

**Suddenly Seen:
How Virtual Employees Experienced Newfound Equality and Visibility During COVID-19**

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic radically changed the normalcy of virtual work, transforming virtual work from something accomplished by a minority of low-status employees in their organizations into the standard work arrangement. We investigated this phenomenon by exploring how employees who were working virtually before the pandemic experienced their newfound structural equality with their coworkers. By conducting an inductive, qualitative study of 52 virtual employees in the technology industry, we found that virtual employees experienced sudden visibility characterized by shared awareness, recognition, and affiliation. As they reacted to their sudden visibility, virtual employees anticipated both new opportunities and challenges. However, in contrast to recent work showing that healthcare employees were skeptical of their sudden visibility, our respondents largely believed their improved status would be sustained. Our research makes contributions to research on virtual work and invisibility at work by demonstrating how mutual empathy, feelings of value, and authenticity are enabling mechanisms through which employees embrace sudden visibility and status. Paradoxically, by creating more physical distance between employees, the dramatic shift to virtual work for all resulted in more closeness and inclusion for those who were already physically distant.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, virtual work, status, invisibility, empathy, authenticity

Virtual employees—those who spend at least some portion of their work time away from the conventional workplace and who interact via computer-mediated technology (Nilles, 1994)—report numerous challenges. Being physically separated from their colleagues and lacking access to “face time” (Glass & Noonan, 2016; Van Dyne et al., 2007), virtual employees can be ignored, forgotten, isolated, and excluded (Koslowski, 2016; McCloskey & Igarria, 2003; Orhan et al., 2016). And, despite evidence showing that virtual employees are often more productive than their peers (Allen et al., 2015; Apgar, 1998; Bloom et al., 2014; Olson, 1985), they often perceive a lack of influence, feel disrespected and devalued (Bartel et al., 2012; Blake, 2010; Nilles, 1994; Wiesenfeld et al., 1999), and struggle to feel a sense of belonging and organizational identification (Bartel et al., 2012; Thatcher & Zhou, 2006; Wiesenfeld et al., 1999, 2001, in press). Similar to how employees who take advantage of flexible work policies endure social penalties and stigma (Golden & Eddleston, 2020; Munsch et al., 2014), virtual employees’ colleagues sometimes make assumptions about how they spend their time, resulting in low trust and doubts about their commitment because they do not observe them working (Elsbach et al., 2010). Anecdotal evidence even suggests that people hold stereotypes of virtual employees as “lazy” (Crossan & Burton, 1993; Parkinson, 2020), or “slackers” (Christian, 2020).

Because collaborating with virtual employees may create extra work or hassle for those at the physical workplace (Golden, 2007; Vega, 2003), virtual employees may also be resented by their coworkers and superiors (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Cooper & Kurland, 2002). Furthermore, virtual employees often miss out on informal interactions that might otherwise strengthen employee communication and relationships, and help them access knowledge and support (Allen et al., 2015; Golden et al., 2008; Kurland & Bailey, 1999; Ruppel & Harrington, 1995). It is no

wonder, then, that virtual employees can feel marginalized and ~~lower status than their in-person peers~~low status (Bartel et al., 2012).

In 2018, while it was estimated that 56% of employees had a job that could be done virtually, only 7% of organizations made virtual work available to most employees (Global Workplace Analytics, 2020). Therefore, despite the increasing prevalence of virtual employees in the past thirty years (see Raghuram et al., 2019), they were typically in the minority in their workplaces. Anecdotal accounts suggested that employees resisted working virtually because they feared that it would damage their credibility and status in their organization (see Bartel et al., 2012), and scholars argued that the difficulty of managing virtual employees was a major factor preventing the wide-scale adoption of virtual work (see Staples et al., 1999). However, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly changed the structure of work; as lockdowns ensued and most physical workplaces closed, millions of employees made an unprecedented move to working virtually from home (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020). One survey of human resources professionals estimated that half of organizations had transitioned over 80% of their workforce to virtual work (Gartner, 2020). Scholars have argued that COVID-19 is a “career shock” (Akkermans et al., 2020), defined as “a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside of the focal individual’s control that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one’s career” (Akkermans et al., 2018: 4). Such significant negative life events, which could include trauma (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Maitlis, 2009) trigger sensemaking and can shape one’s work identity and career. And while many expressed gratitude for being employed during the pandemic, employees have also struggled with this career shock, and the newfound challenges of virtual work it brought (Butler & Jaffe, 2020).

When the pandemic ultimately ends, it seems almost certain that more employees will work virtually than before the pandemic. Many employees are expected to continue working virtually even after the pandemic ends, with firms such as Facebook and Twitter allowing most of their employees to do so (see Hartmans & Langley, 2020). Moreover, organizations will have important decisions to make about whether and how to offer virtual work arrangements to employees who are now more accustomed to them. Such a dramatic shift to virtual work as a result of the pandemic has started to generate research on important topics, such as documenting the effects of shifting to virtual work for employees' work-family conflict and stress (Chung et al., 2020; Vaziri et al., 2020), as well as media attention focused on the challenges of virtual work (e.g., Streitfeld, 2020). Much of this emerging attention has been focused on the challenges for employees who did not work virtually before the pandemic. However, these employees only know what it is like to work virtually when nearly all members of their organization do as well. In contrast, employees who were working virtually before the pandemic are in a unique position—they can compare their prior experiences, when they were in the minority who opted for virtual work, to their experiences now, when nearly everyone is working virtually. Thus, the experiences of already virtual employees may provide theoretical and practical insight into how to make virtual work more effective, both during and after the pandemic.

In this paper, we address the following exploratory research question: *how did the broad shift to virtual work during the pandemic affect employees who were already working virtually?* Abruptly, these employees no longer found themselves in the low-status minority. With the onset of the pandemic, already virtual employees had the same structural work arrangements as their colleagues and managers. Such a change had the potential to equalize disparities in status and opportunities that previously plagued them, but also possibly created new challenges compared

to those working virtually for the first time. To explore these dynamics, we conducted an inductive, qualitative study examining how already virtual employees experienced their newfound structural equality at work (i.e., having the same virtual work arrangements as their coworkers). We built on new, cutting-edge research that examined how front-line healthcare employees reacted to dramatic changes in status because of the pandemic (Hennekam et al., 2020). Below, we first briefly review research on *invisibility at work*, which emerged as our inductive theorizing evolved as a key lens for understanding our findings and how they contribute to theory. We then describe our methods and present our findings, and finally discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our research.

The Invisibility of Virtual Work

Before the pandemic, virtual employees experienced *invisibility at work* (Koslowski, 2016; McCloskey & Igbaria, 2003; Orhan et al., 2016), which has been defined as marginalized group members' experiences of being "overlooked or dismissed by the dominant group in terms of professional authority, potential, and recognition" (Hennekam et al., 2020: 2). Conceptualized as a form of stigma experienced by marginalized group members (Brighenti, 2007), invisibility reflects perceptions of those in lower status groups of not being fully and accurately seen, valued, noticed, or recognized by others at work (Anteby & Chan, 2018). Invisible employees are often negatively stereotyped, and denied recognition, power, and voice (Lewis & Simpson, 2010; Simpson & Lewis, 2005). While research on invisibility at work is still rather nascent, we know that it is important for outcomes such as wellbeing, organizational commitment, a sense of belonging, and dignity (McCluny & Rabelo, 2018; Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014).

The experience of invisibility at work is related to, but conceptually distinct from, being *literally* observed (Anteby & Chan, 2018). Those who are not visually seen as often as others—

such as those who work virtually rather than in person—are more likely to feel invisible. Furthermore, marginalized individuals often strategically try to manage their own visibility, such as by hiding or making less salient aspects of their stigmatized identity to manage discrimination or mistreatment (Goffman, 1963; Kang et al., 2016; Ragins, 2008; Settles et al., 2018), or by trying to be more visible to receive acknowledgment for contributions (Stead, 2013). When a feature is stigmatized or devalued in a particular social context, it is often assumed that those who have the characteristic are “better off” concealing it, if they can (Clair et al., 2005: 81; Crocker et al., 1998; Jones et al., 1984). However, doing so can also have negative psychological implications (Pachankis, 2007). While invisibility is typically negative, sometimes employees benefit from greater autonomy, and less intrusion and surveillance by being less visible (Anteby & Chan, 2018; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2018).

The majority of research on invisibility at work has drawn important attention to the experiences of employees from disadvantaged groups, such as racial minorities (Kim et al., 2019; McCluney & Rabelo, 2018; Smith et al., 2019), women (Bennett et al., 2018; Fernando et al., 2019), and sexual-orientation minorities (Corrington et al., 2019; Ragins et al., 2007; Tilcsik et al., 2015). Critically, scholars have also theorized how work structures, including marginalized work tasks, roles, and occupations, can render employees invisible (Anteby & Chan, 2018; Hennekam et al., 2020; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2018). Hennekam and coauthors (2020) provided a helpful advancement by offering a typology of invisibility at work, specifically, that work invisibility can be task-, skill-, or status-related. Task-related invisibility refers to the work itself being stigmatized, undesirable, or devalued. Skill-related invisibility refers to generally unrecognized or taken for granted abilities to perform activities. Finally, status-related invisibility refers to an employee in a lower position in a hierarchy, who typically receives less

attention, praise, and validation (Kreiner et al., 2006) and has less power (see Lee & Tiedens, 2001) and fewer positive workplace relationships (Krackhardt, 1994).

Notably, Hennekam and coauthors (2020) explored how non-physician healthcare employees experienced their sudden status-related visibility because of elevated status in the eyes of the public. The pandemic changed how others view the status of these healthcare employees, as in our context of virtual work. However, our research differs in several ways, allowing us to significantly expand our theoretical understanding of employee status and visibility experiences during the pandemic and beyond. First, by studying technology company employees rather than essential workers on the front lines, we shed light on status changes among employees who are working virtually, rather than in-person. This is important because most people are working remotely due to transmission risk, and are likely to experience different affective, cognitive, and behavioral work consequences than those who continue to work in person, and in stigmatized “dirty work” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Second, we study how already virtual employees experienced newfound structural equality, rather than valorization or hero status experienced by healthcare employees. Such newfound status is different because it is a smaller change in status compared to valorization, and as a result, potentially more believable and sustainable. Hennekam and coauthors’ research demonstrates that most healthcare employees felt that this newfound hero status was precarious and would likely end with the pandemic. However, the massive transition to virtual work is likely to at least partially persist, also potentially resulting in more sustained changes in status and visibility, and as a result, differences in how employees experience this change. Third, healthcare employees did not experience a relative change in status in comparison to their colleagues; rather, they experienced a change in status in the eyes of the *public*, remaining lower in status in the organizational

hierarchy (Devine, 1978). Yet, relative status *inside* organizations is more proximal for employees' experiences and outcomes. In summary, understanding the experiences of already virtual employees during the pandemic can help advance novel theory on invisibility at work by pushing the boundaries of what we know about sudden status and its temporality.

Method

Context and Sample

The sample consisted of 52 employees at technology companies who were working virtually before the pandemic. Most employees at these companies worked from co-located offices until March of 2020, when the pandemic led the vast majority to switch to virtual work. Participants spanned many functions, had varying years of virtual work ($M = 6.0$ years, $SD = 7.1$ years), and 75% worked for U.S.-based companies (see Table 1). We first conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 employees from May 12 - July 8, 2020. We then collected an additional 20 respondents using an online survey from September 28 - October 3, 2020. We recruited participants through our contacts who introduced us to employees working virtually before the pandemic. Our study was approved by the first author's Institutional Review Board (Protocol #56998). All participants received informed consent and were not compensated.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our semi-structured interview protocol and survey questions are included in Appendices A and B. We began this study with a "guiding interest" in exploring how already virtual employees were responding to their organizations' transitions to virtual work during the pandemic (Charmaz, 2006). In the semi-structured interviews, we asked open-ended questions about each individual's view of working virtually before, during, and after the pandemic. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Consistent with grounded theory, our interview protocol evolved as the study progressed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Once we had conducted the 32 interviews, we began our initial analysis of the data, following an inductive, grounded theory approach (Dougherty, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using NVivo software, we iterated between a set of emergent themes and existing literature. We went through several rounds where the first two authors coded the data, discussed and resolved discrepancies and considered possible directions, and revisited the literature. During this process, a key turning point was the publication of Hennekam et al. (2020), which highlighted the prevalence and importance of (in)visibility in our data. With this insight in mind, we created a revised set of first-order codes, capturing data with relevance to (in)visibility in virtual work. We then categorized these first-order codes into second-order themes and third-order aggregate dimensions (see Figure 1; Gioia et al., 2013).

In light of our new theoretical framework of invisibility, we collected additional data through an online survey and the same recruitment procedures. Once we had 20 new respondents, we coded the data and revisited our coding scheme. These new data provided substantial additional evidence on our existing codes, but only minor changes to the coding scheme (e.g., an addition of a first-order code). It was clear at this point that we reached theoretical saturation. Lastly, to assess the viability of our final codes and their overall fit with the data, we recruited two research assistants to independently code the data (Kreiner et al., 2009). They each coded...

Findings

Experiences of Invisibility (Before Pandemic)

Consistent with prior research on virtual work, participants described how the nature of their virtual work arrangements led to feelings of invisibility prior to the pandemic. In particular,

all three categories of invisibility outlined in Hennekam et al. (2020) were represented in our data: task, skill, and status. See Table 2 for additional quotes. In terms of task-related invisibility, participants described challenges associated with not physically being seen, including feelings of “out of sight, out of mind”. As Holly¹ explained:

Often the team would forget to dial in to include the remote person. Even if they were on the same time zone they faced similar challenges to teammates that were in different countries (hard to feel part of the team and an afterthought in meetings).—Holly, Customer Marketing Manager

Participants described that because their coworkers could not see them, they struggled to understand how they could be as productive virtually as those in the office and were suspicious:

The biggest challenge was educating my higher up that...you don’t have to physically see me... They were used to seeing people in the office... Their...walls were glass screens and they’d be able to look at their workers, sort of like a factory... Not seeing their employees was hard for them...because they couldn’t justify the work that was getting done, even though in marketing you can see almost immediately when someone’s not doing work.—Edmond, Social Media Manager

Regarding skill-related invisibility, participants reported that others in their organization did not recognize that virtual work requires expertise. As Dixie, a Principal Consultant explained, she believed that people in her organization just assumed that being able to work virtually was a “skill set everybody has” and therefore, that it could be easily adopted by anyone.

Lastly, our participants described status-related invisibility before the pandemic. While similar in nature to skill-related invisibility, status-related invisibility relates specifically to one’s position in the organizational hierarchy, such as where virtual employees are perceived to be on the social hierarchy, as well as the extent to which they are provided with equal support and resources in their organizations. Participants explained that, prior to the pandemic, they felt unequal, overlooked, disrespected, and undervalued due to their virtual work, and therefore were

¹ Participants’ names are replaced with pseudonyms

low on the organizational social hierarchy. Steph, a Senior Content Writer, explained that working virtually “often felt looked-down upon” at her organization.

While the task-, skill-, and status-related invisibility that our participants described align with Hennekam and coauthors’ typology (2020), our data suggested that visibility also manifested through virtual employees’ covering and passing *behavior* (Goffman, 1963). Participants described engaging in “strategic invisibility” (Ham & Gerard, 2014), which involved virtual employees downplaying or not disclosing their work arrangement and hiding transitions from in-office to virtual work (see examples in Table 2). As a result, before the pandemic, virtual employees felt that they had to strategically hide some of their work experiences. As Quentin, Head of Talent Marketing, explained, he felt that he “kept a little bit hidden” and that he “wasn't bringing [his] full self to work” because he couldn’t freely discuss the challenges he experienced working remotely. At the same, many respondents reported attempting to compensate by being more active on communication channels such as Slack, being hyper-responsive to communications, and extensively documenting their work. Quentin continued to explain:

I felt like there was a need to document all the different projects that were in flight at once and give updates on those things a couple of times a week versus waiting for somebody to reach out. It was sort of just assumed, if you're not sharing anything in written format, it might be interpreted as you not necessarily making progress on stuff. —
Quentin, Head of Talent Marketing

Channels of Heightened Visibility (During Pandemic)

Participants described three different channels through which their visibility was heightened because of the shift to virtual work during the pandemic. This allowed us to develop novel theoretical insight into the potential mechanisms of overcoming the three forms of invisibility (task, skill, and status). See Table 3 for additional quotes.

Shared Awareness of Virtual Work (Task-Related) Fosters Mutual Empathy

Participants explained how the pandemic opened others' eyes to the experiences of virtual work, which seemed to enable perspective-taking by compelling others to experience the reality of virtual work. Sam, a Senior Customer Success Manager remarked that newly virtual employees "can now empathize with how mentally and emotionally exhausting it can be to work remotely." Like Sam, participants often linked this new shared awareness of virtual work to others' feelings of empathy for the challenges of virtual work. Myrtle, a Marketing Manager, remarked, "I definitely have seen how the pandemic has caused a lot of empathy for the remote workforce. And so a lot of people are totally understanding now." Shared awareness of virtual work also promoted empathy among our participants, who reported being cognizant and understanding of newly virtual employees' challenges:

For a lot of individuals, it is a huge transition. Depending on where they live and the setup they have, it's not always conducive to being able to work remotely. I can really empathize with what people are going through and, and the good news is I feel like it starts to get better. You know, like, you get into your rhythm, for sure. Hopefully, people are experiencing that. —Grace, Large Enterprise Account Executive

Recognition of Expertise (Skill-Related) Fosters Feelings of Value

Participants felt the switch to virtual work prompted by the pandemic made their experiences dealing with the challenges of virtual work more valuable and recognized by others. This entailed being asked to share their expertise, such as through offering tips on office setup to deeper advice such as how to create boundaries between work and home and manage productivity. Helena, a Senior Learning Experience Designer, explained how she had become an adviser to other newly virtual employees:

People have really been looking to more seasoned remote workers for tips for best practices. I've collaborated on a few blog posts...just trying to gain an understanding of: "Hey, I'm new to working from home, like, how do you do it? How do you structure your day?" ...So that's been really nice to be able to share what I've learned.—Helena, Senior Learning Experience Designer

In addition to their expertise being newly recognized and sought out, participants also reported that their colleagues had gained newfound recognition pertaining to the challenges they had (often silently) endured throughout working virtually before the pandemic. As Johann explained:

People have really stepped up and there have been a lot of shout outs on our Slack channels and through email, just giving the remote community at [company] a lot of props, having to navigate all the things that we navigate and still being held to the same standards.—Johann, Channel Account Manager

Yet, this was not an unmitigated good. Three participants mentioned feeling ambivalent about how their expertise made a stressful time relatively easy for them. As Johann continued, “I had such a...brutal tension of gratitude and guilt for how easy of a transition this was for me.”

Affiliation with Others in Organization (Status-Related) Fosters Authenticity

Participants explained that they felt that the shift to virtual work wiped away prior status differences between virtual employees and their in-person coworkers. As a result, already virtual employees described being included and connecting more with coworkers due to their new “common ground” from being “in the same boat,” and without the previously-held negative “beliefs and assumptions” about virtual employees (Sam, Senior Customer Success Manager).

Participants also described how the switch to virtual work during the pandemic helped them to more easily access everyone on their team, both formally and, especially, informally, whereas before the pandemic they had often missed out on non-business interactions or activities available only to in-office employees. Sue (a Brand Marketing Senior Team Lead) explained, “I’m not missing out on watercooler conversations happening in the office.” Similarly, Billy (Software Engineer) stated, “Now that everyone is remote...everyone’s in their own separate Zoom window, I’m able to more freely interact with my team.” Billy continued explaining that because of this increased interaction, he felt more fully and genuinely seen by coworkers: “I

think there's a better shared understanding of my character and my sense of humor and other things that aren't as apparent...when you're talking strictly business in meetings.”

Although participants generally appreciated the changes that emerged due to everyone else sharing the same virtual work arrangement, some participants resented that this also made apparent the lack of pre-existing support for virtual employees:

Since that whole company has had to go remote, our HR team is now, like, above and beyond with resources and support...When I went remote, it was like peace, good luck. And now it's like everyone's remote, let us help you transition. What do you need from us? Here's training, here's support. Here are tips on how to set up your home office, just showering employees with so much support and resources around remote work. I'm like, it's interesting that it took this to do that.—Zelda, Head of Global Community

Anticipated Sustainability of Change (After Pandemic)

In considering how the pandemic altered others' perceptions of virtual work, our participants often noted that their colleagues and managers had become more accepting. Jim, a Senior Software Engineer stated, “Now that everyone is forced to work remotely, a lot of people in my organization who weren't favorable towards remote work are now more open to it.” Our participants believed that this openness to virtual work would, at least partially, be sustained in the long-term. The majority (44 out of 52) of our participants anticipated long-lasting changes in terms of how other people in their organization value virtual employees (see Table 4 for illustrative quotes). As Myrtle explained, “I just don't see how the workplace can go back to normal the way it was like, I think it's transforming.” Stuart similarly stated:

A couple of companies even said... employees will not have to go back into the office for the rest of the year...And some, even for like an undetermined amount of time. So that's a huge change. That's enormous. So I can see... this not just being like a temporary one or two-year thing, it's...a major shift.—Stuart, Senior Customer Success Manager

While most participants predicted that the positive changes would last beyond the pandemic, three were skeptical that the changes would endure. For example, Calvin said:

No, I don't think [the changes will last] in the long term, unless I remind them of it...Their behavior changes, their empathy and understanding for remote workers will fade eventually. Humans being mostly individualistic, especially in the workplace, I think, long term, they will just go back to their office routine and forget we are remote and how our work life is different because of that.—Calvin, Operations Coordinator

In addition, some participants qualified their optimism, noting that even if the changes endure beyond the pandemic, virtual work may still present disadvantages. As Drew explained:

My concern with like a large, remote work shift is...I think you're doing yourself a disservice to go purely remote...unless the entire company is remote...I think you're doing yourself a disservice....the five or so years that I spent in an office was amazing for meeting people and making connections and networking.—Drew, Security Engineer

Discussion

In this paper, we examined how virtual employees' new structural equality prompted by COVID-19 led to sudden visibility and status, and explored why these employees generally believed that their status would be sustained. We outline three distinct channels through which virtual employees' visibility was heightened, and show how mutual empathy, feelings of value, and authenticity were enabling mechanisms through which employees embraced their sudden visibility. Our findings contrasted sharply both with virtual employees' strategic invisibility attempts before the pandemic, as well as the distrust of newfound visibility exhibited by healthcare employees (Hennekam et al., 2020). As virtual work practices continue to evolve due to the pandemic and afterward, it will be critical to understand how structural work changes are impacting employee status and visibility, and for future research to better understand how such changes relate to employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, turnover, and wellbeing.

Theoretical Contributions

Our research opens up a new direction for research on invisibility at work. Specifically, we illuminate three channels—shared awareness, recognition, and affiliation—and corresponding mechanisms—mutual empathy, feelings of value, and authenticity, respectively—

through which visibility may be sustained. Our research lays the theoretical groundwork for future research to test these mechanisms in explaining how structural changes may facilitate sustained visibility and status in virtual work both during and after the pandemic, and among other forms of invisible employee groups, such as employees at satellite offices.

Our research also contributes to existing research by challenging what we know about invisibility at work in several ways. First, in contrast to prior research that has focused on how hypervisibility can be constricting, disempowering, or not accepted by those who suddenly become visible (Brighenti, 2007; Hennekam et al., 2020; Simpson & Lewis, 2005), our study shows how employees experience perceptions of sustainable visibility and status. Second, our research challenges existing work that has concluded that work is more likely to be invisible when it is spatially distant (Hatton, 2017; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). Instead, we show how, by creating more physical distance between employees, a shift to virtual work resulted in increased visibility because it remedied inequalities in status among employees.

Our study also contributes to research on virtual work. First, in contrast to prior research that has focused on how virtual employees change *their own* behavior to improve their relative status at work (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; see also Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), our study shows how changes to status may be triggered by structural changes, rather than concerted efforts. In doing so, our research also contributes to work that has shown how exogenous and technological changes, such as the transition to email (Dubrovsky et al., 1991) or the assignment of work tasks (Valentine, 2018), have the potential to reduce inequality faced by lower-status employees. Second, our study responds to calls for research to explore perceptions of distance more fully among virtual teams (Gibson et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2010). We show how feelings of interpersonal distance may decrease even when actual distance increases. Third, we challenge

prior scholarship that has shown how distance can exacerbate conflict and inequity in virtual teams (Metiu, 2006; Hinds & Mortensen, 2005; Hinds & Bailey, 2003). In contrast, we show how a shift to virtual work, by creating more physical distance between employees, can paradoxically result in more closeness and inclusion. Finally, we respond to scholars' calls for more research on status among virtual employees, which has been understudied despite its importance for virtual employee dynamics (Bartel, et al., 2012).

The limitations and boundary conditions of our study illuminate opportunities for future research. First, while our inductive theory building approach was appropriate for this study since the pandemic created new conditions that fundamentally altered work conditions and related research was nascent (Edmondson & McManus, 2007), it is not conducive to making causal claims. Future research can deductively test the specific relationships among the mechanisms and proposed channels of sustained visibility that we outline, as well as how they relate to downstream consequences such as employee belongingness, productivity, engagement, and career advancement. Second, our study focused on individuals in the technology industry whose work processes were likely easily adaptable to virtual work. Future research can investigate how sudden visibility impacts virtual employees in other industries, who may experience steeper learning curves in adopting technologies to accommodate virtual work, and whose organizations may have comparatively weaker capabilities to support virtual work. Relatedly, scholars can investigate how technology implementations relevant to more prevalent virtual work arrangements, such as increased monitoring, may have adverse impacts on employees (Anteby & Chan, 2018) and contribute to inequality among virtual employees in certain industries and other contexts. Finally, our study did not investigate how childcare responsibility impacted virtual

employees. This represents a ripe area for future research, especially as working parents strive to manage a work-family image that may not be visible (Ladge & Little, 2019).

Practical Implications

This study offers several practical implications that extend beyond the current pandemic. As organizational leaders contemplate the extent to which they will embrace virtual work, this study urges them to consider how work structure could affect the visibility of virtual employees and, in turn, various employee outcomes. Our study urges managers who opt for a hybrid virtual/in-office approach to recognize that, without additional intervention, this may result in status inequalities between employees that could hinder their relationships by affecting their feelings of inclusion, affiliation, value, and authenticity.

This study also provides testable ideas for possible organizational interventions to help reduce status inequalities between virtual and in-person employees. First, in outlining shared awareness as a key channel through which sustained visibility may be achieved, our work suggests that perspective-taking interventions such as job rotation, wherein virtual and in-office employees temporarily swap work conditions and gain empathy for each others' conditions, may help reduce status differentials in sustainable ways. Second, in highlighting recognition as another key channel through which sustained visibility may be achieved, our work suggests that workplace practices such as explicitly acknowledging the expertise and challenges experienced by virtual employees may prove valuable. Finally, in highlighting affiliation, our work urges managers and other change agents to consider developing inclusion initiatives aimed at helping virtual employees connect and express their authentic selves. For example, such initiatives could include establishing dedicated Employee Resource Groups that are open to virtual employees, investing in technology aimed at replicating aspects of the in-office environment (such as virtual

lunches or establishing non-work-related Slack channels), and fostering a sense of community among virtual employees and their in-office colleagues (such as through organizing quarterly retreats or a buddy system). Such interventions could shape the extent to which the positive changes due to COVID-19 will endure. As one of our respondents, Sue, noted, “[COVID-19] will have a long-lasting effect, but the size of that effect remains to be seen.”

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Table 1

Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Title	Gender	Race/ethnic identification	Company Headquarters	Years working remotely before the	Approx. percent of company working virtually	Data collection method
Nick	Strategic Growth Manager	Male	White	United States	1	0-5%	Interview
Maggie	Principal Program Manager	Female	White	United States	2	5-10%	Interview
Quentin	Head of Talent Marketing	Male	White	Australia	3	5-10%	Interview
Brody	Senior Director, Global Customer Success	Male	White	United States	7	5-10%	Interview
Timmy	Senior Software Engineer	Male	Asian American or Pacific Islander	Australia	4	5-10%	Interview
Lloyd	Sales Manager	Male	White	United States	1	0-5%	Interview
Todd	Software Engineer	Male	White	Australia	1	5-10%	Interview
Helena	Senior Learning Experience Designer	Female	White	United States	4	5-10%	Interview
Barbara	Principal Writer	Female	White	Australia	3	0-5%	Interview
Zelda	Head of Global Community	Female	White	Australia	1	5-10%	Interview
Johann	Channel Account Manager	Male	White	United States	1	5-10%	Interview
Grace	Large Enterprise Account Executive	Female	White	United States	3	5-10%	Interview
Annie	Senior IT Help Desk Technician	Female	White	United States	3	5-10%	Interview
Stuart	Senior Customer Success Manager	Male	Black/African American	United States	5	Unknown	Interview

Delbert	Director, Sales Enablement	Male	White	United States	4	5-10%	Interview
Marty	Large Enterprise Account Executive	Male	White	United States	8	5-10%	Interview
Freddy	Engineering Manager	Male	White	Australia	1	5-10%	Interview
Dixie	Principal Consultant	Female	White	United States	1	5-10%	Interview
Catherine	Senior Marketing Manager	Female	White	United States	1	5-10%	Interview
Diana	Operations Manager	Female	White	United States	10	Unknown	Interview
Spike	Senior Manager	Male	White	United States	20	5-10%	Interview
Adi	UX Designer	Male	Black/African American	United States	2	5-10%	Interview
Natalie	Learning Experience Designer	Female	White	United States	1	5-10%	Interview
Myrtle	Account-Based Marketing Manager	Female	White	United States	<1	5-10%	Interview
Jesse	Staff-level Software Engineer	Male	White	United States	35	11-15%	Interview
Kanan	Senior Software Engineer	Male	White	United States	4	5-10%	Interview
Rachel	Expert Columnist	Female	White	United States	15	<5%	Interview
Drew	Security Engineer	Male	White	United States	10	5-10%	Interview
Billy	Software Engineer	Male	White	United States	2	11-15%	Interview
Edmond	Social Media Manager	Male	Black/African American	United States	2	5-10%	Interview
Pat	Global Vice President of Sales	Male	White	Australia	3	<5%	Interview
Thelma	Product Manager	Female	Asian American or Pacific Islander	India	12	5-10%	Interview

Amanda	Associate	Female	Prefer not to specify	United States	3	5%	Survey
Oliver	Senior Software Engineer	Male	White	Canada	5	15%	Survey
Simone	Visual Designer	Female	White	United States	5	10%	Survey
Gomez	Principal Scientist	Male	Prefer not to specify	United States	10	5%	Survey
Steph	Senior Content Writer	Female	White	United States	1	5%	Survey
Sue	Brand Marketing Senior Team Lead	Female	White	United States	7	20%	Survey
Gigi	B2B Content Marketer	Female	White	United States	19	49%	Survey
Calvin	Operations Coordinator	Male	Black/African American	Canada	1	Unknown	Survey
Val	Technical Support Engineer	Female	White	France	4	13%	Survey
Jim	Senior Software Engineer	Male	Pakistani	United States	3	3%	Survey
Robert	Practice Lead	Male	White	United States	20	37%	Survey
Wesley	Software Architect	Male	White	United States	11	10%	Survey
Sam	Senior Customer Success Manager	Male	White	United States	3	10%	Survey
Anyia	Front End Engineer	Female	Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin	United States	1	10%	Survey
Holly	Customer Marketing Manager	Female	White	United States	1	3%	Survey
Nale	Senior Software Engineer	Male	Indian	United States	2	7%	Survey
Fantine	CFO	Female	Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin	China	10	30%	Survey
Reva	Customer Marketing Manager	Female	White	United States	2	2%	Survey

Darla	Marketing Specialist	Female	Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin	United States	10	20%	Survey
Livia	Head of Gaming	Female	White	Hungary	25	30%	Survey

Table 2

Forms of invisibility of virtual work before the pandemic

Task-related invisibility	<p>What are they doing? Like they're not as productive. They're probably watching TV. They're taking their kids to school, going to the doctor, grocery shopping in the middle of the day. Or how are they as productive? Right, because they know you won't be productive here at home. —Brody, Senior Director, Global Customer Success</p> <p>There's a misconception that remote employees don't work as hard or don't work as much. Because, you know, we can just go outside and go to the store, go to the coffee shop whenever we want. Internally, I would say that there's a misconception that we sleep in all day, and we work for like four hours, and then we play Xbox all day or whatever.—Johann, Channel Account Manager</p> <p>What happens is, when you work remotely, the only thing that's visible is your worksite. Nobody sees what time you're coming in, what time you're leaving, people see your work. —Thelma, Product Manager</p>
Skill-related invisibility	<p>I think that people are finally seeing how difficult it is to work remotely and not be able to just go up and have a face-to-face conversation with someone. Interpreting tone is the hardest part, and things can get lost in translation.—Simone, Visual Designer</p> <p>I had a lot of people who would come up and say, "It's really hard. I mean, how did you even manage all these years?" When you're actually on the other side, you realize that it's not the same. It has its own challenges. Working from home has its own challenges. —Thelma, Product Manager</p> <p>The biggest things that people generally have trouble with, and are exacerbated by the pandemic, are feelings of isolation and disconnect. Because it's very much a skill set to learn how to be remote and have relationships when you're talking to people you don't see in real life. So that learning curve is hard anyway.—Diana, Operations Manager</p>
Status-related invisibility	<p>We have had leadership come out and say they're not a fan of remote work, and they don't think it's the same. They don't like it when people work from home....Internally, historically, the culture has actually been very, like, it's kind of frowned upon, and like our president very openly was like, I don't like it, you know, you need to be in an office at your desk.—Zelda, Head of Global Community</p> <p>Remote work was not supported to an equal extent as other offices.</p>

	<p>Meetings were biased towards physically co-located participants (conference room with remote person as a giant floating head on a TV screen). Happy hour events and group volunteer events were not planned with a remote option built-in. We actually didn't even have a dedicated workplace experience manager like the offices.—Sue, Brand Marketing Senior Team Lead</p> <p>I think the biggest misconception is that we...as remote workers, you know, wear our athletic shorts every day, like that we're not as professional....Old fashioned CEO types might look at a remote employee and think...Why would I buy such expensive software from somebody like this?—Johann, Channel Account Manager</p>
Strategic invisibility	<p>I didn't want that [I was working remotely] to necessarily be known. I didn't want to, like, wave that flag...or for people to treat me differently....So I only communicated with those people that I was on direct projects with. It wasn't something that I publicized in meetings and I just kind of kept my head down and tried to continue to prove my work ethic—Helena, Senior Learning Experience Designer</p> <p>I only shared that I was remote if I was asked point-blank—Lloyd, Sales Manager</p> <p>I just didn't feel like I wanted to say anything about it to most of my team... I definitely feel like I was under the radar in that manner.—Annie, Senior IT Help Desk Technician</p>
Attempts to overcome invisibility	<p>I definitely overcompensated and tried to be...omnipresent...liking every page and commenting on things and being really active on Slack to sort of overcompensate and show like, 'Look, see, I'm still like, just as present virtually, through Confluence pages or JIRA tickets or Slack messages or emails. Just to sort of feel like, "Oh, yeah, she's still...very active and plugged in...Probably like 95% of it was for show."—Zelda, Head of Global Community</p> <p>I learned that the best way and probably the quickest way to build trust, at least at a micro level, is to respond as quickly as you can. —Nick, Strategic Growth Manager</p> <p>I sent out weekly progress reports because, in general, there was a lack of trust, just because I wasn't seen in person. When someone's not able to actually see you doing the work, it was hard to continue to prove that I was putting up the same amount of work and effort.—Helena, Senior Learning Experience Designer</p>

Table 3

Channels of heightened visibility during pandemic

Shared Awareness of Virtual Work (Task-Related)	<p>They realize now that there are real challenges associated with remote work, especially if you don't have the right mechanisms in place (e.g., distraction free home office, etc.) —Jim, Senior Software Engineer</p> <p>I would hear some snarky comments like I didn't really work or all I do is play video games all day, or something to that extent instead of actually working. But yeah, now [it's] a little different because of the pandemic. Everybody kind of gets it now. —Edmond, Social Media Manager</p> <p>Some people now wish they could work from home when they need to because they've never had that option before. They're starting to understand that it can be done, and people can be productive when working remotely—Anya, Front End Engineer</p>
Recognition of Expertise (Skill-Related)	<p>I would say I've emerged as like a cultural value to the organization....Our head of HR has actually said thank you to me. She's like, "Thank you. [You've] emerged as someone who has helped drive culture through all this craziness."—Brody, Senior Director, Global Customer Success</p> <p>I think that that DRI ["directly responsible individual"] role was sort of designated to me partially for....having that extra perspective of like, "Hey guys, we already do this, I work remote"—Annie, Senior IT Help Desk Technician</p> <p>I'm way more proud today. But mostly because I think my experience working remotely with [company], my experience, being very vocally advocating for remote work, has just let people in my organization know that they can count on me to contribute to everything I can during COVID.—Johann, Channel Account Manager</p>
Affiliation with Others in Organization (Status-Related)	<p>New things have been implemented that are beneficial for remote workers, that we didn't have before. This includes a monthly internet stipend, a one-time \$500 stipend for setting up your office, a corporate Grubhub account and open Zoom meeting rooms allowing us to do a company group lunch once a month, and of course every meeting is through video now, instead of just</p>

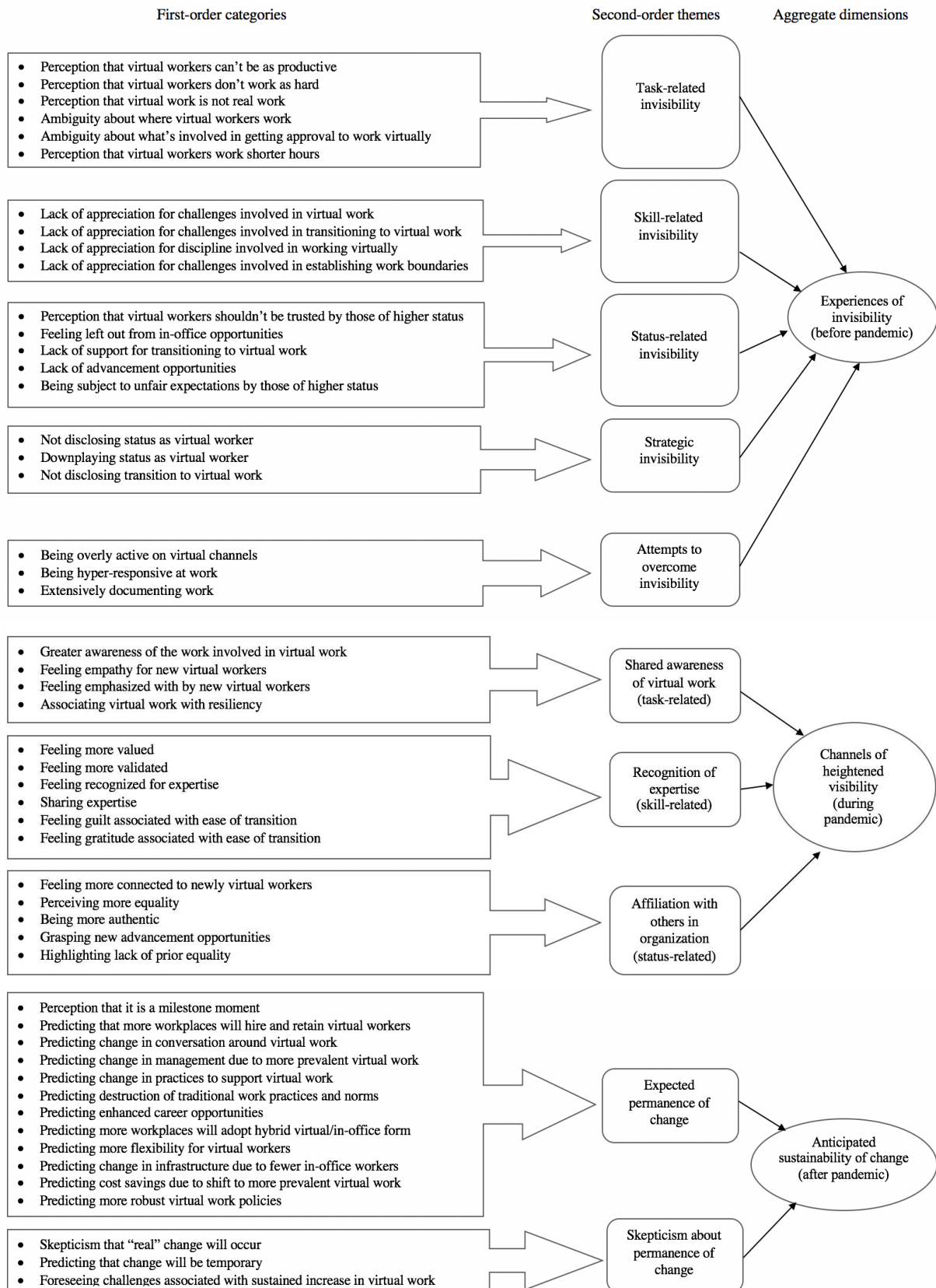
	<p>calls - which makes it easier to have interpersonal conversations. —Simone, Visual Designer</p> <p>Previously, if you were remote you would miss a team building activity or offsite. Now teams are virtually having team building events where everyone can join.—Holly, Customer Marketing Manager</p> <p>[My relationship with my manager] was very transactional... but post pandemic it actually has improved....We tend to talk more like overarching themes of like, how's the business going? What's the landscape of the marketplace? What's going on with our customers...I actually feel closer to him now than I did before. Because we actually talk more frequently.—Brody, Senior Director, Global Customer Success</p>
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Table 4

Anticipated sustainability of change after pandemic

<p>Expected permanence</p>	<p>I think it's forever going to change the American workplace—Spike, Senior Manager</p> <p>And now that companies have been forced into trying it...I think to a certain extent, like the toothpaste is never going to go back in the tube—Jesse, Staff-level Software Engineer</p> <p>Response to survey question—<i>Do you think that COVID-19 will have a long-lasting effect on the way other people in your organization value remote workers? Why or why not?</i>: Yes, I think now that everyone has had a chance to experience working remote, they will have more empathy for a remote worker and be more mindful to be more inclusive of them. I think they also realize how much you can get done in a day when you remove commute time.—Holly, Customer Marketing Manager</p> <p>Response to survey question—<i>Do you think that COVID-19 will have a long-lasting effect on the way other people in your organization value remote workers? Why or why not?</i> Absolutely. It's established and affirmed their value. The old thinking of “if you're not in your seat, you're not working” is long gone.—Steph, Senior Content Writer</p> <p>Of course, the world has changed, how we work has changed and many people will never return to the office nor should they.—Oliver, Senior Software Engineer</p>
<p>Skepticism about permanence</p>	<p>I'm not sure that I would say long-lasting. I think people will forget again and revert back to thinking that remote workers slack off all day. I would love it if companies saw how productive remote work can be and implemented that into their policies/procedures, but I'm not exactly holding my breath on that one.—Simone, Visual Designer</p> <p>The trauma that the COVID-19 created for some people who had to switch to remote working, and how people had to adjust, will be there for a while. Only people who have experienced the remote work will value it though. They will remember the good and bad things based on their own experience. I don't know how much they will value us, but at least they will be able to understand the successes and struggles a little better.—Val, Technical Support Engineer</p>

Figure 1

Data analysis structure

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview protocol

- Tell me about your role at your company.
- How often did you work remotely before the pandemic?
 - Why did you choose to work remotely?
 - Was your manager supportive of you working remotely before the pandemic? How so?
 - Were your team members supportive of you working remotely before the pandemic? How so?
 - How many of your team members also work remotely?
 - Does your manager work remotely?
- What does working remotely mean to you?
- How has the pandemic affected your work?
- How has the change to fully remote work affected you?
- What would you say has been the biggest change for you since your company transitioned to fully remote work?
- How much did you collaborate with members of your team before the pandemic?
- Has your relationship with your team changed since the pandemic began?
- Has your relationship with your manager changed since the pandemic began?
- Have you formed any new relationships with people at your company since the pandemic began that you don't think you would have otherwise formed?
- Have your roles and responsibilities changed since the pandemic started?
- Do you feel more recognized now since your company has transitioned to working remotely all the time?
- What's the biggest misconception about remote work, if any?
- Has the way you think about the meaning or purpose of your work changed since the pandemic? If so, how?
- Has your work identity—or the way you define yourself in your work role—changed since the shift to remote work? If so, how?
- Has your prior experience with remote work changed the way others in your organization see you or your role since the shift to remote work? If so, how?
- Has the shift to remote work created any new opportunities for you to utilize your prior experience with remote work?
- Have you been able to utilize your remote work experience to help others in your organization?
- As someone who was primarily working remotely before the pandemic, have there been any downsides or challenges for you now that everyone is working remotely?

Appendix B: Online Survey Questions

- In your experience, how was remote work perceived by other people in your organization before COVID-19?
- Do you feel COVID-19 has changed the way other people in your organization perceive remote workers? If so, in what way(s)?
- Do you think that COVID-19 will have a long-lasting effect on the way other people in your organization value remote workers? Why or why not?
- In what ways has your work changed since the pandemic occurred, if at all?
- In your experience, how do you think working remotely was perceived by people *outside* your organization (e.g., friends, family, the general public) before COVID-19?
- Do you feel COVID-19 has changed the way people *outside* your organization (e.g., friends, family, the general public) perceive remote workers? If so, in what way(s)?
- Do you think that COVID-19 will have a long-lasting effect on the way people *outside* your organization (e.g., friends, family, the general public) value remote workers? Why or why not?