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New ways of working: Differences between autonomy support and flexible work arrangements and relations to employee stress

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Abstract

The aftermath of COVID-19 has led to the widespread adoption of flexible work arrangements that promote employee's job satisfaction and engagement across industries and organizations worldwide. Although the implementation of flexible work arrangements is generally regarded favorable, research suggests that it can also increase adverse effects on employee job characteristics, such as increased workload and blurred lines between work and personal life. Inconsistencies in the efficacy of diverse work arrangements within industries and organizations have not improved employees' well-being, such as engagement, satisfaction, and commitment at work. Using an experimental method, this study investigates how leaders' approaches to autonomy influence employees' stress levels in various categories of work arrangement manipulation scenarios. This study involved 156 participants who met the sample criteria: active employees in Indonesia with a minimum of 2 years of work experience, aged 22 to 64, and familiar with both conventional and flexible work arrangements. Significant differences in work stress were found in the four work scenarios, with the highest mean in the group with a leader who controlled autonomy in traditional work arrangements (M=39.73) and the lowest mean in the group with a leader who supported autonomy in flexible work arrangements (M=30.56). These findings indicate that a leader's orientation toward supporting employee autonomy in flexible work arrangements could potentially protect employees from potential work stress in the post-pandemic period.

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INTRODUCTION

The global outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) affected many countries, including Indonesia. This caused significant alterations in mental health and human well-being, including in the workplace. Before the pandemic, job stress was responsible for 120,000 annual fatalities and $190 billion in annual healthcare costs in the United States (The American Institute of Stress, 2022). Even after lockdowns were lifted, these numbers increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Teo et al., 2021). Yunita and Saputra (2019) suggest that work mutations have a negative impact on work stress, and that work stress negatively affects employee performance.

The most common adjustment made in workforce management during the COVID-19 pandemic was 'flexible working arrangements' (FWA), which is a system in which many industries and organizations shifted from the conventional work design known as 'work from office' (WFO) to a new work arrangement model for working from anywhere, with employee performance evaluation based on achievement of assigned targets (Jobstreet, 2021). The ability of industries and organizations

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to transform traditional office-based jobs into flexible work designs has given rise to a new perspective that work can be performed remotely and independently by employees, resulting in high hopes for continuing flexible work methods after the COVID-19 pandemic (Parker et al., 2020).

Diverse organizations are generally supportive of the implementation of a more modern and adaptable work model. Previous research supports the implementation of flexible work arrangements and notes the advantages of adjusting work arrangements to employee performance during crises, such as promoting employee autonomy and increasing work productivity compared to conventional work arrangements (Johannsen & Zak, 2020; Maurer, 2020; Thompson et al., 2015; Wörtler et al., 2021). Consistent with the findings of other studies, scholars and practitioners indicate that adopting flexible work is associated with employee job satisfaction by creating an environment that enables employees to act autonomously and supports their perceptions of personal achievement of work outcomes such as organizational commitment (Kidane & Xuefeng, 2021).

However, a vast body of literature has shown that flexible work arrangements affect how employees behave in diverse situations that were previously beyond the control of management, making employees' stress level increase and they are more susceptible to negative emotions, such as offense, worry, loneliness, and guilt (Brunelle & Fortin, 2021). The quality of employee well-being during a pandemic is also impacted by suboptimal leadership in addressing the problems and requirements of employees in situations, and it is prone to uncertainty (Olkowicz & Jarosik-Michalak, 2022). The need to remain present and responsive through technology degrades employee performance and heightens stress (Karimikia et al., 2020). In addition, the absence of physical proximity in the context of flexible work arrangements contributes to the growing difficulties with flexible work arrangements that employees face (Ruiller et al., 2019).

Deci et al. (2017) postulate that self-determination theory facilitates the development of policies, practices, and environments that promote high-quality health and performance among employees. Based on this postulation, there are two categories of leadership related to the inducement of autonomy: leader autonomy support (LAS) and leader autonomy thwarting (LAT). According to the LAS leadership theory, leaders create a positive work environment by facilitating employee work (Hocine & Zhang, 2014). On the other hand, the LAT leadership employs prescriptive behavior management to motivate workers (Deci et al., 2017). Although LAS leadership has a generally positive impact, studies on work autonomy indicate that granting autonomy tends to decrease industrial and organizational productivity due to decreased employee work efficiency (Zhou, 2020). On the other hand, prescriptive leadership styles such as LAT effectively generate positive effects within organizations by enhancing employee performance, motivation, and job satisfaction (Pishgooie et al., 2019; Rathi et al., 2021; Richards, 2020). Moreover, the job demand-control model suggests that applying control to work can reduce employee stress and enhance learning opportunities (Karasek & Theorell, 1990).

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The combination of leadership practices and work arrangements shape the organizational climate, which is how individuals perceive and characterize their working environment through the attitudes and values implemented within the organization (Pudjiomo & Sahrah, 2019; Rožman & Štrukelj, 2021). Dirani et al. (2020) indicate that executives and leaders play a significant role in stress management such as enhancing employee well-being through supervisory support. Meanwhile as a part of the organizational climate context, work arrangements promote employee autonomy, give employees a sense of purpose, and boost work motivation (Gagné & Bhave, 2011).

Based on literature review, the implementation of two categories of autonomy-induced leadership and flexible work arrangement on work related well-being shows some inconsistencies, and thus further exploration is needed. As employee well-being contributes to good performance for both individuals and businesses, and as flexible work arrangements become more prevalent in Indonesia, it is necessary to conduct a post-pandemic study of the organizational climate to accommodate employee well-being better. This study investigates whether autonomy-induced leadership and working arrangement produce the significance mean differences in perceived job stress among employees in the post-pandemic era.

METHOD

Research Design

The research was conducted using a quantitative approach, the experimental vignette method, a 2x2 between-subject design, and a purposive sampling technique, where the criteria for prospective participants were communicated before the study. Several sample criteria were considered for the inclusion of participants: currently employed in Indonesia with a minimum of two years of work experience, aged between 22 and 64, and acquainted with both conventional and flexible work arrangements. The participants were randomly grouped, resulting in four groups: 40 people for CAT, 38 people for CAS, 36 for FAS, and 42 people for FAT (see Table 1 for these abbreviations).Then, each group was presented with a distinct vignette scenario according to their group and proceeded to complete an online questionnaire. This study aimed to identify and evaluate the significance of sketch factors that causally influence individual responses to hypothetical contextual sketch arrangements (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010). The 2x2 between-subject design was divided into two leadership factors (autonomy support versus autonomy thwarting) based on the leadership and labor arrangement factors multiplied by two work arrangements (flexible versus conventional). Because interference effects can be eliminated in this design, a between-subject design was used when cause-and-effect relationships were expected in the experimental study (Charness et al., 2012). The group matrix is displayed in Table 1.

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Table 1. Research Group Matrix

Types of Leader Support	Work Arrangements	
	Conventional	Flexible
Leader Autonomy Support (LAS)	Conventional x Autonomy Support (CAS)	Flexible x Autonomy Support (FAS)
Leader Autonomy Thwarting (LAT)	Conventional x Autonomy Thwarting (CAT)	Flexible x Autonomy Thwarting (FAT)

Participant

Participants in this research were all currently employed staff in Indonesia with at least two years of working experience, aged between 22 and 64, and familiarity with conventional and flexible work arrangements. The total number of participants in this study was 156. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling procedure in which the researcher selects the sample unit based on sampling criteria established (Kumar, 2019) was used to collect the sample for this study. Data were collected from participants via Google Forms.

Data Collection Technique

This research has obtained an ethical clearance certificate (No.047/FPsi.Komite Etik/PDP.04.00/2022) from the Committee of Ethics, Faculty of Psychology, University of Indonesia. In addition, a focus group discussion was convened before data collection to address experiment validity issues (Muise & Pan, 2019). The survey was then distributed via Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram. Before data were collected, respondents were informed that they could make free choices about their participation. The respondents provided informed consent, and the authors also ensured the confidentiality of research data was in conformity with the research ethics. In addition, all data about the participants would be used exclusively for educational purposes. All participants received the survey instruments in the same order: informed consent, manipulated scenario, a questionnaire regarding the dependent variable, manipulation check, and briefing information. All group participants received the questionnaire, which also provided them with informed consent information, including (1) the aim of the research, (2) short description of the topic of the research, (3) the freedom of the participants to participate and to withdraw from the research with no penalty, (4) the freedom of participant to answer each item according to their condition, and (5) data confidentiality. After reading the information and stating that they agreed to participate in the research, the participants filled in the data for demographic information, including age, gender, marital status, length of work experience, length of work with flexible arrangement, and length of work with conventional arrangement. Then they were directed to the stimuli consisting one manipulated scenario, a work stress scale as measurement instrument, manipulation check, and lastly the debriefing information of the study.

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Hypothesis Development

The study was underpinned by the self-determination theory, which suggests that the encouragement of autonomy can foster a positive work environment that promotes health and performance of employees, such as high job performance, job motivation, and job satisfaction (Ng & Feldman, 2015). Other literature, for instance Kubicek et al. (2014), reveals the effect of high and low levels of autonomy related to feeling irritated, burnout, which does not necessarily increase job satisfaction for employees better than those with medium levels of autonomy. For this reason, the study aimed to investigate the categories of autonomy supportive leadership with flexible work arrangements context that are considered a factor influencing employee performance such as work stress (MacHe et al., 2020). Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework used in this study.

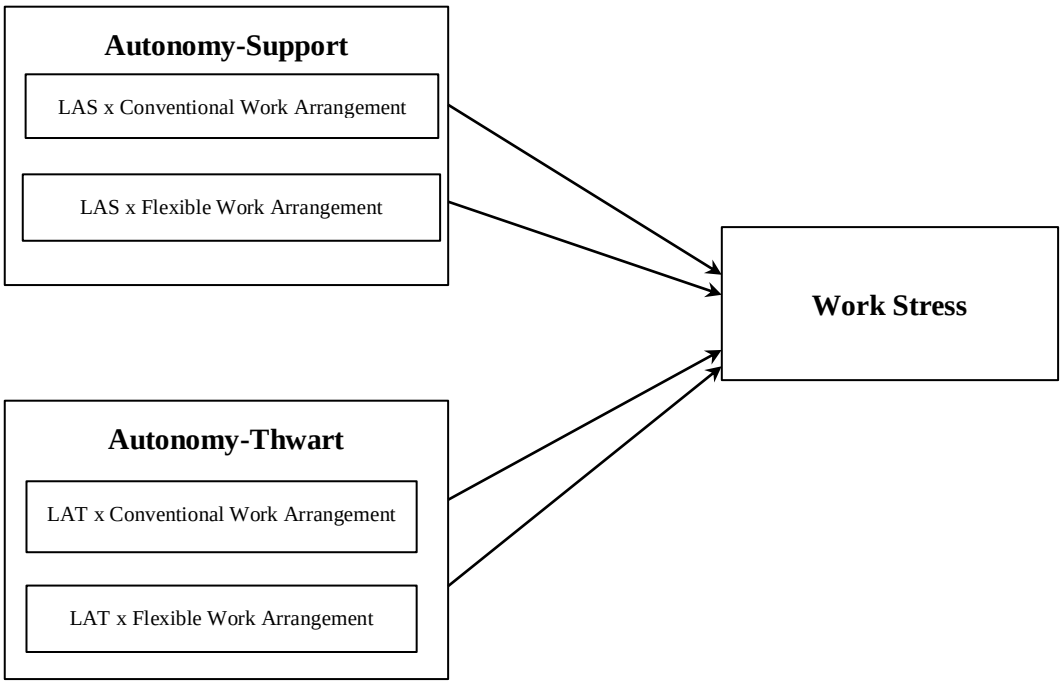

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

This study proposed the following hypothesis:

H_1: There is a significant difference in the average level of work stress perceived by employees among work groups.

Research Instruments

Autonomy Support and Autonomy Thwart

LAS leadership was provided by manipulating vignette narratives to adapt key behaviors from the Work Climate Questionnaire Short Form, which measures employees' perceptions of need-supportive leadership. An example of a narrative is "Your direct supervisor is flexible and offers employees options for completing tasks." In addition, crucial need-thwarting leadership behaviors

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were described based on an adaptation of the Parental Psychological Control scale by Barber (1996) used by Sarmah et al. (2022) to assess employees' perceptions of need-thwarting leadership. Examples of narratives include "Your direct supervisor exerts pressure on you to do the job the way he or she wants, frequently using forceful language when discussing the work you are performing, such as 'You must...', and is unreceptive to your suggestions."

Conventional and Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexible and conventional work arrangements were presented as vignette narrative manipulations based on key definitions from previous research on flexible work arrangements (Allen et al., 2013; Bal & Izak, 2021; Hill et al., 2008). The following is an example of a narrative for a flexible work arrangement: "Your company's job design allows employees to choose and decide to work from a location other than the office, such as home, a café, or another location." In contrast, an example of a conventional work arrangement narrative is as follows: "Your company's job design only allows employees to work from the office and not from other locations."

Work Stress

A 12-item Job Stress Index proposed by Bernas and Major (2000) with a rating scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), which has been translated into Indonesian and validated by an expert, was used to measure the dependent variable with a Cronbach's Alpha = 0.945. The sample included 156 individuals, with a minimum of 30 for each research variation.

Variable Control

Using variable control methods ensures the study is free of potential confounding effects of individual and environmental differences that may threaten the between-subjects research design. This study's controlled variables include demographic information such as age, length of service, and work experience. Participants in the study were treated in equivalent groups from the outset, and each group was made up of participants who were as similar as feasible. In addition, researchers included questions at the outset of the questionnaire about whether participants had worked with flexible work arrangements to ensure that participants shared the same perspective on flexible work arrangements. Furthermore, to improve the study's internal validity, the independent variable was manipulated, and research participants were randomly selected (Horton et al., 2011).

Analytical Technique

This research underwent multiple stages of analysis, including (1) the reliability test, (2) the descriptive test, (3) the assumption tests, such as data normality and homogeneity tests, and (4) the hypothesis test. The reliability test measured the 12-item Job Stress Index’s reliability and discriminant power using Cronbach's Alpha and the statistical software SPSS. The descriptive test

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was administered to observe the characteristics and distribution of respondents based on the mean, frequency, and percentage of their demographic data. To test the research hypothesis, a One-Way ANOVA was used. An evaluation of the data's normality and homogeneity was required prior to the application of the analysis technique with the significance of $p > 0.05$, the data were regarded as normal and homogeneous. Meanwhile, to determine whether the manipulation was adequate, a question regarding the research was posed to check participants' understanding of this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The total number of participants in all four categories was 156, with 94 female and 62 male participants. There were 76 respondents who were between 22 and 24 years old, 52 respondents between 25 and 30, 21 respondents between 31 and 44, and 7 respondents between 45 and 64. Of all respondents, 114 were unmarried, 11 were married without children, and 31 were married with children. In terms of work experience, 72 had a work history of 2 years, 42 had 3 to 5 years of experience, 20 had 5 to 10 years of experience, and 22 had over ten years of experience. Table 2 displays the outcomes of descriptive tests relating to the scores on the job stress index for all four groups. The following is the job stress mean rank from the highest to lowest group score: CAT (M=39.73;SD=12.720), FAT (M=36.57;SD=11.391), CAS (M=35.32;SD=12.554), and FAS (M=30.56;SD=9.407).

Table 2. Descriptive Test Results of Job Stress Index Scores

					95% Confidence Interval for Mean			
	N	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**Std. Error**	**Lower Bound**	**Upper Bound**	**Min**	**Max**
CAT	40	39.73	12.720	2.011	35.66	43.79	16	60
CAS	38	35.32	12.544	2.035	31.19	39.44	14	60
FAS	36	30.56	9.407	1.568	27.37	33.74	13	49
FAT	42	36.57	11.391	1.758	33.02	40.12	13	57
Total	156	35.69	11.964	.958	33.79	37.58	13	60

This study conducted a reliability test on the collected data to evaluate item reliability and discrimination ability. With a score of 0.946%, the results of the reliability test for job stress index were deemed high. Meanwhile, the test results for discrimination power indicated that the items had adequate discrimination power, with CRIT scores ranging from 0.575 to 0.868 for each item. In addition, the homogeneity test result for the assumption test indicated that the obtained data were homogeneous ($p > 0.05$). Based on the analysis, the data were homogeneous, as shown in Table 3.

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Table 3. Homogeneity Test Results (Test for Equality of Variances/Levene's)

F	df1	df2	p
2.211	3	152	.089

The Work Stress Index was subjected to a one-way analysis to determine whether there were significant mean differences between the four work categories. Table 4 displays the results of the ANOVA test. Based on the results of the ANOVA test, the significance of F(3,152) = 4.039 and p =.008 suggests that there were mean differences between the four groups. The significant differences necessitated post hoc multiple comparison tests to determine which groups exhibited significant differences. The Tukey HSD *posthoc* multiple comparison test revealed a significant mean difference between employees in autonomy-thwarting leadership with traditional work arrangements (CAT) (M=39.73; SD=12.720) and employees in autonomy-supportive leadership with flexible work arrangements (FAS) (M=30.56; SD=9.407), thus rejecting the null hypothesis. The results of this study found that participants with autonomy-supportive leadership and flexible work arrangements had the lowest levels of job stress compared to those with autonomy-controlling leadership and conventional work arrangements. The results indicate that a leadership orientation emphasizing autonomy support could substantially reduce stress levels among employees with flexible work arrangements. Meanwhile, the group with adequate autonomy support from superiors in conventional work arrangements and leadership that controlled autonomy in conventional and flexible work arrangements did not show significant differences in employee stress level.

Table 4. ANOVA Test Results

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	1638.249	3	546.083	4.039	.008
Within Groups	20549.360	152	135.193		
Total	22187.609	155			

The results of this study are supported by the research of Murtagh and Dawes (2022) and Shih et al. (2019) which found that autonomy-supportive leadership and flexible work arrangements can decrease levels of job stress. The difference between the current study and the two previous research studies lies in the participants' field of work. Based on the data analysis applied work arrangement may influence the impact of autonomy-oriented leadership on employees. Low levels of job stress indicate that autonomy-supportive leadership in flexible work arrangements, which demonstrates leaders' concern for employees' aspirations, decisions, and self-development, may effectively contribute to employee well-being.

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The findings of the study also indicate that autonomy-oriented leadership has a positive effect on employee well-being. However, from a practical implication standpoint, organizations still need to develop policies that encourage the implementation of flexible work arrangements to support employee well-being more optimally (Bhui et al., 2016; Ramesh et al., 2022) , so that it can have a substantial impact on employee job satisfaction and productivity (Boulet & Parent-Lamarche, 2022; Haddon, 2018). The results also suggest that flexible work arrangements are a contextual factor that can be implemented in the long term and have a positive impact on employee well-being.

In the post-pandemic era, the results of the study may provide substantiation for organizations. Numerous organizations are returning to traditional labor systems. The results of this research would also seem to suggest the importance to support a combination of autonomy-supportive leadership and flexible work arrangements to enhance employee well-being since these arrangements are adaptable to the current industry types (Kumar et al., 2023). Organizations can effectively reinforce this approach as a culture and policy that promotes employee well-being, for instance, giving employees the option to work flexibly at certain times or providing a monthly flexible work quota.

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of a pandemic, flexible work arrangements are generally recommended as an effective strategy. Using experimental vignette methods, this paper investigates the categories of leader support with an emphasis on autonomy and work arrangements that can support the implementation of flexible work arrangements to determine its effect stress levels of employee. Our findings show that leadership that encourages autonomy and flexible work arrangements can substantially reduce stress levels at work. Theoretically, these findings may contribute to the advancement of industrial and organizational psychology, and practically, they may help businesses to develop work environment policies that optimally promote employee well-being.

There are numerous avenues for future research in the field of industrial and organizational psychology based on the findings of this study. Future research could examine the effects of flexible work arrangements and leader support on employee well-being and job satisfaction in the long term. Future research could also investigate the influence of individual differences, such as personality traits, on the efficacy of flexible work arrangements and leader support in reducing employee stress levels. Another potential area of study is the investigation of the impact of various types of flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting or compressed work weeks, on stress in the workplace and employee well-being. Future research could examine the potential disadvantages of flexible work arrangements, such as an increased burden or a blurring of work-life boundaries. By investigating these topics, researchers can add to our understanding of the efficacy and potential limitations of flexible work arrangements and leader support in reducing employee stress at work and enhancing well-being.

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