

Redefining Total Rewards: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Remote Work Stipends on Preventing Burnout and Managing Work-Life Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

In response to the rapid and long-term shift to remote or hybrid work, human resource (HR) teams are expanding their total rewards (TR) beyond just salary up to providing wellness budgets, home office technology allowances, and other allowances for remote workers. Although the use of stipends has increased, there is a lack of empirical research that relates stipend design to employee burnout and employee outcomes regarding engagement. This study aims to fill this void by testing predictors of burnout and engagement related to the amount and nature of remote work stipend and the role of perceived work-life boundary management as a mediator between them. The study adopted mixed methods explanatory sequential approach consisting of a cross-sectional survey of 310 remote and hybrid workers from organizations based in the UK and then followed by semi-structured interviews with 18 individuals. Data were analyzed quantitatively using multiple regression and mediation analysis and qualitatively through thematic analysis. Results showed that employees who were given wellness benefits reported significantly lower burnout and significantly higher employee engagement in comparison to employees who were given strictly technology-based stipends, with this relationship partially mediated by the boundary management factor. Findings indicate that practitioners may want to expand the design of their stipends based on their rewards strategies to make explicit the psychological as well as material needs associated with remote work.

Keywords: remote work stipends, total rewards, burnout, work-life boundaries, employee engagement

INTRODUCTION

Research Background

Over the past few years, the worldwide shift toward remote and hybrid work patterns has radically changed organizations' approach to employee compensation and support relative to their traditional office-based arrangements (Kniffin et al., 2021). The traditional total rewards frameworks, which centered primarily on base pay, cash bonuses, and benefits, have come to look more closely at non-salary financial tools like home-office technology allowances, connectivity subsidies, and wellness budgets, collectively called as remote work stipend (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020). Often these stipends are promoted as evidence of the organization's care and as a sensible way to meet physical needs when working from home (Wang et al., 2020). In this wider transformation, organizations have also been reporting increases in substantial benefits expenditure in relation to the wellbeing of staff compared to the previous year (Deloitte, 2022). But there are also proven psychological disadvantages to working remotely such as a lack of separation between work and home life, long hours, and increased risk of burnout (Kossek et al., 2021). With hybrid and fully remote work as an organizational norm, it is unclear whether the psychological costs are being paid for by stipend-based rewards or just the logistical outer layer of remote work.

Problem Statement

Though many workplaces offer some form of stipend to employees to do remote work, HR professionals still don't have definitive empirical guidance on what kinds of stipends, if any, effectively alleviate burnout or help promote more balanced work-life boundaries (Ollier-Malaterre & Foucreault, 2017). Very little quantitative or mixed-methods studies have rigorously examined this assumption by deriving measurable well-being impacts from a financial investment made in an employee's home environment (Charalampous et al., 2019). Organisations are at risk of investing all the money allocated for total rewards in psychological compensation programs that yield minimal psychological benefit, and the burnout rate among remote and hybrid workers is on the rise, (Gallup, 2023). This article tackles the urgent organizational issue of the misalignment of stipend design, empirically testing the relationship between the type of stipend, burnout and engagement.

Research Gap

Existing research on remote work wellbeing has focused mainly on general variables like autonomy, communication quality and trust in management, while specifically considering fewer compensation elements such as stipends (Vyas, 2022). However, when total rewards research does draw a connection to remote work, it often lends nuance to the concept of the stipend as a single bucket and does not distinguish between the technology reward and the wellness reward (Lee et al., 2021). Additionally, studies have given limited attention to how or why stipends could contribute to burnout issues, creating a conceptual void between the design of stipends and psychological outcomes (Allen et al., 2021). This study directly addresses these gaps by analyzing existing evidence on the disaggregation of stipend types and testing the exogenous entry of boundary management as a mediation variable.

Research Objectives

This study pursues three objectives: first, to examine the relationship between remote work stipend receipt and employee burnout; second, to assess whether stipend type, specifically technology-focused versus wellness-focused, differentially predicts employee engagement; and third, to determine whether perceived work-life boundary management mediates the relationship between stipend receipt and burnout. Together, these goals shift the conversation on the impact of stipends from documenting adoption to examining if and how stipends have a meaningful impact on employee well-being results.

Research Hypotheses

- H1(null): There is no statistically significant difference in burnout levels between employees who receive remote work stipends and those who do not.
- H1(alternative): Employees who receive remote work stipends report significantly lower burnout levels than employees who do not receive stipends.
- H2(null): Stipend type (technology-focused versus wellness-focused) has no statistically significant relationship with employee engagement.
- H2(alternative): Wellness-focused stipends are associated with significantly higher employee engagement than technology-focused stipends.
- H3(null): Perceived work-life boundary management does not significantly mediate the relationship between stipend receipt and burnout.
- H3(alternative): Perceived work-life boundary management significantly mediates the relationship between stipend receipt and burnout.

Significance of Study

This study has theoretical significance because it extends the Job Demands-Resources model and the boundary theory into the under-researched area of stipend design for remote work, with stipends identified as a novel job resource, not a mere material benefit (Bakker & Demerouti, 2023). In practice, findings provide HR practitioners with solid evidence-based recommendations on how to spend a limited total rewards budget to help lower burnout and keep employees engaged in each of the five stipend categories. For organizations that are continuing with their hybrid and remote work models, the study results may guide adjustments in policy, program design and communication plans for total rewards. Furthermore, the study includes qualitative interview data, which offer depth to the respondents' experiences with the use of the stipend as purely quantitative research approaches would lack. Finally, this study provides enhanced understanding of how compensation design meets psychological welfare in distributed workforces, with an improved mechanism-based view.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

In this study, two complementary theoretical approaches are used: the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model states that organizational resources, such as support mechanisms, reduce the impact of job demands on burnout and contribute to establishing engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2023). In this framework, remote work remuneration is understood as a job resource which can compensate for demands like isolation, extended availability and lack of infrastructure at home, for instance. To complement this, boundary theory is used to describe how people establish and uphold psychological boundaries across the work and home domain, and the role of organizational practices in either preserving or blurring boundaries (Cobb et al., 2025). This study thus theorizes that the role of stipends in mitigating the burnout of career-oriented employees is not just as a resource source in terms of material provision but also functions as a resource source for boundary management strategies among employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Remote Work and the Evolving Total Rewards Paradigm

Total Rewards frameworks are usually thought of as comprising of five interdependent components: compensation, benefits, work-life balance, performance recognition and learning and development opportunities (WorldatWork, 2023). With the sudden change to remote work, HR teams have had to rethink how they can apply these factors to non-physical, remote work settings (Kniffin et al., 2021). Researchers have observed that companies are implementing new types of employee benefits, such as home-office allowances and wellness incentives, to make it clear that they are applying and continuing to invest in their staff even when it is not the same building (Wang et al., 2020). According to Jiang et al (2023), such stipends are a hybridization of previously recognized benefits and new flexible benefits categories. Critics warn, however, that incentive payments should not be rhetorically meaningless rewards, but need to be carefully linked to the actual psychological needs of employees. The present study is rooted in this tension between symbolic reward and substantive reward value because it seeks to focus on the effectiveness of the stipend rather than simply stipend provision.

Burnout in Remote and Hybrid Work Contexts

Burnout, a psychological syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment, has consistently been found to be related to prolonged exposure to job stress specific to the lack of resources (Maslach & Leiter, 2022). Burnout risk factors for remote and hybrid workers contain technostress due to being continually connected to technology, social isolation, and struggles to “shut off” work duties after official business hours (Charalampous et al., 2019). According to Gallup (2023), despite the large number of employers running a variety of wellness programs, the rate of employee burnout has consistently stayed high when compared to pre-pandemic levels, especially for remote workers. Vyas (2022) also revealed that autonomy does not prevent burnout in the presence of inadequate supporting institutional structures within an organization. The findings indicate that the burnout in remote settings is not truly defined by the place of physical work but rather by the availability of resources to which employees can strive to meet demands. This

sets employer-provided resources such as stipends in a feasible but under-researched arena for mitigating burnout.

Work-Life Boundary Management

In the boundary theory, work and home are conceptualized as two psychological settings in which individuals make decisions to segment or integrate (Cobb et al., 2025). Remote work can foster boundary integration, in which the spatial and temporal distinction between roles is reduced, which can further support the risk of role insecurity and boundary violations (Allen et al., 2021). Kossek et al. (2021) found that employees with high boundary management skills had lower levels of stress and well-being, even when they had a high intensity of using remote work. The enforced remote working during large-scale disruptions has also highlighted flexible work strain on the work-life interface even among those who already had a history of flexible work (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). Organizational practices relate to employee abilities to apply the boundaries effectively, such as scheduling norms and resource provision, and the presence of flexible working has been linked to mixed well-being outcomes, depending on its implementation (Çivilidağ & Durmaz, 2026). Stipend for wellness explicitly could support boundary segmentation, as it would validate off-work time, while technology stipend can have the reverse effect: it could help staff members' capacity to always remain connected (Golden & Gajendran, 2018).

Remote Work Stipends as an Emerging Reward Category

Empirical studies that directly investigate remote work stipends are scant compared to the more general remote work literature. Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) reported an increasing uptake in the awareness and implementation of home-office allowances within organizations, but they did not explore downstream health results. Chafi et al. (2021) found that financial support for the setup of work from home was reported to have positive effects on perceived organizational support and unclear effects on burnout. Recently, Lee et al. (2021) revealed that wellness-focused allowances, including subscriptions to mental health services or fitness goals, might have a more potent engagement effect than technological allowances, but with a limited sample in a single industry. However, Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault (2017) warn that if such incentives are not communicated and endorsed by managers, then they risk being under-utilized, resulting in poor psychological effect, even if they are designed effectively. Overall, this literature indicates that their effectiveness is influenced by stipend type and the organization in which they are served, although there are relatively limited comparative tests.

Synthesis and Positioning of the Present Study

Together, these reviewed literatures provide three premises which underpin the current study. First, total rewards frameworks are continually evolving to include remote work compensation and are frequently implemented before their actual effectiveness is validated, empirically (Wang et al., 2020). Second, remote settings are significantly influenced by being a context with deficient or insufficient resources, and this led to the theoretical belief that stipends may be a mitigation tool for burnout. Third, boundary management is a potentially useful but inadequately studied link between the provision of a stipend and psychological outcomes. This study fills the specific gap that no prior study has tested the effects of stipend type, burnout, engagement, and boundary management in an empirical study at the same time.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study of this research adopted an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, which involves two phases: a quantitative phase followed by a smaller qualitative phase that seeks to explain the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). A cross-sectional survey was adopted in the quantitative phase to test the three hypotheses, and semi-structured interviews were adopted in the qualitative phase to examine the subjective experience of employees who use the stipend. This design was chosen because it provides a level of statistical generalization from a survey sample that provides an explanation of why specific types of stipend result in different effects on burnout and engagement.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

Participants were remote and hybrid workers representing mid-to-large sized UK-based organizations in the technology, financial services and professional services segments. Data were collected using stratified random sampling to obtain a proportional distribution among sectors and between those receiving or not receiving a stipend. The final quantitative sample included 310 employees, 58% female, 41% male and 1% preferring not to state gender, with a mean of 4.2 years in the organisation ($SD = 2.6$). From this sample, 18 participants were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews because they had indicated their willingness to be contacted further, with representation by type of stipend and burnout score range. Approval was granted by the institutional review board of the researchers, and participants gave informed consent before taking part in the study.

Measures

Burnout was evaluated using the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS) which is a 16-item questionnaire quantifying a total Burnout on three sub scores with a 7-point frequency scale (Maslach & Leiter, 2022). The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale — 9-item (UWES-9) was used to assess employee engagement, a well-established questionnaire consisting of 9 items assessing vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, 2021). The perceived work-life boundary management was measured with a scale of 8 items, modified from existing boundary theory scales, that reflect preferences for boundary segmentation versus integration and enactment. Data on stipend receipt and type was obtained using categorical items that differentiated between non-recipients, technology-stipend recipients, or wellness-stipend recipients according to the documentation of an organization's stipend policy provided by participating employers. For this sample, the internal consistency for all scales was satisfactory to high, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .81 to .93.

Procedure

The survey was delivered electronically via the internal HR communication systems in participating organizations during a six-week period to collect data. Their responses were anonymous, voluntary, and simply a prize-draw entry to prevent response bias. After quantitative analyses, interview participants were invited to schedule 30 to 45 minutes of semi-structured interviews conducted by video call with questions centered on their experience receiving and using stipends and how they're working to manage work-life boundaries. Interviews were audio-recorded in the presence of the participants and transcribed word for word for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Data have been analyzed quantitatively with IBM SPSS Statistics version 29. To test Hypothesis 1, an independent-samples t-test was performed on the Burnout scores obtained from stipend recipients and non-recipients. Hypothesis 2 was tested with one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Tukey post hoc comparisons for engagement scores between the technology-stipend group, wellness-stipend group, and no-stipend group. To test this third hypothesis, the data was analyzed using mediation analysis through the PROCESS macro (Model 4), and the associated bootstrapped 95% confidence interval based on 5,000 resamples was conducted (Hayes, 2022). Qualitative interview data were analyzed following reflexive thematic analysis process, independently by two researchers and then reviewed together in consensus discussions to provide analytical rigour, which included familiarization, coding, theme development, and review (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

RESULTS

Stipend Receipt and Burnout (H1)

An independent-samples t-test showed that employees who were paid stipends to work remotely ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.71$) scored significantly lower on the burn out scale than those who were not paid a stipend to work remotely

($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(308) = 5.13$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.64$. This result indicates that the null hypothesis for H1 is rejected, lending support for the alternative hypothesis that stipend receipt is linked to decreased burnout.

Stipend Type and Engagement (H2)

A one-way ANOVA was performed for the overall scores for the stipend groups, which showed a significant effect, $F(2, 307) = 14.87$, $p < .001$, partial eta-squared = .09. Tukey test post-hoc comparisons showed that, on average, the employees who received stipends for wellness activities ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.68$) were more engaged than technology-stipend recipients ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.74$, $p = .002$) or non-recipients ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.81$, $p < .001$). No significant difference was found between technology-stipend receivers and non-receivers ($p = .06$). Results indicate rejection of the null hypothesis for H2 which confirms the differential prediction of engagement from the type of stipend.

Boundary Management as a Mediator (H3)

Mediation analysis showed that receiving a stipend significantly predicted scores on boundary management ($b = 0.38$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$), and these scores on boundary management significantly predicted scores on burnout ($b = -0.41$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect of the receipt of the stipends anticipated boundary management indicated partial mediation ($b = -0.16$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI: $[-0.24, -0.09]$), while the direct effect of receipt of stipend on burnout was strong ($b = -0.21$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .008$). The findings provide support for rejection of the null hypothesis for H3, which posited that Boundary management partially explains the relationship between stipend and burnout.

Qualitative Findings

Interview data was themed into 3 central themes using thematic analysis approach. First, participants expressed the symbolic permission for disengagement with the wellness stipend, with several participants stating that wellness activities offered by the employer gave them permission to guard their personal time. Second, the participants who were provided with technology stipends only often reported a greater, not a lesser, sense of being tied directly to work, citing as a cause the more productive nature of home-office combinations that facilitated working longer hours. Third, several participants from both groups reported that the stipend was not as important as the environment in which the employees worked or the other managerial behaviours that had a strong impact, cited as being that they did not have the freedom to message out-of-hours, implying that stipends are not enough without appropriate organizational culture. These qualitative explanations support and complement the partial mediation in the quantitative model.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer an empirical basis to redefine remote work incentives as distinctly psychological resources rather than as one-size-fits-all rewards as part of a more comprehensive tool, a total rewards approach. In accordance with Job Demands-Resources theory, the receipt of the stipend was related to fewer feelings of burnout, which was consistent with the previous prediction that organizational support is a resource for employees' well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2023). The study, however, extends past previous literature by comparing a well-being-based stipend with a stipend based on technology alone, and the former tends to be more effective in terms of engagement. The discovery contradicts the assumption held in many organizations that providing equipment allowances is enough to take care of the well-being needs of remote workers.

The partial mediation shown in the boundary management stage reinforces and extends boundary theory by empirically demonstrating a specific mechanism of how stipends affect burnout (Cobb et al., 2025). The qualitative result of symbolic permission to disengage provides a plausible explanation for this mediation pathway – with stipends also serving a symbolic function by providing boundaries that are sanctioned by the organization. In contrast, the theme that technology involves unforeseen connectivity as a result seems to resonate with the concerns of Golden and Gajendran (2018) about the boundary-blurring nature of technology's

ability to facilitate remote working. These results collectively indicate that HR practitioners need to be wary of the assumption that there are consistent wellbeing benefits from any investment of stipends.

Despite not being tested explicitly in the participants' accounts, the finding that managerial behaviour seemed to impact the effectiveness of the stipend is consistent with practitioner literature that highlights that reward effectiveness relies upon a supportive organizational culture (Ollier-Malaterre & Foucreault, 2017). This implies that the stipend should not be regarded as a standalone program but as a totalling culturally reinforced total reward system. The partial mediation further suggests that other unmeasured mechanisms, like psychological safety or perceived organizational support, may play a role in maintaining the given relationship between the stipend and burnout symptoms, as well as deserve to be explored further. These flexible working patterns will also change how employees view and access the stipend, further indicating that the relationship between stipend and flexible working patterns is not likely to be a static one in the future (Spurk & Straub, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR HRM PRACTICE

This study aimed to test the effectiveness of a stipend program to reduce burnout and promote work-life border management through a distance intervention, while testing whether the type of stipend affects these outcomes differently. Results show decreases in burnout as a function of receipt of stipend, greater engagement benefits of wellness-oriented stipends compared to technology-oriented stipends, and that the relationship between stipend receipt and burnout is partially mediated by boundary management. Together, these findings further suggest a reconsideration of the total rewards policy, with the stipend for remote work being understood as a different psychological resource instead of a different financial reward.

These findings have several implications for HRM practice. First, HR departments should utilize a range of stipend portfolios, some geared towards wellness, and others towards technology discounts, instead of relying just on infrastructure. Second, stipend communication strategies should intentionally and clearly represent wellness stipends as an endorsement of boundary protective behaviors in addition to their symbolic and material role. Thirdly, organizations should embed stipend provision with training for their managers that reinforces boundaries respecting behaviour, as qualitative evidence indicates that managerial norms affect the effectiveness of stipends. Fourth, HR analytics should be integrated with stipend-type disaggregation into well-being monitoring systems to better calculate return on total reward.

This study is not without limitations. The cross-sectional quantitative design restricts causal inferences, and the study sample was stratified but only comprised of organizations based in UK, which restricted cross cultural generalizability. Future studies must utilize a longitudinal approach to explore the longevity of stipend effects and should extend this model to other types of stipends – including childcare and commutation – as hybrid working approaches continue to shift. This study represents one of the first experience-to-date, mechanism-based assessments of the effectiveness of stipends for remote work, giving HR practitioners evidence-backed ideas about how to redesign total rewards in the era of the distributed workforce.

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