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Together Apart

*What happens to organizational identification when
employees are 'removed' from the office?*

By

Micheál O' Mahony

Nina Grönkvist

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Supervisor: Monika Müller

Examiner: Roland Paulsen

Abstract

- Title:** Together Apart: What happens to organizational identification when employees are ‘removed’ from the office?
- Authors:** Micheál O’ Mahony and Nina Grönkvist
- Supervisor:** Monika Müller
- Course:** BUSN49, Degree Project in Master’s Programme Managing People, Knowledge and Change, Business Administration, 15 ECTS
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- Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of how organizational identification is impacted by the involuntary shift to working from home and losing the office, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, we investigate responses used by employees to cope with the loss of the office.
- Theoretical perspective:** The theoretical framework refers to literature grounded in organizational identification and the related topics of group identification, professional identification, and organizational culture. We also outline research in relation to the workplace, the office and remote working, both with regards to the physical and socio-psychological dimensions.
- Methodology:** This study contains qualitative research in the interpretivist tradition with an abductive research approach, in the form of a single case study. The empirical data consists of 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews, two focussed interviews, as well as a fieldtrip to the office of the case company.
- Contribution:** This research contributes to literature on remote working and organizational identification by examining the symbolic role of the office in organizational and group identification during involuntarily working from home.
- Key Words:** Organizational identification, group identification, professional identification, organizational culture, office, remote work, working from home, HRM.

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Enjoy reading!

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

When we hastily packed up our laptops and stormed out of our offices, we surely expected to be back there within weeks, maybe months. In hindsight, many of us were naïve to think that our new circumstances would be temporary. Contrary to optimistic expectations of swiftly returning to normality, the COVID-19¹ pandemic has more or less forced millions of workers globally out of their offices and into their homes (Wang et al., 2021). According to Eurofund's (2020) Living, Working, and COVID-19 report, as much as 50 % of employees in its research sample had been partially or fully working from home due to the pandemic during 2020. Statistics Sweden, in their newly published report on remote working during the pandemic, found that as much as 88% of employees employed in the Information and Technology sector in Sweden, worked from home during the first quarter of 2021 (SCB, 2021).

Preparation for this new type of work arrangement had been limited, in the best of cases. Most of us were completely unprepared. Our homes, which we associated as places of relaxation and recreation, when turned into make-shift offices suddenly took on an unfamiliar hue. This drastic change in working arrangements has led us to reflect on our relationships to our workplaces and consider pervasive trends in human resource management.

In an organizational context, the dominance of the human resource management (HRM) ideology has propelled the belief that the workplace can be strategically leveraged to manage organizational culture and influence employee behaviors (Baldry & Hallier, 2010). This has been enacted through not only the use of 'hard' HRM practices, by actions like hot-desking and agile working, but also through 'soft' HRM, where conventional office spaces have been reimaged as social environments for facilitating fun and encouraging employees to bring their 'whole-selves' to work (Baldry & Hallier, 2010; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Examples of this reimaging of workplaces range from humble gaming areas and kitchens to the installation of indoor climbing walls and slides, thus reconceptualizing the office as a social playground

¹ **COVID-19** refers to the global coronavirus disease, declared a public health emergency of international concern by the world health organization (WHO) on January 30, 2020. In this thesis, the terms COVID-19, COVID-19 pandemic, corona, corona pandemic, and pandemic are used to refer to the same phenomenon. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic; <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>)

(Payton, 2015). The goal of this is to attract talent and promote the values associated with a certain organizational culture through design (Payton, 2015).

These efforts by employers to create fun and inviting places of work, correspond to a larger movement by organizations to influence how employees identify with an organization through employer branding (Edwards, 2005₁). Increasingly, organizations are tapping into their ‘unique’ organizational identities to amplify employer attractiveness and become ‘employers of choice’ by creating an aligned sense of identity between worker and the organization; expressed and highlighted as their unique organizational cultures (Frandsen, 2017; Hatch & Schultz, 2008). By applying corporate marketing ideology to HRM, organizations seek to increase levels of organizational identification and commitment, therefore contributing to organizational citizenship behaviors (Hollensen, 2003). It is this sense of identification between workers and their workplaces that piques our interest. To further understand this relationship, we draw heavily on theories of organizational identification. While organizational identification is a broad concept, it generally refers to “the degree to which a member defines him or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization” (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994, p. 239).

The COVID-19 pandemic adds a new layer to employee perceptions of organizational identification as working from home has potentially disrupted organizations’ ability to utilize the office. Restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic limiting face-to-face interactions, raise questions regarding how employees now perceive their connection to organizations to be contingent on the physical office environment. Whereas pre-pandemic, corporate discourse emphasized not just ‘*what we work as*’, but ‘*also who we work for*’ (Lievens, van Hove & Anseel, 2007), these statements are now questioned by workers who have been confined to their homes, effectively invisible. Furthermore, what was thought to be a temporary measure is seemingly becoming a permanent, or rather semi-permanent fixture in organizations (Usborne, 2020).

As such, we are interested in understanding the phenomenon of how employees’ identification with their organizations is affected now that, at least for the time being, a significant amount of the workforce is working at home. Our interest departs from research related to the office as a determinant of organizational commitment (Morrow, McElroy & Scheibe, 2012), which is more associated with turnover intentions and job satisfaction, than a perceived “one-ness or

belongingness” associated with organizational identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p.34; van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006; Edwards, 2005₂). Instead, we seek to examine how employees' organizational identification is impacted while working from home by asking the following research questions: “*How does the shift from the office to working from home impact organizational identification?*” and “*How do employees who work from home cope with the loss of the office?*”.

1.2 Rationale and Purpose of the Study

Our interest in this topic stems from our own experiences working and studying from home, and the experiences of the people close to us. During the early days of the pandemic, we felt as if our worlds became smaller, thus making us more conscious of the spaces we were inhabiting. Being confined to our homes made the lines between work, family, and leisure become indistinguishable, leading to a feeling of life becoming more intense. Thus, the initial direction of our research was grounded in theories of work-life balance and work intensification.

However, our focus gradually changed. The longer we remained physically distant from the campus, classmates, and professors made us question our sense of belongingness and affiliation to the university. In our worlds that had become so small we noted a shift in focus from experiencing events, milestones, and even weekends as a collective, to experiencing them as individuals. This was also touched upon in our empirical study, as our interviewees did not dwell on the blurring of lines between private life and work, but rather instead focused on what the physical distance did to their connection to the organization.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has been omnipresent in personal and professional lives for over a year now, framing any research in its context is not only timely, but also contributes to the body of organizational research that examines the effects the pandemic has had, and is having, on organizational life. In addition, it may guide organizations in their efforts to support employees in navigating their ‘new normal’; adjusting to new work dynamics and maintaining overall health and well-being (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

2 Literature Review

To study the phenomenon of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacts organizational identification due to the transition from working at offices to working from home, we firstly need to establish a grounding in relevant, existing literature on organizational identification and some of its relevant connected concepts, such as group identification and organizational culture. In addition, an understanding of knowledge workers' workplaces, both pre- and mid-pandemic needs to be established to be able to answer our research question about how employees cope with the loss of the office during the pandemic-induced remote working. These theoretical frameworks guide our understanding and interpretation of the empirical data collected during our interviews with employees at Element in Malmö, Sweden. This theoretical grounding also enables us to see how our empirical findings contribute to research in general, and how it might help organizations understand their struggle with and help them adapt to the large-scale working from home practices.

2.1 Organizational Identification

Below, we present the theoretical backbone to organizational identification as follows: Firstly, we briefly touch upon organizational identity as a way of historically anchoring organizational identification. The following deeper discussion of existing conceptualizations of organizational identification illustrates our theoretical understanding of the concept. We subsequently introduce group identification with a focus on workgroups, teams, and professions. Finally, we link in organizational culture and its conceptualization in relation to organizational identification.

Organizational identity is a broad and well-researched topic, and it has been conceptualized in numerous ways. We draw upon its conceptualization in the social constructionist perspective, which suggests that individuals construct a collective organizational identity from shared meanings that seek to answer the question “*who are we as an organization?*” (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Corely & Gioia, 2004; Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000). Early conceptions of organizational identification refer to Foote’s (1951) argument that individuals identify themselves as members of groups to make sense of the world around them. This theory applies to an organizational context to suggest that categorizations of self as a member of an organization serve to motivate pro-organizational behaviors (Edwards, 2005₂). In this sense,

Foote's (1951) focus on group membership and identification signals the way for interest in the topic of social identity theory and its application to organizational identification. Social identity theory suggests that an individual's self-concept is derived from their interactions with social groups (Tajfel, 1982). These social identifications are derived from two cognitive processes; self-categorization and social comparison (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1985).

Academic interest in organizational identification stems from its role as a way of viewing and predicting key attitudes and behaviors in the workplace (Edwards, 2005₂). Organizational identification's importance is highlighted due to the fragmented and globalized nature of work, which requires organizations to attempt to occupy the cognitive realm by residing within the hearts and the minds of their members by emphasizing the importance of identity (Ashforth & Sluss, 2008). Despite organizational identification being subject to a number of debated and contentious conceptualizations (Edwards, 2005₂), on a fundamental level organizational identification can be described as "*the degree to which a member defines him or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization*" (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994, p. 239). In other words, it can be seen as a psychological state describing the strength of the bond between employee and organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Edwards, 2005₂).

We draw attention to Cheney & Tompkins (1987), who highlight the role of language and communication in the construction of organizational identification. As they consider organizational identification as the process of appropriating identity to mirror an individual or group, organizational identification is, as such, simultaneously a process and an outcome in itself (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987).

There has been much debate regarding organizational identification's conceptualization as a cognitive construct, concerning the individual as the locus of identification where their values align with that of the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Elsbach, 1999). Van Dick (2004) attempts to widen the threshold by capturing the affective, cognitive, evaluative and behavioral components of organizational identification. Harquail (1998)'s conceptualization of organizational identification also moves beyond the cognitive aspects of organizational identification to include the affective elements, stating that identification "engages more than our cognitive self-categorization and our brains, it engages our hearts" (p222.). Adding to the cognitive aspects of organizational identification Harquail & King (2010) argue that there is a physical component to organizational identification through

the embodied cognition perspective; through bodily experiences, a point also supported by van Dick et al. (2004) and conceptualized as an action component, as well as by Cheney & Tompkins (1987) and conceptualized as participation.

In relation to outcomes of organizational identification a high degree of organizational identification is said to have positive individual and organizational effects, such as greater job satisfaction, motivation, improved information sharing, as well as loyalty to the organization (Elsbach, 1999; Harrison & Corley, 2008; Riketta, 2005). At the other end of the spectrum, in times of externally or internally induced crisis, identity conflict or organizational disidentification might arise (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Elsbach, 1999; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Pratt, M. 2000). This type of negative identification hints at a “cognitive separation between one’s identity and the organization’s identity” (p. 393) and implies behavioral responses by employees, such as resistance to the conflict creating sources (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

2.1.1 Group Identification

The concept of *group identification* is introduced here to distinguish identification with particular groups or sub-groups in organizations, such as teams, project groups, networks of specialists, and professions from overall organizational identification. Understanding these concepts is important for us to explain the impact of the shift to remote working on organizational identification, as employees on a day-to-day basis do their actual work in these sub-groups.

Ashforth, Harrison & Corley (2008) suggest that in organizations multiple sub-group identifications occur simultaneously, with Sluss & Ashforth (2008) adding that these multiple identifications with groups influence the overall degree of organizational identification. Thus, employees might view the organization through the prism of their group relationships and identifications (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008). One such sub-group are *teams*. Working in teams has increased over the past 20 years and is these days considered a key approach to organizing work, stressing the relative importance of relationships within these teams for *team identification* (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Ashforth, Moser & Bubbenzer, 2020; van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005).

Literature also distinguishes *professional identification*, which refers to the extent to which an individual internalizes and enacts the values, goals, and beliefs associated with a particular profession (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Ashforth et al., 2013), from other types of group identification. Professionals have a high-level of expertise, regulation, a sense of status, and belief that their work contributes to society (van Maanen & Barley, 1984). In this sense, the definition of ‘professional’ is closely aligned to that of a ‘knowledge worker’ (Alvesson, 2001). Research also indicates that individuals with strongly defined professions internalize the values associated with their profession rather than those espoused by their organizations (Schein, 1996). Likewise, an association that an individual has with a profession is more enduring than an association with a particular organization (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Pratt, Rockman, & Kaufmann, 2006).

Ashforth & Johnson’s (2001) work on nested identities illustrates that within organizations there exists a cross-section of multiple identities, ranging from the high-level, abstract, and distant such as to the lower-level, concrete, and proximate. They differentiate these by classifying them as *high-order* and *low-order identifications* where profession, job, and workgroup are viewed as lower order identifications. Low-order identifications are considered to be relatively inexorable and less subject to change as they happen within a context cognitively and physically close to the individual, as opposed to being at a wider organizational level (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). Ashforth, Moser & Bubenzer (2020) add that these lower-level identifications correspond to, or imply, an external focus of identification, where one identifies with things related to, yet outside of, the high-level, abstract scope of the organization, e.g., one's profession, projects, or roles.

2.1.2 Organizational Culture

A much related, yet distinct, concept to organizational identification is that of organizational culture, as it weaves together collective sensemaking of what the organization is with individual identification (Hatch & Schultz, 1997; He & Brown, 2013). Pettigrew (1979), Schein (1985), and Hatch (1993) some 30-40 years ago, highlighted organizational cultures foremost as evolving systems of language, artifacts, and symbols where meaning is created, and sense is made around these systems that create common values. In this line of reasoning, an organization's culture is something that the organization *is* rather than something it *has*. Hatch & Schultz (1997) link organizational culture and organizational identity by describing

culture as the “context within which interpretations of organizational identity are formed” (p. 357). Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail (1994) make the consecutive link of culture to organizational identification as the degree of connectedness an employee perceives to share with the organization (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). In this manner, if culture is defined as “the way we do things around here” (Deal & Kennedy, 1983, p.501), then the office can be considered to be the place where culture ‘happens’.

On a less broad level, Asatiani et al. (2020) point at the importance of distinguishing symbolic and pragmatic cultural components, where the former refers to the explicit declared values, symbols and the later to the implicit behavioral aspects, such as the daily socialization of colleagues. In relation to remote working, the authors highlight that the symbolic aspects might be simpler to transfer to a remote working set-up, whereas the pragmatic aspects might not as easily translate to the physically distant format, and that as a result, “the frequent absence of face-to-face socialisation in virtual organisations could [...] weaken the connection between the symbolic and pragmatic side of organisational culture” (Asatiani et. al., 2020, p.63).

Taking an interpretive stance and a communication perspective, organizational culture is expressed and communicated through language, symbols, beliefs, rituals, and myths (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; He & Brown, 2013; Walker, 2021). In corporate marketing literature, organizational culture has often been conceptualized as ‘glue’, holding the organization together (Dowling, G, 1993). While this conceptualization is criticized as being overly simplistic (Hatch & Schultz, 1997), we find that its metaphorical image makes it easy to grasp, even outside of academic research.

Conceptualizing organizational identification as the degree of affiliation that individuals perceive with their organization’s culture sheds light on why we perceive organizational culture to be of great relevance for our research (He & Brown, 2013; Walker, 2021). In particular, the notion of crisis-induced organizational culture change needs to be considered when discussing the impact of the sudden shift to working from home has had on organizational identification (Spicer, 2020). With the premise of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting non-voluntary working from home, Spicer (2020), as well as Kniffin et al. (2021) suggest that further research into the link of culture and identity/identification is needed, with the novel angle of entire organizations having transitioned to remote working.

2.2 Workplace

In this next part of the literature review, we introduce the concept of workplaces, in order to be able to understand how shifting from the office to working from home has influenced the perception of the different work environments. Firstly, we look at the office, the typical pre-pandemic workplace of knowledge workers. Following this, we introduce remote working, both pre-pandemic and how it differs now during the pandemic, when employees are working from home.

Tuan (1974) suggests that a building without the people is merely a location. As such, it is through social interactions and associations that the people transform buildings from objective vessels to containers of subjective meanings (Hills & Levy, 2014). To clarify, we define the workspace as the physical characteristics of a specific area, designated for the purposes of work (Vischer, 2006; Hills & Levy, 2014). In contrast, workplace has broader connotations denoting the organization as a whole. In this regard, we consider the *workplace* to refer to the organization as a whole, while the *workspace* refers to a localized area within a building that is used for work.

2.2.1 The Office

First, we explore the centrality of the office in organizational life, and the integral role that it plays as a facilitator of meaning. In the process of sensemaking, metaphors provide cognitive frames of reference that aid in the construction of meaning (Weick, 1995; Cornelissen et al., 2008). In organizational discourse, metaphors act by selecting meanings and highlight the most salient aspect. The root metaphor is a prominent tool in organizational discourse, which consists of symbolically framing a base meaning to be used to ascertain a specific point of view (Levinson, 1983). In this manner, a root metaphor acts as a frame of reference for meaning.

Drawing on the concept of the office as a root metaphor, the modern office is built not only from bricks and mortar but is also constructed out of collective symbolic meanings (Baldry, Bain & Taylor, 1997). When filled with meaning, offices become more than empty vessels and contribute to collective action (Blagoev, Costas & Kärreman, 2019). As the office is synonymous with professionalism, white-collar, and knowledge-work, it acts as an anchor grounding workers and providing them with an image of who they are (Baldry, Bain & Taylor, 1997; Zalensy & Farace, 1987). Individuals form attachments to spaces based on a space's

associations to relationships, social norms, and values, as well as meanings and symbolic possibilities (Hauge, 2007; Brown & Humphreys, 2006). This sentimentality and attachment to the office space is further reinforced by a media-portrayal of the office as a representation of corporate life, where the office space acts as both a setting and an actor in the dramatization and satire of organizations (Birthisel & Martin, 2013).

Critical literature examines workplace architecture as structures that represent control of capital, raw material, and social resources, and that drive the reproduction of social norms (Baldry, 1999; Foucault, 1977; Markus, 1993). In this sense, if we define HRM as the management of a company's social resources, then the office can be seen as a 'social factory', inherently tied to the control of people (Markus 1993; Lepak & Snell, 1999).

More recently, critical interest in office space relates to the way in which office design merges private and personal domains by emulating aspects of private dwellings, such as inviting kitchen spaces and comfortable lounge areas (Baldry & Hallier 2010; Burrell & Dale, 2003; Fleming & Spicer, 2004). This appropriation of the private domain by corporate entities corresponds to a larger movement towards the neo-liberalization of the workplace (Haslam, 2007). Organizations are increasingly applying office design to increase organizational identification by creating spaces with a domestic aura, which seek to erode the boundaries between work and private life (Burrell & Dale, 2003; Baldry & Barnes, 2012).

The unification of the office as both a place of comfort and an extension of the corporation corresponds to the concept of neo-normative control (Ekman, 2013), where workers are encouraged to bring their 'whole-selves' to work to promote organizational identification. This has seen organizations increasingly move to attempt to incorporate 'fun' aspects of private life into the office (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). However, in the context of remote working due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the modern office is now temporarily left derelict, effectively collapsing attempts by organizations to promote this form of neo-liberal propelled identification and distorting the frame of reference for workers as the office as a 'home away from home'.

2.2.2 Remote Working

2.2.2.1 Pre-pandemic Remote Working

Remote working is not a new phenomenon in organizational life, research, and theory. Classically termed telework or telecommuting (Ellison, 1999; Tietze, Musson & Scurry, 2009), with a focus on working from a designated home office, in recent pre-pandemic times, it includes a newer focus on working from *anywhere* (Koslowski, Linehan & Tietze, 2019; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 2001). Spatial boundaries in post-Taylorist offices are removed in the name of flexibility in hopes of maximizing efficiency and output (Tietze, Musson & Scurry, 2009; Höge, 2019). In a modern corporate world of digital transformation, the natural boundaries of the physical office space are re-imagined as boundary-free global communication, free Wi-Fi, and virtual teamwork (Sheppard, 2020), leading to the popular depiction of the phenomenon as *virtual working* (Asatiani et al., 2020; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 2001).

However, remote working is generally portrayed as a mixed blessing, where increased flexibility, performance, autonomy, and commitment to the organization is foiled by blurred lines between work and private lives, more work, isolation, and loneliness, with negative consequences on well-being and health (Biron & van Veldhoven, 2016; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Despite this, employees are prepared to make these sacrifices for the benefit of the employer in exchange for the increased flexibility provided by the remote working arrangement, as suggested by social exchange theory (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010).

2.2.2.2 Working from Home during the COVID-19 pandemic

The transition to remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic has in most cases not been voluntary but imposed on employees by local health authorities and governments. Working remotely during the pandemic therefore differs somewhat from the above mentioned flexible, re-imagined working-from-anywhere concept. Instead, it means that globally millions of employees have set up (temporary) workspaces in their homes to minimize physical contact with people outside their families or households (Eurofund, 2020).

As mentioned, terminology for remote working in general varies with subtle differences (Tietze, Musson & Scurry, 2009; Tietze 2005). For the purpose of our research the term

working from home fits best as it gives a clear indication to the spatial sphere of the workplace, the home, while simultaneously explicitly delimiting from the ‘old normal’ workplace, the office. Working from home is the ‘new normal’ for knowledge workers traditionally tied to the office, and it challenges the traditional cultural boundaries of capitalist societies - work and home (Tietze, Musson & Surry, 2009). Working from home is a more emotionally laden concept than the more neutral term remote working, as it combines two of our major spheres of identity, work, and home.

Understanding the effects, the shift to working from home has had on individuals, is necessary to be able to understand the effects it has had on organizations. In the best of cases, employees had a dedicated room at home to be transformed into a home office. Most people however set up their computers at their kitchen tables, in living rooms, or on make-shift desks in their bedrooms. They might be sharing a space with their also working from home partners, flat-mates, or home-schooling kids, indicating that working from home is not controllable and static, but a rather fluidly changing concept around negotiating boundaries (Koslowski, Linehan & Tietze, 2019). The home, a personal place and space of comfort to be yourself in, has overnight been invaded by office equipment and the eyes of colleagues, managers, and customers, potentially scrutinizing one’s wall art and furniture choices. As individuals form attachments to spaces based on a space’s associations to relationships, values, meanings, and symbolic possibilities (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Hauge, 2007), the safe haven of privacy is compromised and turned into a public workspace.

In addition to these physical dimensions of working from home during the pandemic, the effects of the socio-psychological factors of physical isolation and loneliness need to be considered, especially as this pandemic now has been going on for over one year, without clear indication on when things will ‘get back to normal’ (Bartel, Wrzesniewski & Wiesenfeld, 2012). Defined as involuntarily not being co-located with your colleagues, isolation impacts negatively on feeling connected to your organization (Bartel, Wrzesniewski & Wiesenfeld, 2012). Loneliness and social isolation, already a pandemic in itself prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, worsens the burden of stress for employees, with often far-reaching effects on mental and physical health, as well as equality (van Bavel et al., 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020). These individual effects, when added up for all employees working from home might imply considerable impacts on an organizational level as well.

The long-term societal effects of the vast number of employees working virtually in their homes is to be seen, yet the increased dependency on information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been previously linked to individually negative cognitive reactions such as stress and anxiety (Leung & Zhang, 2016). While ICTs might help overcome the physical distance to your colleagues, managers, customer, and organizations as a whole, they hardly bridge the socio-psychological distance that might be experienced in the home office (Bradner & Mark, 2002; Metiu, 2006; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 2001). The long-term impact of the pandemic-induced acceleration of digital technology use for collaboration and communication has yet to be evaluated, but is depicted as one major effect of the large transition to working from home (Ashforth, Moser & Bubbenzer, 2020; Gigauri, 2020).

2.3 Research Questions

With this theoretical grounding of the relevant concepts around organizational identification and employee workplaces, as well as the framing of our research in the context of the crisis that is the global COVID-19 pandemic, we started to question if not employees' conceptualizations of their organizational 'we' is affected by the fact that the group of people that make up the 'we' have not physically met for over a year. In fact, previous theoretical conceptualizations, and linkages of organizational identification and remote working never included a crisis-induced, large-scale, over-night shift of entire office workforces leaving the office, their place of work and home of the 'office family'. Literature on remote working has focused on the voluntary aspect of employees gaining flexibility amongst other things, for offering up their home spheres to their employers, as explained by social exchange theory.

It is this lack of previous theoretical research, combined with fact that we, the researchers very much find ourselves in the middle of this possibly large paradigm shift, that we created the below research questions:

Research Question 1: *How does the shift from the office to working from home impact organizational identification?*

Research Question 2: *How do employees who work from home cope with the loss of the office?*

We chose to ask both questions, as they are very much related, yet highlight the phenomenon from two distinct perspectives. The first question looks at the *effect* that the shift to working

from home and leaving the office has had, whereas the second question looks at employees cognitive and behavioral *responses* to that effect. In that sense, we hope to find not only an explanation of the phenomenon but also to provide an illustration of the resulting actions, which might help organizations to both understand and adapt to the current situation. And the need for adaptation to this new normal seems to be inevitable, as working from home might very well be here to stay, one way or another.

2.4 Research Outline

With the intention of answering the above research questions, the outline of our research looks as follows: The *methodology* section introduces our research approach, case organization, as well as describes how we conducted the research and subsequent data analysis. The *empirical findings* section then elaborates the themes we identified, derived from our empirical data collected at our case organization. The *discussion* section links our findings to existing theoretical conceptualizations of organizational identification and remote working, and in addition expands the view to include new angles and theoretical connections, that our findings indicate regarding working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the *conclusion*, we then elaborate on the theoretical contributions and practical implications of our study and provide suggestions for further research.

3 Methodology

Below we present the research methods that have inspired our empirical research, including our philosophical grounding and approach to the study. After that we introduce our case organization, Element, followed by a description of how we collected and analyzed our data. We also present our take and application of reflexivity, which has largely influenced the direction our entire research has taken, as well as some limitations of the research.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

The purpose of our study is to examine how working from home involuntarily impacts employees' perceptions of organizational identification. We aim to approach this question by drawing on the subjective meanings that employees attach to the office. By exploring the office as the lens through which employees understand and create meaning in times of change, we hope to gain an understanding of how working from home affects the phenomenon of organizational identification. Moreover, as organizational identification is derived from a collection of individual and collective subjective interpretations of meaning, our approach is grounded in the philosophy of interpretivism, which emphasizes the role of subjective meanings in the construction of reality (Prasad, 2018).

We have been primarily influenced by the interpretivist tradition of symbolic interactionism to examine employee perceptions of how the office functions, not only as a physical work environment, but also acts as a 'symbolic realm'. (Prasad, 2018). In line with Pfeffer (1981) we pay close attention to the symbolic properties of organizational life, viewing the office as the epicenter of symbolic attachment. As symbolic interactionism is concerned with individual, subjective experiences that shape meanings, language is effectively a building block of social reality (Prasad, 2018; Fine, 1992). Corresponding to symbolic interactionism's focus on role-taking and identifications in a variety of social situations, we initiated conversations, which prompted interviewees to reflect on *how* they perceived working from home to differ from the office rather than *what* they were doing. As such, we identified markers in language and critical events that positioned the office as a meaning maker.

3.2 Research Approach

Qualitative research methods provided us with the tools to investigate the social interactions, processes, and meanings behind phenomena in their natural environment (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Our study seeks to emphasize the social and interpretive dimensions and uses qualitative methods to explore the office as a social world of employees. In this fashion, we seek to depart from studies that focus on how the ergonomic and physical variables of the office, such as lighting and sound, may impact organizational identification, which may favor a more quantitative approach.

As discussed previously, our research is inspired by the epistemological approach of interpretivism. Central to interpretivism is the concept of *verstehen*, which stresses understanding human behaviors rather than attributing explanations to them (Weber, 1947; Bryman & Bell, 2011). Although explanation too is required, it is employed in a casual sense regarding the role it plays in the “interpretive understanding of social action” (Weber, 1947 p.88; Bryman & Bell, 2011). The *verstehen* approach anchors our research in perceiving the social world of employees and understanding meanings that employees attribute to the office, as well as these meanings’ roles in organizational identification.

Specifically, our approach is of abductive nature, meaning that it includes both inductive and deductive elements. Using this type of approach not only provides us with the benefits of generating theory from research (induction) and vice versa (deduction), but specifically lies in the synergistic effect of continuous re-interpretation, while and through considering each other (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Alvesson & Kärreman (2007) add the importance of dialogue and language in this approach, underlining the above-mentioned notion of *verstehen* in interpretation. Using an abductive approach was therefore most suitable and straight-forward, as it enabled us to gain an understanding of existing theory prior to collecting the empirical material, as well as expand our theoretical understanding through additional relevant theoretical concepts throughout the empirical study, and ultimately add to theoretical conceptualization after our data collection, during the analysis and discussion.

Designing our research around a single, typical case had not only the benefit of being achievable in the given time frame, but also allowed us to dig deeper and focus on the various participants of the case organization as compared to creating a study of and compare multiple

case organizations (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). We deemed the fact that our interviewees all had the same frame of reference regarding the company specific working from home policy, as well as organizational culture, and reference of pre-pandemic office as particularly important, given the novelty of the phenomenon and the expected change to working practices of our interviewees.

3.3 Research Context - Introducing Element

Before describing in detail how we collected our empirical data we feel it is important to introduce our case company, Element, to provide some much-needed context for our empirical study. ‘Element’ is a pseudonym, used to ensure complete anonymity of the company as such, and the individual study participants employed by Element.

Element is a digital interaction agency in Malmö, Sweden, with satellite offices in two other cities in Sweden, employing around 100 knowledge workers. Element has a flat organizational structure with only few layers of leadership. It employs for the most part, software developers, designers, project managers and support staff such as Human Resources (HR) functions and Finance. Element employees use agile working practices for many of their software development and design projects. Having satellite offices, as well as customers all over the world, Element employees had been somewhat used to working ‘physically separated’ from some of their colleagues and customers, even pre-pandemic. Element prides itself on its strong interpersonal connections and focus on creating value for customers through their culture based on togetherness and collaboration.

We approached Element primarily because of our focus on knowledge workers, as it seemed that globally it is primarily these employees, who shifted to working from home. Choosing a company that is well used to, and had already established, digital collaboration tools and processes, without an initial struggle around pandemic-induced digital transformation, was important for us. We did not want our research focus to land on the technical struggle of making working virtually from home function, but instead on the individual and overall perceived impact of the shift to working from home.

Contacting Element was straightforward, as a personal contact of one of us researchers works there as a designer, and he suggested that we establish contact with Carolina at the HR

department, since he knew that Element frequently participated as case company in academic research. We made our first contact to Carolina via email, introducing ourselves, our research topic, and disclosing that one of us researchers was related to one of the Element employees. We quickly booked a personal introductory Zoom² meeting with Carolina, during which we elaborated on our intended research topic and approach, and what our requirements from Element would be. During the meeting, Carolina provided us with a timeline of how the transition to working from home had played out at Element. She further explained Element's working-from-home policy and mentioned that emails had continuously been distributed to employees informing about Element's approach to working from home in line with Swedish COVID-19 restrictions. The overall approach communicated to employees was, and is to this day, to work from home whenever possible, but that the office would remain open for those employees who do not have the opportunity to work from home.

It was also during the initial meeting that we discussed and collectively decided that the personal relationship of one of the researchers to one of the Element employees would not impact the research, as it would not create a conflict of interest, since we would anonymize all research participants and keep all contact with them purely on a one-to-one basis. We further decided that the personal contact at Element would explicitly be excluded as research interviewee. Once we had agreed upon and officialized our cooperation with Element, we signed Element's non-disclosure agreements (NDA), a standard for partners working with Element.

3.4 Data Collection

As collected empirical data is the raw material on which all our findings are based, it is important to disclose the process of obtaining the raw material (Styhre, 2013). Our empirical data was collected through two separate, yet parallel steps in connection with Element. Firstly, we conducted 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews. Following these, we conducted two additional, more focused interviews. Secondly, we went on a field trip to the Element office, during which we were given a tour by Carolina.

² **Zoom** provides videotelephony and online chat services through a cloud-based peer-to-peer software platform and is used for teleconferencing, telecommuting, distance education, and social relations. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoom_Video_Communications)

3.4.1 Interviews with the field

Early on in our research, in line with the interpretivist tradition and abductive aspects of our research, we decided upon conducting semi-structured interviews to encourage open dialogue with each individual interviewee, so that we could “obtain descriptions of the lifeworld of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale, 1996, p. 6). With a focus on exploring rather than questioning the field, we hoped to “get a better understanding of the social worlds we study” (Charmaz, 2006, p.10) and not just looking for answers to the questions we formulated at the outset (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 34).

3.4.1.1 Sampling

As an initial step in preparation for the interviews, we needed to find a sample of relevant interviewees. Through purposeful sampling, meaning that the research sample is selected with the goal of being able to answer the research questions with the help of the empirical material (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Hood 2007) we hoped to achieve just that. To be purposeful, we needed to set criteria that would result in a group of interviewees relevant for our study. The following criteria were set: interviewees needed to have transitioned to working from home and previously worked at the Malmö office or at one of the satellite offices. As we were interested in the impact of the transition to the home sphere, we were looking for employees with potentially varying personal life-constellations at home, e.g., families, partnerships, or single households. Lastly, we set the criteria of professions or job description. To get a varied view, we wanted all major job roles at Element be represented, i.e., software developers, designers, project managers, support functions such as HR and Finance, as well as leadership.

Once we had established these criteria, Carolina suggested making a first selection for us, and approaching potential interviewees who fitted our criteria. We appreciated her suggestion, being aware that by her selecting who might be good candidates, we would diverge from randomly selecting participants based on our criteria, to a form of snowball sampling, with the risk of her selection introducing bias towards or away from certain potential interviewees (Bryman & Bell, 2019; Hood, 2007). Once we were presented Carolina's suggestion of 30 potential interviewees, we then had a free hand to contact each of them to introduce ourselves and book virtual meetings for the actual interviews (see Appendix 1 for list of interviewees).

3.4.1.2 Semi-structured Interviews

As mentioned, we aimed to conduct the interviews in the form of conversations with the interviewees for the purpose of creating an open dialogue. However, as Kvale (1996) highlights, an interview conversation has a structure and a purpose, and it is the researcher who controls the situation through guiding the conversation and through follow-up questions. Thus, we prepared an interview guide (see Appendix 2), to help us keep a structure to the conversation and not miss out on asking important questions, yet focused on letting the interviewees elaborate whenever we felt they deemed certain aspects of their answers as particularly important.

By letting them describe their lifeworlds in detail, the interviewees facilitated our work of ‘distilling, categorizing and interpreting’ the meanings of what is being said (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Therefore, analysis occurred to a large degree already during the interviews, as interpretation of findings started in the data collection phase (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). As we recorded each interview, we did not routinely take additional notes during the interviews, but instead had both researchers focus on facilitating the conversation. At the end of each interview, we reiterated that the interviewees' answers might be used in our research paper but assured them their complete anonymity.

3.4.2 Fieldtrip to the Element office

In addition to, and chronologically after, the semi-structured interviews described above, we went on a field trip to the Element office in Malmö. It was of great importance to us to see with our own eyes and experience first-hand the physical dimension of the office that we heard so much about in almost every interview. At the office, we met Carolina in person, who gave us the grand tour of the office and showed us some of the particularities of the space, such as the glass walls, roof terrace, and the kitchen area. The field trip helped us greatly to put a new perspective on the interviewees’ descriptions of the office. ‘Seeing is believing’ after all.

It is worth mentioning that, indicative of the times we live in, the office was almost empty of people, and it appeared very much ‘on hold’, just waiting for staff to return. The atmosphere was more like that of a doctor’s office or hotel corridor than the former bustling, creative hub that was described to us in the interviews. Despite there being only a small fraction of employees on site, the fruit-bowls in the kitchen areas were fully stacked, giving the impression

that a large group of employees might just come out of a meeting room grabbing a piece of fruit before continuing their workday. Although a few employees were scattered amongst the office space, most areas were vacant and completely barren. Almost like when a relative moves out, the office was shrine-like, as if it was stuck in time. This was reinforced by its immaculate appearance. Even though it had been months since the office was fully in use, cleaning staff were still employed to service it as per pre-pandemic.

3.5 Reflexivity and Limitations

Before moving on to presenting our empirical findings, a short mention of reflexivity is in place to illustrate the true abductive nature of our research and give account of the impact the content of the empirical evidence has had on our research.

The value of reflexivity in qualitative research derives from researchers leveraging an awareness of a researcher's role in practicing research to add a richer, more nuanced understanding to their work (Berger, 2015; Symon & Cassell, 2012). In this sense, engaging in reflexivity requires moving beyond mere reflection, and requires researchers to question and reevaluate their assumptions, heuristics, and actions (Symon & Cassell, 2012). While Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2018) identify reflection as a dimension of reflexivity in conducting qualitative research, they argue that the interplay of reflection *and* interpretation leads to reflexivity. Firstly, with regard to interpretation, researchers must acknowledge that any readings of findings do not stem from one 'universal truth' but rather they are extracted relative to the contexts of the researcher themselves. Secondly, by paying close attention to the elements of the research tradition that the researcher is inspired by, they engage in a meta-interpretation of the data itself (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). The contributions that reflexivity is said to add to qualitative research led us to consciously apply it to our research and in this way, might be credited with helping us overcome the possible limitation of the non-generalizability of findings that might occur in studies of single case organizations (Prasad, 2018).

Moreover, we engaged in reflexivity when reevaluating our research direction by questioning the assumptions about the shift to remote working, which were clouded by our own experiences with working from home. We had first approached our research question with regard to work intensification and the juggling of the work and home spheres. However, engaging in reflective thinking required us to reconsider our approach based on the diverse experiences of our

interviewees, which existed parallel to our own. As we will elaborate on further in our discussion, employees' overwhelming assertion of the existence of a 'social glue' during the early interviews caused us to re-evaluate our direction. Consequently, we let the data dictate our research rather than appeal to our own assumptions, in line with our abductive research approach. Applying reflexively prompted us to trust the strengths of the two-way, conversational nature of the semi-structured interview.

Reflecting over the interviews has us also acknowledge some limitations linked to them specifically. The digital format of the interviews deprived us of valuable personal interaction. It is of course a symptom of the COVID-19 pandemic that we could not meet the interviewees physically at the Element office. Interpretation of the interviewees' body language, mimic and appearance that might have played a role for our analysis was thus largely restricted to the image and sound in the video frame. In addition, using digital tools to facilitate a conversation comes at the risk of these tools not cooperating to the fullest. We had a few problems with shaky internet connections, as well as sound and recording problems, but pragmatically overcame those. Sitting in the 'same boat' as our interviewees somehow created a feeling of togetherness and 'making the best of it' together. Finally, using English as the language of the interview, which is not the native language of the interviewees nor one of the researchers, possibly deprived us of valuable nuances in descriptions. However, applying universally acknowledged humor and the aforementioned 'making the best of it' attitude compensated for potential language barriers.

Isolated from friends, family and working from home, unable to attend our places of work and university, we found that our personal experiences of the pandemic mirrored those of our interviewees, after all we were all 'in the same boat'. Thus, we leveraged our own personal experiences of working from home to bring a level of empathy and understanding of their unique, and sometimes challenging situations, to our interviews. We felt it was important to respect and acknowledge the gravity of the pandemic, so that we could also encourage open responses from our interviewees, many of whom had been so caught-up in their family lives that they had not been given the opportunity to tell their stories. This awareness of reflexivity imprinted on our interviews where we see in our data that in the moments of silence, between questions and in pauses, interviewees themselves acted reflexively by consciously reflecting on and interpreting their own experiences.

3.6 Data Analysis

Following our interviews, during which we, as mentioned, already applied the ‘distilling, categorizing and interpreting’ approach advocated by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018), to continue our analysis, we compiled transcripts of each interview recording, for the purpose of assisting sorting and coding of the raw data. Corresponding to Kvale & Brinkmann’s (2015) comments on interpretation, we sought to uncover the deeper meanings and structures behind the transcribed texts.

In line with Gubrium & Holstein (1997), utilizing the data that we transcribed from the interviews, we began sorting and identifying which topics were discussed (the *what's*). In addition, we also paid particular attention to *how* the information was communicated by our interviewees. For that we consulted our recorded videos, and here, everything from body language to humor and digital appearance was scrutinized. We shifted back and forth between the transcribed text and the video material to detect markers and accordingly code these, such as tone of voice and points of emphasis that related to specific text pieces, and that were not immediately recognizable from our transcribed text. We thus took Gubrium & Holstein’s (1997) argument to heart, calling for a shifting between “substantive resources and constitutive activities” to conduct an interpretative analysis (p. 119). Sorting and coding our data in this way helped us structuring our body of raw material and paved the way for finding deeper meanings in the data, i.e., the interpretation of the data.

As a first step after sorting the data, we performed a categorical reduction, which involved purposefully highlighting certain categories at the expense of those that hold less theoretical significance (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This allowed us to pragmatically and selectively reduce the themes and categories, which we considered to fall outside of the scope of our research (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). At this stage of the analysis, we engaged in many fruitful discussions, guiding the aforementioned reflexivity, which ultimately led us to change the focus of our research.

Our open minds and the abductive nature of our approach meant that letting the data steer where our research was going at this point, was both exciting and challenging at once. A new focus on the impact of the shift to working from home on organizational identification emerged. Although we had identified several themes related to the extensive topic of remote working,

the office, and feeling disconnected, we stringently continued to reduce our data to identify the main themes that not only support our research questions with empirical findings but that are related in such a way as to create a relevant and contributing story and add insights to organizational research in general.

The three main themes we identified are '*Element's social glue*', '*Bringing the Element office home*', and '*Escaping reality*'. The first theme, '*Element's social glue*' was an easily identified theme, as the social glue was like the red thread mentioned in every interview. It explicitly relates to our first research question *How has the shift from the office to working from home impacted organizational identification?* The second main theme we identified, '*Bringing the Element office home*' entails data explaining how Element employees cope with losing the office, thus explicitly linking to our second research question *How do employees who work from home cope with the loss of the office?* The final main theme we identified, '*Escaping reality*', hints at how employees both physically and cognitively struggle with the shift to working from home and how they through escaping reality keep a connection to Element. This theme implicitly links both research questions.

Once we had identified these three main themes, we created a structure of sub-themes to being able to present our empirical data in a coherent and structured way through argumentation. For effective argumentation, we were largely inspired by Emmerson's method of creating excerpt-commentary units Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018). Excerpt-commentary units follow a standardized four element structure of analytical point, orientation, empirical excerpt, and analytical comment (Emmerson et al., 1995), with the benefit of linking empirical data with its interpretation guided by theoretical background (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

4 Empirical Findings

Below we present our three main themes with corresponding sub-themes, which we derived during the analysis of the empirical material, both from the interviews as well as from our fieldtrip to the Element office. The first theme we identified, *'Element's social glue'*, relates to the relational aspects of working at Element, both with regards to pre-pandemic working at the office and working from home. Next, we explore the theme of *'Bringing the Element office home'*. In this theme we present data, which outlines employees' perceptions of losing the Element office and bringing their workplace into the home sphere. Finally, in *'Escaping reality'* we present data suggesting that Element employees cling to thoughts of the past and dreams of the future to stay connected to their perceptions of what Element as an organization means to them.

4.1 Element's Social Glue

Early on during the interviews, we started to notice a pattern around the mentioning of “social glue”. These were the interviewee’s own words, and some used additional descriptions like “culture, family atmosphere, or friends” to explain to us how and what working at Element means to them. Naming this theme *'Element's social glue'* and exploring it was therefore a priority for us in trying to understand what the shift to working from home has meant for identification with Element and the culture that stands at the heart of the company. This main theme is further divided into three sub-themes, each addressing specific relational aspects highlighted by employees. The first sub-theme, *The office - fun, family, and togetherness*, describes the pre-pandemic social glue at the Element office. The second sub-theme, *Working from home - uncertainty and novelty*, is an account of how employees make sense of the novelty and uncertainty of the pandemic-induced working from home situation and how this impacts Element’s social glue. Finally, the third sub-theme *Being present – collaboration, visibility, and feeling removed*, explains how virtual teamwork and support relate to Element’s social glue.

4.1.1 *The office - fun, family, and togetherness*

This first sub-theme centers around explaining how Element employees conceptualize working at the office, their pre-pandemic workplace. Employees vividly elaborated on both the physical aspects of the office, such as the open workspaces and common areas, but also what these

physical aspects enabled regarding, for example, being together, sharing, and collaboration. While sharing this information with us, employees seemed to reflect over how all of these ‘Element office artifacts’ are now either missing from their work lives or how these artifacts manifest differently now that they are working from home.

Interestingly, all interviewees talked lovingly about the office, like one would talk about their childhood home or a place that holds special value. The newly renovated office in Malmö that was just finalized during the first weeks of the pandemic, has not seen most employees for over a year. Nevertheless, most (Malmö-based) employees made a point of referring to the renovation. During our field trip to the office, we perceived that the improvements for collaboration, relaxation and sharing had not only been made to facilitate working practices explicitly, but also implicitly to transpire the feeling of belonging and togetherness.

In addition to providing comfortable workstations and areas for work collaboration, the office is the place where the communal coffee machine is, where valuable ideas were born in connection to planned meetings and spontaneous ones in the open hallways and kitchen areas. The office was also quoted several times to have facilitated after hours fun, which we found the rooftop terrace and lounge areas with gaming consoles indicative of during our fieldtrip. Employees frequently referred to being a work family or a group of friends, synergizing work tasks and private moments, which was well-expressed by Carl *“Typically we are eating lunch with colleagues [...] those non-formal, non-booked meetings are where a lot of actual communication happens. The social, private stuff is like oil for the machinery when you're talking business.”*

Emma added some of the things she had been missing the most about the office while working from home during the pandemic. *“I would say that it is the communication that you lack, by the coffee machine. The casual talks that you have with your colleagues. When you also actually discuss work. Yes, that is something that I have been missing.”*

We learned from our interviewees that they seemed to have appreciated the friendly, family-like atmosphere at Element. In fact, Oscar went as far as to saying, *“I mean, I love Element!”*. This positive feeling seems to be connected to physically meeting colleagues at the office, both for work and after-hours fun activities, with plenty of opportunities for casual and spontaneous

conversations and encounters. The office seemed to be the setting for the much-mentioned social glue that sticks the people of Element together.

4.1.2 Working from home - uncertainty and novelty

Next, the second sub-theme, *working from home - uncertainty and novelty*, explores data related to how the novelty and unpredictability of the pandemic, and the resulting shift to working from home seemed to impact Element employees' feeling of connectedness to the company. In addition, we explore how new employees, having new tasks, or being in new group constellations seemed to influence how connected employees feel with Element.

Our interviewees descriptions of how the transition to working from home and the past year working from home has been perceived by them, sheds light onto the unpredictability and uncertainty of their 'new normal'. We were told a few stories of fluid transitions to working from home, instead the vast number of stories were of employees struggling with adapting to this new arrangement, especially as it now has been over a year since leaving the office. David summed up the unpredictability and uncertainty of it by reflecting back in time to the beginning of the pandemic *"Yeah. If I could go back in time and tell myself "You're going to work from home for a year", I wouldn't do that, because then I would get really depressed. I think it's been good that it's just like two months at a time. If they would have said you need to be at home until May, that would have been impossible, I couldn't have done it."*

The uncertainty dimension of how much longer 'it all' will go on seems to have impacted employees' perception of working from home. The novelty of the situation, it appears, has quickly worn off, being replaced by seemingly divergent feelings of surrender and anxiety. These days employees seemed to get by in increments of time, each laden with hopes of 'getting back to normal' soon.

In addition to the uncertain and continuous nature of the whole situation, some employees, who experienced new working situations such as new team constellations, being newly employed, or given new tasks, told us about having had to invent or reinvent ways to handle these situations, given that the seemingly more easily occurring social glue in the office environment was missing. Carl pointed out:

“I am working both with existing teams, who have been working for quite some time, you know with each other on projects, and I've also been involved in working with a new customer, new people, and a new team. And the first one, it works surprisingly well. Missing the social part of course, but delivery is good, and people are mostly happy. But setting up a new team, with a new project and a new customer, that's been really tricky. People are solution oriented and wanted to make the best out of it, but it was really clear that not being able to have a physical kickoff with the customer, perhaps even having a beer with the customer, and then having to sit in the same room and set expectations and get to know each other a bit better, the social aspect, it affects the results.” - Carl

To summarize, uncertainty and the ever-evolving nature of the pandemic with its restrictions on office work appears to have negatively impacted employees' feelings of connection with Element as they are confined to their homes. Having to adapt to new situations in a physically distant setting seems to have a negative effect as well. While it seems that the employees try to accommodate the new normal situation, the longer it is going on, the more difficult it seems for them to dismiss any feelings of disconnection.

4.1.3 *Being present – collaboration, visibility, and feeling ‘removed’*

A final sub-theme of Element’s social glue, which we identified by analyzing our empirical data, is that of employees not being physically visible and present at the office and how this invisibility impacts the feeling of being connected or glued to Element. We present the evidence below, highlighting it from different angles, that of teamwork and group collaboration, that of noticeability, and finally from the angle of feeling ‘removed’.

Pre-pandemic work collaboration seemed to have been particularly important at Element and was achieved to a high degree in workgroups and teams working on projects together. While (almost) everyone at Element shifted to working from home, project groups appeared to continue working together, sharing work tasks and goals, in much the same way as pre-pandemic, yet virtually. As an organization, Element seemed to have adapted easily to making the technical and interactive part of the virtual work environment work. Already pre-pandemic,

the company had used Slack³ widely as an office communication tool, and that translated well to the remote format and seemed to enable as smooth working conditions as possible for teams and work groups.

Victoria, who had started working at Element only shortly before the start of the pandemic, when asked if she feels included in her team highlighted, *“Yeah, I really do. My team is really good at chatting with each other. So, we have that social connection and we're really good at taking up things that we need to discuss.”* She added though that the connection to colleagues outside of her team seems to be much less involved and clear-cut. *“I don't really have a good connection with anyone outside of my team, because we don't really get that interaction. Now, when we are working online, I don't think it's that often that I really have any connection to anyone outside of the team, so I think that it's sort of hard to form any sort of connection when working remotely.”*

Interestingly, while we saw many employees feeling removed or disconnected from Element as a whole, it seemed that employees still felt very much connected to their work teams, that they have daily interactions with. These daily interactions seemed to focus more on the actual work tasks, such as how to solve specific problems, and less on the social parts of collaboration. Work tasks and professional skills seemed to have been promoted in favor of socializing and people skills. It was particularly interesting to talk with Victoria, as she was newly employed during the pandemic and brought to light specifics as to what it meant to be ‘new at a distant Element, without having been previously physically close at the office’. As illustrated above, throughout our conversation, we felt that Victoria seemed to struggle to connect with Element as a whole, yet we simultaneously felt as if, to a certain extent, she seemed to connect with the company through her team colleagues' descriptions, references, and portrayed image of the pre-pandemic office work life.

A few of the interviewees, when discussing the challenge of not feeling the social glue in the home office, mentioned that by working from home they have a feeling of being ‘out of sight, out of mind’, where unless you have a meeting booked, spontaneous ad hoc meetings do not really occur. Oliver explained,

³ **Slack** is a proprietary business communication platform developed by American software company Slack Technologies. Slack offers many IRC-style features, including persistent chat rooms (channels) organized by topic, private groups, and direct messaging. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slack_\(software\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slack_(software)))

“Now, it's like we're working in our own small offices, and you have to kind of go into someone's office to see the screen. We used to see so much more [of what everybody worked with]. I think we had like hundreds of small contributions [to different projects] each week or per month to all the different projects at Element, and those didn't arise because we were tasked with them; they arose because we just wanted to and could contribute.” - Oliver

Collaboration and support in the form of joint brainstorming, spinning off of each other's ideas, ad-hoc comments, and feedback on other projects than one's own, seemed to be hindered by the physical distance. Employees witnessed feeling ‘out of sight, out of mind’, especially when it comes to all the co-workers that are not part of the employee's core work group, and particularly if everyone else is also working virtually from home. It appears to be more difficult to showcase or prove your contribution when not being physically present in both planned meetings and spontaneous ones that occur around the coffee machine, during lunches, or in connection with just being present at your office desk, working and being visibly available for collaboration.

Linked to feeling ‘out of sight, out of mind’, and in addition to teamwork and collaboration, a creeping general feeling of being ‘removed’ is mentioned by several employees. It became apparent to us that not being at the office is perceived negatively in relation to feeling connected to Element. Employees expressed how much they miss meeting their colleagues at the office. To put it into Carolina's words: *“I get that people maybe not feel the same kind of loyalty to the company anymore, because Element for them is just their day to day working situation or their working tasks, you know. And of course, the colleagues as well, a bit, but it's still digital and still removed. You're not around people all the time and you don't have that situation where you walk around in the office and feel like, Oh, it's pretty nice here.”* It appears like all the communal artifacts of the office, such as coffee machine talks, collaboration, after hours fun, do not translate well to virtually working together from their homes, which impacts the connection employees feel with Element.

While the Element office is quoted by almost every employee as an important part of Element, it appears though that it is more about the people who fill the office rather than the actual office itself. Element employees miss meeting their colleagues at the office and the social glue that

materializes in these physical meetings. Several interviewees fear the negative consequences of the ongoing physical distance. To put it into the words of David, when he was asked if he feels that organizational culture is affected he replied:

“Yeah, I'm afraid so. That's my main concern. It's not that we are not able to perform in our projects and deliver to customers, because we have shown that that is something we do also during the pandemic. Yeah, the feeling of belonging, I think that is missing. I think also, when you're sitting at home and you're starting to wonder, like, if you don't feel a sense of belonging, you start to think “What I'm doing here?”
- David

Vincent added that *“working for Element, but spending 95% of your time at home, it's really difficult to say what Element is providing, that you wouldn't get working elsewhere”*.

4.2 Bringing the Element Office Home

Our empirical findings point to a second central theme, which we identified as *‘Bringing the Element office home’*. This theme describes how Element employees responded to the loss of the office by adapting their homes to working from home. Our findings highlight three sub-themes relating to how, by losing the office, Element employees essentially ‘re-homed’ their workspaces within their private spheres. Firstly, the sub-theme of *Transforming the home into a workspace* depicts how employees adapted to working from home through ergonomic and physical alterations to their homes. Secondly, the *Creating the virtual office* sub-theme corresponds to employees’ and leaderships’ attempts to virtually recreate the Element office. Finally, the sub-theme of *My home is not an office* describes how employees appeared to perceive the merging of home and work spheres to be a source of anxiety.

4.2.1 Transforming the home into a workspace

Our first sub-theme, *transforming the home into a workspace*, outlines how employees seemed to respond to the loss of the office by making alterations to their homes that aimed to transform their private spaces into workspaces. The Element office was generally described as being an open, inviting place that had all the spatial requirements and tools that employees needed to

perform their tasks. Sophia described the office as a place that, in essence, mirrored Element's culture and was conducive to work. *"People are more or less everywhere, and the doors are open. It's a really warm, welcoming culture and if you had a question, instead of typing on Slack, you could always take the walk to your colleague and ask the question, in person. And always you would find someone in the kitchen at the coffee machine that you could talk a little bit with"*.

However, due to the pandemic, the office became inaccessible to most. Almost overnight employees were required to swiftly restructure their homes and welcome the Element office into their most intimate spaces. Living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms, once places of comfort and refuge from work, were abruptly turned into ad-hoc offices. Victoria, who started working at Element at the beginning of the pandemic, recalled this quick switch to remote working and depicted it as almost chaotic. *"It was crazy. I was in the office for 3 days when I first started to get the VPN set up, and stuff like that. And since then, I've been working from home."*

Regarding this sudden transformation, we heard from employees who recounted that their home set-up did not lend itself naturally to working from home. Employees who lived in small spaces with other family members and young children described how they attempted to create a space that was suitable for working from home. Alexander, a self-confessed 'Jack of all trades', described how he moved his workspace into a spare room in his garage. Oscar, a software developer, explained that he did not have the option of separating his home from his workspace in such a pronounced fashion. As such, he made do with the space he had. He described how he lacked the physical space to implement drastic changes and instead made use of technology to blur his screen background, hence building a digital wall, which we found to loosely resemble a partition in an open-plan office.

"And the reason why I have it [his screen background] blurred, it's because sometimes we don't clean the bed. And you know, actually sometimes my partner is sleeping when I'm starting to work because it's been a rough night with the kid or something like that. It's really small. No matter where I sit with my computer, there's always people in the room, basically." - Oscar

From our fieldtrip to the office and the interviews with employees, we grasped that the Element office was very open, with an egalitarian-like design, reflecting the flat hierarchy of the company. In this sense Oscar's description of his seemingly claustrophobic home workspace stood in stark contrast with the image of the Element office pre-pandemic.

4.2.2 Creating the virtual office

Our empirical findings relate to a second sub-theme of *creating the virtual office*, where employees sought to re-establish and maintain a connection with office rituals. We conceptualize *creating the virtual office* as actions, which seek to virtually emulate or reconstruct the routines and norms associated with the Element office. Whilst we identified organized virtual team building activities led by HR and leadership, we also identified the presence of informal attempts by employees to virtually recreate the atmosphere of the office environment at home.

Firstly, in relation to activities that were organized by Element, our HR interviewees spoke about how they hosted online quizzes, workouts, and games digitally. HR appeared to be positive, yet pragmatic about their efforts to engage employees in fun activities that aimed to resemble pre-pandemic working from the office. Sophia illustrated HR's optimistic, yet realistic attitude towards this new 'remote fun'. *"Now we are trying to do it [activities and events] digitally, of course. I would say I have been able to be more creative. And that's actually really cool to find new ways to have fun together, but remotely, that's something new for me."*

Aside from HR, employees also engage in informal ways of reconnecting with, and emulating the Element office environment. Alexander talks about an innovative way that his team simulates the office environment digitally.

"I'm in a team of three people right now and what we tend to do most days is we have a Google Meet⁴, but we join in the morning, then we have our usual standard meeting. And then, as we go about starting to work, we just turn off the camera and the

⁴ **Google Meet** is a video-communication service developed by Google. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_Meet)

microphone and keep the meeting going so that we can easily just talk to each other and throw out a question if someone needs some information.” - Alexander

In the quote above, Alexander describes how his team creates an online meeting and leaves it open continuously throughout the workday. If they choose to do so, team members can leave their microphones unmuted and videos on. In this manner team members seemed to be able to communicate with each other more fluidly, without the need to formally schedule meetings for quick queries. In addition, Alexander described how subtle background noises from other team members also helped to virtually simulate a sense of corporate rhythm. *“You have an instant communication with people, which is easier than if you have to just sit and write something to them, or if you need to book a meeting. So, it helps us a lot, just have that feeling of that you're working together. Even if you're not in the same room.”*

4.2.3 *My home is not an office*

Our empirical findings point to the presence of a third sub-theme nested in the theme of *‘Bringing the Element office home’*. *My home is not an office* relates to a common trope that was evident from our findings, which depicted the struggles employees encountered in trying to create a distinction between their home and work spheres. This manifested in a desire by employees to detangle work activities from their home spheres. As we will outline in our findings below, for some, mirroring the Element office in the home seemed to become somewhat problematic and a source of anxiety.

Several participants spoke about how, particularly during the early days of working from home, they felt like work began to invade their private spheres. They described how they took steps to create a distance between work and home for reasons that were not merely related to ergonomics, lack of space, or other practicalities. While some utilized technology, such as Oscar and Vincent, who blurred their screen backgrounds, others engaged in rituals and routines that helped them to mentally keep their work and home distinct. Jessica recounted her frustrations at the blurring of lines between work and home and described her actions to distinguish the two.

“At first, I just worked on the couch or at the dining room table, and then I felt like the couch got associated with work, so when I sat there, I always noticed that my pulse was a little bit higher. I didn't really ever relax because I felt like I was thinking about what it was that became, like my creative soul, so I started to think about problems at work and I was like, finding myself doing that even when I was watching TV at night, and I was like, this is not good. So, I moved my office into the bedroom, and I bought a desk that you can close. It's like, you open it up and it becomes a desk and when you close it's a drawer. Yeah, so I tuck everything away, the computer and the screen and everything is like in a cabinet during the evening and then I open it up in the morning”
- Jessica

Jessica describes how she felt like her home, and consequently, her creative identity, was becoming threatened by work artifacts that were merging with, and infiltrating her private sphere. She began to associate her living room with work and acted by moving her workspace into the bedroom. While there is certainly an ergonomic advantage to moving her workspace, she seemed to suggest that adjusting her space was also a gesture to re-establish a sense of when it was appropriate to work, and when to enjoy recreational activities. For Jessica, office rituals replicated in the virtual office space began to emphasize the ambiguity between her apartment as a workplace, and her apartment as a home. As Jessica explained: *“The good part about the office is that you leave the bad stuff there, more easily. I mean, you still sometimes bring it home in your mind, but at least you're not physically reminded all the time”*.

In addition to work-related artifacts becoming a source of anxiety, our findings suggest that work-related ‘remote fun’ seemed to elicit complex reactions from employees. Without the Element office as a partition between work and home, many employees expressed how they did not participate in online recreational work events. They commended HR’s efforts at providing fun activities through a digital format, but they seemed to find the online format to be a lifeless and time-consuming substitute for face-to-face interaction. The quotes below by David and Sophia, highlight their perception of the desire by employees to distance themselves from work by not participating in online activities.

“We try with quizzes and competitions and lectures and training together. But I can see now that during the last few months that the interest has been fading. It isn't the

same thing as having it like we had. And the last time we had an event we had 45 people I think, and now this time we were only 26. And everybody liked the last time, so I don't know why people aren't showing up, but if you're sitting by yourself at home, it's not the same thing.” - David

“I also understand that if you have worked in front of your computer the whole day, and then continue to work on an event that's on the computer, I can understand that you're quite tired and don't have energy for it.” - Sophia

Sophia’s comment summarizes the apparent feelings of many of Element employees with regards to online activities that seek to mimic those that would happen at the office. The digital events, which were organized with the intention of being fun opportunities for socializing and stress relief, appeared to feel more like work than play to employees, who were already spending an excessive amount of time at home in front of a screen.

Interestingly, when we asked employees what HR were doing to replace the office-based events, as if reading from a script, practically all employees were positive and enthusiastic about HR’s efforts and the organized activities on paper. However, when we probed further and asked if they had actually attended, the overwhelming response was no, and if they had, it was infrequently or only in the beginning of the pandemic. This suggests that for most of the employees we interviewed, the performative aspect of HR organizing digital events seemed to be more valuable than the events themselves.

When we asked employees questions about their perceived future of work, the desire to keep work and play separate was reflected by their responses. Victoria’s comments appear to favor an inverted take on the classical office dynamic. In Victoria’s ideal scenario the office takes on a more social hue, while the home becomes a place of focus and task-based work. *“It's nice to have some days where you can stay home and focus and go to work and then have a couple of days for meetings or hanging out ideally.”*

4.2.4 *Being a professional at the office*

Our empirical findings bring us to the final sub-theme under the umbrella of *'Bringing the Element office home'*. *Being a professional at the office* describes how employees, predominantly leadership and HR, appeared to associate the Element office with a sense of status and missed the office because it provided them with cues relating to their sense of self. They seemed to believe that being in the office helped them to perform their roles.

Recommendations from Element, based on the sharp recommendations by the Public Health Agency of Sweden⁵, urged employees to work from home if and when possible. However, while most employees worked from home full-time, we found that a small number of participants, mostly HR, continued to work frequently in the office. In the following quote, Sophia discusses why she believes that it was necessary for her to continue to be at the office.

“It's not like my bosses told me to be at the office. But it feels better for me to be at the office because I want to be available for the ones that come in, even just for five minutes to pick up something. I want to be there and meet them and just to maybe have the chance to just chit-chat a little, and just to catch up with them and see how they're doing. But also because I'm a very social person that needs a lot of contact with people. And so that is probably why I've been at the office as well. But my colleagues [other HR team members] have been at the office most of the time as well”
- Sophia

Sophia described how she perceived continuing to work in the office to be seemingly connected to a sense of duty linked to her role as HR personnel. She articulated how despite her boss not encouraging her to be in the office, her sense of obligation towards her colleagues appeared to draw her back to the office. When we asked Sophia to further elaborate on why she still went to the office, her answers were vague. The office appeared to serve no benefit to her in terms of equipment or technology required to perform her job. Her comments suggested that the

⁵ **The Public Health Agency of Sweden** has a national responsibility for public health issues and works to ensure good public health. The agency also works to ensure that the population is protected against communicable diseases and other health threats. Specifics recommendations and regulations regarding COVID-19: <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/the-public-health-agency-of-sweden/communicable-disease-control/covid-19/recommendations-to-reduce-the-spread-of-covid-19/> as well as recommendations regarding working from home: <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/the-public-health-agency-of-sweden/communicable-disease-control/covid-19/regulations-and-general-guidelines/>

physical office space provided Sophia with an intangible, or cognitive connection to her work that she could not experience when working from home. *“I would say, I have the technical equipment I need at home, so that's not the issue at the office. But it's for me, being at the office is important because it's easier for me to do my job, and I know I do my job the best if I'm at the office.”*

Sophia's comment above shows how, despite the office being practically empty and her having access to the same equipment at home, she perceived being in the office as imperative to her performing her role to the best of her ability. For Sophia, there appears to be a strong relationship between what HR does and the physicality of being in the office space. This reflected responses by leadership and HR, which alluded to a cognitive association with the office, and what it meant to them in terms of not only *what they do*, but also *who they are*.

Project manager Erik described this cognitive association as the *“mental relationship”* between work and the office, stating that *“It's about the mental relationship you have to your home. That is difficult to bring into a relationship with your mental relationship with work when you're not in the office context.”*

Elaborating on this, Erik shed light on the intense connection that leadership and HR have to the office. Despite not attending the office himself, he articulated the importance of the office in terms of its role for him as a professional. *“At home, it's not the place that I naturally focus on work. I focus on other stuff that are in conflict with my work interests. So that's why to work in the office is important, as a place where it feels more like it's easier to be professional. In a professional context. It's hard to be professional in my own context.”*

4.3 Escaping Reality

The third and final main theme, *‘Escaping reality’*, explores how dwelling on thoughts of the past and dreaming about the future are used by employees as measures to stay connected to Element. This theme connects the theme of *‘Element's social glue’*, and the theme of *‘Bringing the Element office home’*, by acting discursively to provide Element employees with the language to articulate the meaning of social glue, and secondly as being a mechanism used by employees to compensate for the loss of the office. As such, reminiscing about the past, when all employees physically met, socialized, and had a ‘good time’ is used to ‘keep the flame alive’

for a (hopefully) brighter future, and to darn any potential holes in the connection individuals feel with Element.

As mentioned in our other two themes, during several interviews, employees expressed how much they ‘missed the old times’, referring to working at the office. Here, it is worth mentioning that their voices took on a different tone while indulging in this type of nostalgic reminiscence. At times it felt as if they talked about a long-lost friend or about the times when their children were young, many years ago. As Jessica recounted;

“We had a really nice routine, like an order in which we come into office. It's not like we had decided it, but that's something I miss because I'm always first or second. And then you talk for a while and the next person comes you can say “hi” and “how was your weekend?”. It's those one-on-one conversations but also, I like the breaks when you sit and talk about whatever comes up. Maybe we schedule a lunch where we all go to a really good restaurant in the building next to us. Maybe we go there, it is right by the water, it's really nice to sit outside and watch the water and boats, so I think we are just hanging out. Maybe I wouldn't go to the office to get better cooperation with my team because I think that's working really well. I think I would go just to socialize.” - Jessica

In connection to the observable nostalgia, several interviewees naturally fantasized about the future. In fact, when asked if anything special was planned for when everybody could come back to the office, Sophia exclaimed *“Oh yes! We are probably going to go crazy [planning an over-the-top event]!”*

When employees appeared to struggle with negative feelings of disconnect from Element, they reminisced about the past and dreamed about a better future to counter the negative feelings, and possibly escape their gloomy reality for a while. It is our understanding that Element’s social glue is stretched thinner for every day that passes with colleagues not being able to benefit from the advantages of physical interaction. Thus, nostalgia about the past and fantasies about the future seemed to be employed in attempts to keep the glue from dissolving.

5 Discussion

Below we discuss the implications of our empirical findings. Not surprisingly, the first part of the discussion circles around the heavily mentioned social glue, and how it is affected by leaving the office during the COVID-19 pandemic. After that, we discuss the tactics used by employees to counter the feeling of disconnection from the organization. A final discussion is then around the temporal aspects of the pandemic, and how throughout our research again and again, references to time led us to believe that this aspect plays a vital role in the sensemaking of the new normal situation of working from home.

5.1 Declining Organizational Identification

Our empirical findings relating to the perception of ‘social glue’ indicate that employees have gone through a transition regarding how connected they feel with Element since they shifted to working from home. Firstly, overall organizational identification appears to be declining due to the physical distance created by moving from the office to working from home. The social glue present at the office, that facilitated a high level of organizational identification does not translate to the physically distant, virtual format. It is stretched further and further apart. In addition, we see an unaffected high level of team and professional identification, as well as secondary identification.

5.1.1 *Organizational identification at the office*

Pre-pandemic, as illustrated in our theme on ‘*Element’s social glue*’, while working at the office, employees felt strongly affiliated with Element and the family-like culture. We interpret this as high degrees of organizational identification present in Element employees both regarding cognitive aspects of the culture, such as shared values and underlying assumptions, in addition to affective elements engaging the employee hearts (Harquail, 1998; van Dick et al., 2004). This re-affirms the importance of both symbolic, e.g., agreed upon values, and pragmatic components, e.g., the daily socialization of employees, of the organizational culture (Asatiani et al., 2020) and ergo organizational identification (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994).

5.1.2 *Organizational identification while working from home*

However, since the start of the pandemic and the resulting working from home arrangements, employees have gone through a decline in their feeling of connection with Element, indicative of a decline in the degree of organizational identification. As we stipulated in the literature review, the degree of organizational identification is an indicator of the strength of the collective ‘we’, the organizational culture. It shows how difficult it is to translate organizational cultural values, assumptions, language and meaning to the remote working situation (Asatiani, et al. 2020; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 1999).

The root metaphor for the high degree of pre-pandemic organizational identification at Element was the office family, with its physical dimension the office housing the socio-psychological ‘social glue’, (the family) (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Albert, Ashforth & Dutton, 2000). The office ‘glued’ employees to Element. By removing the presence of the office, the glue is stretched thin, and manifests itself as declined identification with Element. The tightness of the Element culture, based on cognitive and affective values, and around language of family and togetherness, once serving the company greatly by creating an underlying appreciated atmosphere for creativity, collaboration, and teamwork, now appears to almost be a shackle, when the affective elements of this tight culture cannot be lived in a physically ‘removed from each other’ working from home set-up. Working from home in that respect has a negative connotation, while working at the office has a positive one.

Yet, digging deeper, as we have seen in our findings, while some of the cognitive aspects of organizational identification might be impacted to a smaller degree, e.g. values are still shared by Element employees in a similar manner as before, the affective elements steering the heart and concerning the bond between individuals and their organization are affected all the more, leading to the overall decline in organizational identification (Kreiner, & Ashforth, 2004; Harquail, 1998).

Thus, through imposed physical distance, organizational identification decreases by not fulfilling Element employees' affective needs regarding their organizational culture and what it means to be one with Element, decreasing the level of affiliation and feeling of connectedness to Element (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). Our interviewee Erik summarized this rather eloquently by saying that *“It's not the office per se [I am missing], it's who fills the office.”* These findings and discussion explicitly answer our first research question, *how does the shift*

from the office to working from home impact organizational identification? Organizational identification is impacted negatively by the shift from the office to working from home.

However, our data also indicates some nuance to this overall gloomy finding, indicating the presence of parallel processes, such as professional and group identification, and the coping mechanisms of nostalgia and fantasies about the future, as well as continuing to ‘being a professional at the office’, happening simultaneously. These parallel processes might be predictors of general changes in how employees connect with their organizations as a whole and might have critical practical implications.

Before moving on to the discussion of the impact of working from home on group identification as a parallel or possibly mediating process, as well as the mentioning of counter measures to par declining organizational identification, a short notion on organizational *disidentification*. The decline in organizational identification for employees at Element seen here in our research, in our opinion should not be mistaken for organizational disidentification. While what we see is a lowering of the degree of identification with Element due to the enforced physical distance, employees are not disidentifying with Element by “distancing themselves from incongruent values and negative stereotypes” (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Elsbach, 1999) attributed with Element. It is rather a decreasing relevance of the old values in the new workplace setting that impacts the decline in organizational identification. Thus, we refrain from likening the observed decline in organizational identification with increased organizational *disidentification*.

5.1.3 *Parallel identification processes*

Interestingly, what we see has played out at Element, is an underlying shift in *why* and *how* employees value and connect with Element. From a pre-pandemic focus on *what* the office enabled - togetherness, collaboration, creativity, and fun, to a now stronger focus on more individual, personal, place-independent attributes such as skills, adaptability, and virtual efficiency. This shift in focus might impact for example recruitment of new candidates, with a lesser focus on cultural alignment and collaboration abilities, but greater focus on professional skills and team working abilities. While we might anticipate knowledge organizations globally to go through, or at least feel this shift affecting them, the focus on their organizational cultures as normative and neo-normative control mechanisms might be on the decline.

This shift of value focus that employees seem to be experiencing, indicates a greater focus on core work groups, teams, roles, and professions. We saw in our interviewees a continuous strong identification with their work groups, teams, and professions. Day-to-day working in these sub-groups seemed to be functioning well, even in the virtual format from the employees' homes. The lower-level identification, with one's work group or profession, is less likely to be affected by change, since it is less abstract and more closely linked to individuals' personal identities (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008). Ashforth, Moser & Bubenzer (2020) add that these lower-level identifications correspond to an external focus of identification, where one identifies with things related to, yet outside of, the high-level, abstract scope of the organization.

So, while general organizational identification and affiliation with Element might be on the decline the longer co-workers do not meet physically, identification and affiliation with workgroups are strong, supporting the part of identification that relates to cognitively and affectionally close relationships at work. Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud (2001) found that "Virtual work diminishes emphasis on the visible, tangible dimensions (e.g., offices) instead relying primarily on psychological dimensions (e.g., perceptions of employees and others) to represent an organization" (p. 214).

Moreover, values, norms, language, and symbols that had been established in pre-pandemic teams translated rather fluidly to the virtual format. However, working with *new* teams, customers or colleagues indicated similar struggles with identification as were seen with overall organizational identification, supporting the proposition that individuals rather internalize the values associated with their profession or group than with those of their organization (Schein, 1996; Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Pratt, Rockman, & Kaufmann, 2006). Thus, while overall organizational identification is on the decline due to lower degrees of identification with the organizational culture, identification with sub-cultures in teams and workgroups or professional affiliations at work remains mostly unchanged indicating a parallel process that might even counter the decline in organizational identification.

Another interesting dynamic we identified related to organizational identification concerns employees, who were newly employed at Element when they moved to working from home. We identified a mechanism of *secondary identification*, where the new employee identified with the Element organization through the portrayed image and good impressions of the pre-

pandemic culture by colleagues. Element employees frequently indulged in reminiscences about all the ‘fun’ stuff that Element had done together, both during work hours and after hours, and new recruits identified with Element via these accounts of fun. Most Element employees we interviewed also fantasized about a post-pandemic future at the office, maybe only a few days a week, but getting back to the office seems to be a priority for almost everybody. Thus, contingent on how long this pandemic will continue to affect how physically distant we can be to our colleagues, *nostalgia and fantasies* about the future play a role in countering the overall declining organizational identification (Brown & Humphreys, 2006).

A final parallel process concerning identification that we observed and that needs further discussion is that of *saliency*. Pre-pandemic, in a physically proximal work life, collaboration within Element had been high, mainly in teams and work groups, but between teams as well. The physical layout of the office enabled fluid and spontaneous interactions between all employees at Element. Employees had all opportunities to engage with workgroups other than their own, and sharing best-practices and helping out between teams was common practice. Saliency was high at the office. In a physically distant work situation, employees witnessed feeling ‘out of sight, out of mind’, which might be linked to the lack of saliency in virtual environments, where it is difficult to be particularly visible or prominent, especially to all the co-workers that are not part of one’s core work group and particularly if everyone else is also working virtually from home. Decreasing saliency has been found to contribute to decreasing organizational identification (Bartel, Wrzesniewski & Wiesenfeld, 2012; Ashforth, Moser & Bubenzer, 2020), yet we believe that group identification is not affected, since one is more cognitively and spatially (in the virtual space) proximal to one’s group as one is to colleagues with different tasks, projects, or professions. This confirms Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud’s (1999) finding that “in a virtual work context, communication (and particularly electronic communication) is an important determinant of organizational identification” (p. 787).

5.1.4 Summary of declining organizational identification

To summarize, organizational identification is declining due to the physical distance and loss of the office. Group identification continues to be strong, particularly that with teams and one’s profession. Secondary identification helps new recruits to identify with Element when they cannot rely on the physical dimension of the office. Lack of saliency impacts organizational identification negatively, whereas group identification seems not to be impacted.

The involuntary aspect, continuous nature, and large-scale of working from home during the pandemic, paired with the fact that employees remember and miss the times when they worked physically together at the office, underlines the grandness of the impact, when (almost) all Element employees simultaneously struggle with a decline in identifying with “who we are as an organization” (Albert & Whetten, 1985). The impact of collectively declining degrees of organizational identification on organizational cultures, and thus organizational life, performance, and profit could be detrimental in the long run.

5.2 Coping Strategies

Thus far we have examined the degree of organizational identification experienced by Element employees and concluded that working from home decreased employees' perceptions of organizational identification. Corresponding to our second research question, “*how do employees who work from home cope with the loss of the office?*”, we next explore the cognitive and behavioral responses of employees relating to the loss of the Element office.

From our empirical evidence we conceptualize that to Element employees, the office acted as a root metaphor, a symbolic frame of reference, which provides the basis for understanding underlying attitudes and behaviors (Levinson, 1983). Our findings suggest that the loss of the office acted as a *sense-breaking event*; an event which resulted in the destruction of meaning (Pratt, 2000, p. 464). In this sense, working from home distorted the root metaphor of Element as a ‘family’, and the Element office itself as the ‘family home’. The absence of the office required employees to engage in sensemaking, which moved employees to engage in behavioral and cognitive re-evaluations, attempting to reframe the root metaphor of the Element office.

We next identify the behavioral outcomes, which account for how employees made sense of their new dynamic. Our findings suggest that the loss of the office caused employees to reevaluate the question of ‘*who are we in the office?*’ (Albert & Whetten, 1985) to ‘*who are we in the home?*’. We see in our findings that employees coped with the loss of the office primarily through three coping behaviors, which we have identified as *virtual bridge building*, *boundary creation: separating work from home*, and *business as usual*. Firstly, *virtual bridge building* relates to actions that seek to virtually emulate or reconstruct the routines and norms

associated with the office. Secondly, we conceptualize *boundary creation: separating work from home* as coping mechanisms, which manifest themselves in physical and cognitive attempts by employees to create a distinction between work and non-work activities in the private sphere (the home). Thus, we distinguish between creating boundaries that are firstly, workplace boundaries; physical alterations that create a place that is ergonomically suitable for working from home, and secondly, mental boundaries; cognitive barriers that are constructed through behaviors that seek to reclaim the private space from associations. Finally, we define *business as usual* as behaviors where employees reframe their presence in the office as essential to their work, and as such they returned to the office to maintain the status-quo.

5.2.1 Virtual bridge building

Our empirical evidence points to a desire by HR and leadership to pull the office into the digital sphere. Our findings identified coping behaviors that signal that employees wish to re-establish and maintain a connection with office rituals. We conceptualize *virtual bridge building* behaviors as actions that seek to virtually emulate or reconstruct the routines and norms associated with the office. We identified the presence of *virtual bridge building* was led by HR and leadership.

In relation to activities that are formalized and orchestrated by HR and leadership, Element has hosted online quizzes, workouts, and games digitally. HR and leadership are positive, yet pragmatic about their efforts to engage employees in fun activities that aim to resemble pre-pandemic office fun. This feeling of despondent optimism is mostly reciprocated by employees. They commend HR's efforts at trying to maintain the social glue through a digital format, but in general find the online format to be a lifeless substitute for face-to-face interaction. Employees' responses to recreational bridge building activities point to a desire by employees to keep their private and home lives at a distance, which we label as *boundary creation: separating work and home*. Our findings elaborated on, and support Baldry & Hallier's (2010) argument that recreational activities that encroach on the private identities of employees may be ineffective at promoting organizational identification.

5.2.2 Boundary creation: separating work and home

Element's office design reflects a trend, in which organizations apply office design to increase organizational identification by creating spaces with a domestic aura, which seek to erode the

boundaries between work and private life (Burrell & Dale, 2003; Fleming & Spicer, 2004). The communal living room atmosphere is articulated by Carolina, who says that “[*Element*] feels like home when you're there, it feels like a family because people are walking around in their socks”.

However, this domestic image is merely symbolic of a living room. The living room in the office exists in the cognitive realm, almost as a simulation. Element employees passing through the open doors, which flow out onto the office space are reminded that in this space, although they feel comfortable and with their ‘work family’, they are still Element employees and remain bound by the norms that the space enforces. When in this ‘work living room’, they are conscious that they are still at work, embodying the salient identity of an Element employee. As such, the work-tasks and the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995) were defined and reinforced by the boundaries of the physical office space they inhabited.

When working from home involuntarily however, Element workers did not have the luxury of such a clear set of guidelines to distinguish the workspace from the private dwellings. Whereas pre-pandemic, employees described how the office acted as a mental landfill to dispose of their work-related stresses and anxieties, now during working from home, these negative burdens accumulated and littered the home. While blending of work and private life through design, and metaphorically through discourse surrounding the Element ‘family’ is generally accepted in the office, (possibly due to it being voluntary in nature), when the home became the prism through which they viewed work and private-life, employees moved to create boundaries between the two.

In the office, communal areas and artifacts, like the coffee machine, acted as a buffer to infuse small talk into conversations around work. Small-talk and work-talk were two sides of the same coin, sharing an office cubicle so to speak. Our empirical findings demonstrate that rituals that ‘worked’ in the Element office did not translate well to a digital format. Employees considered them to be time-consuming, formal, and high in potential for miscommunication. Now, without these spaces and objects, which acted as a catalyst for spontaneous social interaction, the line between work-related communication and social communication has become far more pronounced. Without the office and office rituals as a mediator, it becomes exhausting to digitally recreate the family feeling. The impersonal nature of online communication (Metiu, 2006) is very much at odds with Element’s family-like culture, further eroding the social glue.

5.2.3 *Business as usual*

While our findings indicate that some employees, particularly designers and software developers engaged in *boundary creation: separating work and home* to distinguish the private and work spheres, leadership and HR remained attached to their pre-pandemic conceptualizations of the Element office, and sought to firstly, on an organizational level, digitally recreate office rituals, and secondly, on an individual level, reframe their presence in the office as essential to their work and thus their professional identities.

In this sense, we see that leadership and HR engaged in a subtle defiance against the involuntary move to working from home, which we describe as *business as usual*. *Business as usual* is expressed as attempts by leadership and HR to preserve and return to conditions that were present before the shift to working from home. This coping behavior is not seen as an act of rebellion or deliberately defying company policy, but rather as a way to sustain and preserve professional and organizational identification by maintaining a connection with the physical office space (Baldry & Barnes, 2012). Responses from HR and leadership suggested that they view being present in the office as essential to their role and resisted the move to imposed remote working by reframing their presence in the office as essential to their work.

Fleming & Spicer (2007) argue that resistance is not always clear-cut, and can come in more subtle forms that are closer to organizational subversion. In differentiating conceptualizations of resistance, they highlight the Foucauldian perspective of power, which states that “power operates by constituting identities and individualities in a manner that is productive to the maintenance of certain organizational imperatives (consent, commitment, innovation, creativity, subordination” (pp. 41). This nuanced perception of power departs from Marxist depictions of resistance largely as a class struggle, and frames resistance as a much more subtle act of defiance. We see the behaviors of HR and leadership in resisting the new normal as corresponding to resistance as creation, “the confounding of subjugation by crafting an alternative identity” (Fleming & Spicer, 2007, p.29).

The move to working from home and loss of the office is seen somewhat as a threat to the status of HR and leadership, who consider the office to be tightly connected to their professional identities (Elsbach, 2003). It seems to be in leadership and HR's interest to resist through the creation of a new identity, which reframes their presence in the office as essential (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). They enact this by fueling the fantasies about returning to the office

to preserve identification with the organization as a whole, but also to preserve their identification with their profession. For Sophia who describes herself as a “*people person*” and Carolina who is “*a very social person*” there seems to be a symbiotic relationship between professional identification and organizational identification for members of HR and leadership in Element. As the role of HR is the management of people, the question of ‘*what is Element without the people?*’ in turn triggers the question ‘*what is HR without Element?*’.

5.2.4 Summary of coping mechanisms

In line with our empirical findings, we suggest there is a divergence between the actions of HR and leadership, who seek to retain their connection to the office, and other employees, who for the most part, create a distinction between work and private spheres to cope with the ambiguity of their new work dynamic. Leadership and HR, who perceived their roles to be heavily reliant on the metaphoric and symbolic properties of the office, struggled to reconcile this loss with their professional identity, and in doing so drew upon discourse through fantasies and nostalgia to keep the Element spirit alive (Brown & Humphreys, 2006). In contrast, other employees, who did not express such a strong symbolic attachment to the office, coped by erecting boundaries to elevate the ambiguity experienced by the shift to remote working.

While previous studies (Elsbach, 2003) have identified the loss of personal workspace in relation to employees’ perceptions of social and personal distinctiveness, our findings expand on this, and suggest that the loss of the office caused employees to cognitively reevaluate their relationship with Element. The loss of the office prompted employees to engage in behaviors that sought to reaffirm their associations of the office as work-task orientated rather than as an outlet for socialization.

In the absence of the social backdrop of the office, the features that made Element unique from employees' home spheres became indistinguishable. Without the people, who inhabit the space and fill it with meaning, the Element culture is struggling (declining organizational identification). The ‘social glue’, which was the adhesive that seamlessly bound the sense of family, comradery and work-related aspects of Element does not translate to the digital sphere. When this glue, the social connection that connected work and play disappeared, the distinction between what is work and what is fun became much more pronounced, thus leading employees to take actions to distinguish the work from home spheres.

5.3 Temporal Dimensions of the Pandemic

Due to our focus on language, communication and discourse, the additional strong focus on ‘time’, which we found in our empirical material, spiked our interest for further discussion. As we did not do a longitudinal study, this discussion partly falls outside the scope of our study. However, as we do frequently compare pre- and mid-pandemic situations and experiences, a short mention of it is yet in place with suggestions for further research opportunities around this temporal dimension in the thesis conclusion.

Throughout the analysis of our empirical findings, we became aware of the temporal dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic induced working from home. In fact, our interviewees mentioned it frequently as “*the longer this has been going on*” or “*once this is over*” or “*in the beginning of the pandemic...*” or even “*before the pandemic*”. All these references to time, with different loci, either to pre- or post-pandemic, the evolving nature of the pandemic, and the novelty of it all, seemed to impact both individual sensemaking of the working from home situation, but also collective sensemaking of the impact on Element as a whole. It also seemed to impact sense-giving by leadership and HR.

A very interesting notion is that of *best-practice HR* during the pandemic (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017). HR and leadership, as everyone else at Element, have very much recognized that the organizational culture, the social glue and the core that makes Element, is affected and changing the longer this pandemic is going on. Yet, thus far very few measures to adapt to or even counter this change have been employed. Instead, it appears almost as if HR and leadership do not want to hear, see, and smell the change. Office cleaning is still done as per pre-pandemic despite only 10% of employees being at the office and the obligatory fruit baskets are delivered just as before, in hopes that everything will just fall back into place. Adaptations are attempted, but only half-heartedly, most efforts to apply the old ways of doing things to the new situation are fruitless. That said, we do acknowledge the crisis-like situation of the entire COVID-19 pandemic and all the efforts that Elements HR and leadership have actually taken to smoothly steer the boat through the eye of the storm.

However, what possibly is needed in addition is a new, *contingency approach to HR* (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017), where the new situation is approached with a new focus. Instead of cultural alignment and being together, specific skills or work practices could stand

at the heart of the ‘adapted’ Element culture. By now, who knows what the future might bring. The further we move away from the start of the pandemic-induced working from home, the closer we get to a non-reversible new normal (whether companies like it or not), with employees feeling less connected to their organizations yet very much connected to their tasks, teams, and professions.

To summarize, it is our understanding that temporal aspects such as uncertainty, the ever-evolving nature of the situation, and novelty play a role in forming employees’ perception of working from home and how connected they feel to Element. The impact seems negative. The more uncertain the situation and the longer it is going on, the lower the degree of organizational identification seems to get. And while Element employees try to accommodate the new normal situation, the longer it is going on, the more difficult it seems to become for them to dismiss any feelings of disconnection. The social glue, while stretched more and more will hopefully not snap. Employers need to address these concerns by putting in place measures to adapt to the disintegrating social glue.

6 Conclusion

As the main goal of our research was to study the phenomenon of the impact of the shift from working at the office to working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, we are humbled by the experience. Not only have we, the researchers, worked together entirely virtually during this research, we were able to conduct our empirical research at our case organization virtually as well. Working from home has been our reality, exactly as it was the reality of our research participants. We were thus able to relate on a deep level to the experiences they disclosed to us. We very much felt ‘as one of them’, which in our opinion adds strength to the interpretations, meanings, and implications of our findings. Below, we present a summary of our findings.

6.1 Empirical Findings

- i. **Organizational identification** is declining since shifting to working from home. Employees feel less connected to their organization as the office is removed from the equation. The office was formerly the enabler of the organizational culture, referred to as the ‘social glue’ by our interviewees. Without the social glue, employees feel removed from one another both cognitively and emotionally, showing in lower overall identification with the organizational ‘we’. Physical distancing translates into socio-psychological distancing.
- ii. **Group identification**, identification with the values and underlying assumptions held in one's workgroup, team or profession continues to be high and unaffected by the shift to working from home. The connection employees feel towards the colleagues they share work tasks or skills with seems unaffected even by physical distance.
- iii. **Collaboration** is affected greatly by the physical distance and lack of being together at the office. While collaboration within teams works similarly as pre-pandemic, collaboration between teams and even between employees with no natural work interactions has declined. An out of sight out of mind feeling has materialized, impacting the connection to the organization. The larger organizational family has shrunk to represent the company only through their immediate team family members.
- iv. **Coping mechanisms** are vigorously used by employees to handle the loss of the office and par the creeping feeling of feeling less and less connected to their organization. These coping mechanisms point at varying processes, both physical, cognitive,

proactive, reactive, inviting and delimiting in nature, and they seem to be employed both singularly as well as jointly:

- a. **Bringing the office home** is one of the tactics employees used and suggests that by adapting their home space to accommodate for work, they invite work into their homes.
- b. **Creating boundaries** is another tactic employees engage in, in order to delimit work and private spheres and counter the blurring of their private and work lives.
- c. **Building virtual bridges** is a measure that employees collaboratively have developed to counter the loss of the office.
- d. **Business as usual**, hints at how, especially HR and leadership continue to work from the office, and through that attempting to validate their professional roles as ‘essential workers’ at the office.
- v. **Escaping reality** through discourse, by drawing on nostalgia and fantasy, is a way for employees to simultaneously connect with their organization, and cope with the loss of the office. This discourse serves them well for the time being, encouraging them ‘not to give up and try to stay connected’, whereas it is to be seen what its long term effects are.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

Our findings contribute to research by identifying theoretical contributions in three directions: organizational identification, lower-order identifications (in the form of group identification and professional identification), and lastly, the loss of the office.

Firstly, our research supports findings by previous studies suggesting that organizational identification is negatively impacted by working from home (Wiesenfeld, 1999; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 2001). While we conclude that the outcome of working from home corresponds to lower degrees of organizational identification, our study also explores the processual dynamics of organizational identification (Cheney & Tompkins 1987). As illustrated by our findings, we suggest that nostalgic and fantasmatic notions of the office as the vessel for organizational culture, mediate the steady decrease in organizational identification.

However, we argue that literature on remote working is outdated and unfit to capture the complexities of the current work environment. Not only have ICT capabilities progressed far beyond the scope of previous research on remote working (Ellison, 1999), but more recent studies indicate that there is a lack of in-depth, qualitative research on the topic of remote work in general, (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). There is even less research on the impact of working from home on organizational identification specifically (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 2001).

Thus, our research calls for a more contemporary conceptualization of organizational identification, which acknowledges the implications of remote working. In the new virtual world of work, definitions of organizational identification, which derive from social-identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; van Dick, 2004), may be lacking in explaining the intricate processes of organizational identification. As our research highlights, employees encounter difficulties with regard to engaging in social comparison online (Turner, 1985; Tajfel, 1982). Due to the limited number of spontaneous interactions, they have online with other members of the organization, they are restricted to making comparisons between themselves and members of their immediate work groups.

The second theoretical contribution centers around group identification, which are low-order identifications (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). Teamwork had already prior to the pandemic gained in importance, yet as our results indicate that the shift to working from home has not negatively impacted identification with groups, the importance of group work might be even stronger mid- and post-pandemic. We thus support and re-affirm the notion that low-order identifications play a considerable role in determining employees' feeling of connectedness to and within their organization (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008).

Our study also elaborates on research related to the physical proximity of targets in low-order identifications. As we previously discussed, low-order identifications are considered to be relatively inexorable, as they happen within a context cognitively and physically close to the individual as opposed to being at a wider organizational level (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). Software developers and designers are physically, and by extension cognitively, very close to the resources that they use in their work-tasks (computers). HR and leadership perceive themselves to be physically distant from the resources they use in their jobs (people, the workplace) in the work from home set-up.

Finally, our research relating to how employees cope with the loss of the office, captures the diverse experiences of employees, who are involuntarily working from home, and makes several theoretical contributions to literature in relation to the workplace. Firstly, our study questions the strength of the root metaphor of the organization as a family in the absence of a physical workplace. As we have previously mentioned root metaphors are designed to enable collective sensemaking through symbolic framing (Levinson, 1983).

However, we suggest that applying the root metaphor of family in the context of involuntary work from home arrangements, is perhaps too unitarist a perspective to capture the diverse living situations of employees. Our research demonstrates that unlike in the home, the office (as a space) does not discriminate against those with turbulent personal struggles or family commitments. In flat organizations, where the office is designed to emulate their egalitarian structures, pushing employees into the home, limits the ability that organizations have to control their workspaces and to add a ‘domestic hue’ to work (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). This may in turn create a fragmented conceptualization of the root metaphor of the family in the minds of employees.

6.3 Practical Implications

The trends we identified happening regarding identification, the decline in organizational identification and the possible mediation, possible parallel process of continuing high low-order identification, as well as the applied coping mechanisms, indicate that organizations, even in a post-pandemic flexible working arrangement of office and remote working need to adapt several core assumptions and functions. The focus on organizational culture and cultural alignment that has been noticeable in recruitment and employer branding might be, as suggested, in for a rocky ride. As our findings indicate, a stronger employee focus on skills and sub-group core values and assumptions might suggest that organizations should shift focus to highlight these in job ads and on company websites. Another implication that the focus on smaller sub-groups and teams has is that of actual team constellations with respect to both skills diversity, personalities, etc. A stronger focus on building teams for virtual collaboration will be essential to ensure high degrees of group identification and ultimately team loyalty.

When we found that employees frequently engaged in nostalgia and fantasizing about the future, our first inclination was to find this positive, as it immediately helped create a

connection to colleagues in the virtual space. However, what happens if the fantasy about coming back to the office does not play out? We believe that Element's strategy to plan and talk about a big reunification at the office is to be communicated with care. As organizational identification declines, so maybe does the appeal of the fantasy to come back to the office. At this point in time, no one knows what office life will exactly be like in the future, only that it will probably look very differently. The danger of nostalgia and fantasy turning into myth might very well be present. As long as the overall narrative is to 'go back to normal' and have an 'over the top party' once 'this all is over', it postpones the inevitable shift in working practices and perceptions of why people work for certain companies, that organizations need to adapt to.

Will new, alternative forms of work arrangements be established to foster more team collaboration? Will employees abandon organizations for freelancing gigs and consultancy out of their living rooms? We might as well see a paradigm shift happening in the future, where the popular neo-liberal notion of the office as a place of fun, flexibility and to be yourself in, needs to be reframed as one of professionalism and rigid separation of work tasks and socializing. The future holds great uncertainties, but isn't it exciting to be present and participate in this global shift? In the future we might very well speak of pre- and post-corona work practices.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

Before we elaborate on the opportunities for further research that we have identified, a quick mention of the limitation of our research. At times we wished our study had been a longitudinal study, starting right at the beginning of the pandemic and continuing to a time after the last restrictions regarding office work were eased. Thus, we could have had a focus on the effect of time. The constant mention of time by our interviewees, e.g., the novelty, the past, the present, the future, the ongoing-ness, and ever-evolving nature of it all, would have been very interesting to put into a larger perspective.

What we have instead, is an account of a moment in time, salted with nostalgia and future fantasies by our interviewees. We surely cannot predict what the long-term effects of the found decline in organizational identification are and are therefore limited to assumptions and careful suggestions. What we can say though is that one year into the pandemic, organizations will

need to make an effort to re-establish and communicate to employees why anyone should work for them, as it seems more and more plausible that the importance of *who we work for* is declining in favor of *what we work as* (Lievens, van Hove & Anseel, 2007).

6.5 Opportunities for Further Research

These limitations of our study, if looked at from the opposite direction, hint at a plethora of opportunities for further research. The pandemic, as horrific as its implications are on society in general, opens for great opportunities in organizational research. *Work, both the physical and cognitive dimensions* of it, whether it be the office or virtual space, will likely look different in our near future. This offers many opportunities to investigate how office space is best adapted to and utilized by a workforce that only partially works at the office. Hot-desking might be a trend to grow exponentially when only fractions of employees are at the office at one time in the future.

Regarding the cognitive space, the relevance and importance of *organizational culture* that has had an ever-growing popularity in HRM might need to be redefined to account for employees not meeting physically the way they did prior to the pandemic. This hints at new ways and opportunities to conceptualize culture, with new buzzwords, and possibly less focus on physical togetherness.

Scrapping at the surface of the impact of the large shift to working from home during the pandemic, the trends identified regarding *organizational* and *group identification* also clearly indicate a need for further research regarding the *temporal dimension* of the trends. Is the decline in organizational identification a linear one or can it be expected to be exponential? And what about the identified *counter measures* used by employees? What large an impact do they have in the long run?

One question that had us discuss, without coming to a clear conclusion, is the continuous high identification with *sub-groups*, and how, if at all it correlates with overall organizational identification. Possibly quantitative research to investigate if group identification mediates organizational identification decline could be conducted.

We also presented a finding around what we termed *secondary identification*, where employees seem to be identifying vicariously through the narratives of past good times, told by others. If this is supported by other studies, and what its long-term effects are, would be an interesting angle for further research. Related is the question of what will happen in the future if the fantasies that were used to counter the decline in organizational identification do not come true. What if post-pandemic working at the office is nothing like the good old times at the office? And related to that is the question: What happens to organizational identity and identification if ‘the post-pandemic future’ takes a long time to actually materialize? All these suggestions hint at ample opportunities for researchers to investigate and understand the impact of the pandemic on work life.

“Oh, hope that we can get together soon” - Dusty Springfield

7 References

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8 Appendix

8.1 Appendix 1 – List of interviewees

Name	Profession
Carolina	HR/Leadership
Sophia	HR/Leadership
David	HR/Leadership
Erik	Project Manager
Carl	Project Manager
Anna	Software Developer/Project Manager
Oscar	Software Developer
Alexander	Software Developer
Jessica	Software Developer
Victoria	Software Developer
Emma	Designer
Oliver	Designer
Vincent	Designer

8.2 Appendix 2 – Interview Guide, Element employees

- i. **Introduce ourselves**, mention anonymity and that we would like to record the interview. Ask for their permission.
- ii. **Introduce our research topic**: We are looking into employees' experiences and perceptions of transitioning from working at the office to working from home, due to the corona pandemic.
- iii. **Introductory questions**:
 - a. What's your name?
 - b. What is your job at Element?
 - c. How long have you worked at Element?
 - d. Are you working from home? Since when?
 - e. Is there anybody else in your household? Are they working from home? Homeschooling? Etc.?
- iv. **Working at the office**:
 - a. Describe your pre-pandemic workday at the office.
 - b. How did you get to the office? Was there a commute?
 - c. What other activities do you do with work besides the actual work? Extra curricular?
 - d. Did you appreciate/like your workspace and your office?
 - e. Please describe any other parts of the office, like communal areas, etc.?
 - f. How do you feel about your physical workspace/place/environment at the office?
- v. **Working from home**:
 - a. Describe your current workspace (during the pandemic). How does it differ from your office workspace?
 - b. What do you perceive as with working from home? (autonomy, flexibility, time management)
 - c. What do you perceive as negative? (more work, blurring of free time/private and work)
 - d. How do know when to take breaks and switch off from work?
 - e. What do you do to "leave work" in the evenings/during lunch, breaks?
 - f. How do you connect with your colleagues?

g. Are you engaging with any fun activities with work while working from home? What kinds of activities? What's your perception about those?

vi. Final questions:

a. What's your overall take-away from the shift to working from home?

b. If you had a time machine, what would you tell yourself one year ago (pre pandemic). Any advice?

vii. Thank you so much for your participation!