think when businesses start seeing their **bottom line affected**, people will get on those planes.'
Corporate Travel Supervisor	'When you sign your contract, you know that **you need to be fit to travel** as part of your role.'	'There would be **less travel now.** You had a lot of people travelling to the opening of an envelope. You are gone for two days and it is costing two nights' accommodation and the flight and everything else, and literally you have to do something for half an hour.'
Director Global Regulatory Affairs	'I suppose the **global responsibility** we have; we have distribution markets across the globe, so that is one of the reasons why I would travel…we have entities throughout the globe where people would carry out work for me.'	'There will be **a more critical view on travel**. People have gotten used to not travelling. So they will say, well, I can do that over the phone, I do not have to go to China … certain things like me going to the US to meet my boss which are important trips…And it will be down to budget as well. You save so much on travel now or the next six months or whatever.'
Director Supply Planning	'**My job is about relationships**, so unless I go and look people in the eye and talk to them it does not work. I have to go for dinner, have lunch…because the next time I need them. I can pick up the phone.'	'Even if it was once or twice a year being able to go out for dinner and get to know the guys and look them in the eyes. I still think that that is really invaluable but to be honest **I do not think we needed as much travel as we were doing** and I think that will definitely change a lot obviously for next year, financially and everything, we would have to be creative.'
European Sales Manager	'The vast majority of our team and customers, are outside of Ireland…it means **I have to get out of Ireland** to do so.'	'I hope in the future we will **find a happy medium** and I am not sure if that is going to be a 50/50 or a 75/25 split but it is definitely going to be more virtual eventually.'

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Table 4 (*continued*)

Interviewee	Pre-onset views on global work	Post-transition views on global work
Global Benefits Manager	'The people in that region will be directly reporting through my regional co-ordinators so then **I will have to go and have facetime** with them….oh yeah, **travel is mandatory.** It will not happen if I do not go.'	'Travel was never particularly focused on getting a certain issue resolved, it was definitely more of keeping the connection…**virtual has been more efficient and productive**. And I think it really has shown to me that you could be sitting in a room with like 15 people for three days in a different country and nothing really comes, it can be a waste of time in some ways, in terms of being productive… **Always good to meet in person** though, because we are such a global company.'
Global Business Manager	'I make it very clear to people in interviews, **you will be travelling** at weekends, you will be away for at least 12, 13, 14 weeks a year…I tried to count up how many flights I have done, it is like 600/ 700 flights.'	'We spend millions a year on travel…the mindset has been if your customer facing, it has been successful in the past so maintain that and that is why we have grown every year but our revenue this year will be higher than it has ever been, so we are kind of thinking maybe that **might change the mindset**.'
Global Manager	'**My job, at its very core is travel**…. Control, it is all about control, you cannot control it effectively (without travel); (requires) being face-to-face with the customer, being face-to-face with your team.'	'The question will always be, **do we really need to travel? Is there a legitimate reason?** There will be times when we do need to travel…If we need to present something to a physician for prototype testing, they would have it in their hand and be able to look at it and feel it and do all that sort of stuff. That has to be face-to-face.'
International Business Manager	'We are a global company so **we like to have a presence** everywhere across the globe…within my remit now I have got 33 countries, so I try and visit them as much as I can.'	'People who are travelling for business from a personal perspective now have a taster of what it is like not to travel and I would be interested to see whether whenever things start to return to some kind of normality if they are actually going to be keen to continue on their old path. I do think **things are going to become a lot more virtual.**'
Medical Advisor	'I consider travel as part of my job. So I do not consider it as something special…if you go to see people, get a direct answer, it saves you time.'	'I probably prefer to travel again to go out…I travel about, let us say, 75% almost. If it is down to 50%, yes, I can manage that, but if you say, travel is down to 25%, I do not know if I can…I would be **afraid I am losing the connection**, the medical field experience.'
Programme Manager	'Projects we are working on that would drive a lot of the need for travel…It is **just part of the DNA; you get on the plane and you do it**…It is just so normal in our culture to have travel, we operate truly as a global organisation… the **cost of travel is just a small price to pay** in order to keep growing.'	'We are **building an inventory of all meetings** and which we think we can keep remote. We are looking very critically at what we have been able to achieve virtually rather than everybody automatically assuming that they have to jump on a plane…**I am not going to be travelling as much.** It really depends on your role…If you are in sales or if you are in R&D you are probably going to be getting back pretty much close to what you were used to before because you support cases and surgeries.'
R&D Director	'We have been fortunate, going through a growth phase where our numbers have been positive and **our direct boss is very keen on travel** so despite the pressure he never asks us to curtail travel.'	'Not being able to travel would be I think a limiter or would inhibit better relationships. I will **definitely adopt travel to some extent**. It is just questionable as to how much it needs… I will probably manage somewhere between 4 and 5 trips a year… Teams and Zoom are here to stay.'
Senior Engineer	'**I did not anticipate this much travel**. I knew there would be a bit but when it started to become every single month, creeping up and up. But that was on the table when I took on the project.'	'I think there will be more virtual. They will see that as being able to **keep the costs** down which makes sense and maybe in about five, six or seven years, **things will start creeping up** bit by bit, you know how things go.'
Senior R&D Manager	'**It just sort of is what it is.** If I wanted to do a good job, and want to get more involved… if I do not travel you may not have the right level of influence So **you want to get in there and get involved** to make sure that people get the full picture.'	'I think what will happen is… **it will be specific events** that you travel for where significant groups of people are getting together with a specific goal in mind, as opposed to, there was a little bit of travel for the sake of… there was not always a specific purpose, it was more vague or less defined. But I would imagine in the future, **it will be much more purposeful**.'

increased level of travel.

4.3.1. *Well-being and effectiveness outcomes*

Global workers experienced both positive and negative changes to work and non-work-related factors as a result of the pandemic. In relation to the latter, from a '*health perspective, people are probably glad*' (Global Business Manager) as many had previously referred to the demands and strains of frequent travel. Albeit being at work, having more time with family and better balance were reported; for example, the option '*to pop out for five minutes to chat or fifteen minutes to kick a soccer ball*' was a concrete situation mentioned (European Sales Manager). Participants realised how much they were missing out previously.

> 'Some colleagues, who will spend most of their time travelling, are absolutely delighted at the moment to be able to be at home and spend time with their family and see children during the day and be with their partners' (Manager Advanced Quality).

Several participants emphasised that the new GVW environment improved their network position in the organisation, '*for the first time, levelling the playing field*' (Programme Manager). While previously a majority of colleagues were permanently collocated at, for example, the headquarters, and respondents were only able to join for short periods when travelling or dialling in virtually, now '*everybody has the same handicap*' which made it easier to get speaking time (R&D Director). This new situation allowed for a more balanced representation and involvement in projects where people felt that they were '*going to be really part of it*' (Director Supply Planning), with the following quote being indicative:

'There are 21 of us and I am the only one not in the US at the headquarters, so I always felt at a slight disadvantage, so when this happened, I thought, listen, it does not matter whether I am in California, Hong Kong, or Ireland, we are all in the same boat' (Programme Manager).

At the same time, participants recognised several limitations with the GVW environment including reduced strategic relationship building capacities, limited informal check-in opportunities, and inefficiencies around creative group dynamics and processes. Getting customers and distributors on the phone or on video calls was challenging because they were busy dealing with Covid-19 testing and overall, there were less touch points. Being in front of a person was viewed as a lot more valuable as you could control the room and pick up all of these cues which could be built into conversation. Internally, participants missed the corridor conversations, bumping into somebody. At times, GVW limited access to the ultimate decision maker. While on-site informal chats might be a 5–10-minute discussion, in a GVW context, you needed to schedule a meeting for 30 min. *'Everything is a phone call. You find yourself on the phone 9–5 and that probably took away from your time to do normal work'* (Global Business Manager).

Several participants recognised the challenge of adapting their creative, interactive on-site discussions to a virtual setting. This included workshops where you would spend a whole day doing a given topic and activities which traditionally would be done with flipcharts, whiteboards, and post-its. Virtual brainstorming activities were described as not as impactful and not particularly successful because '*people are doing six other things at the same time*', losing the dynamic exchange (R&D Director). In addition, some processes such as approval of contracts and assessment of manufacturing facilities were delayed or postponed due to the travel ban.

4.3.2. Re-assessment of global work and travel dependence

Participants actively considered changes in GVW practices and policies for the organisation. The process of adapting to GVW was described as an eye opener, with most staff embracing the GVW environment. While some executive leaders were described as initially being reluctant to working virtually, many executives saw that their concerns about people not being productive had not come to fruition. An example of applied learning from the R&D space included the development of virtual experiences with live feeds and cameras to facilitate visuals of equipment and manufacturing sites. While pre-Covid-19 the focus was generally on the bottom-line, restricted travel allowed participants to discover and eliminate issues which were perceived as making the business more efficient. The following two quotes are indicative of this:

'I have started now to do a bit more digging, and a deep dive into some of the data that we get, and it is giving me time to really understand where the needs are. The things I need to address as opposed to just being in a cycle of constantly going from one travel trip to the next. I realised that underneath all of this travel, we have hidden a lot of issues that need to be dealt with' (European Sales Manager).

'As we realised that this was going to continue for longer, there is a huge focus on watching what the competition is doing because this is an opportunity for us to take share, so if we are ahead of the curve, if we are better, faster with virtual technology…that is a win for the business. We are seeing it as an opportunity' (Programme Manager).

Participants shared their views on core areas of travel post pandemic and flagged the importance of considering both individual preferences and the wider organisational culture. Participants argued that whether or not travel will be reduced will heavily depend on the executive leadership team. Pre-pandemic, travel was almost an ethos with an expectation to spend time face-to-face with suppliers, customers, and colleagues. Some participants doubted that this culture is going to change per se but there might be more of a pushback on the leaders' request to travel. However, some individuals also stated that they miss getting on a plane and they would be afraid of losing the connection and field experience if travel was to be reduced significantly. Ultimately, some individuals still saw '*face-to-face as almost being the gold standard*' (R&D Director) while others hoped for a happy medium going forward.

The consensus among global workers was that there will be a more critical view on whether travel is required with many planning to get better at being selective and prioritising. Some individuals started to build an inventory of all meetings to assess whether they could be done virtually instead of assuming that individuals have to travel. While this was an ongoing exercise, participants indicated that particularly in R&D and sales roles, a return to very similar levels of travel was expected. For example, they remained to be convinced that tactile and sensory elements could be replaced such as showing a prototype to a physician allowing them to test it and feel it in their hands. It was also expected that travel would take place for some higher-level strategic meetings and for some team building events while there was a hope that some maintenance and troubleshooting may continue virtually in the future. The advantages of a more selective approach were outlined:

'It may mean that trips become more meaningful. I was very used to just scheduling a trip, getting on a plane, no big deal. Whereas if they become like once a quarter events, people may make more of an effort to be in the one place at the one time, so the value of travel may increase' (R&D Director).

5. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the transition that global workers experienced from global travel to a virtual working context amidst a global health pandemic. Fig. 1 illustrates how Covid-19 as a global macro event (McFarland et al., 2020) has evoked a transition process for global workers where they have recognised that the 'old normal' of a reliance on global travel was not necessarily the only way to engage in their global work (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Schinoff et al., 2020). The figure depicts this transition process consisting of pre-onset, transition, and post-transition periods. We elaborate on these periods as part of the following discussion of our two primary contributions.

Our first contribution centres around the transition process of global workers. Taking a transition perspective (Bliese et al., 2017), we provide insights into transitional experiences of global workers in a crisis context. Specifically, we examine how global workers reconfigure structural and relational dimensions of previously unquestioned global work routines. In contrast to most of the extant literature on global work, which tends to focus on collocation (Nurmi & Hinds, 2020) or well-established virtual teams (Lauring & Jonasson, 2018), we provide insights into how organic and ad hoc GVW is organised at the individual level in a crisis context. In doing so, we respond to the recent calls for more empirical individual-level studies in international business (Cerar et al., 2021) and particularly on virtual work (Makarius & Larson, 2017). Covid-19 led to what Adler and Castro (2019) refer to as a 'meaningful transition' – one that prompts substantial change for individuals with regard to how they experience their work. We largely found Adler and Castro's (2019) assumptions around transitions to be true in our crisis context, i.e., transitions are inevitable, transition points are artificial, transitions are an opportunity, transitions occur at the individual and organisational level, and transitions present organisations with a paradox. However, we challenge the general assumption that transitions are marked by a lead-up period (Adler & Castro, 2019). Following a disruptive global macro event, as in the case of Covid-19, transitions are required without any anticipation of the event, and therefore, lead-up periods are unlikely to be identified. Thus, reconfiguring of structural and relational dimensions of work was completed suddenly, without any lead-up period for global workers. We interpret our findings about transitions as an indication that the routinised rules and expectations for global workers are highly contingent on circumstances outside of their

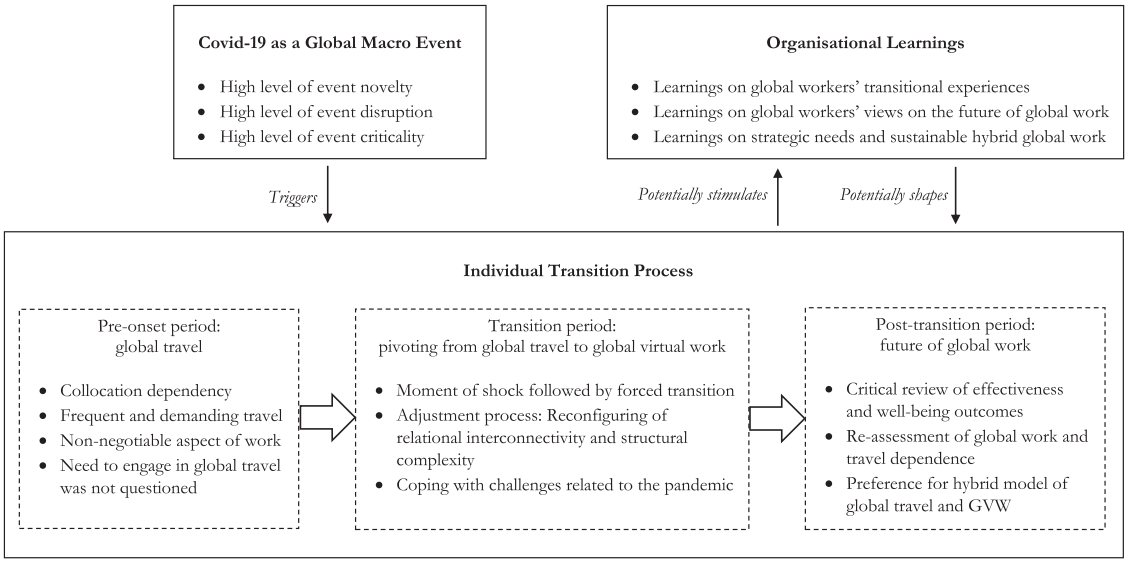


Fig. 1. : The transition process of global workers.

control rather than solely shaped by norms that are stable over time.

While global workers were forced to transition to GVW, i.e., had no agency in the actual decision to transition, our findings illustrate how global workers showed agency in reconfiguring structural and relational dimensions in their new work setting. Covid-19 had severely interrupted the everyday routinised processes and practices of global workers, and thus they had to reconsider how they could effectively continue collaborating with cross-border colleagues. As such, managers attempted to 'enact some order' (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) in this unfamiliar context as well as cope with tensions sparked by the new work situation and exacerbated by personal challenges. Our participants were high-level workers who had the responsibility of supporting their subordinates, providing them with some 'workable certainty' (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) through configurations of new work routines. While many global workers have noted the need to adjust to increased relational interconnectivity and structural complexity, the transitional experiences as part of this adjustment were mixed. Specifically, we found several contingencies that shaped the transitional experiences. For example, those individuals with greater confidence in sustaining their performance in a GVW setting tended to have more positive transitional experiences. Our findings also indicated that the extent of travel pre-Covid and experience with GVW as well as personal circumstances, sometimes intensified by Covid-19, were contingencies which likely influenced transitional experiences of global workers. Therefore, our study reiterates the need for individual-level considerations when making decisions about global work in MNEs.

Our second contribution unpacks the learnings developed throughout the transition process and proposes an alternative way to think about the functioning of globally distributed workforces in MNEs (Nurmi & Hinds, 2020; Reiche et al., 2019). Our study reveals how Covid-19 as a macro level event rendered the conventional global mobility practices of MNEs obsolete. Therefore, we challenge the traditional wisdom that global travel and the establishment of collocated spaces (Gibson, Dunlop, & Cordery, 2019; Hinds & Cramton, 2014; Narula & Santangelo, 2009) is a necessity for global work. Despite the triggering event being an exogenous shock, transitions can be an opportunity to rethink anachronistic ways of global working that have become engrained in organisations (Adler & Castro, 2019). Our findings compare global workers' pre-onset and post-transition views on global mobility and GVW and reveal how participants reflected on more strategic and sustainable pathways to their global work (Jooss et al., 2021) which entailed a more critical review of travel (Makarius & Mukherjee, 2020). We argue that this reflexivity acts as an important opportunity recognition and is a crucial stage of the overall transition process. Recognising the differences between GVW and global mobility (Makarius & Larson, 2017) provided global workers with a way to wean themselves off their unhealthy dependence on coordination and collaboration through collocation.

Our results indicate that while some global workers continue to take the position that collocation is the most effective form of global work, the majority of interviewees showed a change in how they perceived collocated work vis-à-vis virtual work. We did not find any major influence in terms of gender, age, and experience of individuals on their views on global mobility. However, variation in the extent to which participants wanted to go back to travelling depended on the role of global workers, the market they operated in, the state of relationships and team compositions, and personal circumstances and personality. Our findings indicate that the position in particular (and accompanying responsibilities in the role) impact perceptions on global work. Those global workers in external facing roles appear to be more likely to return to pre-COVID travel routines compared to those individuals in internal facing roles. For example, individuals in sales roles continued to highlight the importance of augmenting relational interconnectivity virtually and managers in product development roles flagged the vital role of physical engagement when dealing with complex tasks or technical product creations. Ultimately, MNEs will find a spectrum of global workers – some wanting to return to pre-Covid travel commitments, some seeking hybrid global work arrangements, and others hoping for a largely virtual work setting.

These reflections and learnings lead us to reason that in the future of global mobility, traditional forms of global work and their associated classifications are more fluid and porous than currently depicted in the literature. Specifically, we assert that much more overlap between various forms of global work exists in practice than what specific classifications in the literature suggest. Most of the extant literature (e.g., Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007; Shaffer et al., 2012) distinguishes between individuals taking on a particular form of global work, for example, global travel, international commuting, rotational assignments, flexpatriation, or virtual assignments. Yet, in practice, a global worker might be simultaneously engaged in various forms of global work. For example, Dimitrova, Chia, Shaffer & Tay-Lee (2020) found that expatriates also engage in international business travel, however, the travel component of their role is often neglected, and these expatriates are therefore 'forgotten travellers'. In this context, reference to flexible global working arrangements (Jooss et al., 2021) or global work arrangements (Reiche et al., 2019) might be more fruitful, allowing for

wider discussion of the multiple transitions that individuals may make between different types of global work on a daily basis. Considering the shifting landscape of global mobility and given the centrality of GVW amidst the pandemic and likely beyond (Selmer et al., 2022), we contend that any definitions of global work should more firmly view virtual working as a one of the core approaches to conducting cross-border business. As our study considered the transition from global travel to GVW, we build on Jooss et al.'s (2021) definition of flexible global working arrangements, integrating not just physical mobility but also virtual mobility. Thus, we contend that *flexible global working arrangements* are more holistically defined as.

> situations where employees physically *and/or virtually* engage in working internationally as part of their substantive role for a condensed and defined period ranging from one day to up to one year (adopted from Jooss et al., 2021).

Ultimately, this amended definition is more reflective of the future of global work where distinguishing between collocated forms of global physical mobility and GVW may become an unhelpful task, yet it continuously emphasises the *flexibility* in global work arrangements.

We assert that the individual transition process of global workers potentially stimulates organisational learnings, which, in turn, might also shape individuals' ongoing post-transition process. We highlight particularly three learnings that require proactive consideration by organisations. First, MNEs need to gather learnings on employees' transitional experiences and preferences in terms of global work settings. In a post-pandemic context, a 'collocation-virtual paradox' might lead to tensions among those stakeholders who prefer the pre-pandemic modus operandi which has proven to be successful for MNEs versus those stakeholders that seek new forms of global work. Drawing on event system theory, we suggest that individual travellers' preferences may lead to mindset changes at the organisational level over time (Morgeson et al., 2015), indicating a bottom-up effect in response to the event occurred. Second, MNEs must analyse learnings on global workers' view on the future of global work, particularly in the context of talent management. If individuals' preferences around global working are ignored, this may likely lead to high turnover of key talent and also challenges in attracting new talent to join the firm. On the other hand, responding to individuals' needs and connecting global hybrid working with talent development interventions can build individuals' commitment to the organisation and strengthen internal talent pipelines. Third, strategic needs must be considered which are likely to incorporate a wider range of stakeholders. For example, executive leaders might share a particular view on the relevance of collocation as part of the firm's philosophy; or external stakeholders might demand face-to-face exchanges for particular negotiations and developments. We propose that to realise more strategic and sustainable pathways, the future of global work in MNEs requires a hybrid model with individuals that can operate in, and balance the demands of, both collocated and GVW settings. Ultimately, the longevity of substantial changes to global work arrangements will be impacted by both individual and organisational habits.

5.1. Managerial implications

It is important to note that while GVW was embraced by many participants, several individuals emphasised the importance of building relationships in a face-to-face environment hoping to return to temporary collocation post pandemic. After we emerge from this period, firms should look to a hybrid global working architecture where frequent and intermittent face-to-face exchanges are combined or blended with repeated virtual interactions providing the foundations for a quasi-collocation approach to managing a globally distributed workforce. The reality is that the sustainability of global work in MNEs requires workers to find a healthy balance between collocated and virtual working spaces. As such, most global workers will endeavour to establish some form of physical proximity with their cross-border collaborators, however temporary it may be, and this seems to remain an important feature of global work (Reiche et al., 2019). In addition, adequate support structures and training must be put in place by organisations to facilitate GVW and policies should indicate expectations around global collaboration practices which is particularly important for global workers who navigate spatial and temporal distances (Nurmi & Hinds, 2016). For example, organisations should be mindful of global workers' schedules and working hours as they try to manage dispersed colleagues across multiple time zones – a key challenge identified in our study. In practice, this means that, in the first instance, initiators of meetings should confirm that meeting participants' work schedules overlap. Given that it is likely that meetings across multiple time zones require some flexibility, rotating recurring meeting times, recording meetings, and offering a post-meeting discussion platform could aid in managing globally dispersed workforces in a virtual setting. In addition, making virtual meetings less frequent but more focused with shared agendas could increase global workers' commitment. Finally, organisations should identify core areas of 'travel need' making business trips also more purposeful, consider individual preferences to sustain motivation, and monitor well-being and effectiveness outcomes of global workers. If organisations do not realise the need for reassessment of global work and if they do not engage positively and proactively with this, it could lead to attraction and retention challenges of global workers.

5.2. Limitations and future research

Our research presents important insights into the GVW transition process. Yet, it is important to acknowledge the limited generalisability of our findings. Some boundary conditions for transferability to other settings relate to the nature of work (global work), the nature of the transition (abrupt, unplanned, forced), and the extent of virtuality (entirely virtual). Our study provides insights into transitions in a particular macro context, that is, the global Covid-19 crisis which resulted in individuals being forced to transition abruptly and exclusively to GVW. The limited agency in that decision and the extent of virtuality likely impacted the overall transition to their virtual environment (Makarius & Larson, 2017). For example, with greater agency and more flexibility on the extent of virtuality in a post-pandemic context, global workers can assess what coordination and collaboration efforts require global travel versus what global work aspects can be facilitated virtually, which arguably will lead to more positive transitional experiences.

Looking forward, whether global workers will thrive in this new work setting will arguably be subject to how well they manage the post-transition period and cope with the ongoing Covid-19 challenges faced which may be heavily impacted by one's own personal circumstances and organisational contexts (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Jackowska & Lauring, 2021; Yang et al., 2022). Future research should consider other industries and contexts to expand our understanding around how global workers transition to a virtual setting as well as quantify the effectiveness of GVW in the medium and long term. In this regard, multi-level studies that consider the impact at organisational or even societal levels are suggested. While our study provided rich extracts on transitional experiences, highlighting mixed perspectives, we did not test any measures of performance, for example, in relation to productivity and collaboration. Interestingly, while Yang et al. (2022) found a decline for these two performance measures in the context of Microsoft, our study indicates a potentially more balanced view on performance impacts. Moreover, how well global workers navigate the GVW space might also be impacted by their varying engagement with technology, and a socio-materiality lens (Orlikowski, 2010) could aid in unpacking this further. However, further research is needed to draw conclusions on particular performance outcomes. In addition, we suggest three specific avenues of future research.

First, expanding on event system theory, future studies could take a

sensemaking lens (Weick, 1995) to further unpack the transition process between various global work arrangements. Events have been described as foundational for sensemaking processes (Morgeson et al., 2015). While event system theory focuses on the strength of events and their impact, sensemaking allows to better understand the interpretive process that occurs between event occurrence and actions. Specifically, studies could consider the process and outcomes of sensemaking and factors influencing sensemaking as part of the everyday micro-transitions that individuals undertake when moving between different types of global work. This could aid us to better understand what a healthy balance of collocation and GVW might look like, in other words, exploring the extent of collocation required among globally remote stakeholders post pandemic.

Second, studies could take a job crafting perspective (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) when researching how global workers manage the transition to GVW. With an absence of a formal organisational architecture around GVW, global workers have a significant degree of autonomy in managing their work which allows them to reconfigure relational interconnectivity and structural complexity. Further understanding of the degree of job crafting and its potential benefits and drawbacks in a GVW context would be useful and could assist organisational efforts to provide guiding frameworks for global work. While often perceived as positive, job crafting may be a double-edged sword when it comes to an individual's job demands and well-being (Harju, Kaltiainen, & Hakanen, 2021). For example, Jooss et al. (2022) found that job crafting inadvertently intensified rather than eased the demands-resources mismatch of international business travellers. Similar effects might be observed in a GVW setting. This means organisations need to carefully consider the extent to which they provide structures and support through global work frameworks vis-à-vis autonomy which allows for crafting to take place. A cautionary note in terms of 'crafting' global work is suggested.

Third, future studies could take a paradox view (Lewis, 2000; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989) on global work transitions and arrangements. This might encompass further examination of the tension between old and new – the comfort of the past (collocation dependency) and uncertainty of the future of global work (hybrid model). Better understanding the collocation-virtual paradox and the dynamics among individuals may foster learning and sustained organisational performance while ignoring these tensions might result in being stuck in comfortable routines. We therefore call for a nuanced understanding of the perspectives of key actors including global workers, HR, line managers, and executives on the future of global working.

6. Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has completely transformed how individuals in MNEs engage in their global work. In this paper, we have taken an event-oriented approach to spotlight the transition from global travel to a virtual environment. Our study challenges a dominant assumption in global mobility studies that collocated interactions are the most effective way to coordinate a globally dispersed workforce. We did so by unpacking the transitional experiences of global workers who reconfigured structural and relational dimensions of their work. We find that while GVW has its limitations, overall a change in thinking about how global work is carried out has taken place with global workers being much more open to GVW, alongside global travel. Key lessons learnt relate to the need for a more critical review of effectiveness and well-being outcomes of global work approaches (e.g., global travel versus GVW) and a subsequent re-assessment of global work and travel dependence in MNEs. Reflecting on these lessons will allow MNEs to offer better global work experiences and to take more strategic and sustainable approaches to global work. We hope that our empirical phenomenon-based research findings and our future research suggestions stimulate further studies on the transition to and future of global work.

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Conflict of interest

We do not have any competing interests to disclose.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, Stefan Jooss. The data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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