

# *A diary study on location autonomy and employee mental distress: the mediating role of task-environment fit*

Article

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**A diary study on location autonomy and employee mental distress:  
The mediating role of task-environment fit**

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**A diary study on location autonomy and employee mental distress:****The mediating role of task-environment fit****Abstract**

**Purpose:** This study examines the role of location autonomy (i.e., autonomy over where to work) in shaping employee mental distress during their working days.

**Design/methodology/approach:** 316 employees from six organizations in the UK provided data for 4082 half-day sessions, over ten working days. Random intercept modelling is used to analyze half-day data nested within individuals.

**Findings:** Results show that location autonomy, beyond decision-making autonomy and work-method autonomy, is positively associated with the perception of task-environment fit, which in turn, contributes to lower mental distress during each half-day session. Results of supplementary analysis also show that location autonomy can contribute to higher absorption, task proficiency, and job satisfaction via task-environment fit during each half-day session.

**Originality:** This study reveals the importance and uniqueness of location autonomy in shaping employees' outcomes, offering implications for how organizations can use it in their work-life flexibility policies to support employee mental health.

**Keywords:** location autonomy, task-environment fit, mental health, diary study

## Location autonomy and employee mental distress 2

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3 Employees' mental health problems have become a prevalent issue at work. World  
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5 Health Organization's (2022) report shows that 15% of the world's working-age adults were  
6  
7 estimated to experience a mental disorder. Mental health problems undermine employees'  
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9 personal life and affect organizational productivity and healthcare costs for employers (e.g.,  
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11 Chisholm et al., 2016; World Health Organization, 2022). Organizations have recognized the  
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13 importance of addressing mental health and introduced human resources policies to support  
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15 employee well-being, such as offering mental health days as part of their leave policies,  
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17 providing access to counseling services, and offering training to support employees with mental  
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19 health concerns (e.g., Wu et al., 2021). While these human resources policies help employees  
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21 to access support for mental health issues, organizations can use human resources policies to  
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23 prevent employees from developing mental health issues. For example, Guest (2017) develops  
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25 a bundle of well-being-oriented HRM practices (e.g., training and development, work design,  
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27 employment security, and organizational support) for organizations to provide a positive social  
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29 and physical environment to promote employee well-being. However, the focus on the bundles  
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31 of HRM practices did not help us understand the function of a specific HRM practice (e.g.,  
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33 Kossek et al., in press), the knowledge we need to inform what to be included in the HRM  
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35 bundles for employee well-being.  
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42 In this study, we zoom into location autonomy, or the autonomy for employees to  
43  
44 choose where to perform their work. Location autonomy has long been offered as a work-life  
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46 flexibility policy (Kossek et al., in press; Spivack and Milosevic, 2018). However, the  
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48 mainstreaming of hybrid work practices following the COVID-19 pandemic has made it  
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50 accessible to a much wide range of employees. While job autonomy is a resource for employees  
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52 to cope with demands (e.g., Karasek, 1979; Wall et al., 1996) and is related to lower anxiety,  
53  
54 stress, and exhaustion in a meta-analysis (Humphrey et al., 2007), studies so far mainly focus  
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56 on other forms of autonomy, such as decision making autonomy (i.e., the freedom to make  
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## Location autonomy and employee mental distress 3

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3 decisions), work method autonomy (i.e., the freedom to determine which methods and  
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5 procedures are utilized to complete the work) and work scheduling autonomy (i.e., the freedom  
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7 to determine how to distribute working hours) (Humphrey et al., 2007; Morgeson and  
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9 Humphrey, 2006). Although location autonomy has been discussed in the teleworking (i.e.,  
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11 working away from the office setting) research (e.g., Allen et al., 2015; Bailey and Kurland,  
12  
13 2002), it has not been directly measured, making it hard to evaluate its impact on employees.  
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15 Moreover, teleworking mainly concerns with working away from the office setting and does  
16  
17 not consider autonomy in choosing a workspace within an office (e.g., quiet areas, open-plan  
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19 areas, or meeting rooms) (Davis et al., 2011; Wessels et al., 2019), which can also be a key  
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21 factor in shaping employees' daily work activities. So far Spivack and Milosevic (2018) have  
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23 measured location autonomy specifically and conducted a cross-sectional study of university  
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25 staff and students (n = 201). They reported that location autonomy contributes to intrinsic  
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27 motivation and enables individuals to choose work environments that can enhance productivity  
28  
29 and well-being, indirect evidence showing the potential link between location autonomy and  
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31 employee mental health. In this study, we seek to directly examine the role of location  
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33 autonomy in shaping employee mental health and offer a theoretical account to understand how  
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35 location autonomy could promote employee mental health.  
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42 Drawing on person-environment fit theory (e.g., Edwards et al., 1998; van Vianen, 2018)  
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44 and empirical research (e.g., Furnham and Schaeffer, 1984), which shows that fit between a  
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46 person and the environment can protect individual mental health, we argue that location  
47  
48 autonomy allows employees to choose an environment that fits their job tasks, which prevents  
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50 employees from experiencing mental distress. We, therefore, focus on task-environment fit, a  
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52 specific dimension of person-environment fit (Bäcklander and Richter, 2022; Hoendervanger  
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54 et al., 2019; Soriano et al., 2020) to explain why location autonomy can contribute to employee  
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56 mental health. Empirically, we conducted a diary study by asking employees from different  
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## Location autonomy and employee mental distress 4

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3 organizations to report their location autonomy and mental distress during each half-day over  
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5 ten working days. This diary study design helps us capture the employees' momentary  
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7 experiences regarding their choice of work environment and their mental health within a  
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9 working day. Bäcklander and Richter (2022, p.995) specifically call for diary methods to  
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11 explore TE fit by suggesting that "Task–Environment fit is suitable to examine over time and  
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13 at a short time scale, for example, using a diary method".  
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17 Our study brings three major contributions. First, deviating from an HRM bundling  
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19 approach (e.g., Cooper et al., 2019; Guest, 2017), our study highlights the value of studying  
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21 location autonomy as a separate, single concept to understand its role in protecting employee  
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23 mental health. Second, by zooming in on location autonomy, we highlight the need to  
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25 investigate location autonomy specifically and distinguish it from other types of workplace  
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27 autonomy. Finally, our focus on task-environment fit highlights the importance of fit between  
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29 tasks and the physical environment under the consideration of person-environment fit.  
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**Person-Environment Fit Theory and Task-Environment Fit**

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35 Person-environment fit refers to the match between individuals (e.g., abilities, needs)  
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37 and their wider environment (e.g. demands, supplies) (Edwards and Cooper, 1990; Kristof-  
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39 Brown et al., 2005). At its heart, person-environment fit theories argue that the level of fit  
40  
41 predicts individual outcomes better than the personal or environmental factors on their own  
42  
43 and that fit (or misfit) is more influential than the levels or direction of the contributing factors.  
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45 In work settings, person-environment fit theories suggests that when a worker's personal needs  
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47 match the environment then positive outcomes result, e.g., increased job satisfaction,  
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49 performance or mood (e.g., Caplan, 1987; Edwards and Cooper, 1990).  
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54 The concept of person-environment fit has also been applied to understand the reactions  
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56 of workers in different office environments, most notably open-plan offices (Appel-  
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58 Meulenbroek et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2011; Vischer, 1989; Wohlers and Hertel, 2017). The  
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## Location autonomy and employee mental distress 5

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3 emergence of Activity Based Workspaces (ABW) (offices providing a range of different  
4 workspaces suited to different activities) has led researchers to extend person-environment fit  
5 to incorporate the fit that workers gain by seeking out spaces appropriate to their task-at-hand  
6 (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2011) – task-environment fit (Wohlers and Hertel, 2017). Task-  
7 environment fit concerns the appropriateness of the physical space to support the current task,  
8 with the fit being influenced by the nature of the task, the environment and the individual's  
9 preferences and needs (Hoendervanger et al., 2019). Task-environment fit developed to  
10 accommodate the more diverse nature of the workspaces that workers may have access to and  
11 the opportunity that this provides individuals to develop a dynamic fit between their tasks and  
12 work environments throughout the day (Bäcklander and Richter, 2022). Recent empirical  
13 studies have applied task-environment fit to occupants of ABW offices and found support for  
14 task-environment fit being related to positive outcomes, including decreased distraction and  
15 increased workspace satisfaction (Gerdenitsch et al., 2018), performance (Soriano et al., 2020),  
16 team functioning (Bäcklander and Richter, 2022) and vitality (Wohlers et al., 2019).

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Finally, person-environment fit scholars have suggested the perceived fit is superior in outcome prediction to actual congruence between fit constituents, especially when personal decisions are involved (Cable and Judge, 1997; Kristof, 1996). This is more important in the task-environment fit situation, as past research has shown that workers vary, in their preferences of workspaces (Maher and von Hippel, 2005), tendency of using different spaces (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2011), and in space-switching behaviors (Hoendervanger et al., 2016). Thus, the perception of task-environment fit is used in our study to avoid inaccurate presumptions.

### Hypothesis Development

#### Location autonomy, task-environment fit and mental distress

## Location autonomy and employee mental distress 6

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3 Person-environment fit theory (e.g., Edwards et al., 1998; van Vianen, 2018) suggests  
4 that people tend to seek out environments that match their own characteristics or needs. This  
5 is the case because individuals “prefer consistency, wish to exert control over their lives and to  
6 reduce uncertainty, have a need to belong, and want happiness and life satisfaction”(van Vianen,  
7 2018: 77). Individuals also actively seek opportunities to resolve misfit by changing their  
8 environment, leading to improved fit in its success (Follmer et al., 2018). Due to this general  
9 tendency, we argue that as for work environment specifically, individuals will seek fit between  
10 their tasks and work environment to master their work activities and deliver performance  
11 effectively. Having autonomy in choosing where to work therefore can thus contribute to  
12 higher task-environment fit for two reasons.  
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26 First, when employees have higher location autonomy, they can choose where to work  
27 based on tasks they have, resulting in higher task-environment fit due to their space use  
28 behavior. Several studies have provided findings to support this reasoning. A study reports that  
29 when workers autonomously use spaces that facilitate intensive communication for  
30 communicative tasks, they are likely to perceive task-environment fit (Wohlers et al., 2019).  
31 Similarly, research on activity-based working (ABW) and activity-based flexible offices (A-  
32 FO) suggested that the autonomy over different workspaces in an A-FO could result in better  
33 fit between task and space as employees are able to choose from various types of office spaces  
34 to best suit their job at hand (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2011; Wohlers and Hertel, 2017). In  
35 the context of office working, workers who are provided a variety of workspaces are seen to  
36 make self-determined use to improve task-environment fit (Eismann et al., 2022). Second,  
37 psychologically, it is also possible that individuals may justify their choice of environment post  
38 hoc as autonomous and attribute person-environment fit to the decision (Aday and Schmader,  
39 2019). People rationalize automatic or unconscious decisions as volitional and freely chosen,  
40 either anticipatory or in retrospect (Cooper, 2007; Kay et al., 2002). This activated feeling of  
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## Location autonomy and employee mental distress 7

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3 authenticity in their perceived autonomy of situational selection can subjectively signal the  
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5 perceived fit. As such, location autonomy will contribute to a strong sense of task-environment  
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7 fit due to opportunities to use different spaces and associated psychological justification.  
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10 Next, we propose that a sense of task-environment fit can prevent employees from  
11  
12 mental distress. Employees experiencing a higher sense of task-environment fit are less likely  
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14 to experience mental distress at work because they do not need to worry about being in an  
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16 inappropriate workspace that can interfere with their work, or which lacks essential equipment  
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18 for carrying out their tasks. When there is a mismatch between the workspace and tasks to be  
19  
20 performed, employees can feel anxious by not knowing whether they can deliver the tasks on  
21  
22 time or at the expected standard due to the constraints of the space. They are also likely to feel  
23  
24 depressed by seeing how their performance is undermined due to being in an inappropriate  
25  
26 space for the tasks. As such, we expect that task-environment fit will prevent employees from  
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28 experiencing mental distress at work. Following the conventional approach to capture  
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30 psychological wellbeing at work (e.g., Meier et al., 2014), we use feeling depressed and  
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32 anxious at work as an indicator for mental distress.  
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37 Hypothesis 1: Location autonomy is positively related to task-environment fit, which  
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39 in turn, is negatively related to mental distress. Task-environment fit mediates the  
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41 relationship between location autonomy and mental distress.  
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### 44 **Hypotheses for supplementary examinations**

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46 As mentioned earlier, location autonomy has been rarely examined directly. While we  
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48 aim to examine its role on employee mental health in this study, we also seek to provide more  
49  
50 empirical evidence to assess its impact on employees. To extend research by Spivack and  
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52 Milosevic (2018), we examine the function of location autonomy on employee attitudes and  
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54 performance via task-environment fit from the same person-environment fit perspective. We  
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## Location autonomy and employee mental distress 8

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3 focus on absorption and task proficiency as indicators of work attitudes and job performance  
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5 respectively.  
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8 Absorption at work is a cognitive state of engagement (Fleck and Inceoglu, 2010),  
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10 having full concentration on a task and the sense that time has moved quickly (Bakker et al.,  
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12 2008). Location autonomy can contribute to absorption via task-environment fit because  
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14 employees can avoid distractions and interruptions (Zamani and Gum, 2019). They do not need  
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16 to spend time dealing with demands and requests from others in the same environment that are  
17  
18 not relevant to their tasks. Employees do not need to find ways to accommodate the work  
19  
20 environment before working on their tasks when they work in an environment that fits their  
21  
22 work activities. Empirically, Soriano et al. (2021) reported that office type–work pattern fit, a  
23  
24 specific form of task-environment fit between work pattern (defined as task complexity and  
25  
26 interactivity required) and office space, is positively related to flow experience indicated by  
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28 being engaged and focused. In sum, we expect that location autonomy can contribute to task-  
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30 environment fit, which in turn, contributes to higher levels of absorption.  
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35 Hypothesis 2: Task-environment fit mediates the relationship between location  
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37 autonomy and absorption.  
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40 Location autonomy can contribute to task proficiency (i.e., performance on core tasks  
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42 that employees are required to complete) (Griffin et al., 2007) via task-environment fit. The  
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44 positive link between task-environment fit and task proficiency is a result of the environment  
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46 facilitating key work behaviours in specific locations, for example, collaboration is easier  
47  
48 within accessible, open spaces (Zamani and Gum, 2019). Supporting this reasoning, within a  
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50 working sample, a greater level of fit in a new office promoted higher performance (Bankins  
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52 et al., 2021), while Hoendervanger et al. (2019) found that task-environment fit promoted  
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54 performance on a cognitive task within a population of students in virtual reality simulations.  
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## Location autonomy and employee mental distress 9

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3 Soriano et al. (2021) reported that office type–work pattern fit contribute to in-role performance  
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5 indirectly via flow experience.  
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8 Hypothesis 3: Task-environment fit mediates the relationship between location  
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10 autonomy and task proficiency.  
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13 Finally, to offer more evidence on the link between location autonomy and wellbeing  
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15 at work, we additionally include job satisfaction, “a pleasurable or positive emotional state  
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17 resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences” (Locke, 1976: , p. 1304), as a  
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19 positive indicator. It captures the cognitive element of psychological wellbeing (Diener et al.,  
20  
21 2003) but in a job-related context (Warr, 1999). Job satisfaction is engendered when employees  
22  
23 reduce the gap to achieve what they seek to accomplish (Locke, 1969; Locke, 1976). We  
24  
25 propose that location autonomy can contribute to job satisfaction via task-environment fit. This  
26  
27 is the case because employees are likely to engage in and deliver the task in the space where  
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29 they are in and enjoy the positive experiences and achievement from the work activities.  
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31 Employees who are in the right place to perform tasks they need to accomplish (i.e.,  
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33 experiencing higher task-environment fit) will experience higher job satisfaction because they  
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35 can deliver the tasks and achieve the goal more easily.  
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40 Hypothesis 4: Task-environment fit mediates the relationship between location  
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42 autonomy and job satisfaction.  
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## 45 Method

### 46 Sample and Procedure

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48 We invited employees in six UK organizations to complete the diary surveys between  
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50 October and November 2021. A time when each organization encouraged hybrid working and  
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52 a return to the office. Three organizations were from the private sector (one each from  
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54 healthcare, construction and consultancy) and three from the public sector (local government  
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56 and healthcare). Four organizations employed less than 500 individuals, one employed around  
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## Location autonomy and employee mental distress 10

7,000 in the UK and the last employed over 15,000. Access was granted to selected departments where employees occupied job roles consisting of desk or office-based work, allowing for varying degrees of location autonomy across the sample. No frontline workers were included in the present study, and there were no legal restrictions for working on site or in an office. We invited employees within these departments or teams to take part via internal emails and adverts. The diary period lasted 10 working days, with participants receiving email reminders at 11am and 4pm to complete a survey. Participants received a £15 shopping voucher upon completion of the diary period. Our final sample consisted of 316 employees (male: 136, female: 178; third gender: 2) from six organizations (ranged from 26 to 79 employees from each organization). They altogether provided data for 4082 half-day sessions. The mean age is 38.47 (range 19 to 64; SD = 10.66). They completed between one and 20 surveys. Among those 316 employees, 228 participants provided data over all 10 days.

**Measures**

**Within-individual level variables.** At each half-day survey, participants indicated their *location autonomy* “Were you able to choose where you worked in the last few hours?” (1 = yes, 0 = no). They then rated agreement to three items on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): *task-environment fit*: “My current working space is suitable for the requirements of my current job tasks” (Hoendervanger et al., 2019: , adapted to be applicable across work and home environments) and *mental distress* on two items, depressed and anxious, based on their experiences over the last few hours (from 1 = very rarely or never to 5 = very often or always). A mean score of the two items was created to indicate mental distress because the two ratings were highly related ( $r = .53$ ).

For controls, we included: *time* (i.e., 0 = morning; 1 = afternoon); *planned work*: “Considering the job tasks you’ve completed over the last few hours, were they mostly planned or unplanned/unscheduled?” (1 = not planned at all; 5 = fully planned); *decision-making*

## Location autonomy and employee mental distress 11

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3 *autonomy*: “In the last few hours, were you able to decide what job activities or tasks you  
4 completed?” (Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006) and; *work-method autonomy*: “In the last few  
5 hours, were you able to decide how you completed job activities or tasks?” (Morgeson and  
6 Humphrey, 2006) (both measured from 1 = not at all to 5 = completely). We asked participants  
7 to report their *physical comfort* with the agreement: “Over the last few hours, I have felt  
8 physically comfortable within my working location” on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5  
9 (strongly agree). Finally, we asked participants to report their *workplace* by indicating whether  
10 they were working in office (=1), or home and other places (=0), during each half-day session.

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21 We measured variables for supplementary analysis, including *absorption*: “I was  
22 immersed in my work” (Schaufeli et al., 2019), *task proficiency*: “I have fulfilled all of my job  
23 tasks/requirements” (Reizer et al., 2019) and *job satisfaction*: “Thinking of the last few hours,  
24 how satisfied are you with your job?” (from 1 = extremely dissatisfied to 5 = extremely  
25 satisfied).

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33 **Between-individual level variables.** We included several control variables at the  
34 between-individual level, including gender (male, female, or third gender), age (in years),  
35 tenure (in years), education (1 = Primary Education; 2 = Secondary Education; 3 = A-Levels;  
36 4 = Vocational Qualification; 5 = Undergraduate Degree; 6 = Postgraduate Degree; 7 =  
37 Doctorate Degree), managerial position (1 = yes, 0 = no), disability status (1 = yes, 0 = no),  
38 ethnic minority (1 = yes, 0 = no) and work types (1 = full-time; 0 = part-time).

## 46 47 48 Results

### 49 Hypothesis testing

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51 Table 1 presents basic descriptive statistics. While we had three responses for gender  
52 and created two dummy variables altogether (see Table 1), we only included one dummy  
53 variable in analyses because the two dummy variables were highly correlated ( $r = .98$ ). We  
54 estimated random intercept models using MIXED MODELS in SPSS to predict task-

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environment fit and mental distress at the within-individual level. We used a maximum likelihood estimator for estimation and all models were tested using half-day data nested within individuals.

Table 2 presents the results of analyses in which we used control variables and location autonomy as predictors. We found that higher location autonomy ( $B = .09$ ,  $S.E. = .03$ ,  $p < .01$ ) contributes to higher task-environment fit. Location autonomy, however, did not predict mental distress. Next, we used the same control variables, location autonomy and task-environment fit to predict mental distress. Table 3 presents the results. We found that higher task-environment fit contributes to lower mental distress ( $B = -.08$ ,  $S.E. = .01$ ,  $p < .01$ ). We then calculated mediation effects of task-environment fit on the relationships between location autonomy and mental distress using the RMediation package developed by Tofighi and MacKinnon (2011), which estimates a mediation effect based on the distribution-of-the-product method. Results show that task-environment fit has a significant mediation effect on the relationships of location autonomy with mental distress (mediation effect =  $-.007$ ,  $S.E. = .003$ ,  $95\%CI = [-.013, -.002]$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1.

### Supplementary analyses

We conducted the same analysis with the other outcome variables. As shown in Table 2, location autonomy did not predict absorption, job performance or job satisfaction. As reported in Table 3, higher task-environment fit contributes to higher absorption ( $B = .17$ ,  $S.E. = .02$ ,  $p < .01$ ), higher task proficiency ( $B = .10$ ,  $S.E. = .02$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and higher job satisfaction ( $B = .14$ ,  $S.E. = .01$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Task-environment fit has a significant mediation effect on the relationships of location autonomy with absorption (mediation effect =  $.015$ ,  $S.E. = .005$ ,  $95\%CI = [.005, .027]$ ), task proficiency (mediation effect =  $.009$ ,  $S.E. = .004$ ,  $95\%CI = [.003, .017]$ ), and job satisfaction (mediation effect =  $.013$ ,  $S.E. = .004$ ,  $95\%CI = [.004, .021]$ ), supporting Hypothesis 2, 3 and 4.

## Discussion

Our study makes several contributions. First, although location autonomy has been used as a work-life flexibility policy, studies on work-life flexibility policies typically examined it together with other policies under a broad conceptualization or within a policies bundle (Kossek et al., in press). By examining location autonomy specifically, we are thus able to demonstrate its value for organizations to promote employee mental health, which also provides evidence to support including location autonomy as an element within integrated well-being-oriented HRM practices. Moreover, our study offers a different account to explain why location autonomy can help protect employee mental health and contribute to other positive outcomes (i.e., absorption, task proficiency, and job satisfaction). Location autonomy, like other work-life flexibility HRM policies, are usually discussed from a boundary control perspective (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek et al., in press), as it helps employees to manage transitions between different roles and thus likely to prevent them from distress due to inter-role conflict (such as work vs. family roles). For example, employees having location autonomy are also likely to avoid stressors in balancing roles in different life domains, such as work and family duties, because they can decide where to work to help them better fulfill their duties across different roles. In contrast to this boundary control perspective, our study highlights that location autonomy can help prevent employee distress by increasing the fit between their tasks and the work environment, facilitating an intra-job-role transition across tasks and work environment.

Second, to job design research, our study highlights the need to consider location autonomy as an important, different type of workplace autonomy. We found that decision-making, work-method and location autonomy have differential predictive effects on different outcome variables in Table 2. In brief, location autonomy only predicts task-environment fit, while decision-making autonomy only predicts mental distress and job satisfaction, and work-

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3 method autonomy predicts all outcome variables. This finding reveals that different forms of  
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5 autonomy have their own unique effects on employee outcomes. As such, managers should  
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7 consider how to design jobs with different levels of autonomy in different aspects to achieve  
8  
9 specific focus. For example, our finding suggests that both work-method autonomy and  
10  
11 location autonomy can help promote task-environment fit. We thus argue that the direct  
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13 approach to promote task-environment fit is to allow employees to choose where they work so  
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15 that they can match their tasks and work environment easily. However, if location autonomy  
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17 is not feasible (e.g., limited office space, customer requirements, data confidentiality), allowing  
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19 employees to determine work methods for their tasks can be an alternative approach to promote  
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21 task-environment fit. Meanwhile, managers should not rely on granting more decision-making  
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23 autonomy if the goal is to promote employees' task-environment fit.  
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29 Third, our study highlights the need to consider task-environment fit in human  
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31 resources management practices. The perspective of person-environment fit and different  
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33 concepts of fit (e.g., person-job fit) has been applied in human resources management research  
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35 (e.g., Boon et al., 2011; Werbel and DeMarie, 2005), but task-environment fit has rarely been  
36  
37 considered. Although task-environment fit does not directly consider individual attributes, it can  
38  
39 affect how individuals evaluate their person-job fit in two aspects. First, with regards needs-  
40  
41 supplies fit (the fit between what a job provides and what the individual needs), task-  
42  
43 environment fit could influence how employees evaluate their needs-supplies fit. For example,  
44  
45 employees may perceive lower needs-supplies fit when they find that they cannot do their work  
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47 effectively in a provided or assigned workspace. Second, within demands-abilities fit (the fit  
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49 between the individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities and the demands of carrying out the  
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51 job), task-environment fit could also play a role. For example, employees would perceive  
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53 higher demands when completing tasks in workspaces that do not fit the tasks and would need  
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55 to see if they are still capable of performing the tasks despite the unfavorable workspaces.  
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## Location autonomy and employee mental distress 15

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3 Accordingly, task-environment fit can contribute to creating better person-job fit specifically  
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5 or person-environment fit broadly.  
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8 This study provides several insights for organizational practices. First, organizations  
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10 should consider how they facilitate location autonomy across their workforce. While job  
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12 autonomy has been recommended in the work environment for some time (e.g., Humphrey et  
13  
14 al., 2007; Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006), our findings suggest that employees can also  
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16 benefit specifically from autonomy over where they work. Nevertheless, we only observed an  
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18 indirect, but not a direct effect, of location autonomy on mental distress via task-environment  
19  
20 fit. The finding suggests that a sense of task-environment fit is needed for employees to enjoy  
21  
22 the benefit of location autonomy on mental health. This means that granting location autonomy  
23  
24 will not necessarily help employee mental health and other examined outcomes, if employees  
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26 do not use such freedom to perform tasks in a work environment that fits better to the tasks.  
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28 Hence, our study suggests that location autonomy can protect employee mental health and  
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30 bring positive outcomes, but only when employees can utilize it to improve their task-  
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32 environment fit.  
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38 Following the above point, we recognized that the perceived task-environment fit is  
39  
40 likely to vary according to individual preferences, job roles, and services. This has implications  
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42 for the way that organizations design policy and practice on aspects such as hybrid or remote  
43  
44 working (Davis et al., 2022). We suggest that our findings might therefore lend themselves to  
45  
46 ‘freedom within a framework’, rather than ‘fixed rules’. Even in job roles and environments  
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48 where location autonomy is possible, HR professionals will also need to work carefully to  
49  
50 understand the wider trade-offs that offering location autonomy may necessitate. For instance,  
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52 given its individualised nature, it is possible that employees who need to work together, may  
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54 have different space preferences. Without careful management, this could lead to negative job  
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## Location autonomy and employee mental distress 16

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3 crafting behaviours (Tims et al., 2015), or have undesirable ramifications for the wider working  
4 environment and culture, for instance, by encouraging silo working (DeShon et al., 2004).  
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8 This study has several limitations. Our findings should be cross validated in a large,  
9 nationally representative sample for generalizability. Meanwhile, our study does not provide  
10 evidence supporting the casual relationships between variables. To establish casual effects of  
11 location autonomy on employee outcomes, experimental studies are required. We used single  
12 item measures to reduce participants' time burden and maximize response rates, as is typical  
13 in diary studies. Ideally, multiple item measures would be employed in future. In addition,  
14 participants reported all variables in each session, which can introduce common method bias.  
15 Future studies could include supervisor-report outcomes to avoid these biases. Finally, our  
16 study only observes the employees' perspective to understand their experiences of location  
17 autonomy and outcomes. Future studies are encouraged to examine cost and benefits of  
18 location autonomy from a manager's perspective to better understand how organization can  
19 better implement and utilize location autonomy.  
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**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables.

|  | M                        | SD    | Correlations |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
|--|--------------------------|-------|--------------|-----|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--|
|  |                          |       | 1            | 2   | 3      | 4      | 5      | 6      | 7      | 8      | 9      |  |
|  | Between-individual level |       |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 1. Age (years)                                     | 37.73                    | 10.73 | 1            | .03 | -.01   | -.14** | .10**  | -.10** | .60**  | .37**  | -.18** |  |
| 2. Gender 1 (male =1; female, or third gender = 0) | 0.44                     | 0.50  |              | 1   | -.98** | .07**  | -.12** | -.06** | .09**  | .06**  | .22**  |  |
| 3. Gender 2 (female =1; male, or third gender = 0) | 0.55                     | 0.50  |              |     | 1      | -.08** | .09**  | .06**  | -.08** | -.04** | -.23** |  |
| 4. Education <sup>a</sup>                          | 5.31                     | 1.10  |              |     |        | 1      | .04**  | .07**  | -.13** | .11**  | -0.02  |  |
| 5. Disability (yes = 1; no = 0)                    | 0.08                     | 0.28  |              |     |        |        | 1      | .02    | -.05** | -.05** | -0.03  |  |
| 6. Ethnic minority (yes = 1; no = 0)               | 0.06                     | 0.24  |              |     |        |        |        | 1      | -.12** | -.05** | .07**  |  |
| 7. Tenure (years)                                  | 7.20                     | 7.49  |              |     |        |        |        |        | 1      | .31**  | -.20** |  |
| 8. Manager (yes = 1; no = 0)                       | 0.42                     | 0.49  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        | 1      | -.08** |  |
| 9. Work type (full-time = 1; par-time = 0)         | 0.86                     | 0.35  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1      |  |
|  | Within-individual level  |       |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 10. Time (morning = 0; afternoon = 1)              | 0.48                     | 0.50  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 11. Workplace (office =1; home or others = 0)      | 0.27                     | 0.44  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 12. Comfort  | 4.34                     | 0.86  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 13. Decision-making autonomy                       | 3.84                     | 1.14  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 14. Work-method autonomy                           | 4.09                     | 1.06  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 15. Planned work                                   | 3.80                     | 0.89  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 16. Location autonomy                              | 0.87                     | 0.40  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 17. Task-environment fit                           | 4.44                     | 0.78  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 18. Absorption                                     | 3.95                     | 0.93  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 19. Job satisfaction                               | 4.09                     | 0.80  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 20. Task proficiency                               | 3.78                     | 1.02  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |
| 21. Mental distress                                | 1.55                     | 0.75  |              |     |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |  |

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . Correlations in upper triangular are correlations at the between-individual level ( $n = 316$ , except for mental distress,  $n = 315$  due to a missing value from a participant) among all variables. Within-individual level variables ( $n = 4082$ , except for mental distress,  $n = 4072$  due to missing data on 10 sessions from different participants) were aggregated to the between-individual level for the calculation. Correlations in lower triangular are correlations among variables at the within-individual level only.

<sup>a</sup> Education: 1 = Primary Education; 2 = Secondary Education; 3 = A-Levels; 4 = Vocational Qualification; 5 = Undergraduate Degree; 6 = Postgraduate Degree; 7 = Doctorate Degree.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables (cont.)

|  | Correlations |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
|--|--------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
|  | 10           | 11     | 12     | 13     | 14     | 15     | 16     | 17     | 18     | 19     | 20     | 21     |
| 1. Age (years)                                     | .01          | -.02   | .08**  | .15**  | .15**  | -.03*  | .09**  | .09**  | .25**  | .02    | -.04** | -.09   |
| 2. Gender 1 (male =1; female, or third gender = 0) | -.01         | .14**  | -.11** | .01    | .05**  | .03    | -.02   | -.10** | .00    | -.03*  | -.00   | -.07   |
| 3. Gender 2 (female =1; male, or third gender = 0) | .01          | -.13** | .12**  | -.01   | -.04** | -.04** | .02    | .11**  | .02    | .02    | .02    | .06    |
| 4. Education <sup>a</sup>                          | .00          | -.03   | -.10** | -.02   | -.01   | .02    | .12**  | -.07** | -.02   | -.08** | -.05** | -.01   |
| 5. Disability (yes = 1; no = 0)                    | .01          | -.03   | -.07** | -.03   | -.03*  | .02    | -.14** | -.01   | .00    | .04*   | .05**  | .00    |
| 6. Ethnic minority (yes = 1; no = 0)               | .01          | .03    | .08**  | .04*   | .06**  | .03*   | -.07** | .07**  | .00    | .01    | .08**  | -.01   |
| 7. Tenure (years)                                  | .00          | -.07** | .02    | .11**  | .11**  | -.08** | .06**  | .00    | .07**  | .00    | -.07** | -.06   |
| 8. Manager (yes = 1; no = 0)                       | .02          | .03    | -.04** | .06**  | .10**  | .00    | .04*   | -.05** | .13**  | .03*   | -.07** | -.02   |
| 9. Work type (full-time = 1; par-time = 0)         | .01          | .06**  | .01    | .02    | .02    | .10**  | -.05** | -.02   | -.05** | -.01   | .07**  | .01    |
| 10. Time (morning = 0; afternoon = 1)              | 1            | --     | --     | --     | --     | --     | --     | --     | --     | --     | --     | --     |
| 11. Workplace (office =1; home or others = 0)      | .00          | 1      | -.01   | -.10** | -.03   | -.04** | -.05** | -.09** | .05**  | .00    | -.06** | .00    |
| 12. Comfort  | -.01         | -.02   | 1      | .23**  | .29**  | .19**  | .10**  | .74**  | .35**  | .37**  | .35**  | -.34** |
| 13. Decision-making autonomy                       | -.01         | -.05** | .16**  | 1      | .85**  | .49**  | .30**  | .24**  | .26**  | .37**  | .27**  | -.21** |
| 14. Work-method autonomy                           | .00          | -.03*  | .18**  | .73**  | 1      | .39**  | .25**  | .31**  | .30**  | .38**  | .27**  | -.24** |
| 15. Planned work                                   | -.02         | .02    | .08**  | .29**  | .20**  | 1      | .10**  | .12**  | .21**  | .31**  | .32**  | -.14*  |
| 16. Location autonomy                              | -.01         | -.03   | .10**  | .21**  | .19**  | .03    | 1      | .06**  | .04*   | .06**  | -.07** | -.03   |
| 17. Task-environment fit                           | .01          | .07**  | .49**  | .16**  | .20**  | .07**  | .07**  | 1      | .41**  | .40**  | .37**  | -.32** |
| 18. Absorption                                     | .01          | .00    | .21**  | .15**  | .20**  | .20**  | .02    | .26**  | 1      | .45**  | .41**  | -.33** |
| 19. Job satisfaction                               | -.03         | .02    | .24**  | .27**  | .29**  | .22**  | .04*   | .29**  | .37**  | 1      | .37**  | -.49** |
| 20. Task proficiency                               | .03          | -.03   | .19**  | .18**  | .18**  | .25**  | -.03*  | .22**  | .34**  | .31**  | 1      | -.30** |
| 21. Mental distress                                | .01          | .00    | -.22** | -.17** | -.19** | -.12** | .00    | -.24** | -.26** | -.42** | -.27** | 1      |

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . Correlations in upper triangular are correlations at the between-individual level ( $n = 316$ , except for mental distress,  $n = 315$  due to a missing value from a participant) among all variables. Within-individual level variables ( $n = 4082$ , except for mental distress,  $n = 4072$  due to missing data on 10 sessions from different participants) were aggregated to the between-individual level for the calculation. Correlations in lower triangular are correlations among variables at the within-individual level only.

<sup>a</sup> Education: 1 = Primary Education; 2 = Secondary Education; 3 = A-Levels; 4 = Vocational Qualification; 5 = Undergraduate Degree; 6 = Postgraduate Degree; 7 = Doctorate Degree.

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**Table 2.** Coefficients of random intercept models (n = 4082).

| Independent/Dependent variables                  | Task-environment fit |      | Mental distress <sup>b</sup> |      | Absorption |      | Task proficiency |      | Job satisfaction |      |
|--|----------------------|------|------------------------------|------|------------|------|------------------|------|------------------|------|
|  | B                    | S.E. | B                            | S.E. | B          | S.E. | B                | S.E. | B                | S.E. |
| Intercept  | 2.46                 | 0.18 | 2.50                         | 0.26 | 1.79       | 0.23 | 2.29             | 0.30 | 2.85             | 0.24 |
| <b>Between-individual level predictors</b>       |                      |      |                              |      |            |      |                  |      |                  |      |
| Age (years)                                      | .00                  | .00  | .00                          | .00  | .01        | .00  | .00              | .00  | .00              | .00  |
| Gender 2 (female = 1; male, or third gender = 0) | .06                  | .05  | .10                          | .07  | .01        | .06  | .06              | .08  | .02              | .06  |
| Education <sup>a</sup>                           | -.01                 | .02  | -.01                         | .03  | .01        | .03  | -.04             | .03  | -.03             | .03  |
| Disability (yes = 1; no = 0)                     | .02                  | .08  | .01                          | .12  | -.06       | .10  | .10              | .13  | .11              | .11  |
| Ethnic minority (yes = 1; no = 0)                | .02                  | .09  | -.03                         | .13  | -.01       | .11  | .05              | .15  | -.06             | .12  |
| Tenure (years)                                   | .00                  | .00  | .00                          | .01  | -.01       | .00  | -.01             | .01  | .00              | .01  |
| Manager (yes = 1; no = 0)                        | -.06                 | .05  | .01                          | .07  | .09        | .06  | -.07             | .08  | .05              | .07  |
| Work type (full-time = 1; part-time = 0)         | -.04                 | .06  | .04                          | .10  | -.09       | .08  | .07              | .10  | .01              | .09  |
| <b>Within-individual level predictors</b>        |                      |      |                              |      |            |      |                  |      |                  |      |
| Time (morning = 0; afternoon = 1)                | .02                  | .02  | .01                          | .01  | .02        | .02  | .08**            | .02  | -.03             | .02  |
| Workplace (office = 1; home or others = 0)       | .23**                | .02  | -.04*                        | .02  | -.03       | .03  | -.02             | .03  | .07**            | .02  |
| Comfort  | .34**                | .01  | -.08**                       | .01  | .15**      | .02  | .10**            | .02  | .11**            | .01  |
| Decision-making autonomy                         | .01                  | .01  | -.02*                        | .01  | -.03       | .02  | .03              | .02  | .06**            | .01  |
| Work-method autonomy                             | .06**                | .02  | -.03**                       | .01  | .13**      | .02  | .06**            | .02  | .09**            | .02  |
| Planned work                                     | .02                  | .01  | -.06**                       | .01  | .20**      | .02  | .21**            | .02  | .10**            | .01  |
| Location autonomy                                | .09**                | .03  | .03                          | .03  | -.04       | .04  | -.02             | .04  | -.03             | .03  |
| <b>Random effects</b>                            |                      |      |                              |      |            |      |                  |      |                  |      |
| Residual   | .35                  | .01  | .21                          | .01  | .57        | .01  | .55              | .01  | .30              | .01  |
| Intercept  | .11                  | .01  | .33                          | .03  | .19        | .02  | .37              | .03  | .27              | .02  |

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .<sup>a</sup> Education: 1 = Primary Education; 2 = Secondary Education; 3 = A-Levels; 4 = Vocational Qualification; 5 = Undergraduate Degree; 6 = Postgraduate Degree; 7 = Doctorate Degree.<sup>b</sup> Analysis of mental distress were based on 4072 sessions due to missing data on 10 sessions from different participants.

**Table 3.** Coefficients of random intercept models (n = 4082).

| Independent/Dependent variables                  | Task-environment fit |      | Mental distress <sup>b</sup> |      | Absorption |      | Task proficiency |      | Job satisfaction |      |
|--|----------------------|------|------------------------------|------|------------|------|------------------|------|------------------|------|
|  | B                    | S.E. | B                            | S.E. | B          | S.E. | B                | S.E. | B                | S.E. |
| Intercept  | 2.46                 | 0.18 | 2.69                         | .26  | 1.36       | 0.23 | 2.03             | 0.30 | 2.50             | 0.24 |
| <b>Between-individual level predictors</b>       |                      |      |                              |      |            |      |                  |      |                  |      |
| Age (years)                                      | .00                  | .00  | .00                          | .00  | .01        | .00  | .00              | .00  | .00              | .00  |
| Gender 2 (female = 1; male, or third gender = 0) | .06                  | .05  | .10                          | .07  | -.01       | .06  | .05              | .08  | .01              | .06  |
| Education <sup>a</sup>                           | -.01                 | .02  | -.01                         | .03  | .01        | .02  | -.03             | .03  | -.03             | .03  |
| Disability (yes = 1; no = 0)                     | .02                  | .08  | .01                          | .12  | -.06       | .10  | .09              | .13  | .10              | .11  |
| Ethnic minority (yes = 1; no = 0)                | .02                  | .09  | -.03                         | .13  | -.01       | .11  | .05              | .15  | -.06             | .12  |
| Tenure (years)                                   | .00                  | .00  | .00                          | .01  | -.01       | .00  | -.01             | .01  | .00              | .00  |
| Manager (yes = 1; no = 0)                        | -.06                 | .05  | .01                          | .07  | .10        | .06  | -.07             | .08  | .06              | .07  |
| Work type (full-time = 1; part-time = 0)         | -.04                 | .06  | .03                          | .09  | -.08       | .08  | .08              | .10  | .02              | .09  |
| <b>Within-individual level predictors</b>        |                      |      |                              |      |            |      |                  |      |                  |      |
| Time (morning = 0; afternoon = 1)                | .02                  | .02  | .01                          | .01  | .01        | .02  | .08**            | .02  | -.03*            | .02  |
| Workplace (office = 1; home or others = 0)       | .23**                | .02  | -.02                         | .02  | -.07*      | .03  | -.04             | .03  | .03              | .02  |
| Comfort  | .34**                | .01  | -.05**                       | .01  | .09**      | .02  | .06**            | .02  | .07**            | .01  |
| Decision-making autonomy                         | .01                  | .01  | -.02*                        | .01  | -.03       | .02  | .03              | .02  | .05**            | .01  |
| Work-method autonomy                             | .06**                | .02  | -.03*                        | .01  | .12**      | .02  | .05*             | .02  | .08**            | .02  |
| Planned work                                     | .02                  | .01  | -.05**                       | .01  | .19**      | .02  | .21**            | .02  | .10**            | .01  |
| Location autonomy                                | .09**                | .03  | .04                          | .03  | -.06       | .04  | -.03             | .04  | -.04             | .03  |
| Task-environment fit                             |                      |      | -.08**                       | .01  | .17**      | .02  | .10**            | .02  | .14**            | .01  |
| <b>Random effects</b>                            |                      |      |                              |      |            |      |                  |      |                  |      |
| Residual   | .35                  | .01  | .24                          | .00  | .56        | .01  | .55              | .01  | .30              | .00  |
| Intercept  | .11                  | .01  | .32                          | .03  | .18        | .02  | .36              | .03  | .25              | .02  |

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .<sup>a</sup> Education: 1 = Primary Education; 2 = Secondary Education; 3 = A-Levels; 4 = Vocational Qualification; 5 = Undergraduate Degree; 6 = Postgraduate Degree; 7 = Doctorate Degree.<sup>b</sup> Analysis of mental distress were based on 4072 sessions due to missing data on 10 sessions from different participants.

## Response to the editor's comments

Editors would like to see greater reference to HRM in your revised manuscript especially with reference to theoretical contributions to HRM and HRM practitioner implications.

### Response:

Thank you for the guidance. We have now improved our engagement with HRM literature and practices. Please see the updated Introduction and Discussion for our revision.

## Response to Reviewer 1's comments

Thank you for the opportunity to review this interesting paper. The topic is current and important. I enjoyed reading about the unique role of location autonomy as compared to other forms of autonomy, and you have presented a rather convincing case using T-E fit perspective. I also appreciated the solid research design using diary study, and the thoughtful consideration of controlling a range of variables to rigorously test your proposed effects. I provide some comments with the aim to help you improve the communication of the paper.

### Response:

Thank you for your positive comments. We are grateful to have your feedback to help us improve the manuscript. Please see our responses to your comments below.

1. You stated on Page 2 that "During the COVID-19 pandemic, increased location autonomy has allowed employees to cope with concerns regarding safety and to balance work and personal needs." I am a bit unclear about the context of the study, was it during a lockdown period of COVID? If so, did people have location autonomy to work (they can only work from home during that time)? And, it seems that you have collected data from 6 different organisations (which is a strength by the way) and some of the organisations are healthcare providers – did employees in these organisations have location autonomy? I would have thought that the nature of their work would require them to work on site all the time? In any case, I think there's a lot of value to clarify the specific context of your study, so that readers can put those into perspectives. It also helps readers to understand to what extent these employees in your study have location autonomy.

### Response:

Thank you for your comment. The study was conducted in a period after government-mandated lockdowns had ended in the UK and when there were no government restrictions on office/site based work. There was advice still in place regarding the use of face masks, but no limits on social contact or activities. All organizations in the study had been encouraging hybrid working and actively encouraging staff to spend time back in the office. Participants within the study were all engaged in forms of office/desk based working and all had some level of autonomy relating to where they worked, with variation in the expectations whether this was a formal arrangement such as two dedicated days working in the office and three from home, or complete freedom to choose where they worked from on any given day. The methods section (also below; p.9-10 in the manuscript) has been updated to provide more clarity.

*"We invited employees in six UK organizations to complete the diary surveys between October and November 2021. A time when each organization encouraged hybrid working and a return to the office. Three organizations were from the private sector (one each from healthcare, construction and consultancy) and three from the public sector (local government and healthcare). Four organizations employed less than 500 individuals, one employed around 7,000 in the UK and the last employed over 15,000. Access was granted to selected departments where employees occupied job roles consisting of desk or office-based work, allowing for varying degrees of location autonomy across the sample. No frontline workers were included in the present study, and there were no legal restrictions for working on site or*

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3 *in an office. We invited employees within these departments or teams to take part via internal*  
4 *emails and adverts. The diary period lasted 10 working days, with participants receiving*  
5 *email reminders at 11am and 4pm to complete a survey. Participants received a £15*  
6 *shopping voucher upon completion of the diary period. Our final sample consisted of 316*  
7 *employees (male: 136, female: 178; third gender: 2) from six organizations (ranged from 26*  
8 *to 79 employees from each organization). They altogether provided data for 4082 half-day*  
9 *sessions. The mean age is 38.47 (range 19 to 64; SD = 10.66). They completed between one*  
10 *and 20 surveys. Among those 316 employees, 228 participants provided data over all 10*  
11 *days.”*  
12

13 2. This statement on Page 2 “teleworking and location autonomy should not be regarded  
14 as the same concept because employees can perceive lower location autonomy if they were  
15 requested to be in a specific place for their teleworking” and then again on Page 3  
16 “furthermore, it should be distinguished from the concept of teleworking”. Can you elaborate  
17 or give examples on how these two constructs are different? This would be of value to  
18 readers to get the nuances between them while also help to justify your focus on location  
19 autonomy.  
20

21 **Response:**

22 We have now revised our elaborations and please see the clarification for how  
23 location autonomy is different from teleworking (p.3 in the manuscript).  
24

25 *“Although location autonomy has been discussed in the teleworking (i.e., working away from*  
26 *the office setting) research (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Beckel and Fisher, 2022; Allen et al.,*  
27 *2015), it has not been directly measured, making it hard to evaluate its impact on employees.*  
28 *Moreover, teleworking mainly concerns with working away from the office setting and does*  
29 *not consider autonomy in choosing a workspace within an office (e.g., quiet areas, open-plan*  
30 *areas, or meeting rooms) (Wessels et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2011), which can also be a key*  
31 *factor in shaping employees’ daily work activities.”*  
32

33 3. As you did not find a direct relationship between location autonomy and outcomes  
34 (including mental health outcomes), you only found a relationship between location  
35 autonomy and the mediator (TE fit), it would be useful to have a more purposeful discussion  
36 on what this result implies.  
37

38 4. In the discussion, I think you can bolster the implications from HRM perspective. A lot  
39 of the implications seem to be for line managers or organisations, which may be somewhat  
40 too general. It would be useful to offer discussions that are dedicated to HR policies and  
41 practices.  
42

43 **Response:**

44 Thank you for your suggestions. We respond to these two comments together  
45 because we have directly discussed the implications of the nondirect relationship between  
46 location autonomy and outcomes and linked this discussion to HR policies and practices.  
47 Please see our revision below (also in Discussion, p.15 in the manuscript).  
48

49 *“This study provides several insights for organizational practices. First,*  
50 *organizations should consider how they facilitate location autonomy across their workforce.*  
51 *While job autonomy has been recommended in the work environment for some time (e.g.,*  
52 *Humphrey et al., 2007; Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006), our findings suggest that employees*  
53 *can also benefit specifically from autonomy over where they work. Nevertheless, we only*  
54 *observed an indirect, but not a direct effect, of location autonomy on mental distress via task-*  
55 *environment fit. The finding suggests that a sense of task-environment fit is needed for*  
56 *employees to enjoy the benefit of location autonomy on mental health. This means that*  
57 *granting location autonomy will not necessarily help employee mental health and other*  
58 *examined outcomes, if employees do not use such freedom to perform tasks in a work*  
59 *environment that fits better to the tasks. Hence, our study suggests that location autonomy*  
60 *can protect employee mental health and bring positive outcomes, but only when employees*  
*can utilize it to improve their task-environment fit.*

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3 *Following the above point, we recognized that the perceived task-environment fit is likely to*  
4 *vary according to individual preferences, job roles, and services. This has implications for*  
5 *the way that organizations design policy and practice on aspects such as hybrid or remote*  
6 *working (Davis et al., 2022). We suggest that our findings might therefore lend themselves to*  
7 *'freedom within a framework', rather than 'fixed rules'. Even in job roles and environments*  
8 *where location autonomy is possible, HR professionals will also need to work carefully to*  
9 *understand the wider trade-offs that offering location autonomy may necessitate. For*  
10 *instance, given its individualised nature, it is possible that employees who need to work*  
11 *together, may have different space preferences. Without careful management, this could lead*  
12 *to negative job crafting behaviours (Tims et al., 2015), or have undesirable ramifications for*  
13 *the wider working environment and culture, for instance, by encouraging silo working*  
14 *(DeShon et al., 2004)."*  
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Meanwhile, we have also discussed how our study contributes to HRM research on work-life flexibility policies. Please see the revision below (also in Discussion, p.13 in the manuscript).

*"Our study makes several contributions. First, although location autonomy has been used as a work-life flexibility policy, studies on work-life flexibility policies typically examined it together with other policies under a broad conceptualization or within a policies bundle (Kossek et al., in press). By examining location autonomy specifically, we are thus able to demonstrate its value for organizations to promote employee mental health, which also provides evidence to support including location autonomy as an element within integrated well-being-oriented HRM practices. Moreover, our study offers a different account to explain why location autonomy can help protect employee mental health and contribute to other positive outcomes (i.e., absorption, task proficiency, and job satisfaction). Location autonomy, like other work-life flexibility HRM policies, are usually discussed from a boundary control perspective (e.g., Kossek et al., in press; Ashforth et al., 2000), as it helps employees to manage transitions between different roles and thus likely to prevent them from distress due to inter-role conflict (such as work vs. family roles). For example, employees having location autonomy are also likely to avoid stressors in balancing roles in different life domains, such as work and family duties, because they can decide where to work to help them better fulfill their duties across different roles. In contrast to this boundary control perspective, our study highlights that location autonomy can help prevent employee distress by increasing the fit between their tasks and the work environment, facilitating an intra-job-role transition across tasks and work environment."*

## Response to Reviewer 2's comments

This study focuses on the influence of location autonomy on absorption, task proficiency, job satisfaction, and mental stress, drawing upon the task-environment perspective. I applaud your efforts to conducting a diary study. The data seems strong. The paper is easy to follow. However, there are substantial conceptual/theoretical/analytical issues that have significantly limited its potential contributions. Below are some example points which I hope can help you further improve the paper.

### Response:

Thank you for your feedback. We highly appreciate your time and insights to help us improve our work. Your feedback and suggestions are well taken, and we have revised our manuscript significantly to address those highlighted issues. Please see our responses to your comments below. It is great to have your specific comment to lift up our work to the next level.

1. The motivation of this study needs to be articulated more clearly. I understand you were trying to argue the broad relevance of location autonomy to contemporary HRM (p. 2, para. 2). However, you did not really provide adequate justification to support your claim. The audience might be left wonder why you tried to make argument. I do think your claim here

needs more robust rationale and deserves much more in-depth analyses.

**Response:**

This is a great suggestion. We have now revised the introduction of the paper, to strengthen the communication of the motivation of this study. Please see the revision below (also the first two paragraphs in Introduction).

*“Employees’ mental health problems have become a prevalent issue at work. World Health Organization’s (2022) report shows that 15% of the world’s working-age adults were estimated to experience a mental disorder. Mental health problems undermine employees’ personal life and affect organizational productivity and healthcare costs for employers (e.g., Chisholm et al., 2016; World Health Organization, 2022). Organizations have recognized the importance of addressing mental health and introduced human resources policies to support employee well-being, such as offering mental health days as part of their leave policies, providing access to counseling services, and offering training to support employees with mental health concerns (e.g., Wu et al., 2021). While these human resources policies help employees to access support for mental health issues, organizations can use human resources policies to prevent employees from developing mental health issues. For example, Guest (2017) develops a bundle of well-being-oriented HRM practices (e.g., training and development, work design, employment security, and organizational support) for organizations to provide a positive social and physical environment to promote employee well-being. However, the focus on the bundles of HRM practices did not help us understand the function of a specific HRM practice (e.g., Kossek et al., in press), the knowledge we need to inform what to be included in the HRM bundles for employee well-being.*

*In this study, we zoom into location autonomy, or the autonomy for employees to choose where to perform their work. Location autonomy has long been offered as a work-life flexibility policy (Spivack and Milosevic, 2018; Kossek et al., in press). However, the mainstreaming of hybrid work practices following the COVID-19 pandemic has made it accessible to a much wide range of employees. While job autonomy is a resource for employees to cope with demands (e.g., Wall et al., 1996; Karasek, 1979) and is related to lower anxiety, stress, and exhaustion in a meta-analysis (Humphrey et al., 2007), studies so far mainly focus on other forms of autonomy, such as decision making autonomy (i.e., the freedom to make decisions), work method autonomy (i.e., the freedom to determine which methods and procedures are utilized to complete the work) and work scheduling autonomy (i.e., the freedom to determine how to distribute working hours) (Humphrey et al., 2007; Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006; Wegman et al., 2018). Although location autonomy has been discussed in the teleworking (i.e., working away from the office setting) research (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Beckel and Fisher, 2022; Allen et al., 2015), it has not been directly measured, making it hard to evaluate its impact on employees. Moreover, teleworking mainly concerns with working away from the office setting and does not consider autonomy in choosing a workspace within an office (e.g., quiet areas, open-plan areas, or meeting rooms) (Davis, Leach & Clegg, 2011; Wessels et al, 2019), which can also be a key factor in shaping employees’ daily work activities. So far Spivack and Milosevic (2018) have measured location autonomy specifically and conducted a cross-sectional study of university staff and students (n = 201). They reported that location autonomy contributes to intrinsic motivation and enables individuals to choose work environments that can enhance productivity and well-being, indirect evidence showing the potential link between location autonomy and employee mental health. In this study, we seek to directly examine the role of location autonomy in shaping employee mental health and offer a theoretical account to understand how location autonomy could promote employee mental health.”*

2. It seems that your research question is not quite clear. This makes it difficult to appreciate what meaningful contributions your study can make to the field. Readers would understand that you focus on a set of variables (e.g., location autonomy, task-environment fit, and other performance and well-being related variables). But firstly what are you trying to answer with this set of variables? This is not clearly elaborated.

**Response:**

This is indeed an issue we need to solve. In our revision, we have now clarified why we focus on location autonomy by revising the introduction of this study, as shown in our

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2  
3 response to your Comment #1. We have also improved our theoretical foundation by  
4 introducing person-environment fit theories first before zooming into task-environment fit.  
5 Finally, we focused on mental distress as the focal outcome in our revised introduction too.  
6 In other words, our revised version has provided a clearer message for why we examined  
7 location autonomy, task-environment fit and mental distress together.

8 We still keep other outcomes and results in our paper, but we now treat them as  
9 supplementary examinations. Location autonomy has rarely been examined directly. While  
10 we aim to examine its role in employee mental health in this study, we seek to provide more  
11 empirical evidence to assess its impact on employees. We thus have included "Hypotheses  
12 for supplementary examinations" in the Hypothesis Development and "Supplementary  
13 analyses" in the Results to communicate the purpose and findings of these supplementary  
14 examinations.

15 Please read our revision directly in the manuscripts for these changes. We hope our  
16 revision helps clarify the position of this research while keeping its value of offering more  
17 evidence on the links between location autonomy, task-environment fit and employee  
18 outcomes.  
19

20 3. Why do you focus on task-environment fit perspective? There is not adequate theoretical  
21 justification of this focus.

22 **Response:**

23 We have improved our theoretical foundation by introducing person-environment fit  
24 theories first before zooming into how location autonomy can contribute to task-environment  
25 fit. Please see the added paragraph below in "Hypothesis Development" section (p.3 in the  
26 manuscript).  
27

28 *Person-environment fit theory (e.g., Edwards et al., 1998; van Vianen, 2018) suggests*  
29 *that people tend to seek out environments that match their own characteristics or needs. This*  
30 *is the case because individuals "prefer consistency, wish to exert control over their life and*  
31 *to reduce uncertainty, have a need to belong, and want happiness and life satisfaction" (van*  
32 *Vianen, 2018: 77). Individuals also actively seek opportunities to resolve misfit by changing*  
33 *their environment, leading to improved fit in its success (Follmer et al., 2018). Due to this*  
34 *general tendency, we argue that as for work environment specifically, individuals will seek fit*  
35 *between their tasks and work environment to master their work activities and deliver*  
36 *performance effectively.*  
37

38  
39 4. The differentiation between workplace autonomy and location autonomy is not  
40 clear...work location autonomy seems still within the work context. Employees have  
41 autonomy to choose work locations. Doesn't this also to some extent reflect work-scheduling  
42 and decision-making (e.g., they have choice freedom) autonomy? In your current writing, it is  
43 hard to conceptually/theoretically justify location autonomy as construct separated from  
44 workplace autonomy. Basically, your own claim has not been articulated in a convincing  
45 manner.  
46

47 **Response:**

48 We are sorry for the confusion. The message we want to communicate is that studies  
49 on workplace autonomy mainly focus on other forms of autonomy (e.g., decision-making,  
50 work methods and work scheduling) but not location autonomy. In other words, workplace  
51 autonomy is a broader concept and location autonomy can be a specific form under the  
52 broader concept. Conceptually, location autonomy is different from other forms of autonomy  
53 because it refers to freedom in choosing *where* to work, while decision-making autonomy is  
54 about *what* to do; work methods autonomy is about *how* to do the work; and work scheduling  
55 autonomy is about *when* to do the work. In our revised version, we have made our point  
56 clear.

57 Although different forms of autonomy may have been discussed and examined under  
58 the same label, we argue that these different forms of autonomy should be studied  
59 separately. For example, Kelly et al. (2014, p. 487) consider schedule control (or autonomy)  
60 as "employees' control over the timing of their work, the number of hours they work, and the  
location of their work," which incorporates temporal control (i.e., time), spatial control (i.e.,

location) and size control (i.e., the number of work hours). Their conceptualization does not help understand each aspect of control (or autonomy) and their effectiveness in shaping employee outcomes. In a recent review paper, Kossek, Perrigino, and Lautsch (in press) directly mentioned that “while we applaud studies that assess job autonomy, such measures are too vague and imprecise to account for which type(s) of boundary control is experienced in relation to different flexibility policies. Similarly, general measures of schedule control (e.g., Kelly et al., 2014) should either focus specifically on temporal control or should parse apart the different types of control that are embedded within”. Our study addresses this call by offering a fine-grained analysis of the specific effect of location autonomy.

Kelly, E. L., Moen, P., Oakes, J. M., Fan, W., Okechukwu, C., Davis, K. D., Hammer, L. B., Kossek, E. E., King, R. B., Hanson, G. C., Mierzwa, F., & Casper, L. M. 2014. Changing work and work-family conflict: Evidence from the work, family, and health network. *American Sociological Review*, 79: 485-516.

5. I would suggest that you clearly focus on mental stress, which is more closely related to the theme of the special issue. This will require you to reframe your introduction, which currently starts from location autonomy. It would be better to start with mental health-related variables (e.g., job satisfaction/mental stress), and then elaborate on what factors (i.e., location autonomy) and how these factors can influence mental health. In this way, you might be able to craft a better, clearer introduction that can demonstrate stronger relevance to the special issue.

**Response:**

Great suggestion. However, instead of framing our paper from the mental health-related variables, we frame it from HR practices for well-being to introduce location autonomy as a practice for protecting employee mental health. We chose this approach because the Editor would like to see a greater engagement with HRM research and practices to address the call of the special issue. Although we did not follow your suggestion for framing, we appreciated your suggestion, which has helped us find a better way to position our study and introduce the examined variables.

6. Another important concern is that this paper lacks an overarching theoretical framework, which can guide the choice of variables. The variable selection seems to be very arbitrary. At least in its current form, the paper has not provided a strong, overarching theoretical foundation.

**Response:**

As mentioned in our response to your Comment #2, we have provided a clearer message for why we examined location autonomy, task-environment fit, and mental distress together as focal variables. We then keep other outcomes and results in our paper as supplementary examinations. Please read our revision directly in the manuscripts for these changes.

7. Hypothesis development needs substantial improvement. For example, for H1, you have listed various perspectives/findings to help you articulate the possible relationship between location autonomy and task-environment fit. It reads like a list of evidence pieces without logical organization. I would suggest that you clearly group these ideas to, say, two categories to streamline your thoughts. Also, it would be better to ensure you start from theory (e.g., what theory has informed this relationship?).

**Response:**

We cannot appreciate more to see this advice. We have revised the paragraphs, and please see the revised version below (also p.6 in the manuscript) for how we built arguments and used previous studies to develop the link between location autonomy and task-environment fit.

*“Person-environment fit theory (e.g., Edwards et al., 1998; van Vianen, 2018) suggests that people tend to seek out environments that match their own characteristics or needs. This is the case because individuals “prefer consistency, wish to exert control over their lives and to reduce uncertainty, have a need to belong, and want happiness and life satisfaction” (van*

Vianen, 2018: 77). Individuals also actively seek opportunities to resolve misfit by changing their environment, leading to improved fit in its success (Follmer et al., 2018). Due to this general tendency, we argue that as for work environment specifically, individuals will seek fit between their tasks and work environment to master their work activities and deliver performance effectively. Having autonomy in choosing where to work therefore can thus contribute to higher task-environment fit for two reasons.

First, when employees have higher location autonomy, they can choose where to work based on tasks they have, resulting in higher task-environment fit due to their space use behavior. Several studies have provided findings to support this reasoning. A study reports that when workers autonomously use spaces that facilitate intensive communication for communicative tasks, they are likely to perceive task-environment fit (Wohlers et al., 2019). Similarly, research on activity-based working (ABW) and activity-based flexible offices (A-FO) suggested that the autonomy over different workspaces in an A-FO could result in better fit between task and space as employees are able to choose from various types of office spaces to best suit their job at hand (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2011; Wohlers and Hertel, 2017). In the context of office working, workers who are provided a variety of workspaces are seen to make self-determined use to improve task-environment fit (Eismann et al., 2022). Second, psychologically, it is also possible that individuals may justify their choice of environment post hoc as autonomous and attribute person-environment fit to the decision (Aday and Schmader, 2019). People rationalize automatic or unconscious decisions as volitional and freely chosen, either anticipatory or in retrospect (Kay et al., 2002; Cooper, 2007). This activated feeling of authenticity in their perceived autonomy of situational selection can subjectively signal the perceived fit. As such, location autonomy will contribute to a strong sense of task-environment fit due to opportunities to use different spaces and associated psychological justification."

8. Same to the above point, similar problems exist for H2. This is something you need to consider when further developing the paper. Additionally, it is not quite sure why the four outcome variables are tested here (indeed, this should have been justified properly and in a convincing way in the introduction).

**Response:**

We have also improved the arguments for the link between task-environment fit and mental distress. Please see the arguments below. We provided arguments on anxiety and depression purposefully because we measured mental distress with items for anxiety and depression. In addition, we have moved paragraphs for other outcomes in "Hypotheses for supplementary examinations", which helps clarify the focus of this study while giving more evidence to advance research on location autonomy (also p.7 in the manuscript).

"Next, we propose that a sense of task-environment fit can prevent employees from mental distress. Employees experiencing a higher sense of task-environment fit are less likely to experience mental distress at work because they do not need to worry about being in an inappropriate workspace that can interfere with their work, or which lacks essential equipment for carrying out their tasks. When there is a mismatch between the workspace and tasks to be performed, employees can feel anxious by not knowing whether they can deliver the tasks on time or at the expected standard due to the constraints of the space. They are also likely to feel depressed by seeing how their performance is undermined due to being in an inappropriate space for the tasks. As such, we expect that task-environment fit will prevent employees from experiencing mental distress at work. Following the conventional approach to capture psychological well-being at work (e.g., Meier et al., 2014), we use feeling depressed and anxious at work as an indicator for mental distress."

9. What has been proposed in your paper clearly reflect a mediation pathway. However, there is not a mediation hypothesis proposed. Why don't you clearly propose that task-environment fit mediates the effect of location autonomy on absorption, task proficiency, job satisfaction, and mental distress? (anyway, it seems very problematic to have all these outcome variables without proper theoretical rationale in the upfront).

**Response:**

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2  
3 We have followed your advice and have converted all hypotheses into mediation  
4 hypotheses directly. Please see our revision in the manuscript.  
5

6 10. For data analysis, SPSS mixed models seem to be a lot less efficient than Mplus and R.  
7 Could you please provide and report results generated from Mplus, which is far stronger and  
8 more accurate when analysing ESM longitudinal data?  
9

**Response:**

10 Thank you for this advice. We fully understand that R and Mplus provide more  
11 functions to test advanced, more complex models for longitudinal data. Nevertheless, we  
12 examined the associations between variables at the within-individual level for our research  
13 purpose, which does not involve longitudinal effects. Using SPSS mixed models is sufficient  
14 to obtain results from random intercept models to examine our hypotheses, including the  
15 mediation effects with the RMediation package developed by Tofighi and MacKinnon (2011),  
16 which is actually a program based on the R language. We hope our explanation helps clarify  
17 why we use SPSS for our analyses.  
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Personnel Review