

Does Working Out-of-the-Office Work for Employees? Alternative Work Arrangements, Ambiguity, and Job Satisfaction in the Federal Workforce

Public Personnel Management

1–23

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DOI: 10.1177/00910260251316525

journals.sagepub.com/home/ppm

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Abstract

Public employees working away from the office has become more common in recent years, but the impact of these changes is not fully understood. This study considers whether out-of-office work culture impacts how employees come to make sense of their organizations, jobs, and work life, and, in turn, how this may affect job satisfaction. Using Stata 15's random sampling tool, the authors employ Structural Equation Modeling of three random samples of 2,000 respondents from the 2022 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. Findings indicate that employees are likely to perceive more goal clarity and support for work–life balance where out-of-office work proliferates, leading to higher job satisfaction. By altering how employees interact with their colleagues, working away from the office often leaves employees with clearer perceptions of organizational goals and boundaries around their work lives. In turn, this supports higher job satisfaction as public servants have a stronger understanding of their work identities. This adds further dimension to understanding how the push toward telework or similar arrangements impacts organizations and employees in the public sector.

Keywords

work-from-home, goal ambiguity, role ambiguity, work–life balance, job satisfaction

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Out-of-office working arrangements, such as telework or remote work, have proliferated in recent years. According to data from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), the percentage of federal employees in the United States either teleworking at least once a week or having an approved remote work agreement doubled between 2019 and 2022¹ (U.S. Office of Personnel Management [OPM], 2019, 2022). However, telework participation declined after 2021, despite increases in eligible employees (OPM, 2023). Given the proliferation of these arrangements tied to the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent dissipation, there is growing debate around when or if organizations will return to pre-pandemic usage of office spaces. Despite significant support for continuation, many large corporations are ordering remote workers to return to the office (e.g., Tanzi & Boyle, 2023), and in April 2023, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) instructed federal agencies to “substantially increase meaningful in-person work at federal offices” (Wagner, 2023). Nevertheless, there are numerous pressing questions surrounding out-of-office work and its implications.

While working arrangements like telework or remote work are characteristics of it, out-of-office work culture encompasses broader patterns of behaviors, attitudes, and interactions among co-workers who are working away from traditional offices. Out-of-office work is the performance of any routine work duties in settings that are not characterized by multiple employees doing related and interconnected activities in the same physical space and time on a regular basis. Offices inherently provide opportunities for co-workers to interact in which they share information and engage in social processing. Out-of-office work, thus, reshapes how co-workers relate to each other, as well as clients, stakeholders, and/or the public. This represents a dimension of organizational culture distinct from traditional office-based working, as work patterns must be adjusted. Out-of-office work culture is an important element of how employees orient themselves toward work in modern organizations, as they must make sense of their work identities in settings that are not always associated with work, such as their homes or other community spaces (e.g., coffee shops). As out-of-office work becomes increasingly common, this has important implications for understanding changing work dynamics, particularly for public servants who often hold strong intrinsic motivations connected to their work identities.

Scholarship on this topic explores many themes, including job satisfaction, work–life balance, gender differences, career impacts, performance, employee turnover, and management practices (e.g., Athanasiadou & Theriou, 2021). While increased productivity has been realized as the initial barriers and capital costs were overcome (e.g., Ban, 2023), there still remain concerns about technology and capacities to supervisor employees who are not present in the office (e.g., T. Kim et al., 2021). Scholarship also indicates that employees often favor work arrangements that offer flexibility and work–life balance, which is correlated with higher job satisfaction and mental health benefits (e.g., Boulet & Parent-Lamarche, 2022). Nevertheless, some scholars contend that these arrangements also place unintended strains on employees and their workplace relationships and potentially impact their sense of social belonging in their organizations (Allgood et al., 2024; Kwon & Kim-Goh, 2023; Mele et al., 2021).

Intervening factors that may account for these complexities are organizational goal or role ambiguity, as employees must make sense of their work in new ways.

The aim of this study is to understand how out-of-office work impacts the dynamics of culture and work identities among public servants; specifically, it considers whether out-of-office work culture impacts how employees make sense of their organizations, jobs, and work life, and, in turn, the effects on job satisfaction. The authors contend that employees working out-of-the-office often gain clarity as a result of altered social processes that reduce competing signals about one's organizational goals, individual job responsibilities, and the boundaries between work and non-work life. Social processing is a crucial component of how employees come to understand their work identities (i.e., how one conceptualizes their work as an intersection between perceptions of organizational social contributions, individual job roles, and the interaction between work and non-work lives). In turn, employees who understand their work identities are more likely to be satisfied in their jobs (e.g., Schilling, 2015). As public employees often self-select into public service organizations because of their intrinsic motivations to serve the public interest and use social processing to connect these to their jobs (i.e., Jung, 2013; Wright, 2001), it is important to consider how changing work culture impacts employees connected together by a socially relevant mission, especially where organizational goals or individual roles are driven by an inherently ambiguous public interest.

Social Processing, Goals, Roles, and Work–Life Balance

Social processing theory argues that “one can learn most about individual attitudes and behaviors by studying the informational, social, and organizational environment within which those attitudes and behaviors occur and to which they adapt” (Jung, 2013, p. 962). Within organizations, employees receive signals about organizational goals, individual job roles, and the boundaries between work and non-work lives. However, those signals may be ambiguous and require processing, or sense-making, so they can be distilled into a clear understanding. Specifically, when signals are ambiguous, “employees may need to develop legitimate rationalizations for actions and, in turn, feel more job pressure and boredom” (Jung, 2013, p. 962). Social processing, thus, is a crucial element of work culture and the working environment in that it shapes how employees make sense of their work. Public servants, in particular, need clarity to satisfy intrinsic motivations (i.e., work in itself being interesting or enjoyable) that create a draw to the public sector (Jung, 2014; Stazyk, 2016; Tao & Campbell, 2020).

On one hand, social processing alleviates ambiguity by providing access to “sense-givers” or thought partners (e.g., Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). In this way, engaging with co-workers facilitates sense-making of ambiguous messages via sharing of information and cognitive capacity. On the other hand, social processing also complicates sense-making by exposing individuals to competing ways of thinking and may lead to over-processing and collaborative inertia (e.g., McGuire & Agranoff, 2011). Essentially, it can be overwhelming to engage numerous individuals with access to

different sources of information and interpretations of that information. Thus, there are likely economies of scale and scope to social processing that impact the efficiency by which individuals make sense of work. In other words, too little or too much social processing undermines clarity, but an effective balance enhances clarity.

In this context, scholars often focus on two types of ambiguity that impact the work environment: organizational goal and job role. Organizational goal ambiguity surrounds how individuals understand the purposes of their organization, while role ambiguity surrounds how individuals understand their individual role within their organization and how their work contributes to those goals. Goal ambiguity is connected to competing demands, policy problem complexity, and publicness and is also connected to decreases in organizational performance, although some authors contend there are also benefits (Chun & Rainey, 2005; Stazyk & Goerdel, 2011). Role ambiguity focuses on how individuals prioritize competing demands or job functions, perceptions of individual responsibilities, or its relationship with evaluation and appraisal (e.g., Campbell, 2016; Jong, 2016; Tao & Campbell, 2020). Goal ambiguity is also often treated as a predictor of role ambiguity (e.g., Davis & Stazyk, 2016). Essentially, goal ambiguity relates to how one perceives the contributions of the organization to society and role ambiguity relates to how one perceives the value of their individual responsibilities.

Extant scholarship connects these issues directly to job satisfaction. For instance, Wright and Davis (2003) contend that public employees are motivated and satisfied in their position if they understand the mission of their organization and their contributions to it. Jung (2013) further connects goal ambiguity to job satisfaction through social processing theory, contending that social interactions aid individuals in processing their organizations and contributing to shared understandings. In turn, employees who understand the causal pathway from their actions to valued social impacts are more likely to satiate their intrinsic motivations (e.g., public service motivation; Ritz et al., 2016). While social processing simplifies this by creating alignment between individuals and easing disagreements over goals, it also facilitates how individuals come to understand their individual contributions to organizations. Jung (2014) adds to this by arguing that employees who internalize their work and employment as part of their identity view the organization as an extension of their self and are less likely to leave and more likely to support the organization. In addition, employees often feel a connection to the organization through their relationships with co-workers or clients (Walsh & Gordon, 2008).

Given that role ambiguity is often connected to role conflict, one can easily surmise that it also leads to conflict between work and non-work roles. Work–life balance describes how individuals balance competing demands of work and non-work life as well as navigating the conflicts of social roles in both areas. Work–life balance is difficult to measure as it is based on perceptions, so whether any individual employee has effective balance depends on one's own interpretations or perceptions (Kalliath & Brough, 2008; Schilling, 2015). Nevertheless, Michel et al. (2011) demonstrate that role ambiguity positively influences work–family conflict, and other scholarship contends that employees who have well-defined job roles are more likely to achieve a

preferable or manageable work–life balance, than those who face unclear job responsibilities or expectations (e.g., Caillier, 2013; Omar et al., 2015; Sirgy & Lee, 2018; Yang & Islam, 2021). Importantly, this likely results from a stronger understanding of the intersection of personal and work, rather than clearer boundaries between the two.

In essence, where employee job roles are clear, it becomes easier for employers, co-workers, and managers to negotiate boundaries between work and non-work lives; in contrast, where employee job roles are ambiguous, there is often conflict between expectations. This conflict, then, creeps from work to non-work life, as employees take on stress or anxiety about work-related matters during non-work hours, or where managers or co-workers push boundaries as conflict emerges between differing understandings of what one's job entails (e.g., working hours). While organizational policies and culture are important contributors to work–life balance as they signal boundaries between work and non-work, critics argue that prevailing approaches to work–life balance shift responsibility for role conflicts from organizations to individuals (e.g., Feeney & Stritch, 2019; Perreault & Power, 2023). In any case, perceived work–life balance is an important component of job satisfaction as it relates to understanding one's work identity.

Disrupting Social and Information Processing

There are numerous studies explaining job satisfaction. For instance, Cantarelli et al. (2016) identify more than 40 variables, ranging from compensation to interpersonal relationships to mission valence. Theoretical models of job satisfaction often impart different perspectives on sources or drivers, suggesting alternative causal pathways between work environments or managerial decisions and impacts on employees (e.g., Steijn & van der Voet, 2019; Wright & Davis, 2003). Within this literature, some authors make the specific connection between alternative working arrangements, goal ambiguity, social processing, and job satisfaction. For instance, Bae and Kim (2016) argue that telework enhances job satisfaction by altering social exchanges within organizations, and Lee et al. (2024) find that goal ambiguity serves as a moderator for the effects of telework on interpersonal collaboration. In particular, the latter argues that organizational goal clarity either strengthens or weakens interpersonal relationships, but it does not further connect that finding to job satisfaction.

The study here builds on these findings in two ways. First, this study contends that job satisfaction is a function of how employees engage in social processing as a part of working culture to understand their organizations, jobs, and work lives, as it forms their work identities (e.g., Walsh & Gordon, 2008). It also contends that as work identities become clearer, then employees should derive more satisfaction from their jobs. From this perspective, employees exposed to working cultures that strike an effective balance of social processing are likely to perceive a better understanding of how their organizations, jobs, and work–life fit together, leading to more job satisfaction, while those who have less clarity are less satisfied. In this context, then, goal and role ambiguity serve as mediators of the relationship between working culture related to the level of in-office engagement and job satisfaction, as they are central to the causal

pathway connecting working arrangements, the work environment, and perceived satisfaction. Thus, the concern here for out-office-work is its impact on how employees perceive components of their work identities as a result of social processing.

Second, this study considers out-of-office work culture to include individual working experiences and the perceptions of working arrangements of fellow employees, as opposed to a more constrained view of just one's working arrangement. Telework or remote work represents one dimension of out-of-office work culture, particularly in the context of social processing, as interactions with co-workers are an essential element. For instance, the experience of the only teleworking employee in an organization, while other employees continue to work in traditional office spaces, is likely different from an employee whose peers are also routinely working at home. Furthermore, where out-of-office work is common within organizations, workers may find themselves in relatively empty office spaces even when they choose to go to the office. Thus, by considering both individual experiences and perceptions of other employees' experiences, there is a more robust view of the working culture surrounding out-of-office work and how it impacts social processing within organizations. This provides additional nuances to previous studies and offers new insights into the dynamics of telework, ambiguity, and job satisfaction.

While flexible working arrangements may benefit employees, it also disrupts the working culture, specifically, how employees engage in social processing of organizational goals and job roles (e.g., Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). Notably, this is a function of both an individual's working arrangements as well as those of colleagues, since social processing cannot happen in isolation. For instance, water cooler talk, informal chats, or closed-door discussions of sensitive topics occur over the phone, in writing, or on digital platforms, altering how information is shared and processed. Out-of-person communication also reduces the role of non-verbal communication and decreases the likelihood of serendipitous interactions between colleagues (Bailenson, 2021). Thus, being isolated physically not only alters the quantity and quality of interaction with co-workers but also it may alleviate over-processing too. Although previous scholarship does not directly consider this in the context of social processing, research on related issues such as social inclusion and identities (e.g., Hogg & Gaffney, 2023; Patel et al., 2024) and collaborative networks (e.g., McGuire & Agranoff, 2011) indicates that over-processing occurs where ties between individuals overwhelm capacities to process information resulting from those interactions. In other words, too much information overwhelms one's capacity to process that information, so there is essentially an economy of scale to social processing, reducing its effectiveness as a tool to navigate organizational goal or role ambiguity.

One unintended consequence of moving communication to digital forms, where non-verbal communication is muted, is that cognitive processing is more taxing and individuals feel less comfortable sharing potentially sensitive information (e.g., Bailenson, 2021; Belanger & Allport, 2008; Taskin & Bridoux, 2010). Out-of-office work culture also likely makes it more difficult for dis- or mis-information to spread across organizations as employees have fewer unstructured opportunities to interact. Disrupting social processing likely creates important limitations to knowledge and

information sharing, reshaping working culture within organizations (e.g., Belanger & Allport, 2008; Taskin & Bridoux, 2010) and impacting the amount of competing information or perspectives about organizational goals, job roles, or work–life balance. From these studies, one can glean that while social processing facilitates a collective understanding of complex issues (i.e., Jung, 2013), fully engaging in social processing may also be a source of ambiguity in that it creates mixed signals, imparts irrelevant information, or challenges one’s existing understanding of organizations or job roles. In turn, this requires employees to “make sense” of additional information that likely leads to over-processing or cognitive dissonance, counteracting the positive effects of social processing.

Thus, if there are barriers to engaging in social processing while relying on out-of-person communication, then employees may not fully comprehend or be able to process all the information provided and/or reduce the amount of information they share with others. Therefore, they may be able to avoid over-processing, achieving an effective economy of scale. Given that, it is likely that out-of-office work culture provides truncated opportunities for social processing that lead to clarity, rather than challenge that clarity in the same ways that high quantity, low-quality interactions with colleagues at the office would (e.g., sharing rumors). In effect, out-of-office work culture has dual effects, but as employees gain experience, it is likely that they develop coping mechanisms to minimize the various negative impacts associated with out-of-office work. While previous scholarship does not consider the potential competing effects that may occur here, it does document that employees often learn how to cope with the personal or social impacts of teleworking or remote work over time (Greenwood-Hickman et al., 2021) and also indicates that experience with out-of-office work often affects the perceptions of its impacts (e.g., Mele et al., 2021).

Thus, working cultures in which employees engage in more out-of-office work likely lead to an effective balance in social processing, so there is neither under- nor over-processing. Given this, it is expected that where out-of-office work proliferates, employees are likely to perceive higher levels of goal and role clarity. In addition, it is expected that out-of-office work culture increases the likelihood that employees perceive support for their work–life balance for two reasons: (a) it gives the impression that managers are aware of the pressures of non-work life and are willing to be flexible with employees and (b) flexible arrangements create more opportunities for employees to match available resources (e.g., time) with the variety of tasks that they are responsible for both at work and at home (Valcour et al., 2011). Even if employees are working more, flexibility likely creates the perception that they are more efficiently using their resources and reduces the conflicts between work and non-work lives. The result is that employees are likely to perceive greater support if they engage in out-of-office work:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): Employees are likely to perceive more goal clarity where out-of-office work culture is more prolific.

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): Employees are likely to perceive more role clarity where out-of-office work culture is more prolific.

Hypothesis 1c (H1c): Employees are likely to perceive more support of work–life balance where out-of-office work culture is more prolific.

Second, it is expected that perceived goal clarity is associated with perceived role clarity, and role clarity is associated with perceived support for work–life balance. Previous scholarship indicates that as employees better understand their organizations, they also better understand their individual contributions (e.g., Davis & Stazyk, 2016; Wright, 2001). In addition, it is expected that as job responsibilities become clearer, employees are likely to better understand their specific work–life balance, as ambiguity in one’s job role is often correlated with increased work–life conflict (e.g., Michel et al., 2011; Sirgy & Lee, 2018). Clarity empowers employees to draw their own boundaries and employers to provide support based on clear expectations (e.g., Caillier, 2013; Omar et al., 2015; Yang & Islam, 2021). In other words, it is likely that where both employees and employers have clear expectations around job roles, each party is more likely to understand how work–life balance is supported. In contrast, where job responsibilities are fluid, it is likely difficult to understand boundaries and easier for conflict to emerge between employees and managers (or between co-workers). Thus, this study expects perceived role clarity to be positively associated with perceived support for work–life balance:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): Perceived goal clarity is positively associated with perceived role clarity.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): Perceived role clarity is positively associated with perceived support for work–life balance.

Third, it is expected that perceived goal and role clarity, as well as perceived support for work–life balance, are associated with higher job satisfaction (Jung, 2014; Stazyk, 2016). Given that employees attracted to the public service are motivated by an intrinsic need to further the public interest (e.g., Ritz et al., 2016), it is likely that as organizational goals, individual contributions, or boundaries between work and non-work life become less clear, intrinsic motivations become more difficult to satisfy, leaving employees disengaged where their work feels disconnected from the public interest. Previous scholars also connect this to employee motivation via person-organization fit arguments (e.g., S. Kim, 2012) as well as goal-setting theory (e.g., Lee et al., 2024). In either case, employees who are able to connect their intrinsic motivations or long-term goals with those of their organizations are more likely to be satisfied in their jobs; however, working without a clear connection to the things that motivate an employee, over the long-term, is likely to lead to less job satisfaction.

Finally, if employees better understand boundaries between their professional and personal lives, it is likely they will be more satisfied with their jobs, so it is also expected that perceived support for work–life balance also contributes to job satisfaction (e.g., Caillier, 2013). For employees who have flexibility to better match resources with both professional and personal responsibilities, they are likely more satisfied with their jobs in as far as their jobs are not creating conflicts with their personal lives.

Furthermore, these employees are also likely to perceive their organizations as supporting their need for work–life balance, as well as perceive themselves as a good fit for the organization and their job as serving personal career goals, which likely further enhances satisfaction with their positions. In any case, this rests on employees having a clear understanding of how their work lives connect with their job responsibilities, so they understand how organizations are supporting them and how they can best utilize their resources (S. Y. Kim & Lee, 2020; Valcour et al., 2011):

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): Perceived goal clarity is positively associated with job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): Perceived role clarity is positively associated with job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3c (H3c): Perceived support of work–life balance is positively associated with job satisfaction.

Methodology

Data

This study uses the 2022 FEVS data. FEVS is conducted annually by OPM to assess organizational climate and experiences with policies, practices, procedures, and characteristics of federal agencies and leadership. FEVS is administered electronically to permanent, non-political, non-seasonal, full- or part-time, and phase retirement federal employees who were employed as of April 2022. Invitations were sent to 1,582,112 employees with a total of 557,778 employees responding (35% response rate; OPM, 2022). This study focuses, specifically, on 2022, as it represents the most recent perceptions about telework post-pandemic that included multiple question items imperative to measuring key theoretical concepts. Surveys conducted either prior to or during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic likely capture a starkly different work environment for many federal employees. In addition, 2022 is the only year in which multiple items were asked about telework that capture different aspects of the working environment, providing more robust data in which to measure the relative work culture.

Given that a data set of this size increases the risk of type 1 error (i.e., false positives) in the results and could potentially lead to the failure to reject hypotheses with spurious evidence (e.g., Hargittai, 2015), this study randomly samples 2,000 respondents from the full FEVS data set, reducing the potential for bias and creating a more robust statistic test.² Specifically, the authors pulled three random samples for the purposes of cross-comparison. In effect, if hypotheses are supported across all three random samples, then one can largely infer that there is strong evidence of support.³ While this is a relatively novel approach, it provides a test of robustness that would otherwise not be achievable by analyzing the full data set alone. To accomplish this, Stata 15's random sampling feature⁴ was used to pull samples of 2,000 respondents from the full data set; missing data reduced the analytical samples to between 1,414 and 1,429 observations (See Supplemental Appendix A for a comparison between

random samples and full data set and Supplemental Appendix B for samples across agencies).

Measurement and Analysis

This study focuses on five latent variables: out-of-office work culture, goal clarity, role clarity, work–life balance support, and job satisfaction. The study uses batteries of two or three items to measure latent variables (see Table 1 for questions and response scales, and Supplemental Appendix C descriptive statistics). The authors reviewed the FEVS codebook to determine how each item may align with latent variables (if any). In several cases, this was straightforward; for instance, there are questions clearly designed to measure job satisfaction. In other cases, the authors were guided by the core conceptual issues at hand as outlined in previous scholarship (e.g., Chun & Rainey, 2005); this was most readily apparent with goal and role ambiguity.

In addition, to measure the proliferation of work culture related to out-of-office work, the authors used a battery of three survey items meant to capture the individual respondent's working arrangements (e.g., teleworking) and their perceptions of colleagues working arrangements.⁵ Specifically, these items measure how individual's perceive the patterns of behaviors within organization as it relates to out-of-work, which can be used as a basis to infer more broadly how altered working patterns impact goal and role ambiguity, work–life balance, and job satisfaction. Taken together, this captures a spectrum of work cultures that measure to what extent respondents work in office spaces alongside their colleagues, where at one end, out-of-office work is the prevailing dynamic, and at the other end, in-office work dominates. This captures the underlying theoretical concept of concern here, specifically whether employees engage with colleagues in traditional office spaces or whether that engagement is limited based on working arrangements. This is an important distinction from previous scholarship, as the concern here is not narrowly with telework, but more broadly with work culture.

After initial variable selection, tests for correlations and reliability were conducted to confirm that the data aligned with theoretical assumptions (see Supplemental Appendix E); all values are within the recommended thresholds, providing evidence for the validity and reliability of the measures (see DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As an additional robustness test, the authors removed battery items one at a time to determine how individual items impacted findings. In doing so, it was determined that no substantive shift in coefficients, statistical significance, or goodness-of-fit (GOF) indicators resulted, indicating that these battery items measure central latent concepts that are not sensitive to the specific questions included. In addition, four dummy variables to control for race (Whites to non-Whites), gender (males to females), age (under 40 to over 40 years), and supervisor status (compares non-supervisor/team leader to supervisor/manager/executive) were included as well as one ordinal variable for tenure (ranging from 10 years or fewer [0] to more than 20 years [2]).

For two reasons, the authors use SEM to estimate latent variables that are unobserved based on observed variables. First, Structural Equation Modeling provides a

Table 1. FEVS Survey Items.

Latent variable	Survey item	Response scale
<i>Out-of-office</i>	What percentage of your work time are you currently required to be physically present at your agency worksite (including headquarters, bureau, field offices, etc.)?	(1) 100% of my work time (2) At least 50% but less than 100% (3) Less than 50% (4) I am currently not required to be physically present at my agency worksite
	2. Please select the response that BEST describes your current remote work or teleworking schedule. [responses recoded]	(1) Chooses not to telework (2) Does not telework; required to be on site, has technical issues, or did not receive approval (3) Teleworks infrequently; ranging from as-needed up to two days a week (4) Teleworks frequently or has a remote work agreement
	3. Please select the response that BEST describes how employees in your work unit currently report to work:	(1) All employees in my work unit are physically present on the worksite (2) Some employees are physically present on the worksite and others telework or work remotely (3) No employees in my work unit are physically present on the worksite, we all work remotely
<i>Goal clarity</i>	1. I know what my work unit's goals are.	(1) Strongly disagree (2) Disagree
	2. I have a good understanding of my organization's priorities. Managers communicate the goals of the organization.	(3) Neither disagree nor agree (4) Agree (5) Strongly agree
<i>Role clarity</i>	1. I have a clear idea of how well I am doing my job.	(1) Strongly disagree (2) Disagree
	2. I know how my work relates to the agency's goals. I know what is expected of me on the job.	(3) Neither disagree nor agree (4) Agree (5) Strongly agree
<i>Work-life balance</i>	1. Employees in my work unit support my need to balance my work and personal responsibilities.	(1) Strongly disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neither disagree nor agree (4) Agree
	My supervisor supports my need to balance work and other life issues.	(5) Strongly agree
<i>Job satisfaction</i>	Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?	(1) Very dissatisfied (2) Dissatisfied
	Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?	(3) Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (4) Satisfied (5) Very satisfied

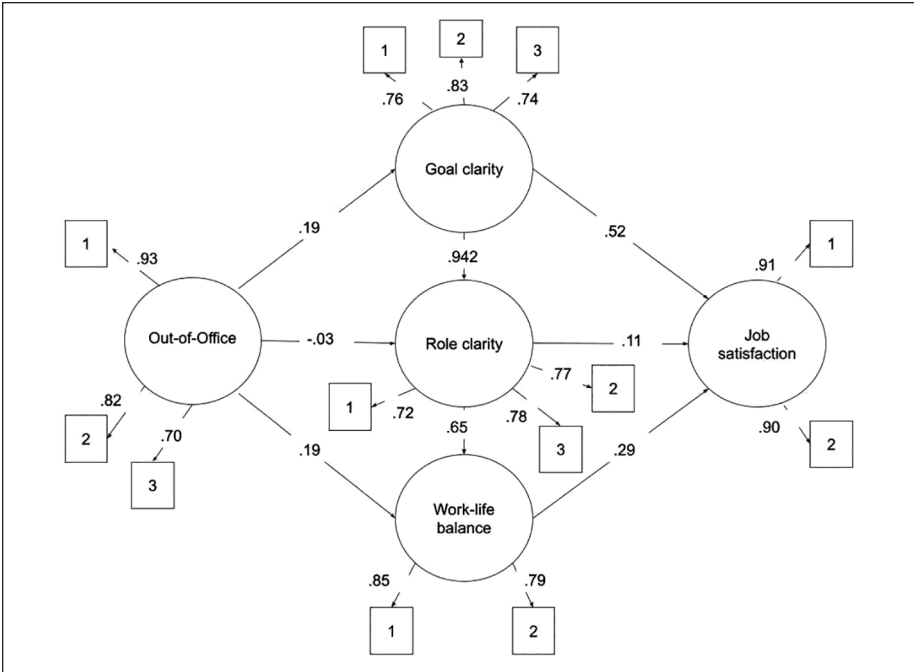


Figure 1. SEM Results for Latent Variables.
Note. Coefficients in diagram are averages of standardized coefficients across samples.

basis for making inferences about the relationships between latent variables or latent and observed variables (Coursey, 2008). In this case, constructs such as goal ambiguity may suffer from measurement error, but SEM allows us to incorporate multiple survey items to assess a single latent variable. Second, the study is concerned with multiple causal pathways between latent variables that SEM can test within a single model. GOF indicators, for reported models, are within acceptable thresholds (Hooper et al., 2008; Kline, 2015), so there is reason to be confident that the theoretical model is an accurate depiction of the observed data. Standardized coefficients are reported.

Results

Findings are displayed in Table 2 and Table 3, and Figure 1 illustrates findings based on averages across all three samples. First, employees perceive more goal clarity where out-of-office work proliferates, indicating that federal employees who are less engaged in physical office spaces are likely to better understand organizational goals (H1a). However, findings related to H1b are statistically insignificant, indicating their association is spurious. This suggests that out-of-office work has an inconsistent impact on role clarity that likely depends on other factors, such as the specific job role.

Table 2. SEM Results for Latent Variables.

Predictors	Sample 1		Sample 2		Sample 3	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
<i>Structural Model</i>						
Out-of-Office -> Goal Clarity	.162***	.031	.194***	.030	.199***	.030
Out-of-Office -> Role Clarity	-.041	.024	-.029	.025	-.012	.022
Out-of-Office -> Work-Life Balance	.207***	.027	.192***	.028	.155***	.028
Goal Clarity -> Role Clarity	.946***	.014	.928***	.015	.953***	.012
Role Clarity -> Work-Life Balance	.639***	.022	.659***	.021	.637***	.022
Goal Clarity -> Job Satisfaction	.402***	.116	.629***	.109	.522***	.141
Role Clarity -> Job Satisfaction	.221	.117	.029	.113	.091	.146
Work-Life Balance -> Job Satisfaction	.306***	.030	.269***	.032	.301***	.030
<i>Measurement Model</i>						
Out-of-Office 1	.928***	.010	.934***	.011	.931***	.011
Out-of-Office 2	.839***	.011	.819***	.013	.807***	.013
Out-of-Office 3	.716***	.015	.687***	.016	.693***	.016
Goal Clarity 1	.720***	.015	.733***	.015	.818***	.011
Goal Clarity 2	.774***	.014	.817***	.013	.903***	.012
Goal Clarity 3	.731***	.015	.743***	.014	.750***	.014
Role Clarity 1	.759***	.014	.680***	.017	.728***	.014
Role Clarity 2	.761***	.014	.755***	.014	.786***	.012
Role Clarity 3	.764***	.014	.770***	.014	.798***	.012
Work-Life Balance 1	.836***	.015	.850***	.014	.849***	.015
Work-Life Balance 2	.786***	.016	.798***	.015	.783***	.016
Job Satisfaction 1	.898***	.008	.891***	.009	.908***	.008
Job Satisfaction 2	.906***	.008	.899***	.009	.916***	.008
<i>GOF Indicators</i>						
N	1,424		1,414		1,429	
Chi2 (97)	464.22***		498.85***		481.62***	
RMSEA	.052		.054		.053	
CFI	.965		.961		.966	
TLI	.949		.943		.950	
SRMR	0.035		0.033		0.030	

*** $p < .01$. ** $p < .05$. * $p < .1$.

Table 3. Standardized Parameter Estimates for Control Variables.

Predictors	Sample 1		Sample 2		Sample 3	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
<i>Out-of-Office</i>						
Race	.0002	.028	.016	.028	−.029	.028
Gender	.184***	.027	.160***	.027	.182***	.027
Age	.075*	.031	−.015	.031	−.040	.030
Tenure	.017	.031	.065*	.031	.027	.031
Supervisor	−.101***	.028	−.114***	.028	−.098***	.028
<i>Goal Clarity</i>						
Race	.162	.030	−.042	.029	−.045	.029
Gender	−.012	.031	.063*	.030	.020	.029
Age	.030	.033	.002	.032	.026	.032
Tenure	−.007	.033	−.042	.033	−.017	.032
Supervisor	.095**	.300	.070*	.030	.092**	.029
<i>Role Clarity</i>						
Race	−.014	.021	−.009	.021	.012	.019
Gender	−.017	.021	−.002	.022	.015	.019
Age	−.023	.023	−.018	.023	.029	.021
Tenure	.012	.023	.003	.024	.013	.021
Supervisor	−.049*	.022	−.012	.022	−.046*	.019
<i>Work–Life Balance Support</i>						
Race	.036	.025	.087***	.025	−.002	.025
Gender	−.035	.026	−.031	.025	−.021	.026
Age	.031	.028	−.021	.027	−.014	.028
Tenure	−.005	.028	−.020	.028	−.059*	.028
Supervisor	−.032	.026	.006	.026	.0009	.026
<i>Job Satisfaction</i>						
Race	−.029	.019	−.043*	.032	.007	.019
Gender	.012	.019	−.034	.019	.004	.018
Age	.088***	.021	.083***	.019	.045*	.021
Tenure	−.066***	.021	−.042	.021	−.037	.021
Supervisor	−.026	.020	−.039*	.020	.008	.020

*** $p < .01$. ** $p < .05$. * $p < .1$.

It may also be that social isolation facilitates finding role clarity in some ways but not in other ways, which aligns with the dual impacts discussed above. In addition, employees perceive more support for work–life balance where out-of-office work proliferates (H1c), which is consistent with findings from other scholarship concerning telework and work–life balance (e.g., Athanasiadou & Theriou, 2021).

Second, perceived goal clarity has a strong, positive association with perceived role clarity, where federal employees perceiving clarity in their organization’s goals also perceive a clarity in their own roles (H2a). More notably, though, perceived

role clarity has a positive and strong relationship in predicting perceived support for work–life balance, indicating federal employees who have clarity in their own job roles feel more supported in seeking work–life balance (H2b). This is consistent with previous work that indicates role clarity is an important aspect of work–life balance (e.g., Omar et al., 2015).

Third, perceived goal clarity is positively associated with job satisfaction, indicating that federal employees who better understand their organizations tend to be more satisfied with their jobs (H3a). While the impacts of role clarity are directionally the same, the results are spurious (H3b). This may suggest that public servants are more tolerant of ambiguity in their individual job roles than there are in organizational goals, so they may not need to understand precisely how their actions contribute to the organization, but they do need to understand how their organizations are serving the public interest to be satisfied in their work. In addition, findings indicate that perceived support for work–life balance also increases job satisfaction (H3c). Notably, the substantive impact of goal clarity on job satisfaction is significantly higher (about 80%) than the impact of support for work–life balance, suggesting that goal clarity is the most important predictor of job satisfaction here.

Finally, demographic factors have a varied impact (see Table 3). Federal employees with supervisor status were likely to perceive higher levels of goal clarity but lower levels of role clarity. This may be because supervisors often take on an amalgamation of tasks, which gives them clarity in some ways but less so in others. In addition, those who are older are more likely to have higher job satisfaction as compared to their colleagues who are younger. Findings for other demographic factors were not consistent enough to draw conclusions. While findings surrounding key variables were consistent across samples, the varied results for demographic factors, as well as those for H1b and H3b,⁶ illustrate the importance of using multiple samples here, as the full sample likely would have led to Type 1 errors.

Discussion

Findings indicate that where out-of-office work proliferates, there is a positive impact on both perceived goal clarity and support for work–life balance. This is likely a result of disrupting social processing as employees experience different types of interactions with their colleagues, altering both the quantity and quality of social processing opportunities among co-workers. In other words, where employees are away from the office more, the white noise in organizations changes by altering information flows and processing (e.g., Taskin & Bridoux, 2010), so that employees have a clearer understanding of their work that is not obscured by irrelevant information coming from disorganized sources. In turn, employees are often left with more clarity surrounding organizational goals and with a stronger understanding of how their personal and work lives intersect, leaving them feeling connected to organizational missions and increasing job satisfaction. In essence, there is less confusion about who they are as a public servant or how their work connects to the public interest, leading to higher job satisfaction. This is particularly significant for intrinsically motivated public servants that

need to feel connected to the missions of their organizations, so they are likely more readily impacted by the underlying dynamics here than workers in the private sector. This adds further dimension to understanding how telework, remote work, or similar arrangements impact public sector organizations and employees and offers insights into potential strategies on how to best utilize these arrangements.

As indicated by previous scholarship, social processing is a key dynamic within public sector organizations that connects to worker motivation, interpersonal relationships, and job satisfaction, so the disruption of that process has important implications (e.g., Jung, 2013; Lee et al., 2024). Although there are countervailing forces for out-of-office work that both positively and negatively impact social processing, it appears that federal employees are able to strike an effective balance in their social interactions so that out-of-office work ultimately has a positive impact. Notably, these results are based on data from 2022, so there is little reason to believe that findings are a result of a novelty factor here associated with new working arrangements spurred by COVID-19. In addition, other than age and supervisory status, demographic factors did not have a significant impact here, suggesting that social processing is not reliant on a person's individual factors within the workplace. However, this finding needs further research as public administration continues to grapple with how to create inclusive workplaces and serve diverse populations (e.g., Newman et al., 2023).

There are two potential explanations for the complicated results for role clarity. The first is that the impacts of out-of-office work on role ambiguity are dependent on other factors that cannot be controlled for using FEVS data, such as specific job responsibilities, the purposes of interactions with colleagues, or personal relationships. The second is that out-of-office work has countervailing impacts. On one hand, there are social processing and identity components that contribute to a shared understanding of job roles; on the other hand, those same processes may create confusion when one's preferences are contradictory to others, particularly as co-workers put pressure on their colleagues to shift focus. If so, then out-of-office work likely alters the white noise around job roles and responsibilities in some ways but not others. This also likely means that the relationship between out-of-office work and role ambiguity is dependent on specific job functions or responsibilities. In either case, role ambiguity is more complex than organizational goal ambiguity here, so there is a need for additional work on this issue.

While role ambiguity is not directly impacted by out-of-office work nor directly impacts job satisfaction, findings indicate that it plays an important role in the causal pathway: goal clarity affects role clarity and role clarity affects work–life balance. Out-of-office work increases goal clarity by altering the white noise in organizations, leading to employees with greater role clarity; greater role clarity, then, enables employees to establish stronger boundaries between their work and personal lives. Goal clarity and work–life balance connect directly to out-of-office work and job satisfaction, while role clarity serves to connect goal clarity and work–life balance. Although the specifics of how role clarity is impacted by out-of-office work need additional research, as it is likely more complex than other factors, it is an important factor here. Notably, there is a gap in public administration scholarship surrounding

the relationship between role ambiguity and work–life balance, so these results are a novel contribution. Nevertheless, one can conclude that how individuals perceive their organizations, jobs, and work lives are important in shaping their job satisfaction, and the work environment contributes to this by creating clarity and flexibility for employees to establish careers that best align with their preferences.

For practitioners, findings here also suggest strategies to mitigate potential negative effects that out-of-office work may have on employees. Specifically, managers should be thoughtful about how to provide high-quality opportunities for social processing between employees that create clarity and do not contribute to mental exhaustion. Out-of-office working arrangements provide an opportunity to reconsider how employees engage in social processing, and when an effective balance is struck between quantity and quality, it can lead to greater job satisfaction. In other words, managers should strategize around how to create interactions between employees that buttress positive thinking and clarity about organizations, jobs, and work lives without tipping into over-processing. For instance, the impacts of alternative working arrangements on job satisfaction may best be taken advantage of if managers create opportunities for employees to collaboratively interpret and build shared understandings of organizational goals, as a supplement to more conventional messaging from organizational leadership.

Nevertheless, there are important constraints to the data and analysis, and findings should be considered with a degree of circumspection for several reasons. First, FEVS data are used to operationalize latent concepts. While this may work well for job satisfaction, FEVS items were not initially designed to capture goal or role ambiguity, so there are limitations to how well concepts are measured. For instance, work–life balance is measured as perceived support, as opposed to actual work–life balance, meaning that respondents may perceive they are being supported in achieving a work–life balance but may not believe themselves to have one. In addition, several questions concerning telework and physical engagement in the office are used to measure out-of-office work culture, but there are limitations to how well they capture the latent concept, as this was not the original intent or design of those items. However, in identifying these measures, a theoretically driven approach was used, and selection was confirmed via statistical measures, so there is reason to be confident in the research design and findings.

Second, there are likely other factors impacting job satisfaction, as well as goal or role ambiguity and work–life balance, beyond what is accounted for here. In the interest of parsimony, this study focuses on variables indicative of core theoretical concerns, but issues like trust, communication, or interpersonal relationships also play important roles (e.g., Cantarelli et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2024). In addition, personality type (i.e., introvert, extrovert), job characteristics, or job fit may impact these relationships. Further examination is recommended to provide depth to understanding under what conditions telework disrupts social processing and/or information sharing in public organizations in positive and negative ways. Finally, due to inconsistency in questions between years, findings rely on only 1 year of data that provides a snapshot during a tumultuous era and precludes multiple-year comparisons that may elicit

additional insights into these relationships. Additional research is necessary to further pin down how these dynamics have evolved (or not), particularly during recent years, to better understand whether or not these represent a new trend within public organizations.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, one can conclude that ambiguity is an important intervening factor in how out-of-office work impacts employees and organizations. Building on previous scholarship (e.g., Bae & Kim, 2016; Lee et al., 2024), this is a novel contribution to extant scholarship on both work culture, social processing, and job satisfaction in general and issues such as out-of-office work in specific. Generally speaking, working out-of-office impacts how employees make sense of their work identities via social processing, and in many cases, it likely creates clarity by altering the “white noise” that contributes to confusion around one’s job, organization, and/or work–life balance. In other words, being out-of-office likely leads employees to more clarity about their work lives, which is crucial to satisfying their intrinsic motivations for serving the public. This is likely an unintended consequence of these working arrangements, but it is an important issue to consider for managers who are concerned about the long-term impacts of a reduced physical presence in the office on organizational culture.

For many public servants, having purpose in their work is crucial to job satisfaction, morale, and performance motivation (i.e., Wright, 2001). Without mechanisms to connect the individual to the broader public service mission, administrative work in public organizations likely begins to look and feel the same as in the private sector, which is often perceived as offering stronger extrinsic motivators (e.g., higher pay; Fowler & Birdsall, 2020). Although many seeking remote work or work-from-home opportunities are likely to self-select into organizations that offer those arrangements, disrupting the social aspects of the workplace has long-term implications for employees and organizations. Thus, it is imperative that how employees interact and build culture while engaging in telework be managed carefully to both convey impressions of support and clarity around work identities. While other scholarship often treats organizational goal and role ambiguity as highly interrelated, particularly as it relates to job satisfaction, findings indicate that the social processes of understanding organizational goals likely diverge from those of understanding individual job roles. While these concepts are often studied together, findings suggest that the complexity of role ambiguity warrants further examination of its impact on issues like job satisfaction and work–life balance.

Finally, findings here suggest that public administration scholarship needs to continue to grapple with how new technologies disrupt public service organizations at a social or cultural level. While these findings suggest that the process by which employees cope with organizational goal ambiguity is altered by telework or remote work, one can surmise that similar issues are likely to arise where technology alters the qualities of social interactions within public sector organizations. This draws numerous

important questions about how to engage public servants in organizations when the connections between one's work and the public interest are not self-evident. On the other hand, it also suggests the need to understand how the competing pressures on employee's mental health, like those brought on by work-life balance, are addressed in public organizations. Certainly, COVID-19 has placed a spotlight on these issues, but other unprecedented challenges have also emerged in recent years, such as those around racial justice, climate change, and misinformation and represent new barriers to keeping public servants engaged in their work (e.g., Nowell & Stutler, 2020).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. OPM distinguishes between telework (agreements where employees report to approved worksites) and remote work (employees report alternative worksites at their discretion).
2. Target sample size was approximately 100 responses per parameter. A total of 2,000 respondents were selected, assuming missing data in 30% of responses. Sample size for models ranged from 1,414 to 1,429. Given model sophistication, this provided a modest size sample (e.g., Wolf et al., 2013) that reduces the possibility of both type 1 and type 2 errors (i.e., not too big or too small).
3. For comparison, full sample results are included in Supplemental Appendix F.
4. Stata 15's random sampling feature utilizes a probability sampling technique, in which each observation has an equal chance of selection from a larger data set.
5. Supplemental Appendix D compares out-of-office 1 and 2. In some cases, there is a mismatch between reported teleworking behaviors and time physically present in the office. While the obvious explanation is inconsistent responses, some respondents may have job duties that require being out-of-office but do not fall under telework (e.g., site visits). While SEM controls for the value of both measures when estimating latent variables, as a further robustness test, an analysis excluding these inconsistent cases was conducted, and results remained consistent.
6. For H1b and H3b, findings for random samples consistently indicate statistically insignificant results, but for the full data set, statistically significant results below the .001 level. Given the statistical power of the random samples, it is more likely that type 1 error would

occur in the full sample than type 2 error in the random samples. Thus, this difference is likely due to the larger size of the full data set, and potentially suffers from type 1 error, particularly when considered in the context of varying results of demographic factors. The authors are cautious in interpreting these findings, and err on the side of caution, assuming they cannot be generalized.

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