

**The Impact of Alternative Work Schedules on Job Satisfaction in the Federal Sector:**

**A Qualitative Phenomenological Study**

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## **Abstract**

This study explored the impact of alternative work schedules on federal employees, aiming to understand how these arrangements affect employees' experiences and satisfaction within the federal sector. Its primary objective was to evaluate employees' perceptions of alternative work schedules in relation to job satisfaction following the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with respect to return-to-work initiatives. Specifically, the study examined three key questions concerning alternative work schedule practices and their impact on federal employees' job satisfaction: (1) What alternative work schedule work factors enhance job satisfaction? (2) What alternative work schedule factors lead to employee dissatisfaction? and (3) What alternative work schedule factors influence job satisfaction during the return-to-work phase? Using a qualitative phenomenological approach rooted in H2FT, insights were gathered from 11 government employees in the North Atlantic region. The findings demonstrated the importance of balancing structure and flexibility: employees appreciate the autonomy provided by an alternative work schedule, yet they also expect organizations to establish well-defined objectives and a transparent framework for progress. Although this study's scope is limited due to its focus on participants from a single medium-sized government agency, this focus enabled a detailed exploration of alternative work schedules within that specific context. However, gaining a broader understanding would necessitate examining a wider variety of government departments with diverse missions and structures. Exploring how the cultures of federal agencies influence flexible work schedules provides a basis for future research aimed at developing more equitable alternative work schedule practices across sectors. The findings lay a foundation for further study of job satisfaction in the public sector.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The federal government adopted strategies to promote employee safety and job satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic, marking a notable shift in the public-sector work ethic (Jacobson, 2023; Liu et al., 2020). It is important to note that alternative work schedules (AWS) have become a vital tool for enhancing working conditions for federal employees (Abilash & Siju, 2021). According to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM; 2021), employees authorized under AWS may perform duties from other approved locations, such as their homes or temporary offices, rather than their primary workplace. Types of AWS include compressed, flexible, telework, and remote work schedules. A key feature of these arrangements is their ability to help employees balance personal life and job responsibilities (Monroe & Haug, 2022; Rad & Rad, 2021). Since government agencies reopened, the demand for AWS among employees has increased (Ng et al., 2021).

AWS is not a new business practice. In response to the Great Depression, the Kellogg Company implemented 6-hour days and 30-hour workweeks in 1930, optimizing shifts with shorter hours (Roopavathi & Kishore, 2021). However, this approach gained renewed attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. Federal authorities quickly adopted AWS in response to orders for employees to stay home at the start of the crisis. The only office tasks performed during the pandemic are those that, mainly due to data security concerns, cannot be completed at home (Fraij & Aburumnan). Several studies have indicated that AWS is essential for future mission priorities as the public sector supports initiatives to reopen workplaces (Hajal, 2022; Jacobson, 2023; Vyas, 2022).

The 2022 government-wide Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey revealed that federal employees favor AWS and believe it boosts productivity. It also showed a 7% decrease in federal

employee work satisfaction during the beginning of the return-to-work initiative (OPM Federal Employment Viewpoint Survey, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, employees had to consider the most effective ways to adjust their priorities, whether working from home or in the office (Vyas, 2022). These changes in work arrangements affect the significance of AWS and job satisfaction, as individual workplace experiences continue to evolve (Abilash & Siju, 2021).

Federal agencies changed how they operate and improved their technical skills, creating options to increase employee satisfaction (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021; Rad & Rad, 2021). As a result, the rapid adoption of AWS transformed how federal agencies functioned, as it provided a practical solution to the unexpected challenges posed by COVID-19. Although AWS may boost employee and organizational productivity and job satisfaction, earlier studies have shown that it can also bring several drawbacks (Brough et al., 2022; Quy & Zhu, 2024). Additionally, de Lucas Ancillo et al. (2021) observed that due to AWS's increased autonomy during the COVID-19 pandemic, employees effectively managed their time by balancing personal and professional goals. Furthermore, the development of the AWS culture makes it easier to connect with remote employees, removing any barriers to AWS (Basu, 2022). Besides staying current with trending workplace initiatives, there are many benefits to establishing and managing effective AWS programs (Vroman, 2020). Understanding and utilizing AWS is essential for adapting to changing environments and improving employee satisfaction (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021; Kocot et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2021). Similarly, Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou (2021) argued that by reevaluating the relevance of routine work and the need to reconsider what constitutes labor, new criteria for defining AWS should emerge.

## Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was that federal employee job satisfaction significantly decreased by 7% during the return-to-work initiative (OPM Federal Employment Viewpoint Survey, 2022). During the rollout of the 2022 FEV survey, many federal employees who had been accustomed to remote work over the past two years began returning to office settings. A significant change for federal workers was the decreased availability of AWS as agencies shifted back to traditional operations (Ng et al., 2021).

Additionally, no explicit OPM directive required all federal employees to return to traditional work practices. Instead, each agency decided when employees would do so based on its mission (OPM, 2021). As a result, some organizations continued allowing remote work, while others advised employees to return to the office. Workers who returned to the workplace used different types of AWS. Abilash & Suju (2021) highlighted that organizations need to assess job satisfaction as more employees go back to the office.

Research has indicated that a discrepancy persists regarding AWS and job satisfaction (Pokojski et al., 2021; Schur et al., 2020; Stoian et al., 2022). Rad and Rad (2021) observed that federal agencies can no longer presume that pre-COVID labor standards provide optimal arrangements and efficiency, owing to technological advancements facilitated by AWS. Furthermore, Ng et al. (2021) proposed that understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic has altered work patterns is essential.

Additionally, organizational culture and management commitment are vital for improving job satisfaction among AWS users (Jacobson, 2023). Strong leadership that fosters a supportive environment can significantly enhance user engagement and morale. Moreover, Ballantine et al. (2022) highlighted that workplace factors such as inherent resistance to flexibility and negative

perceptions associated with AWS stigma can obstruct the development of a positive AWS environment. Addressing these barriers through targeted training and effective communication strategies is essential for creating an inclusive and adaptable workplace culture.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This phenomenological study examined why federal employee job satisfaction dropped by 7% during the return-to-work initiative. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened awareness of AWS practices, and it became clear that further research was needed to understand how this phenomenon impacted federal employees' job satisfaction. Although the federal sector had shown the value of AWS practices, issues impacting employee satisfaction had influenced federal employees' perceptions (Ng et al., 2021). Therefore, it was necessary to understand how AWS practices directly affected federal workers and how these participants managed tasks and adhered to standards to achieve organizational goals.

Several studies have examined how AWS benefits organizations by increasing employee job satisfaction and enabling staff to perform their responsibilities more effectively. Additionally, AWS provides more flexible opportunities that can adapt to individual needs (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021; Kocot et al., 2021; Monroe & Haug, 2022). De Bois et al. (2025) emphasized the importance of employee choice, noting that flexibility and the advantages of AWS should be grounded in employees' best interests. Vyas (2022) cautioned against using AWS in every work situation, pointing out that job autonomy might be perceived as inappropriate if managerial control or coordination is lacking, and that individual effort could potentially undermine team efficiency. On the other hand, Maurer et al. (2022) suggested that employees can effectively manage AWS arrangements through self-managed activities and a sense of responsibility, despite the challenges posed by geographic separation. Ng et al. (2021)

highlighted the need for further research into how AWS influences workers' preferences over time. Moreover, Jacobson (2023) argued that organizational culture and managerial commitment are crucial factors that can enhance employee satisfaction by fostering a supportive environment for AWS adoption.

The phenomenological approach helped assess the daily experiences of federal employees and provided the information needed to explain how they managed work requirements and their level of job satisfaction (Halling, 2021; Stanier, 2022; Suddick et al., 2020). This study contributed to H2FT by examining the motivators and dissatisfiers related to AWS practices and their effect on the attitudes of government workers returning to their offices. Participants were from a medium-sized, mid-Atlantic government agency and had worked in the public sector. Employees of the agency faced significant weekday disruptions due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Snowball sampling, a non-probability technique, was used to recruit participants for the study. Researchers employing this method asked participants to help spread the word and recruit additional individuals (Dragan & Isiac-Maniu, 2022). Information about the study's purpose and contact details was provided to prevent any violation of confidentiality or invasion of privacy (Simkus, 2023). Eleven individuals who had been working remotely for the past two years were selected from different departments within the organization. McDermott (2023) found that seven to nine interviews with small samples yielded the most codes and themes, allowing for quick data saturation. Additionally, Aguboshim (2021) noted that there is no standard benchmark for determining when a sample size is adequate in qualitative research. However, more interviews would have been conducted if data saturation had not been reached.

In this phenomenological study, only participants employed by the selected federal agency were considered as part of the recruitment criteria. Specifically, the chosen participants included those who had previously worked from home during the pandemic and were then returning to the office. Furthermore, prospective participants had to be able to provide information regarding their interest: individual experiences with AWS and its impact on job satisfaction. Semi-structured interviews were used to interact with federal AWS workers. The most effective method for gathering data for this study was through interviews, as phenomenological research can elucidate workplace culture and provide insights into the nature of human experience (Yildiz, 2020). Additionally, to evaluate the effectiveness of the comprehensive interview questions and identify any researcher bias, a trustworthy pilot study was conducted (Simkus, 2023).

The investigation's scope, purpose, and nature were explained to subjects before interviews to ensure transparency (Ruslin et al., 2022). The Zoom platform was used for online interviews. Before taking the survey, all managers signed a consent form allowing staff participation. Participants' names were kept confidential throughout the research by using pseudonyms. Data were collected, transcribed, and analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach to understand the phenomenon from the perspectives of public sector employees who experienced and described it (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Lochmiller, 2021).

The data were initially coded utilizing open coding methods, subsequently categorized into broader classifications and further elaborated into themes, patterns, and insights. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo was employed to manage the data (Dhakal, 2022). This study gathered opinions from federal employees to provide insights into the factors influencing job satisfaction among AWS personnel. Government agencies may enhance their operational

effectiveness by refining AWS policies, thereby improving employee management whether interactions occur in person or via AWS (Errida & Lofti, 2021; Monroe & Haug, 2022; Tahlyan et al 2022).

### **Introduction to Theoretical Framework**

H2FT serves as the basis for this investigation. The core of H2FT involves understanding how to support or enhance job satisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959). Maximizing job satisfaction is a key organizational goal (Stoian et al., 2022). Herzberg aimed to understand workers' perspectives, attitudes, and motivators, seeking to clarify what employees expect from their jobs and the workplace. Herzberg et al. (1959) argued that organizational and motivational factors are inherent and contribute to improving job satisfaction. Motivators effectively identify internal and external factors that influence employee satisfaction and boost organizational efficiency by addressing needs for growth and self-actualization (Koncar et al., 2022).

Previous research by Graen (1966) indicated that the distinction between satisfiers and dissatisfiers in the H2FT is not always logical, as satisfiers have a significantly greater impact on contentment and discontent than dissatisfiers. Conversely, Grigaliunas and Herzberg (1971) noted that biases stemming from expected benefits, preconceptions, misunderstandings, or inconsistencies could influence job satisfaction and may not fully align with the motivation-hygiene theory. Furthermore, Gardner (1977) emphasized that the strengths of H2FT lie in its consistency and flexibility to accommodate methodological differences, suggesting that researchers struggling to support the theory often deviate from Herzberg's original framework.

Recent research involving H2FT examined the connections between key factors and job satisfaction (Koziol & Koziol, 2020; Peramatiziz & Galanakis, 2022; Thant & Chang, 2021). Understanding the elements that influence employees' job satisfaction is vital, as it helps attract

and keep top talent and boost organizational performance (Lee et al., 2022). Although many motivation theories have been created over the years, more research is needed to see how they can be practically applied (Kalogiannidis, 2021). However, Soga et al. (2022) contend that despite the challenges in motivating employees, the H2FT method can effectively identify and categorize sources of motivation. Additionally, Bhatt et al. (2022) highlighted the growing trend of blending work and life, and the H2FT framework provides strong evidence of improving workers' social, physical, and emotional well-being.

Considering the setting and goals of H2FT, the idea of federal employees demonstrating effective job satisfaction was clear. Sa'adan et al. (2023) further argued that H2FT motivation indicators could serve as a catalyst for increasing federal employee satisfaction. Additionally, Davidescu et al. (2020) stated that employee feedback was valuable and provided a trustworthy data source for understanding motivational factors. H2FT emphasized that satisfied employees were more dedicated, innovative, and efficient. Similarly, recent empirical studies (Katebi et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Mullins et al., 2022) examined the connection between AWS and job satisfaction. Median-Rodriguez et al. (2020) also suggested that if an organization fostered an internal culture that recruited, supported, and maintained motivated individuals, it would be better positioned to succeed in a competitive local or global environment economy.

AWS altered the way federal employees engaged with their work, necessitating strategies to motivate and involve staff. The study's approach took these factors into account when investigating what drives employee motivation and dissatisfaction. Employees often developed routines that affected their behavior as they adapted to organizational changes. Additionally, the study explored the re-entry into office work through H2FT. Overall, flexible work

arrangements—balancing office presence with remote work—proved beneficial for all employees, especially as workforce size increased (OPM 2021).

### **Introduction to Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)**

This research used a qualitative phenomenological approach. Husserl (1961) and FÄRber (1962) argued that phenomenology focuses on studying researcher observations and reflecting the viewpoints of research subjects, gaining 'rich' knowledge and perspectives through deductive, qualitative methods such as personal interviews, dialogues, and direct observations. In this case, the aim was to examine the unique motivators and dissatisfiers of AWS practices affecting the attitudes of government workers returning to their offices. Therefore, a phenomenological approach was ideal for the investigation.

The phenomenological design examined people's experiences and how they understand them by questioning traditional beliefs, adding an interpretive aspect to qualitative research that helps teach, inspire, or challenge strategies and practices, serving as a basis for practical theory (Fernandez & Crowell, 2021; Halling, 2021). This investigative study employed a qualitative methodology that required careful examination of social phenomena and in-depth observations. The phenomenological approach ensured that participants provided firsthand information from their experiences in their natural settings. Offering important reflections and insights on the phenomenon helped articulate the philosophical and methodological alignment (Suddick et al., 2020).

Researchers use qualitative research as an inquiry method to evaluate information expressed through language and actions in specific contexts because it can capture expressive information about beliefs, principles, attitudes, and motivating factors that influence patterns of behavior, which cannot be explained through quantitative data (McBeath, 2022). Additionally,

using semi-structured interviews, researchers collect in-depth information from study respondents (Stanier, 2022). This study employed a phenomenological design, using semi-structured interviews to gather respondents' detailed insights into how the organization's scheduling protocol affects employees' productivity. Furthermore, this design incorporated participant information to better understand what managers can do to maintain strategic alignment between the agency's needs and interests and those of its employees.

The phenomenological design was ideal for this study because it was grounded in the specific circumstances participants experienced in a particular situation. It allowed access to perceptions and behavioral tendencies that could be experienced only directly, rather than through an algorithmic or staged process (Larsen, 2021). This approach enabled an in-depth assessment of the phenomenon and the population by gathering firsthand information from government workers who expressed a particular set of thoughts or ideas, thereby providing insight into the nature of the phenomenon (Halling, 2021; Levitt, 2021).

### **Research Questions**

This study provided insight into why federal employee job satisfaction significantly fell by 7% amidst the return-to-work initiative (OPM Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, 2022). The H2FT research framework, in conclusion, assisted in guiding the following study inquiries:

#### ***RQ1***

What motivators regarding AWS practices influence federal employees' job satisfaction?

#### ***RQ2***

What aspects of AWS practices are dissatisfying?

**RQ3**

How do the aspects of AWS practices impact job satisfaction amidst the return-to-work initiative?

**Significance of the Study**

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the professional and personal factors shaping the attitudes of government workers returning to the workplace and AWS practices. This research was important because it uniquely employed the H2FT theoretical framework, established a dynamic link between various employee constructs related to job satisfaction, and explored the situations in which employees responded to different environmental stimuli.

Recent research reveals a gap in understanding how AWS promotes workplace flexibility and impacts job satisfaction (Pokojski et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2020; Stoian et al., 2022). Alternative work schedules give government agencies more flexibility, and before COVID-19, they attracted workers looking for a better work-life balance (Bucata et al., 2022). Federal employees adapted to these protocols, and it is also important to explore the personal and professional relationships associated with this phenomenon (Barboza-Wilkes et al., 2024). Therefore, this research aims to increase awareness of how AWS users perceive and utilize it.

The study's findings offer insights into AWS and job satisfaction among government workers who returned to the office. Understanding how AWS impacted government employees helped clarify how the federal sector responded to this phenomenon (Ballantine et al., 2022). Additionally, analyzing how AWS affected organizations produced information that could improve job satisfaction among public sector employees (Agache et al., 2021).

**Definitions of Key Terms**

This section contains definitions of key terms relevant to this study:

### *Alternative Work Schedule*

Alternative work schedules provide flexible options beyond the traditional 9-to-5, Monday-to-Friday routine to meet personal and professional needs (Choi, 2020).

### *Compressed Work Schedule*

A work schedule enables employees less than five business days to finish a regular 35- to 40-hour weekly work schedule (du Bois, 2025). For instance, an individual who works full-time might work four days for 10 hours rather than five days for 8 hours.

### *Flexible Work Schedule*

With a flexible work schedule, employees can choose their hours within the boundaries that their company has established (Choi, 2020). Examples of flexible work schedules include the following:

**Flexitour.** A work plan that allows for flexibility at the start and conclusion of the workweek concerning each employee's daily arrival and departure times while maintaining a 40-hour workweek requirement (OPM, 2022).

**Gliding schedule.** An eight-hour workday and forty-hour workweek work schedule; employees may alter their arrival and departure timings on each of the ten workdays to make up a pay period if they adhere to the unit plan's time constraints. The worker is required to work during the core time (OPM, 2022).

**Maxiflex schedule.** A work plan where the employee's work schedule may include the beginning and conclusion of the workday and the midpoint of the lunch break, allowing them to finish an 80-hour work period. The length of a single workday, in hours, may vary during each week within the organizational limits (OPM, 2022).

***Leadership Flexibility***

The capacity to accurately assess a situation's needs and respond with a workable strategic plan.

***Leader-Employee Dynamic***

Managers and employees must work together to generate profitable results for the company. Because of this, the two must work together well (Alajmi & Lengyel, 2021).

***Leader Position***

Enables managers to behave consistently with their goals, essential for the practice of leadership over oneself, others, and the workplace (Sturm et al., 2021).

***Organizational Job Structure***

Aspects significantly impact how managers evaluate reliability data when setting policy (Allegrini et al., 2022)

***Telework***

A work plan specifies where employees carry out their duties without an agency workplace (Mele et al., 2023).

***Remote Work***

A work plan in which an individual is not needed to report to an agency workplace and regularly works even though they are not employed nearby or in the job site's local commuting region (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021). The employee supplies their workspace, typically their home, where they carry out their daily tasks.

### ***Situational Favorableness***

Explains the capacity of the leader to control a situation that might impact how people behave (Amhalhal et al., 2022).

### **Summary**

The problem in this study was that federal employee job satisfaction had significantly fallen by 7% amidst the return-to-work initiative (OPM Federal Employment Viewpoint Survey, 2022). AWS, however, allowed personnel to operate in better, more manageable, and more adaptable environments, enhancing safety despite the unexpected working conditions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak (Schur et al., 2020). Ultimately, the pandemic fundamentally changed existing institutional frameworks, forcing organizations to rethink how to perform essential tasks (Agache et al., 2021). The rapid advancement of technology has influenced how government organizations function since it provides practical solutions for unforeseen situations. Despite these challenges, technological progress and the shift toward innovation and collaboration have enabled AWS in government agencies to be strengthened, leading to substantial operational improvements over time (Abulibdeh 2020).

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the motivators and dissatisfiers of AWS practices on the attitudes of government workers returning to the office. Identifying and analyzing this phenomenon demonstrated how AWS directly impacts federal employees. Additionally, federal administrators can use this study to understand better why the government may or may not be effective in maximizing the productivity of AWS workers by evaluating the daily experiences of federal employees, which measure job satisfaction. Through H2FT foundations, organizations gain more insight into how AWS is implemented within the federal sector. Since advancements involving AWS practices influence or could affect job satisfaction, it

is crucial to understand government organizations from their employees' perspectives to identify the actions needed to manage these types of work schedules (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021; Kocot et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2021).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This phenomenological study examined the factors behind a 7% drop in job satisfaction among federal employees after the return-to-work initiative. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which required the government to reorganize its workforce toward more flexible work strategies, federal agencies quickly responded by reevaluating their ability to provide additional flexibility through AWS (Fraij & Aburumnan, 2021; Spurk & Straub, 2020). AWS has enabled federal organizations to continue performing their duties during the crisis and meet public needs (Mendoza et al., 2022; Quy & Zhu, 2024; Vaiman et al., 2021). Despite the evident benefits of using AWS, further research is necessary to identify the key factors that influence government employees' job satisfaction.

Although there is substantial knowledge about AWS, studies have yet to examine the link between AWS and employee satisfaction in the federal sector. This study investigates how the return-to-work initiative affected federal employees' job satisfaction. This chapter begins by outlining the systematic approach used for the literature review, the theoretical foundation in the field, the complexities related to the study problem, and the research question. The analysis of the H2FT framework is followed by a description of the types of AWS, the satisfying and dissatisfying aspects of AWS, and the impact of COVID-19 on AWS. The remainder of the chapter provides a critical synthesis of the literature on the influence of COVID-19 on AWS, the effects of the return-to-work initiative on federal employees, and job satisfaction within the federal workforce sector.

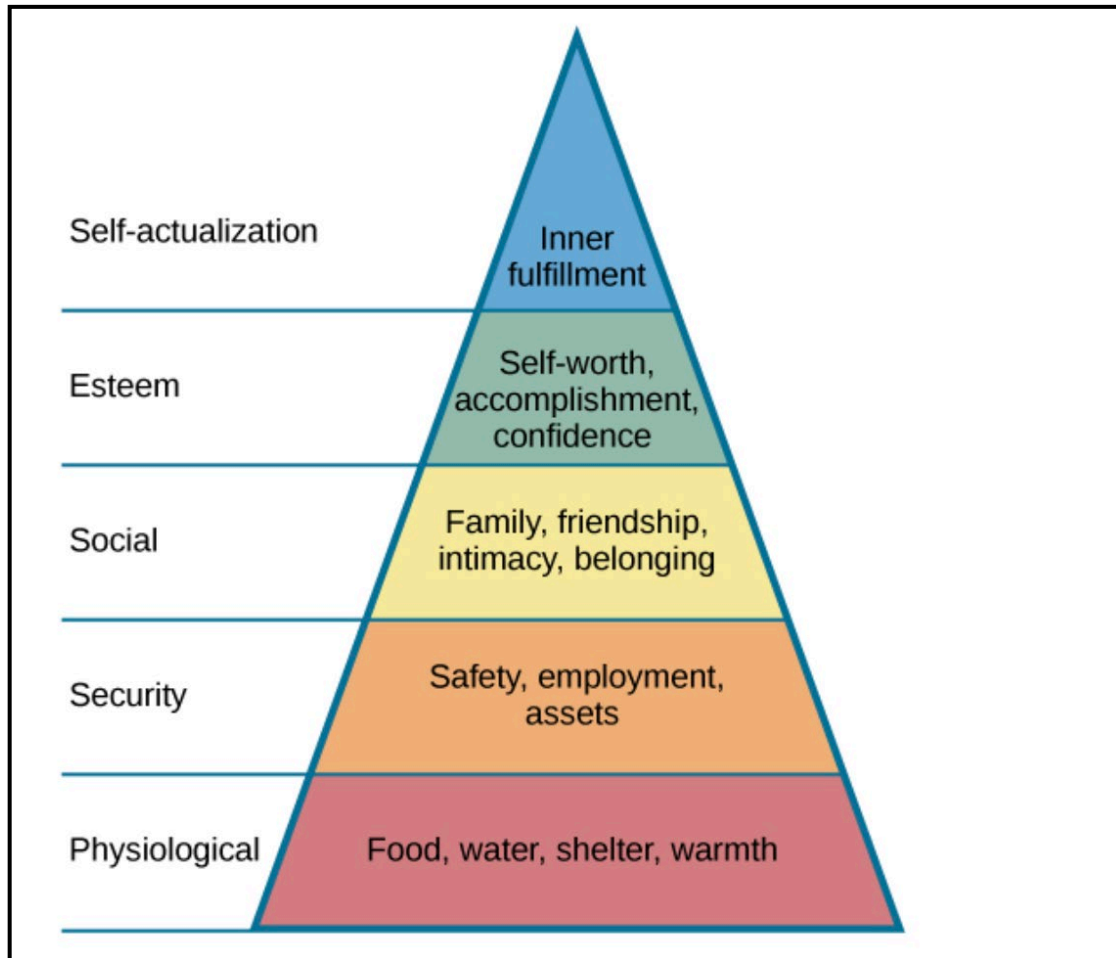
Extensive research was conducted through a systematic review of peer-reviewed studies published over the past five years on the topic. Website data analysis enabled identification of how AWS influenced job satisfaction among federal government workers. To gather the

necessary materials, major databases such as EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Roadrunner, Google Scholar, and the NCU Library were examined.

The literature review used specific terms to gather information related to the research topics, including AWS, job satisfaction of federal workers, returning federal employees to the office, AWS and COVID-19, and AWS and federal employees' job satisfaction. The search criteria helped retrieve the most relevant and credible information. However, no restrictions were set on the publication dates of news summaries, government reports, judicial decisions, newly enacted laws, or position papers from institutions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1943) provided the foundation for H2FT concerning job satisfaction. Maslow's model (Figure 1) is often shown as a pyramid. He believed that people need to satisfy their basic needs (necessities) before they can pursue higher-level goals, such as self-actualization and spirituality (Maslow, 1943). His research focused on what it means for individuals to reach their full potential, rather than just addressing psychological needs.

**Figure 1***Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

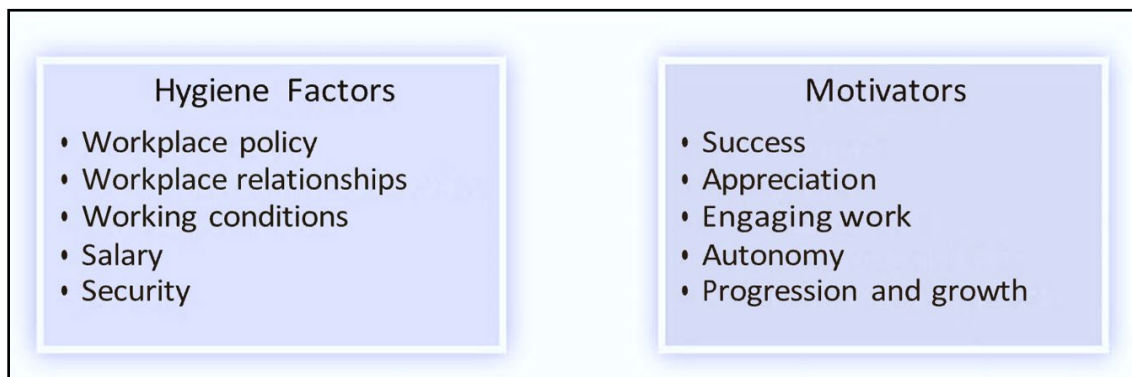
*Note.* Maslow helped humans understand the relationship between needs and the repercussions of meeting (or not meeting) daily demands (Maslow, 1943).

H2FT divides the traditional Maslow pyramid into two parts, allowing each factor to independently influence satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Herzberg, 1965; Herzberg et al., 1959). He emphasized that intrinsic qualities such as achievement, appreciation, engaging work, autonomy, advancement, and growth impact workers' satisfaction and motivation. Conversely, feelings of dissatisfaction mainly stem from workplace policies, relationships, conditions, salary,

and security. Managers can identify potential causes of employee satisfaction or dissatisfaction by examining hygiene and motivational factors (Figure 2). Understanding the difference between an organization's motivational and hygienic factors is the first step toward grasping Herzberg's theory of organizational dynamics (Koncar et al., 2022).

## Figure 2

### *Herzberg Hygiene Factors and Motivators*



Note. The motivation-hygiene theory describes two separate spectra of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction that are mutually independent and not necessarily correlated (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965). Hygienic factors help prevent job dissatisfaction, while motivators increase job satisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959).

The fundamental idea of H2FT included motivation and job satisfaction as key constructs that evolved his research. He suggested that employee satisfaction and dissatisfaction exist on the same spectrum, even if they are on opposite ends (Herzberg et al., 1959). In other words, neither can coexist and should be treated as separate entities. The motivation-hygiene theory distinguished between satisfaction and dissatisfaction, arguing that factors influencing one do not necessarily affect the other (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965). As a result, a worker may

feel satisfied with some aspects of their job while simultaneously feeling unsatisfied with others (Alrawahi et al., 2020; Koziol & Kozial, 2020; Thant & Chang, 2021).

The problem in this study was that federal employee job satisfaction had significantly fallen by 7% amidst the return-to-work initiative (OPM Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, 2022). AWS, however, allowed personnel to operate in better, more flexible, and more adaptable environments, improving safety despite the unforeseen working conditions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak (Schur et al., 2020). Ultimately, the pandemic fundamentally changed existing institutional frameworks, forcing organizations to rethink how to carry out crucial tasks (Agache et al., 2021). The rapid advancement of technology has influenced how government organizations operate, providing practical solutions for unexpected situations. Despite these challenges, technological innovations and the shift toward collaboration and innovation have enhanced AWS in government agencies, leading to significant improvements in operations over time (Abulibdeh, 2020).

Motivators increased job satisfaction, while hygienic factors prevented dissatisfaction with the workplace (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965). Motivation originated in the workplace, increased job satisfaction, and addressed employees' desires for growth, self-realization, and achievement. Motivators did not aim to reduce employee dissatisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965). Herzberg mentioned emphasizing the factors related to work as job enrichment.

Employee satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their job have historically been seen as points on the same spectrum, as noted by Herzberg and colleagues (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965). From this viewpoint, increasing job satisfaction is thought to reduce job discontent. However, the motivation-hygiene hypothesis suggests that satisfaction and

dissatisfaction are separate constructs; factors influencing one do not necessarily affect the other. Dissatisfaction is the opposite of contentment with one's job, meaning that a worker can enjoy some aspects of employment while finding others frustrating.

Herzberg argued that job dissatisfaction could be prevented if certain hygiene factors were in place, while motivators could be used to increase job satisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965). Although a decline in hygiene factors may lead to job dissatisfaction, this is not always guaranteed, assuming hygiene elements are present. Herzberg believed that after meeting hygienic needs, motivators could boost job satisfaction. Since extrinsic and intrinsic factors are important to employees, this theory suggests that employers should give equal importance to hygiene factors and motivators.

### ***Herzberg's Hygiene Factors***

**Company and Policy.** For many employees, policies that are unclear, meaningless, or not designed for everyone can cause significant confusion (Kalogiannidis, 2021). All employees should have access to the policies and procedures set by decision-makers; if such policies do not exist, create them and involve the workforce in the process (Kalogiannidis, 2021). Although policies might never motivate or satisfy employees, organizations can reduce employee dissatisfaction by ensuring fair rules apply equally to both management and staff (Herzberg et al., 1959).

**Working Relationships.** Organizations must select qualified individuals for management roles as a baseline to reduce employee dissatisfaction in this area (Herzberg et al., 1959). The ability to treat everyone fairly is a crucial aspect of effective management, as not all talented individuals become successful managers (Sadat & Alizadeh, 2022). To prevent individuals from

feeling targeted, managers should use employee assessment and appraisal strategies and provide genuine and meaningful praise when appropriate (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965).

**Working Conditions.** The office environment can significantly influence a worker's level of internalized satisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959). Organizations should maintain their offices and equipment to enhance pride in the workplace's aesthetic. Additionally, provide each employee with a private space, like a desk, bookcase, or storage area (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020).

**Salary.** Organizations can maintain high employee satisfaction by offering competitive pay and rewards. Salary is a crucial hygiene factor because it often serves as a motivator (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965). Issues arise when pay is perceived as significantly lower than that of similar roles in comparable organizations. Although addressing this discrepancy may eliminate dissatisfaction, it does not necessarily enhance motivation (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965).

**Security.** There is a potential to prevent dissatisfaction among employees by fostering a sense of security and appreciation in the workplace. When employees feel valued and supported, they are more likely to remain motivated and engaged in their tasks. Conversely, a lack of security can lead to negative emotional states, which may affect overall productivity.

### ***Herzberg's Motivator Factors***

**Success.** Herzberg's theory fundamentally states that most people genuinely want to do a good job (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965). Organizations must assign workers to roles that utilize their skills and avoid setting them up for failure (Demircioglu, 2021). It is essential to establish clear, measurable objectives for each role and communicate these to the team (Johnson

& Johnson, 2021). Additionally, individuals should feel sufficiently challenged at work and receive timely, constructive feedback (Johnson & Johnson, 2021).

**Appreciation.** Besides fostering a sense of satisfaction and admiration among employees, recognizing exceptional work rewards it and motivates them to maintain positive work behaviors (Herzberg et al., 1959). Such recognition can include verbal praise, awards, or other forms of acknowledgment. The more an employer offers genuine compliments on an employee's actions, the more likely employees are to replicate those actions and stay motivated (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg). This practice not only enhances individual performance but also contributes to overall organizational success. Additionally, consistent recognition ensures compliance with employment standards and promotes a fair work environment. Employers should implement formal recognition programs to ensure equitable and effective acknowledgment of employee achievements, thereby meeting legal and ethical standards in the workplace.

**Engaging Work.** Providing employees with confidence that their job matters and that their duties have a purpose is the most crucial factor in employee motivation (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965). When employees understand the significance of their roles, they are more likely to be motivated and committed to their work. Organizations should identify unnecessary tasks to minimize or eliminate to increase productivity and satisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959). Furthermore, reducing such tasks can help ensure compliance with labor regulations and promote a fair work environment. It is essential for organizations to regularly review job responsibilities to maintain clarity and alignment with organizational goals, which also supports legal compliance and reduces potential disputes.

**Autonomy.** When employees feel responsible for their work, they are more motivated to succeed at it (Rakić et al., 2022). Giving workers the autonomy and authority to complete their tasks makes them feel ownership of the results (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965). Organizations should look for ways to include challenging and rewarding work by providing employees with greater independence and responsibility (Chambel et al., 2022).

**Progression and Growth.** When there are many options for continuous improvement, employee motivation and engagement tend to be higher (Lee et al., 2020). Allowing employees to develop their skills and enhance their efficiency at work fosters a sense of confidence and achievement that greatly motivates them (Herzberg et al., 1959).

Since the conception of the two-factor theory, recent academic research has explored its usefulness in various contexts, demonstrating its broad applicability (Al-Awar et al., 2022; Bhatt et al., 2022; Gangwar et al., 2022). Kalogiannidis (2021) found that workers are motivated by factors beyond pay and benefits, such as job security, friendly coworkers, opportunities for advancement, and a sense of purpose in their work. Sobaih & Hasanein (2020) used Herzberg's theory to study motivation and satisfaction in emerging countries' hotel sectors in Cairo, Egypt. According to the data, Herzberg's theory may only apply to some employees in both developed and developing countries (Sobaih & Hasanein, 2020).

These studies further supported Herzberg and colleagues' conclusions that motivators are essential in determining job satisfaction in wealthy nations (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965). In contrast, in less developed countries, hygiene factors are more important (Sobaih & Hasanein, 2020). One explanation could be that because necessities are scarcer in poorer nations, workers there are more likely to be motivated by monetary gains and other factors that support their jobs (Sobaih & Hasanein, 2020). Additionally, even though employers did not fulfill certain

valued factors, less satisfied employees continued working because they had no other options due to the high underemployment rates in their area (Sobaih & Hasanein, 2020).

Sobaih & Hasanein's (2020) explored a range of motivational and hygienic factors that may influence workers' decisions to stay or leave their jobs. However, in the hotel sector in Cairo, Egypt, despite these factors, workers remained employed due to local underemployment statistics (Sobaih & Hasanein, 2020). Herzberg's concept offered motivational and hygiene factors that influence federal employees' choices to stay or leave based on their perceived job satisfaction.

Similarly, Choi (2020) believed that participation in AWS has contributed to lower turnover rates in federal agencies. Although AWS did not reduce transfers or turnover, it was shown that employees were more likely to stay with the organization if they had more flexibility in how, when, and where they completed their work (Choi, 2020). While the public sector may not be able to offer its employees as many luxuries as the hotel industry, government organizations implement AWS to provide employees with another source of job satisfaction. Therefore, an organization's commitment to its employees can become essential to building and maintaining high levels of job satisfaction (Choi, 2020).

### **Criticism and Assessment of Herzberg's Theory**

Since its inception, the motivation-hygiene theory has faced heavy criticism. House and Wigor (1967) proposed revising the two-factor theory, which states that job-related satisfiers have greater motivational potential than dissatisfiers. The critique argued that, to distinguish between satisfiers and dissatisfiers, Herzberg's terms must be arbitrarily defined. Additionally, a complete break can only determine the argument's validity. Peramatzis and Galanakis (2022) asserted that Herzberg's theory is important and applicable across a wider range of work

contexts, especially regarding motivation. Additionally, the motivation theory cannot be used alone and expected to yield clear results because other important factors also play a role (Peramatzis & Galanakis, 2022).

Behling et al. (1968) argued that authors and researchers reached conflicting conclusions about the evidence for the motivation-hygiene duality, from which Herzberg drew his conclusions; many researchers supported the duality idea even though they had different interpretations. Furthermore, Behling et al. (1968) claimed that the theory was partly semantic or that the main issue was categorizing motivators and hygiene factors. However, Herzberg's key assertion is that greater emphasis leads to a variety of outcomes (Herzberg, 1965). Additionally, Herzberg's theory remained relevant 50 years after its inception (Bhatt et al., 2022; Gangwar et al., 2022; Koncar et al., 2022). Despite criticism, how work satisfaction is understood through Herzberg's theory continues to be valued by both academics and practitioners for its ability to predict important employee outcomes (Judge et al., 2020; Koziol & Koziol, 2020; Sadat & Alizadeh, 2022).

Despite criticism, Herzberg's methodology remains useful and provides a theoretical basis for understanding workers' satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Additionally, no single method is best at accurately conveying these aspects (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965). While hygiene factors mainly have an indirect effect on job satisfaction, it is important to recognize that issues may continue if Herzberg's factors are not adequately addressed. Nonetheless, observable data supports Herzberg's theory. Its key ideas are simple, adaptable to any organization, and supportive of managers' perspectives and authority (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1965).

This study's research questions were developed to test the validity of Herzberg's idea regarding employee roles in relation to the theory. The framework was relevant to the issue

because the level of job satisfaction among federal employees dropped by 7% during the implementation of the return-to-work initiative. Additionally, the framework aligned with the purpose statement. It helped support the research findings on whether AWS impacted federal workers' satisfaction with their work jobs.

### **Alternative Work Schedules**

This study was timely since managers had become increasingly interested in AWS as a policy, and it added to the existing body of empirical work on how AWS affected job satisfaction in the federal sector. Research suggested that AWS were developed to fulfill employees' daily demands and give them more freedom to juggle their obligations of work and professional lives (Brough et al., 2022; Chung & van der Lippe, 2020; Ray & Pana-Cryan, 2021). Organizations sought to provide work arrangements that met employees' needs; it was, therefore, necessary for organizations to fully understand these needs, particularly beyond financial considerations, to remain competitively viable (Valet et al., 2021), particularly since federal agencies were unable to provide a lot of the retention-based benefits frequently offered by top commercial businesses (Brough et al., 2022).

Margheritti et al. (2024) argued that the factors associated with AWS positivity impact both the organization and the employee. Buick et al. (2024) further claimed that if federal agencies permit flexible scheduling, they can more practically support employees' work-life balance, remove the stigma associated with AWS, promote a family-oriented culture, and promote more engagement in the workplace. Bolino et al. (2021) affirmed that employees' performance at work, satisfaction and motivation at work, and success at numerous other duties relating to their jobs are all impacted by their access to more flexible working arrangements that

could affect how successfully employees perform on the job, their levels of happiness and motivation, as well as other work-related tasks.

Due to COVID-19, it became essential to change work schedules; research showed that having control over working hours led to a 62% increase in job satisfaction and a 20% decrease in stress on the job (Ray & Pana-Cryan, 2021). For example, some well-being indicators that benefited from flexible work options had higher levels of job satisfaction, more healthy days, and lower stress at work. This suggested that flexible work arrangements could benefit businesses if designed with both the company's and employees' interests in mind (Bal & Izak, 2021). Supporting work culture and showing a willingness to accommodate employees, flexible work-time programs or guidelines have been highly valued by workers at that time (Johnson & Johnson, 2021). A more committed workforce often results from an organization that values its employees' time and flexibility (Austin-Egol et al., 2020; Bolino et al., 2021; Wiater, 2022).

### ***History of Alternative Work Schedules***

The impact of AWS on government employee satisfaction has not yet been thoroughly examined. This work helped clarify AWS's fundamentals so scholars could better understand the program. It was long argued that employees need to be physically present in the office to perform their tasks (Ispen et al., 2022). However, as technology advanced in the 1980s, many organizations started permitting employees to perform some or all of their tasks remotely (Faulds & Raju, 2022). Because the pandemic forced a real test for AWS, it enabled many individuals to work from home for the first time, demonstrating that various AWS mechanisms can be effective (Rahman & Arif, 2021; Prodanova & Kocarev, 2022; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021).

The Telework Enhancement Act (TEA), which received support from members of both parties, was passed by Congress and signed into law in December 2010 (OPM, 2021). Since

then, there has been an increase in the prevalence, trends, and conditions surrounding alternative work arrangements due to significant organizational and technological developments that have changed the nature of work in the United States (Bolino et al., 2021; Quy & Zhu, 2024).

Organizations have entered a period of rapid practical advancements, given the tremendous technological progress in the last ten years (Garg, 2022).

Choi (2020) highlighted the importance of the finding that workers eligible for AWS were more satisfied with their workplaces than those who were not. Wiatr (2021) noted that having a balanced schedule at work and home was a key factor in the complex relationship between AWS and job satisfaction. Workers without AWS reported lower levels of job satisfaction than those who chose not to work there due to personal preferences or job demands (Choi, 2020).

### **Types of Alternative Work Schedules**

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) continues to promote productive employment initiatives within the federal government that benefit all parties involved, even as the government's organizational culture undergoes AWS transformations (OPM, 2022). In the public sector, flexible employment programs that are comprehensive and well-implemented serve as an effective strategy to improve worker satisfaction while also increasing mission efficiency and governance (Lee et al., 2022). By allowing employees greater control over how they complete their work, organizations that adopt alternative work scheduling demonstrate appreciation for their staff and are more likely to retain employees (Brough et al., 2022; Choi, 2020).

### ***Flexible Work Schedules (FWS)***

Workers still put in eight hours a day under this setup but can clock in at their convenience (OPM, 2021). This type of AWS is supported by research showing that when an organization promotes a culture that values and respects family commitments, employees are more likely to make choices that benefit both workers and their families (Buick et al., 2024). In general, FWS has been linked to more positive behaviors, and it is believed to influence attitudes because it shows that an organization cares about the welfare of its employees. Kossek et al. (2021) argue that FWS can lead to a better understanding of psychological empowerment, which, in turn, can help reduce stress between employees' work and personal lives. However, the main goal of FWS is to give workers more flexibility over when, how, and where they report to work (Buick et al., 2024).

### ***Compressed Work Schedules (CWS)***

Employees might participate in this arrangement to get a day off work in exchange for working longer hours or days (OPM, 2022). Increased demand for on-site personnel during COVID-19 made it more difficult for organizations to schedule meetings due to restrictions on on-site employees (Kiwanuka et al., 2021). Additionally, CWS has the potential to reduce the number of commutes each pay period; it is less common than other forms of AWS because there is no specific combination of scheduling system type, plan, form, employer, or employee that guarantees a direct benefit over a long period (Su & Wang, 2020). Employees can still enjoy long weekends or extra days off without a reduction in their salary because of this arrangement (Shanker, 2022). CWS is continually evolving, and variations of it can be found across a wide range of industries (Kiwanuka et al., 2021).

### ***Telework***

A form of AWS where employees perform their duties outside the office, connecting with their supervisors and colleagues via the Internet and handling their daily tasks away from the company's physical location (OPM, 2021). There is a significant divide between employees and management on whether it is appropriate to approve telework under specific conditions (Sigahi et al., 2021). There is ongoing debate about the benefits of telework programs for organizations (Monroe & Haug, 2022). A large portion of the COVID-induced shift toward AWS has lasted for a considerable amount of time after the pandemic.

During the pandemic, 28% of American workers were in hybrid arrangements, four times the percentage before COVID-19 (Barrero et al., 2021). The data used in this argument come from the Working Arrangements and Attitudes Survey, which found that employees across various demographics and family structures wanted the ability to perform job tasks outside of a traditional workplace (Barrero et al., 2021).

Similarly, a 2021 assessment of the global workforce by the McKinsey Global Institute showed that COVID-19 had the greatest impact on workers and contributed to the rise of remote work by employees (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021). Although telecommuting has been an option for many years, remote work became more widespread during the pandemic due to the rapid adoption of new technological platforms such as teleconferencing, document-sharing tools, and increased cloud computing capabilities (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021). Agreements like these allow workers to continue working from home even as the pandemic subsides, which may help federal agencies improve employee well-being and attitudes (Choi, 2020). Since then, specific provisions of legislation (Table 1) have been enacted to support telework in the public sector (OPM, 2021).

**Table 1***Telework Legislation*

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>PUBLIC LAW #</b>	<b>HOW IT CONTRIBUTED TO AWS</b>
<b>1996</b>	Public Law 104-208, §407	With this clause, GSA was able to set up virtual workplaces. It also allowed GSA to offer advice, help, and supervision for those setting up and running nontraditional working arrangements.
<b>1999</b>	Public Law 105-277, §630	As part of a telework/flexible initiative, this provision was to be utilized by specific executive agencies to allow employees to do some of their usual duties from a remote location.
<b>2000</b>	Public Law 106-346, §359	Every executive agency must adopt a telework policy that allows qualified personnel to work remotely as much as possible without negatively impacting the employee's performance.
<b>2002</b>	Public Law 107-67, §638	Required that updates on the development be provided to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) of the Executive branch flexible telecommuting programs from the relevant agencies.
<b>2003</b>	Public Law 108-7, §623	The Departments of State, Justice, and Commerce and the Small Business Administration acquired assistance and additional necessities to appoint telework coordinators to provide progress reports twice yearly.
<b>2005</b>	Public Law 108-447, §622	It was required of the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Small Business

2010	Public Law 111-292	<p>Administration to confirm that telecommuting possibilities were made available to their fully qualified workforce per this section. There are also yearly reporting stipulations and telework coordinator appointments to make.</p> <p>The 2010 Telework Enhancement Act created rules for executive agencies to coordinate their efforts, required agencies to include telework in their disaster recovery strategies, mandated that staff and supervisors participate in facilitated training and approve telework contracts in writing, mandated that agencies designate a telework managing officer, and directed that organizations formalize a set of rules under which workers can participate in telework.</p>
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*Note.* This table outlines legislation for establishing and implementing federal telework requirements to support government agencies in developing effective telework programs (OPM, 2021).

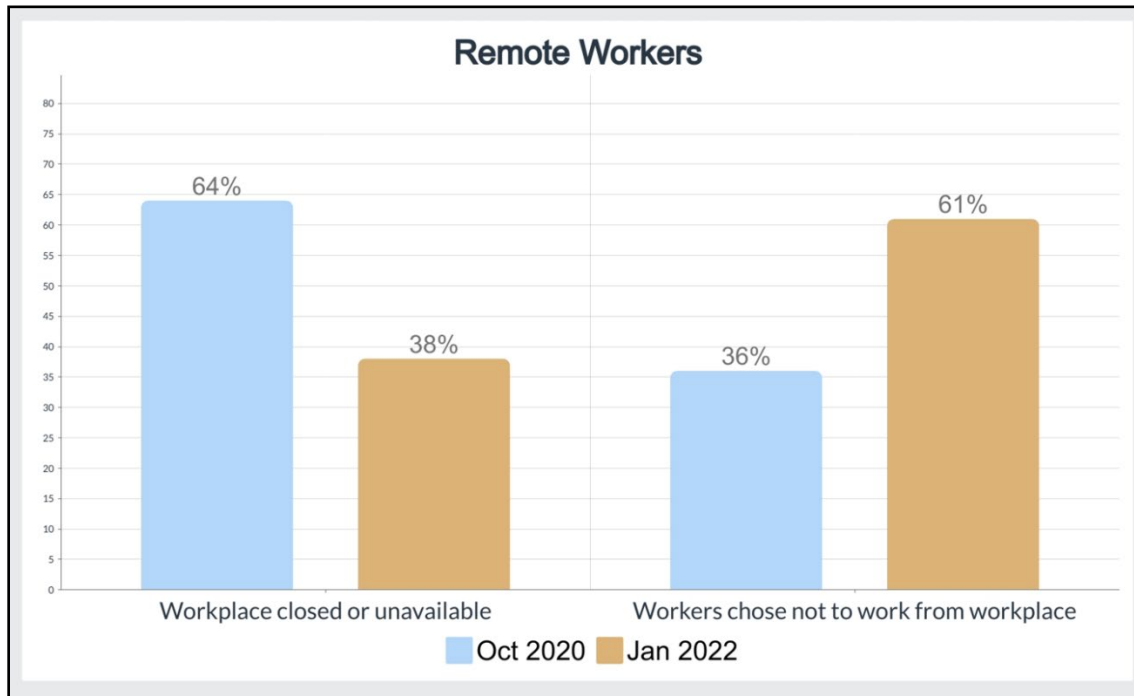
### ***Remote Work***

Under remote work arrangements, employees did not need to report to a central office regularly; instead, they worked from a location of their choice, either within or outside their usual commute time from home (OPM, 2021). Since 2020, many things have changed, including why people work remotely. A 2022 assessment of the global workforce found that many workers prefer to work remotely, not due to financial necessity but because of personal preference (Pew Research Center, 2022). As a result of the closure or inaccessibility of their workplaces, 61% of

post-Covid workers said they no longer went to an office, and 38% said they did their jobs from home (Pew Research Center, 2022). Employees who are new to their roles or less confident and therefore need clearer guidance from their supervisor may find remote work particularly challenging (Brooks et al., 2022).

Alternatively, workers who are skilled at making key decisions and completing tasks may be okay with having fewer opportunities to interact with their management staff (Brooks et al., 2022). Remote workplaces can play an important role and already do contribute significantly to increasing the productivity and satisfaction of remote workers because of features in virtual workplaces, such as social support and professional autonomy, which serve as resources that help workers overcome challenges caused by remote work (Wang et al., 2021).

Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA, a significant portion of the population earned a living from home (Abulibdeh, 2020). However, in October 2020, it was reported that 64% of workplaces had closed, while 36% of workers continued their jobs remotely (Pew Research Center, 2022). By January 2022, the percentage of businesses that had shut down decreased to 38%, yet remote work increased to 61% (Pew Research Center, 2022). Many employees preferred working from home even after many companies reopened, and this trend persisted even after the initial wave of coronavirus cases subsided (Figure 3).

**Figure 3***Remote Workers*

*Note.* This figure displays the number of businesses open and employees working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Providing employees with the opportunity to work a variety of AWS throughout the day or week has become increasingly common among organizations (Bolino et al., 2021). As a result, some, if not all, employees have benefited from AWS. Employees who have control over how much time they spend working are more likely to experience a sense of mental peace and be motivated to give their best efforts to organizations that employ them (Shanker, 2022). Overall, AWS are becoming more prevalent in today's workplaces and offer a way for businesses to meet the needs of employees with more complex jobs and personal obligations (Ray & Cryan 2021).

### **Advantages of AWS (Motivators)**

Many questions about AWS still need answers, as adopting flexible schedules is a major departure from tradition. However, it offers long-term benefits worth considering. Research by Rodriguez-Sánchez et al. (2020) and Dimian et al. (2023) shows that flexible work schedules provide several advantages for both employers and employees. AWS employees, whether working in a traditional office or remotely, tend to be highly motivated, independent, self-reliant, organized, and communicative. They often perform better because employers grant them the autonomy to complete their tasks in the way that suits them best (Rodriguez-Sánchez et al., 2020).

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant change in work. While jobs that offer such high flexibility are often seen as family-friendly, the reality is that even though AWS schedules provide more free time, workers are still responsible for their tasks (Quy & Zhu, 2024). In many parts of the world, especially in Europe, workplace flexibility is linked to companies bypassing rules and policies to make employees work whenever the organization needs them (Chambel et al., 2022). However, in the United States, flexibility usually means giving workers control over when, where, and how they work, as this is one of the most sought-after benefits in the country (Chambel et al., 2022). Still, businesses can gain from AWS, particularly those that involve employee input, which is designed to support a healthy balance between work and personal life (Dimian et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2020). Therefore, organizations need to promote employee feedback on AWS-related decisions (Austin-Egole et al., 2020).

### ***Increases Retention***

Positive employee attitudes and perceptions of a less stressful workplace have been shown to increase staff retention rates (Kakar et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2020), which is why businesses that utilize specific types of AWS tend to have higher retention rates. Organizational attachment is one way to gauge employee commitment. AWS has strengthened current employees' perceptions of their autonomy and connection to their employers since they do not intend to quit (Bontrager et al., 2021). According to Choi (2020), organizations with longer average employee tenure have lower voluntary turnover rates, suggesting that older, more experienced employees are less likely to leave, and satisfied workers tend to stay with their organizations longer and leave only for higher salary offers.

Agencies experienced less turnover when participants engaged in alternative work programs (Choi, 2020). Organizational metrics that guide individuals toward actions that enhance their work-life balance are becoming so crucial that they can help prevent employees from leaving voluntarily (Marx et al., 2021). From an organizational perspective, this is beneficial because it shows that employers value their employees' personal lives by providing time off to be with their families, encouraging workers to stay with the organization (Choi, 2020). Furthermore, AWS practices are more than just goodwill gestures by businesses toward their employees; they are now widely recognized as strategically valuable assets that increase a company's competitive edge in the labor market (Dilmaghani, 2021; Neto, 2020; Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2020).

### ***Attracts Talented Recruits***

Ben-Gal (2022) asserted that understanding the goals and tactics of both the business and potential hires is essential. Furthermore, organizations need to foster a reputation for being

highly employee-centric to stand out. By highlighting their commitment to diversity and inclusion on their corporate websites, companies leading the way in the new inclusive culture can enhance their recruitment efforts (Kossek et al., 2021).

Flexibility in the workplace, along with other positive employee reviews and attractive job features, has been shown to increase the number of applications a company receives (Ahamad et al., 2023). Pietsch (2023) argued that businesses should offer competitive salaries and allow employees to choose flexible work schedules to maximize profits. Consequently, hiring new employees now more than ever is a decision-making process that requires flexibility and the best course of action (Ben-Gal, 2022; Margheritti et al., 2024).

### ***Boosts Productivity***

The expected benefits for businesses that adopted AWS are numerous and diverse, but the most common include increased job satisfaction among employees and higher productivity levels (Austin-Egole et al., 2020; Febrita & Prasajo, 2023; Neto, 2020). Concerns about productivity shifted significantly from the start to the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, as many managers recognized that productivity could be maintained while working from home (Williamson et al., 2022). With AWS, remote workers experience fewer interruptions from coworkers and avoid the stress of commuting, enabling them to accomplish more in less time and improve their work-life balance (Pabilonia & Vernon, 2022).

Rahman and Arif (2021) assert that developing a person's sense of self-efficacy is vital for succeeding in their professional activities, as it is necessary when a goal or intention affects an employee's performance or productivity. There are direct links between AWS, employee motivation, and productivity, just as highly motivated and productive employees are connected to an organization's success (Petak, 2022). The pandemic's impact on people's worldviews has

been significant. While pre-epidemic data showed high productivity from workers but low trust, post-epidemic data reveal high levels of both (Barrerro et al., 2021; Choudhury, 2021; Williamson et al., 2022).

### ***Separation of Life and Work***

Focusing on how employees with AWS manage their work and personal lives is becoming increasingly important as the nature of work and employment evolves (Sharma, 2021). There must be a careful balance between encouraging employees to disconnect to maintain a sense of work time and abandoning the idea of work time altogether to promote alternative ideals in response to the challenges of AWS (Katsabian, 2020). Because employees are more likely to try to balance their personal and professional lives independently without managerial guidance, this has become vital for the growing segment of the workforce (Sharma, 2021).

Parker et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of designing suitable work systems to support employees, noting that shifting from a clearly defined structure to a more flexible one can be challenging. Technology plays a central role in contrasting viewpoints: some see it as a negative force that must be controlled to protect workers, while others view it as a positive force to be harnessed (Katsabian, 2020). Additionally, employees with less time spent on travel and preparation tend to be more productive, suggesting that AWS helps its workers achieve a better work-life balance (Pabilonia & Vernon 2002).

### **Disadvantages of AWS (Hygiene Factors)**

The advantages of teleworking, both in theory and practice, have been shown in several studies (Chambel et al., 2022; Quy & Zhu, 2024; Sánchez et al., 2020), although many people's experiences have been mixed during the pandemic. A key managerial concern with flexible work arrangements is the challenge of managing teleworkers, as there are fewer opportunities to

observe employee behavior (Dos Santos et al., 2022). Jacobson (2023) argued that AWS workers would be less likely to let fear of consequences stop them from working outside the office if they felt confident in their managers' support.

Organizations must consider their employees' diverse backgrounds, circumstances, and ages if AWS is to be widely adopted, especially for roles or activities not requiring physical presence (Tahlyan et al., 2022). Workers in an AWS environment often face challenges, notably in dealing with a lack of human interaction, which can lead to feelings of alienation from the workplace; therefore, employers should carefully consider the potential drawbacks of AWS (Abdulah et al., 2020). Although many believe that all it takes to participate in AWS is a computer with internet access, implementing change or transformation remains difficult for organizations (Medina-Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Ballentine et al. (2022) asserted that to promote change, senior managers must recognize that support for AWS could lead to positive attitudes toward AWS, given its advantages. Many obstacles have been overcome due to technological advancements and shifts in organizational culture (Medina-Rodriguez et al., 2020). A change in mindset at the upper levels of management is essential for the widespread adoption of AWS (Ballentine et al., 2022).

### ***Weakened Employee Relationships***

Haines et al. (2020) stated that employees who participate in AWS and work outside the office might experience psychological stress due to limited access to social support networks that are more available in an office setting. Similarly, Cheng et al. (2023) pointed out that workers' emotional reactions to AWS were mixed, with isolation at work being the most common complaint, since employees who spend a lot of time alone at work are also less likely to collaborate with others. As a result, AWS can be considered disadvantageous to organizations

over time because it discourages workers from forming close friendships and hampers efforts to create lively, information-rich workplaces (Cheng et al., 2023).

Luebstorf et al. (2023) observed that more virtual face-to-face meetings have a depressing effect on workers' morale. Because of this, meetings reduce workplace productivity by taking up time that could be used for work or more productive activities (Luebstorf et al., 2023). Optimal productivity in the workplace can be achieved when workers are given the freedom and authority to set their schedules and priorities (Mache et al., 2020). Giving employees more leeway to manage their own time and work routines, along with holding fewer virtual meetings, will help employees regain more valuable time for work-related tasks (Luebstorf et al., 2023).

### ***Lapse in Communication***

Although open communication channels are vital for building trustworthy partnerships, the various customization options offered by AWS can sometimes lead to misunderstandings (Garg, 2022). This makes sense since remote workers often have more flexible schedules (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). Even in a hybrid organization, confusion is common because it's tough to recall in-person conversations when working remotely (Garg, 2022). When workers have open lines of communication with their supervisors, they tend to feel more invested in the outcomes. They are also more likely to voice their concerns about areas of confusion (Alexander et al., 2021).

Because of the miscommunication, absent employees might not have a solid understanding of the initial instructions, and even worse, they might start feeling as though they are being excluded (Garg, 2022). Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi (2020) also highlighted that most employees felt less resourceful at home, while others preferred finding a comfortable place to

work. A lack of in-person interactions or a failure to stay regularly connected with knowledgeable coworkers can lead to issues, which are essential for getting valuable feedback (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020).

### **The Impact of COVID-19 on Alternative Work Schedules**

Although AWS was not new, it had yet to be recognized as an efficient and effective method (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). Meanwhile, employers discovered that AWS enabled their organizations to keep functioning normally despite the ongoing crisis (Agba et al., 2020). Workplace flexibility boosted productivity and allowed employees to better address family needs, benefiting both employees and employers (Da et al., 2022; Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020; Ramana & Krishna, 2022). Even though AWS work trends were on the rise before COVID-19, they have grown even more widespread since the conclusion of the pandemic (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020).

While widespread pessimism may have deterred some agencies from reconsidering the idea, what was once dismissed as corporate bias has since been regarded as worth considering (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). Since the COVID-19 pandemic had worldwide effects, this event might be seen as a pivotal moment in the history of AWS (Agba et al., 2020; Da et al., 2022; Hajal, 2022).

Virtual teams replaced formal meetings, and some workers found themselves in situations where they needed to be prepared but were still required to participate due to the prevalence of technology (Bussin & Swart-Opperman, 2021). For many employees, the biggest challenge was developing and maintaining a sense of belonging to a cohesive team while working in a virtual environment (Hajal, 2022). Usually, workers preferred to have direct conversations with their

immediate supervisors about work-related issues, but COVID-19 negatively affected that process (Ramana & Krishana, 2021).

Working from home needed to replicate the distinctive vibe that existed at the office (Ramana & Krishana, 2021). As a result, organizations sought out new ways of working that merged AWS's scalability with the benefits of personal interaction, and flexibility led to the implementation of hybrid schedules, where an employee's presence is required in both the physical and virtual worlds, depending on the tasks at hand (Grzegorzczak et al., 2021; Sonnenschein et al., 2021). Due to the increased focus on the effects of AWS, it is now more important than ever for managers to understand how to lead and support employees' productivity and well-being through remote hybrid work management (Ispen et al., 2022).

### **The Impact of the Return-to-Work Initiative on Federal Employees**

Throughout the pandemic, return-to-work (RTW) guidelines underwent several revisions (Garzillo et al., 2022). Due to the widespread spread of COVID-19, RTW was carried out in a dispersed manner, at varying rates, and with different sets of procedures and expectations across many institutions, which affected people's opinions and created a unique situation for the workforce, complete with specialized protocols for management, staff, infrastructure, and institutions (Mobach, 2023). Thus, when it became safe, the federal sector started developing effective strategies to promote positive return-to-work attitudes among employees by implementing hybrid work models (OPM, 2021). Although there were no universal procedures, many organizations selected the best RTW strategy for their workplace by considering CDC recommendations and their specific circumstances (Garzillo et al., 2022).

Despite some debate over AWS's efficacy, many companies have adopted "work-from-home" policies and other remote employment practices considering the COVID-19 pandemic

(Mohammed et al., 2022). In 2023, 82 federal agencies reported a total of 1,055,593 flexible workers, a decrease from 2022, when 84 agencies reported 1,066,2826 workers teleworking (OPM, 2023). Additionally, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses have a stronger obligation than ever to ensure that their employees can stay productive while working remotely, which is changing how they typically do business or requiring adaptation to a unique and different work environment (Shaw et al., 2020).

The return-to-work (RTW) process led organizations to adopt safe business practices as a direct result of implementing mitigation measures alongside other strategies (Asaba et al., 2022). As employees returned to work environments, employers employed methods that focused on testing, monitoring, workplace adjustments, and cleanliness necessary to keep workers healthy and environments safe (Fragala et al., 2021; Godeau et al., 2021). Despite their best efforts, workers faced various new challenges due to the widespread adoption of AWS in the workplace. Additionally, the pandemic highlighted mental health issues among workers, which have since become a top priority for many organizations (Koonin, 2022).

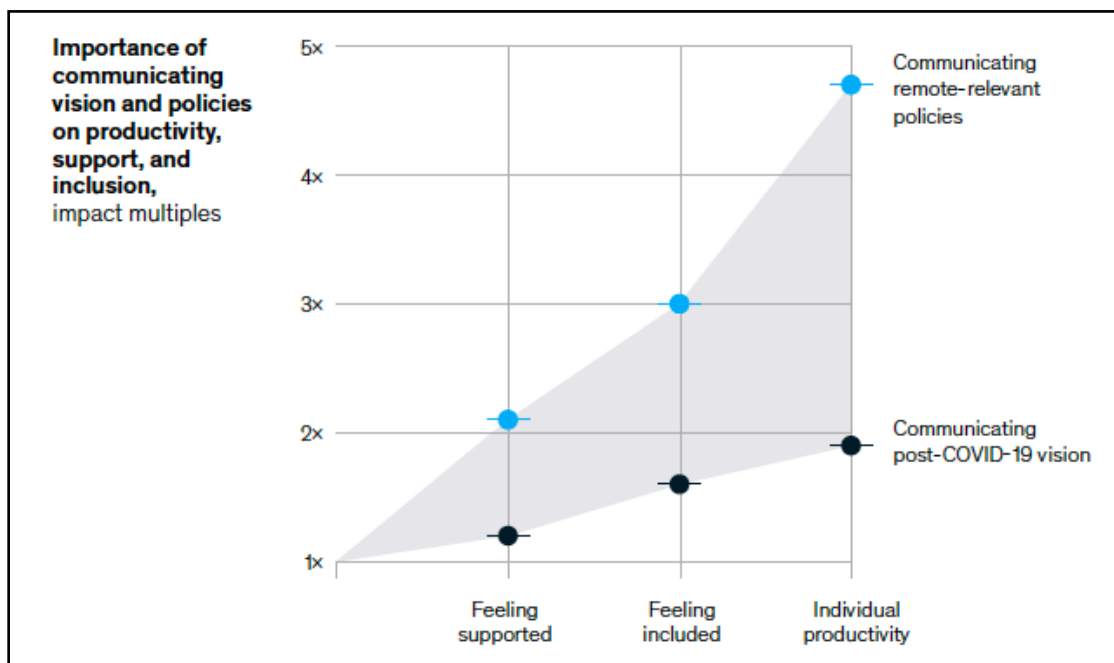
### **Federal Sector Job Satisfaction Following the COVID-19 Pandemic**

AWS has offered several benefits during the crisis, including increased output and higher employee satisfaction with their work (Lim et al., 2022). During COVID-19, enhancing organizational support and reducing workplace stress seemed to significantly impact employees' psychological well-being (Göktaş & Özdiñç, 2022). From this viewpoint, AWS's symbolic influence has been positive, especially as workers report greater satisfaction and interest in their jobs due to having more autonomy and control over their roles and responsibilities (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020).

Organizational support practices for employees since the start of COVID-19 have significantly increased job satisfaction while reducing depression, stress, and anxiety (Göktaş & Özdiñç, 2022). COVID-19 preparedness communication efforts by managers have proven to be beneficial for worker satisfaction and productivity (Figure 4). Workers who had access to more detailed updates on business-related developments were found to be more satisfied and productive (Alexander et al., 2021).

#### Figure 4

*Policy Uniformity and Clear Communication Set the Tone for the Future of Work*



*Note:* McKinsey & Company surveyed 5,043 workers from the private and public sectors in their "Reimagine Work" study from December 2020 to January 2021 to compile these results (Alexander et al., 2021).

Brunelle & Fortina (2021) argued that remote workers experience lower job satisfaction because of isolation from their coworkers, loneliness, and worry about being replaced. Similarly, Sellar & Peiris (2021) acknowledged that employees' satisfaction levels might decrease if they

are required to work remotely for an extended period due to the resulting emotional distance and isolation from their coworkers. On the other hand, Fan & Moen (2023) found that compared to workers who had access to AWS options, those randomly assigned to stay in the office reported higher satisfaction levels, less emotional exhaustion, and a more optimistic outlook.

### **Summary**

As federal workers returned to office sites, a 7% drop in job satisfaction emerged as a key issue during the return-to-work initiative (OPM FEVS, 2022). A more organized option for federal employees, AWS, was quickly created after agencies reassessed their ability to offer additional flexibility in response to COVID-19 (Fraij & Aburumnan, 2021; Spurk & Straub, 2020). An evaluation of the global workforce in 2022 showed that many workers prefer working from home for personal reasons rather than necessity (Pew Research Center, 2022). Workers hired after the COVID-19 pandemic reported that 61% no longer go to a physical workplace, and 38% said they are telecommuting because their offices were closed or inaccessible (Pew Research Center, 2022).

As a direct result of the ongoing flexibility offered by the return-to-work initiative, the mindset of the public sector employment market has experienced a significant change due to the COVID-19 crisis (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021; Monroe & Haug, 2022; Rad & Rad, 2020). Because of this, flexible working arrangements have become valuable for many workers. Employees who have some control over their schedules report feeling more satisfied with their jobs and are more energized to perform at a high level (Shanker, 2022). It has become essential for organizations to understand these employee needs to stay competitively viable (Valet et al., 2021), especially since federal agencies are often unable to offer many of the incentives for retention that successful private-sector businesses typically provide (Brough et al., 2022).

Despite the claims in this chapter, the effectiveness of AWS remains debatable. The widespread use of "work from home" policies and other forms of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic also connects this chapter to the broader argument (Mohammed et al., 2022). Employees report higher levels of satisfaction and engagement at work because of AWS's symbolic role, which grants them more autonomy in their roles and greater control over their tasks (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020).

The next step in addressing the research question guiding this study is to outline the research methodology. In Chapter 3, the methodology will be explained to demonstrate rigor as a scholar. Phenomenology was chosen as the most appropriate approach to understanding why federal employees' job satisfaction decreased by 7% after the return-to-work initiative was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic (OPM Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, 2022).

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The issue examined in this study was that federal employee job satisfaction declined by 7% during the return-to-work initiative (OPM Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, 2022). During the 2022 Federal Employee Viewpoint (FEV) survey rollout, many federal employees who had been working remotely for the past two years started returning to office settings. A major change for federal workers was the reduced availability of AWS options as agencies resumed normal operations (Ng et al., 2021). Research had identified a gap in job satisfaction related to AWS (Pokojski et al., 2021; Schur et al., 2020; Stoian et al., 2022). This phenomenological study explored why federal employee job satisfaction decreased by 7% during the return-to-work initiative. Recognizing the significance of AWS and the organizational factors that shaped federal employees' perceptions and experiences could benefit both employees and agencies.

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore how job satisfaction functioned within the federal workforce during the return-to-work initiative. Since it could gather detailed information about people's thoughts, values, feelings, and reasons for their actions—information that numbers could not convey—the qualitative method examined data shared through words and actions in specific situations (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). This approach analyzed experiences and interpretations by focusing on and challenging systemic or traditional beliefs, adding an interpretive layer to qualitative research. This enabled the method to inform, question, or influence strategies and practices by using these experiences and interpretations as a basis for practical theory (Fernandez & Crowell, 2021; Halling, 2021).

This study employed a semi-structured interview and a structured data collection process to explore federal employees' views on different work schedules, their understanding of the

process, and whether these schedules improved job satisfaction. The primary goal was to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1      What motivators regarding AWS practices influence federal employees' job satisfaction?
- RQ2      What aspects of AWS practices are dissatisfying?
- RQ3      How do the aspects of AWS practices impact job satisfaction amidst the return-to-work initiative?

Methods for participant selection, experimental materials, and equipment were all explained in Chapter 3, along with the chosen research design and methodology. More details were provided about the data collection process, including its parameters, assumptions, and ethical considerations. The research method was summarized at the end of this chapter.

### **Research Methodology and Design**

This section provided an overview of the methodology employed in this qualitative study, which aimed to explore how federal employees perceived the COVID-19 period with respect to increased knowledge of AWS and job satisfaction (Halling, 2021; Stanier, 2022; Suddick et al., 2020). Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, participants' accounts of the phenomenon were gathered and analyzed to identify its most significant characteristic (Creswell). The approach was chosen to ensure a comprehensive understanding of subjective experiences and to adhere to established qualitative research standards and ethical guidelines, thereby safeguarding the validity and reliability of the data.

#### ***Phenomenological Design***

Phenomenology was the most appropriate framework for the investigation and was used to understand how federal employees perceived and experienced the effects of flexible work

schedules. Phenomenology was observable and measurable (Dangal & Joshi, 2020). By adopting this approach, insights were gained into the perspectives and realities of AWS from the employees' point of view in the federal sector. Furthermore, phenomenology justified the use of meaningful experiences and empirical evidence (Fernandez & Crowell, 2021).

Another consideration was that phenomenology could help better understand the research problem (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). This study aimed to determine whether AWS enhanced or reduced job satisfaction among federal employees by gathering key insights from this group through a phenomenological approach. As a result, clearer understanding of the effects of such schedules was achieved, providing deeper insight into the phenomenon from the employees' perspectives.

Phenomenology also supported the research questions that aimed to clarify whether federal AWS had caused a decline in job satisfaction and what employees understood from these schedules. Overall, the questions focused on workers' experiences. Through this approach, federal employees provided firsthand accounts of the phenomenon. Detailed observations and insights also helped ensure the study's philosophical and methodological consistency (Suddick et al., 2020). The employees' thoughts, feelings, and words inevitably shaped relevant themes (Stanier, 2022).

**Alternative Research Designs Considered but Not Selected.** The research designs listed below were considered but ultimately not chosen:

**Case Study.** Case studies can shed light on phenomena by examining real occurrences in their original contexts and considering related factors (Nohria, 2021; Viera, 2023). Since data can be gathered through various methods, including in-person interviews, online surveys, and written reports, data collection remains a flexible analytical tool that can be used to study an

individual, a small group, or a major event (Nohria, 2021). Priya (2021) pointed out that firsthand observation is a vital source of information that can be collected throughout a study, helping researchers gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon or its causes. While case studies are often helpful, drawing broad generalizations from them can be difficult (Hancock et al., 2021). Although case studies usually involve deep analysis of one or two cases within a specific context, phenomenology aims to understand the core of individual lived experiences through fewer cases rather than making wide-ranging conclusions (Kekeya, 2021). Therefore, this study would benefit more from a phenomenological approach than a case study.

***Ethnography.*** Researchers learn about a phenomenon through firsthand accounts from individuals who have experienced it, using fieldwork and active engagement (Bartholomew & Brown, 2022). Ethnographers can understand daily life within a culture and critically evaluate how these observations relate to theoretical frameworks (Schindler & Schäfer, 2021). Ethnography requires a thorough understanding of the issues involved, while also recognizing that accurate interpretation requires close attention to context (Ryder, 2021). When conducting ethnographic research, one can thoroughly explore a group's norms, practices, and social structure dynamics.

Studying people's cultural and ethnic backgrounds helps ethnographers better understand and categorize human experiences. Additionally, ethnographic research can be systematic and thematic, allowing researchers to analyze historical trends (Simanjuntak et al., 2022). Since ethnographic research aims to understand the unique experiences of a society, this study would benefit more from phenomenology, which emphasizes the personal experiences of individuals within a group connected by shared activities (van Manen & van Manen 2021).

**Grounded Theory.** Grounded theorists use previous scientific work as a foundation for their research, building a theory while seeking new data (Stough & Lee, 2021). The process begins with formulating research questions or collecting qualitative data, followed by extracting themes and applying codes (Turner & Astin, 2021). Then, similar concepts are grouped into clusters, forming the building blocks for a more complete theory (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Using grounded theory, the aim is to develop theories (Turner & Astin, 2021). However, in this study, federal workers were asked about their feelings regarding flexible scheduling from the perspective of H2FT. The viewpoints of government employees regarding AWS cannot be fully understood by relying solely on grounded theory.

***Narrative Research.*** A narrative inquiry examines how an individual's social, intellectual, and systemic contexts influence the stories they tell, the meanings they create, and how those contexts shape the stories themselves (Johnston, 2024). When conducting a narrative inquiry, one must immerse themselves in the narrative they are constructing about a situation rather than distancing from the experience they are interpreting. Narrative inquiry requires understanding the problem through the lens of the narrative (Islam & Md. Sayeed, 2022). This approach is communicated through storytelling and the connections that arise from it, focusing on the event's context and the individuals involved. When presenting narratives, it is crucial to listen to each person's unique experience and highlight the features of their personal perspective that are relevant to the study (Ntinda, 2020). Researchers cannot remain completely objective because they have personal stakes in the research process and its outcomes (Islam & Md. Sayeed, 2022). Researchers seek the narrative, the quasi-relationships between events, and the key individuals in meaning-making (Riker, 2019). This foundation includes the people essential for this meaning-making process and the loose causal links between events (Islam & Sneed,

2022). Narrative research allows stories to be a way to gain knowledge (Ntinda, 2020). Conversely, phenomenology provides a more suitable framework for incorporating the experiences of federal employees.

### **Population and Sample**

The study's population included full-time federal employees with at least four years of experience who were at least 22 years old. Participants had worked a standard schedule for at least one year prior to the pandemic. They also participated in an alternative work schedule during the three years before the return-to-work initiative and had a minimum of four years of work history (OMB, 2020; CHCO Counsel, 2023).

The sample consisted of 11 government employees impacted by COVID-19 who had resumed their usual work routines as part of the government's return-to-work initiative from an unnamed Mid-Atlantic agency. Analyzing this participant group in depth increased the credibility of the research. Only those meeting these criteria were selected for the study.

Snowball sampling was used to select individuals who experienced the phenomenon of interest. Berndt (2020) notes that for snowball sampling to be effective, the initial participants should be randomly selected. Overall, the snowball sampling method involves starting with a small group of initial participants who then recommend additional subjects. This process allows the sample to grow gradually, like a snowball gathering size as it rolls downhill (Turner, 2020). A well-designed study with clear inclusion and exclusion criteria ensures enough data is collected from the appropriate population to inform future research in the same field (Subedi 2021).

This research aimed to better understand participants' experiences with AWS and how these experiences affected their job satisfaction within the federal government by exploring their

perspectives. Participants were required to meet the admission criteria and comply with all exclusion requirements. Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis were used to analyze the data. As compensation, all participants received a \$20 Amazon gift card.

### **Instrumentation**

Qualitative methods were employed to gather detailed and descriptive data aimed at better understanding the extensive diversity of human experience (Sharma, 2022). The research instruments utilized included participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Additional details concerning these materials are provided below:

#### ***The Semi-Structured Interview Guide***

The phenomenological framework, a methodology that aimed to gather people's interpretations and perspectives on a phenomenon, relied on semi-structured interviews as one of its most common methods (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather participants' firsthand accounts of working with flexible schedules to support the study's main objective. Due to its flexible design and pre-established questions, the semi-structured interview guide made it easy to collect detailed information from participants (Ruslin et al., 2022). Because semi-structured interviews were a common way to gather data, this guide also helped obtain highly personalized information directly from the source (Sharma, 2022). Additionally, semi-structured interviews tended to elicit more candid responses from respondents (Adeoye-Olantunde & Olenik, 2021).

Creating an interview guide based on the provided framework provided direction and structure to the research process (Teresi et al., 2022). It ensured that all key information was captured during the interview and that all relevant issues were covered. Using a framework-based interview guide allowed for better organization and analysis of the collected data, making

it easier to identify patterns, trends, and themes (Simkus, 2023). More specific, organized, and reliable data could be gathered for the study by employing a framework-based interview guide (Teresi et al., 2022).

A well-designed semi-structured interview guide was essential to ensure that all relevant details were covered, research topics were supported, and study questions aligned with the framework (Roberts, 2020). As a first step, pilot testing was conducted to evaluate how the interview questions performed in real-world settings before introducing them to research participants. Additionally, Roberts (2020) suggested that selecting a sample of participants representative of the target population was common practice in field research.

Pilot testers reviewed the interview questions for the preliminary investigation in an environment that mirrored the actual study. The testers reviewed the questions, provided input, and evaluated the instrument. Their responses assessed the interview questions' utility, effectiveness, and dependability (Teresi et al., 2022). This process allowed for the identification of areas for development and a deeper understanding of the instrument's functionality (Simkus, 2023).

After the evaluation, the study questions were revised to address pilot testers' concerns and suggestions and to improve the user experience. Once the adjustments were made and the instrument met the performance standards, the study questions were finalized and prepared for broader use or adoption. As a result, pilot testing helped ensure that the research questions (Appendix C) made sense within the study's parameters (Teresi et al., 2022).

### ***Participant Observation***

Supplementing phenomenological interviewing with observational data was a common practice, especially when verifying the accuracy of the phenomena described by the interviewees

(Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Participant observation could produce credible results in situations where other methods were unlikely to do so (Mustapha, 2020). Using the Zoom platform, live interviews were conducted and recordings of each participant were reviewed to identify any nonverbal cues they might have used, enhancing the observation of each participant.

Observing people was one of the best ways to gather descriptive information that could not be measured or counted. It was the most effective method for collecting qualitative data (Surawy-Stepney et al., 2023). By formulating targeted research questions, one could explore more deeply the factors driving the actions and motivations of the participants, which led to additional follow-up questions (Sharma, 2021).

### **Study Procedures**

This study used H2FT to examine the impact of the federal alternative work schedule (AWS) on employee job satisfaction. The problem, study objective, and research questions were thoroughly explored to achieve this aim. Analyzing the effects of AWS on government employees provided insights into the federal sector's response to this phenomenon, highlighting the need for more comprehensive efforts to improve federal employees' satisfaction levels. The following methods were employed to carry out this study:

#### ***Pilot Study***

Before incorporating the questions into the main study, a pilot study was conducted to evaluate and refine the questions. The questions were reviewed and improved until they aligned with the study's objectives, were easy to understand, and covered all relevant topics. A rough draft of the interview guide was created, including the anticipated research questions. The pilot group represented the target population, and all participants met the necessary requirements. The interview guide was then used to conduct interviews for the study subjects.

The pilot test of the interview guide was completed with four participants. During the interviews, participants' comments on each topic were used; detailed responses were encouraged; and signs of uncertainty or miscommunication were monitored. After the pilot interview, the effectiveness of each research question in the interview guide was assessed based on clarity, relevance, and the depth and quality of responses.

Concerns, areas for improvement, and potential adjustments were noted for each question. Final modifications included adding or removing questions, adjusting language, and more to ensure clarity and alignment with the research goals. After a thorough revision based on this input, the interview guide was finalized and prepared for widespread use and distribution.

### ***Recruit the Sample Population***

Participants were recruited from an unnamed federal agency in the Mid-Atlantic region. The recruitment email (Appendix A) outlined the study's methodology. Its purpose was to attract interest and gather potential participants. The study was open to federal employees aged 22 and older who had worked at the agency for at least four years. A four-year tenure was necessary because participants needed to have maintained a regular schedule for at least one year before COVID-19 began. Additionally, these employees had to have direct experience with the agency's AWS during the three years prior to the return-to-work initiative. People in this group were expected to have personal experience with the phenomenon to provide valuable firsthand insights.

### ***Informed Consent***

Those interested in participating were then asked to electronically sign a consent form that explained the study's goals (Appendix B), procedures, the invitation to participate, and any potential risks. Each person interested in the research was required to sign the consent forms.

Participants could raise questions or concerns about the study's methodology and design.

Additionally, participants were told they could withdraw from the study at any time, as required by research protocol investigations.

### ***Data Collection (The Semi-Structured Interview)***

Dunwoodie et al. (2022) found that interviews are the most effective method for gathering information in qualitative research. Collecting participants' callback numbers, thoroughly explaining the entire process, and ensuring all participants understood the importance of starting and ending the interview on time were ways to improve the success of virtual interviews (Hill et al., 2021). Therefore, a time was scheduled for the virtual interviews with the participants, considering their availability and preferences. Interview time slots for this study were arranged via Outlook's appointment scheduling feature, email, or phone.

Participants were informed at the beginning of the interview that it would be recorded on video. Efforts were made to ensure they felt comfortable speaking candidly about their thoughts and feelings throughout the process. Oliffe et al. (2021) stated that once rapport was built, individuals were better able to explore topics relevant to their main study objectives.

An interview guide with 5 demographic questions and 15 semi-structured questions served as the primary data collection tool for this study (Appendix C). Zoom, an affordable and user-friendly alternative to in-person interviews (Khan & Maceachen, 2022), was used. It addressed the distance between the interviewer and interviewee, maintained security protocols, protected personal space and privacy, and offered a unique opportunity to conduct the study (Khan & Maceachen, 2022). Additionally, Oliffe et al. (2021) noted that Zoom encouraged participants to be more open and honest, leading to more meaningful sharing dialogue.

In addition to conducting interviews, observations were made of participants with notes taken to support any information that might help explain the situation. Close attention was paid to participants' responses, followed by asking follow-up questions to gather more details for the study. Otter.ai was used to transcribe the interview data into written form, ensuring all relevant information was captured (Sterne & Sawhney, 2022). Participants received a physical copy of the transcript to validate their answers and participate in the member-checking process (McKim, 2023; Motulsky, 2021). Member checking improves data reliability by allowing participants to revisit and review their comments (Dado et al., 2020).

Additionally, after the interview, the reviewer examined the recorded sessions to follow up and identify any important nonverbal cues that may have arisen during the interview. This method helped improve the triangulation process (Adler, 2022). Furthermore, Dunwoodie et al. (2022) stated that researchers should take notes of the responses given by participants to develop follow-up questions. At the end of the interview, the interviewer thanked the participants for their time and informed them that they would receive an electronic \$20 Amazon gift card.

### ***Institutional Review Board (IRB) Protocols***

Participants' confidentiality, privacy, and autonomy were protected throughout the interviews. Before each interview, the purpose of the video recordings and their use in the study were explained. Participants were also informed of their rights regarding the recordings, including the right to revoke permission for their use or retention (Dahl 2024).

Research ethics continued after the interviews. Video recordings were safeguarded against misuse, loss, or unauthorized access. Additionally, compliance with data protection laws was ensured, and the recordings were securely managed and stored during and after the study, adhering to the required retention periods (Normand & Donohue, 2023).

## **Data Analysis**

Research methods in qualitative studies relied on analyzing textual, observational, or interview-based data rather than numerical data (Watson & Jackson, 2025). Coding techniques were used to identify the data's themes, patterns, and relationships. The data analysis process included finding patterns in participant responses and applying qualitative analysis techniques such as content or theme analysis to the generated data (Gomes et al., 2023). NVivo platform was used to make the data more manageable by organizing it thematically and breaking it down into smaller portions (Dhakal, 2022).

NVivo was utilized to review each paragraph and identify any themes present. It was then used to continuously merge topics related to building codes. To construct topologies, patterns of agreement and disagreement across the interviews were identified. Afterwards, the transcripts were reread to confirm the results (Dhakal, 2022).

### ***Coding of Data***

Regarding qualitative research, Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed a six-step process for data analysis, which proved to be helpful in this study. This process made it easier to move from raw data to facts and representations. Their six-step approach for data analysis is outlined:

**Familiarization.** The first and most important step in qualitative data analysis was to immerse oneself in the data and gain a full understanding of the subject. One could thoroughly grasp the material, context, and key details in sources like field notes, transcripts, or other data types by reading them multiple times (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was highly recommended to better understand the data and identify themes, patterns, or concepts to guide the next stages of analysis. Rereading the data helped form initial impressions, ideas, and

thoughts that could inform the coding and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase, a comprehensive understanding was developed to lay the foundation for subsequent analysis.

**The Coding Process.** Once familiarized with the data, coding began. Coding involved systematically analyzing the data and identifying meaningful units or patterns. Open coding (Villiger et al., 2022) was employed, meaning generating initial codes without predefined categories or a narrow focus. This approach allowed for a free and unbiased exploration of the data (Villiger et al., 2022). By carefully examining the data, concepts, ideas, or themes that emerged naturally were identified. Open coding helped uncover new insights, deepen understanding of the data, and generate ideas for further analysis (Villiger et al., 2022).

**Establishing Foundational Themes.** Once the initial coding of data was completed, the next step was to review the codes and identify patterns, connections, and similarities among them. Afterwards, the codes were reviewed again and these elements were identified. When the first round of coding was complete, the codes were reviewed and grouped into potential themes based on identified patterns, connections, and similarities among specific codes (Lochmiller, 2021). The relationships among the codes were considered along with the study's aims and questions. The tentative themes provided an initial framework for further analysis.

**Examining Themes.** After grouping codes into potential themes, careful analysis and evaluation were necessary to ensure their coherence, relevance, and explanatory strength within the data. The analysis stayed grounded in the data, ensuring the themes accurately reflected the underlying meanings and patterns (Lochmiller, 2021). This thorough review enabled refinement of the themes, enhancing the analytical rigor and credibility of the data analysis (Lochmiller, 2021).

**Identifying and Defining Themes.** After reviewing and refining the themes, the next step was to clearly and concisely define each one. Articulating what each theme captured and represented within the dataset helped provide a comprehensive understanding of the underlying concepts or patterns (Lochmiller, 2021). The definitions of each theme served as guiding statements that structured the analysis and interpretation of the data, provided a framework for understanding and organizing the findings, and acted as reference points throughout the process (Lochmiller, 2021). By defining the themes clearly and concisely, communication was improved and interpretation became easier.

**Analyzing the Data.** The final step was to write the analysis using the acquired themes to organize and present the findings. At this stage, interpretation and discussion of the data related to each theme were conducted, including relevant quotations or excerpts to support or illustrate the interpretations, with specific citations from the data. To strengthen the findings and enhance credibility, clear, straightforward language was used to express ideas, ensuring that the analysis was organized, logically structured, and coherent (Bingham 2023).

By coding, a subset of text was highlighted and then categorized into codes based on shared characteristics (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). Multiple results eventually converged around a single narrative (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). When the themes were defined and aligned, it became easier to understand them, and their importance was clarified (Islam et al., 2021). When the data analysis was finished, the contributions of each respondent were coded in a way that allowed for secure reporting and analysis.

### ***Triangulation***

Triangulation involves using three or more independent variables to support and verify a conclusion (Knott, 2022). Additionally, it helps reduce bias and increase confidence in the

findings, making the data more credible and reliable. Examples include conducting interviews with participants, cross-checking observations with other researchers, and comparing findings with existing literature (Knott, 2022). In this investigation, triangulation was applied by using two different types of data sources: participant observation and semi-structured observation interviews.

During multi-source triangulation, evidence from different sources was compared to determine whether they supported the same conclusion (Shea, 2022). Using triangulation, the trustworthiness and validity of the data were improved by reducing bias and enabling ongoing data review for errors (Adler, 2022; Shea, 2022). Additionally, triangulation helped identify patterns, consistency, and contradictions, strengthening the findings and enabling a deeper analysis of the research topic (Adler, 2022), which ultimately enhanced the overall validity.

### **Assumptions**

Certain assumptions about the past, present, and future, as claimed by Pilcher & Cortazzi (2024), influenced how research challenges were framed and solutions were developed. Data output might have been insufficient if the user lacked a critical understanding of the underlying assumptions (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2024). Assumptions could have been made about the observed phenomena, the data-collection tools, the research strategy, and the results (Jones, 2024). Jones (2024) demonstrated that maintaining an open mind and fostering intellectual progress required constantly challenging assumptions. The first assumption was that the belief in the underlying theory adequately representing the problem was correct. The second assumption was that interviewees would be honest in their assessments. The third assumption was that all participants had direct experience with the issue being studied and that appropriate criteria were used in

selecting the sample. Finally, the fourth assumption was that people would be motivated to cooperate with the study, as dishonest answers could lead to skewed data and results.

### **Limitations**

Qualitative research can face methodological challenges because it relies on self-reported data. The validity of results, particularly regarding potential risks to general or specific validity, underlies any limitations in scientific studies (Marx, 2023). A study's conclusions must apply to the target group to be considered valid. Additionally, to be internally valid, findings must be reliable, meaning they are accurate and predictive (Marx, 2023). Interviews are valuable for gathering insights into people's experiences, but their data can be limited because they rely on participants' subjective reports. Often, participants' word is accepted at face value, which makes verification challenging (Rodda et al., 2024). Conversely, if a participant struggles to recall details or embellishes events to enhance their importance, it can create issues (Montgomery, 2023). Nevertheless, asking respondents open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews elicits more detailed and accurate responses (Montgomery, 2023).

### **Delimitations**

Researchers use delimitations to set the boundaries of their study (Marx, 2023). This study focused on a specific group of federal employees involved with AWS at any point before, during, or after COVID-19. To keep the data current and pertinent, the study was limited to a three-year period, reflecting the pandemic's widespread impact. Additionally, the research questions were refined to ensure the data collected would effectively address the key issues asked.

## **Ethical Assurances**

During the investigation, the protocol was carefully reviewed to ensure participants felt safe throughout. All participants' constitutional rights were protected during the proceedings. All necessary conditions for conducting the study were met after the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the protocol (Spellecy & Busse, 2021). If participants felt their privacy was being compromised during the research, they could choose to discontinue participation. Under the principle of beneficence, all necessary precautions were taken to safeguard the respondents' safety (Spellecy & Busse, 2021). Consent forms were emailed to participants explaining the research aims (Appendix B), procedures, requests for participation, and potential risks, if any. According to these guidelines, participants were informed they could withdraw at any point. It was essential that participants voluntarily sign the documents to take part in the study. To show appreciation, the volunteers received a \$20 Amazon e-gift card.

Additionally, considerable effort was directed toward ensuring that participants were not exposed to any dangers while involved in the study. For this reason, all volunteers were required to be at least eighteen years old and to have seven or more years of federal government experience, in line with the recruitment standards (Appendix A). Each participant's position within their organization was considered when selecting the final study sample, including only those with substantial background knowledge and expertise.

The suggestions in the Belmont Report were considered (Redman & Caplan, 2021). Three main ethical norms were articulated and established as standards for scientific research (Redman & Caplan, 2021). Guiding values include individual liberty and dignity, mutual aid, and fair treatment (Redman & Caplan, 2021). Participants were not harmed, and the study

produced useful information. Finally, data on participants was encrypted on the computer to ensure confidentiality. After a seven-year retention period, the material was discarded.

### **Summary**

Chapter three provided a comprehensive overview of the methodological approach and described the procedures used to gather relevant information. It aimed to clarify the data collection process and ensure valid conclusions. This section also addressed the research strategy, demographic and sample details, tools and methods, data analysis, assumptions, constraints, and ethical considerations.

This study used a qualitative approach to examine the dynamics of federal workforce job satisfaction within the context of the return-to-work initiative. As an investigative strategy, the qualitative method assessed data communicated through thoughts and actions in specific settings due to its ability to record descriptive information about guiding principles, attitudes, and the factors that motivated behavior patterns (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). This approach educated, encouraged, or challenged strategy and practice as a basis for practical theory by incorporating an interpretive element into qualitative research. It emphasized and explored experiences and perspectives (Fernandez & Crowell, 2021; Halling, 2021).

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to identify the most important aspects of the phenomena, analyzing participants' accounts of the occurrence (Creswell, 2023). Additionally, the sample population was recruited from an unnamed federal agency in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. It consisted of ten to fourteen government workers affected by the COVID-19 outbreak who had returned to their regular work schedules as part of the government's initiative to bring people back to work. Snowball sampling was employed to select the study participants.

To support the study's purpose, a semi-structured interview guide was used to gather firsthand testimonies from participants about their experiences with flexible schedules. Its adaptable design and the inclusion of pre-established questions helped collect more information from participants (Ruslin et al., 2022). Adding participant observations to phenomenological interviews could also yield credible results, especially in situations where other approaches were unlikely to do so (Mustapha 2020).

The two-factor theory developed by Herzberg was used in this study to explore how the federal alternate work schedule (AWS) affected employees' job satisfaction. A thorough investigation was carried out to achieve this goal, examining the problem, the study's objective, and the research questions. Furthermore, to better understand how the federal sector responded to this issue, it was important to examine the effects of AWS on government employees. This approach provided insight into the need for more comprehensive efforts to enhance federal employees' satisfaction.

Coding techniques were used in this study to identify themes, patterns, and relationships in the data. An essential part of the data analysis process involved recognizing patterns in participants' responses and applying qualitative methods, such as content or theme analysis, to the data (Gomes et al., 2023). The data were organized by topic and divided into smaller sections using the NVivo platform, which facilitated easier data management (Dhakal, 2022). The platform analyzed each paragraph and highlighted the identified trends. Subsequently, NVivo was used to combine themes related to building codes, continuously design topologies, and identify patterns of agreement and disagreement across the interviews with participants.

The most significant assumption was that the problem had been accurately identified and that the theory offered a sufficient description. The investigation's limitations and any potential

threats to the study's generalizability or validity were assessed in relation to the validity of the findings. However, a delimitation required restricting the research questions to ensure that the gathered information was relevant and useful for solving the problem. Additionally, measures were taken to ensure that participants were not exposed to potentially hazardous situations. When selecting the final sample for the study, each participant's role within their organization was considered, focusing on those with the necessary knowledge.

The fourth chapter presents findings from semi-structured interviews and observations. These results include emerging themes and organizational factors that influenced AWS from the perspective of federal employees. In addition to outlining the methodology, the results are presented thoroughly and clearly. Chapter Five then follows with a summary and discussion of the information in Chapter Four, and a conclusion is drawn for each finding.

## Chapter 4: Findings

Understanding the factors that affect employee job satisfaction is essential for federal agencies amid changes in work environments. This study examined the decrease in federal employee job satisfaction, which fell by 7% during the return-to-work initiative (OPM Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, 2022). The goal of this phenomenological study was to explore the reasons behind this 7% decline in job satisfaction.

Chapter Four discusses the experiences of federal employees with Alternative Work Schedules (AWS), highlighting the documented pros and cons. This chapter presents the research findings in detail and is divided into several key sections: first, it assesses the reliability of the data collected during the study; second, it reports the research results, including main themes identified from participant interviews; third, it compares the findings with existing literature; and finally, it summarizes the overall conclusions of the chapter.

This study identified factors that influence job satisfaction among federal employees regarding AWS. The importance of understanding these factors increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, which changed work dynamics. As federal agencies implemented return-to-work programs, examining how AWS practices affected employee morale during this transition was essential. Research has shown that employees experience higher job satisfaction when given more autonomy, a better work-life balance, and shorter commutes, thanks to flexible work arrangements (Asaba et al., 2022; Da et al., 2022; Fan & Moen, 2023). AWS was noted to provide federal employees with the flexibility to manage both their work and personal lives. However, AWS could also pose challenges for those who preferred traditional office settings (Agache et al 2021).

During the 2022 FEV survey, federal employees who had worked remotely for the previous two years returned to office environments. A significant change for these employees was the reduced availability of AWS as agencies reverted to traditional operations (Asaba et al., 2022; Garzillo et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2021). Data from government workers who participated in AWS during the COVID-19 pandemic support this observation. Numerous studies (Abdullah et al., 2020; Agba et al., 2020; Campo et al., 2022) have shown that this situation has significantly altered employee interactions with workplaces and colleagues. This shift emphasized the importance of AWS as a key part of continuity of operations strategies for government agencies (Chambel et al., 2022).

For this study, the semi-structured interview guide functioned as the primary data collection tool, providing insights into the experiences of federal employees using AWS. By analyzing both positive and negative aspects, the research aimed to offer a comprehensive understanding of how these practices affected job satisfaction. These findings were relevant as agencies updated their policies and procedures in response to the pandemic. This study sought to enhance understanding of AWS in the federal sector, particularly regarding the return-to-work initiatives.

Ultimately, the study collected participant experiences through phenomenological responses. This method provided a detailed examination of relevant factors by summarizing participant narratives (Creswell, 2023; Stanier, 2022). Eleven federal employees from a mid-sized Atlantic government department, affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and now returning to standard work schedules under the government's return-to-work initiative, contributed feedback on their experiences with AWS. A structured 15-item interview methodology was applied to gather information from this group regarding their AWS experiences during and after

the pandemic. Participants shared various experiences concerning AWS and offered insights into how the transition back to traditional work environments influenced their job satisfaction. The qualitative findings reflected the complexities of adapting to a post-pandemic work environment, where many employees had become accustomed to the flexibility of AWS.

### **Trustworthiness of the Data**

Assessing the credibility of data in qualitative research is crucial for ensuring that the findings are trustworthy and can support informed decisions based on factual evidence (Adler, 2022). In qualitative studies, trustworthiness is usually assessed through four main characteristics: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each of these elements is vital in establishing the strength and reliability of the research findings.

This study employed multiple methods to meet each of the four criteria, boosting the overall credibility. By thoughtfully applying strategies to increase data trustworthiness, it aimed to generate reliable, meaningful findings that could be relevant in various contexts. Combining different techniques to maintain these standards ensured that the collected information provided a strong base for future research, encouraging more active academic discussion and practical applications.

### ***Credibility***

Establishing credibility enhances the study's trustworthiness and underscores its importance in guiding practice and policy within the field (Creswell, 2023). Pilot testing of interview questions was conducted before including them in the semi-structured interview guide. Pilot testing improves the study's quality by identifying necessary question adjustments and increasing confidence in collecting reliable data (Simkus, 2023).

For this study, credibility of the findings was strengthened through multi-source triangulation, using semi-structured interviews and participant observation as primary data sources. Triangulation was a vital methodological strategy that increased the trustworthiness and validity of the collected data by minimizing biases and facilitating continuous evaluation for potential errors (Adler, 2022; Shea, 2022). Using multiple data sources, information was cross-verified, leading to a more robust understanding of the research topic.

Dialogue was encouraged through semi-structured interviews. Participants shared their perspectives in their own words, yielding rich qualitative data on their experiences and insights. By employing participant observation, firsthand insight was gained into behaviors, interactions, and contextual factors influencing the research topic. This dual data-collection method ensured that findings were not solely reliant on self-reported data, which can be affected by personal biases or social desirability bias (Adler, 2022; Shea, 2022).

Through member checking, the reliability of the findings was enhanced by allowing study participants to confirm the accuracy and credibility of the conclusions and interpretations based on their data. Each participant was provided with a copy of their interview transcript to review the interpretations and conclusions, ensuring they accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. By establishing credibility, the integrity of the findings and interpretations was maintained, thereby strengthening the study's trustworthiness (Creswell, 2023; Dado, 2023).

### ***Transferability***

Establishing transferability in a research study is essential for ensuring that the findings are relevant and applicable to similar contexts or populations. To achieve this effectively, researchers can use thick descriptions and intentional sampling techniques, which greatly enhance the depth and relevance of the study's findings (Drisko, 2024). In this study, a thick

description was employed, providing detailed and comprehensive accounts of the study's context (Younas et al., 2023). This included the specific federal agency setting, the nature of the work, and the characteristics of AWS being examined. By offering insights into the operational environment, organizational culture, and the experiences of employees who used AWS, an understanding was developed of how these practices affected federal employee job satisfaction.

The study also included diverse participants of different ages, genders, ethnicities, and job roles to strengthen this analysis. Diversity enriched the findings, making them more relevant by showing how alternative work schedules affected different employee groups in distinct ways. Accounts from eleven government employees provided insights into AWS's impact on job satisfaction. This research is practical for enhancing work environments in the post-pandemic era, making it a valuable resource for a broader audience dedicated to improving job satisfaction across various settings and industries.

### ***Dependability***

A thorough assessment of the study's methods and data processing strategies is essential for ensuring the reliability of the results. Careful documentation improved the study's dependability and increased transparency, making replication by other researchers easier (Ahmed, 2024). The study's meticulous and organized approach contributed to its reliability, strengthening the credibility of the findings and facilitating future replication efforts. Additionally, the reliability of the study is further reinforced by a detailed analysis of data collected from participants' real-life experiences with AWS during the federal sector's return-to-work initiative.

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability is essential in qualitative research because it ensures that the findings genuinely reflect the participants' perspectives and are not influenced by biases (Kynge et al., 2020). When examining alternate work schedules (AWS) in the federal sector, prioritizing participant perspectives is paramount. Engagement with federal employees who have firsthand experience with AWS grounded the findings in the real-life context of those adapting to flexible work arrangements. To improve the dependability of the results, personal experiences, preconceptions, and interests that could distort data interpretation were deliberately omitted.

Precautions were taken to avoid bias by carefully reviewing interview notes after each session, considering how personal feelings and thoughts might influence the interpretation of the results. This study aimed to provide a reliable analysis of AWS in the federal sector by focusing on participant viewpoints and applying rigorous analytical methods. It contributes to the discussion on effective AWS strategies within the public sector. This reflective approach aimed to maintain neutrality and ensure that the findings accurately represented the diverse perspectives of federal employees regarding their AWS.

## **Results**

The results of this qualitative study on AWS and its impact on federal workers' job satisfaction during the return-to-work initiative are presented in this section. This study critically examined the notable 7% decline in job satisfaction among federal employees during the return-to-work initiative (OPM Federal Viewpoint Survey, 2022). Understanding the factors that influence job satisfaction is especially important for federal workers, as their engagement affects organizational effectiveness, service quality, and employee retention (Asaba et al., 2022; Da et al., 2022; Fan & Moen, 2023). The return-to-work initiative, aimed at helping employees

transition from remote work to traditional office settings after an extended period, introduced unique challenges and opportunities that could significantly influence job satisfaction levels.

This study employed a phenomenological approach to capture the essence of participants' subjective viewpoints and experiences. Participants from various departments within the agency provided diverse perspectives on the implementation and implications of AWS. A diverse sample is necessary for a comprehensive analysis of how AWS affects government employees' job satisfaction.

In-depth interviews with participants from various roles and departments were conducted via Zoom, using open-ended questions to elicit reflections on their personal experiences with AWS. By actively observing and engaging with participants, the nuances of their experiences were captured, providing a richer context for the findings through the effective collection of key insights from federal employees who have encountered AWS both before and during the pandemic. The qualitative data gathered from these interviews was vital for identifying potential features of AWS in a federal setting.

The data was carefully analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis, known for its rigor and suitability in qualitative research. A key step involved a systematic reduction process, where responses were carefully classified to distill the qualitative data into manageable segments. During this stage, all participant responses were thoroughly reviewed, highlighting recurring themes and emerging patterns. This iterative process ensured a comprehensive examination of the data and promoted a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives.

Each theme was refined through ongoing comparison with the original data, enabling a more detailed interpretation of the findings. This method allowed for a clear focus on the

participants' lived experiences while ensuring the analysis remained grounded in the collected data. Conducting thematic analysis is essential for uncovering valuable insights into the root causes of employee satisfaction and dissatisfaction during the major organizational shift to AWS (Lochmiller, 2021). Ultimately, these findings contribute to the academic understanding of AWS and lay the groundwork for how AWS impacts federal employees' job satisfaction.

A triangulation approach was used to enhance the reliability and credibility of this study's results. Triangulation, as described by established scholars, is a methodological strategy that employs multiple data sources, investigators, or theoretical perspectives to cross-check and confirm research findings (Knott, 2022; Adler, 2022). This methodological rigor is essential in qualitative research, where the complexity of human behavior and social phenomena requires a thorough understanding.

This analysis used triangulation by drawing on two data sources: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation provided firsthand insights into the contextual dynamics and interactions within the study setting. This approach enabled the collection of real-time, detailed data on participants' behaviors and the environment, offering rich contextual clues that might not be captured through interviews alone.

On the other hand, semi-structured interviews promoted in-depth discussions with participants, allowing them to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in their own words. This approach was especially useful for exploring complex issues, as it gave participants the opportunity to expand on their perspectives and offer insights that might not have emerged in a structured format. By analyzing data from both participant observation and semi-structured interviews, common themes and patterns were identified, strengthening the credibility of the findings and providing a more complete picture of the studied phenomena.

Responses on AWS were collected from eleven federal employees at a mid-Atlantic agency. The participants' summary (Table 2) includes demographic information about the interviewees. This diverse representation is essential for understanding how people from different backgrounds assess job satisfaction related to AWS.

**Table 2**

*Participant Summary*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gov. Experience</b>
1	52	Male	White	20 yrs
2	57	Male	West Indian/Caribbean	11 yrs
3	50	Male	Black	10 yrs
4	62	Male	White	12 yrs
5	40	Female	White	7 yrs
6	39	Male	Black	16 yrs
7	44	Female	Black	14 yrs
8	47	Female	Black	15 yrs
9	29	Male	White	4 yrs
10	55	Female	Black	15 yrs
11	43	Female	Black	15 yrs

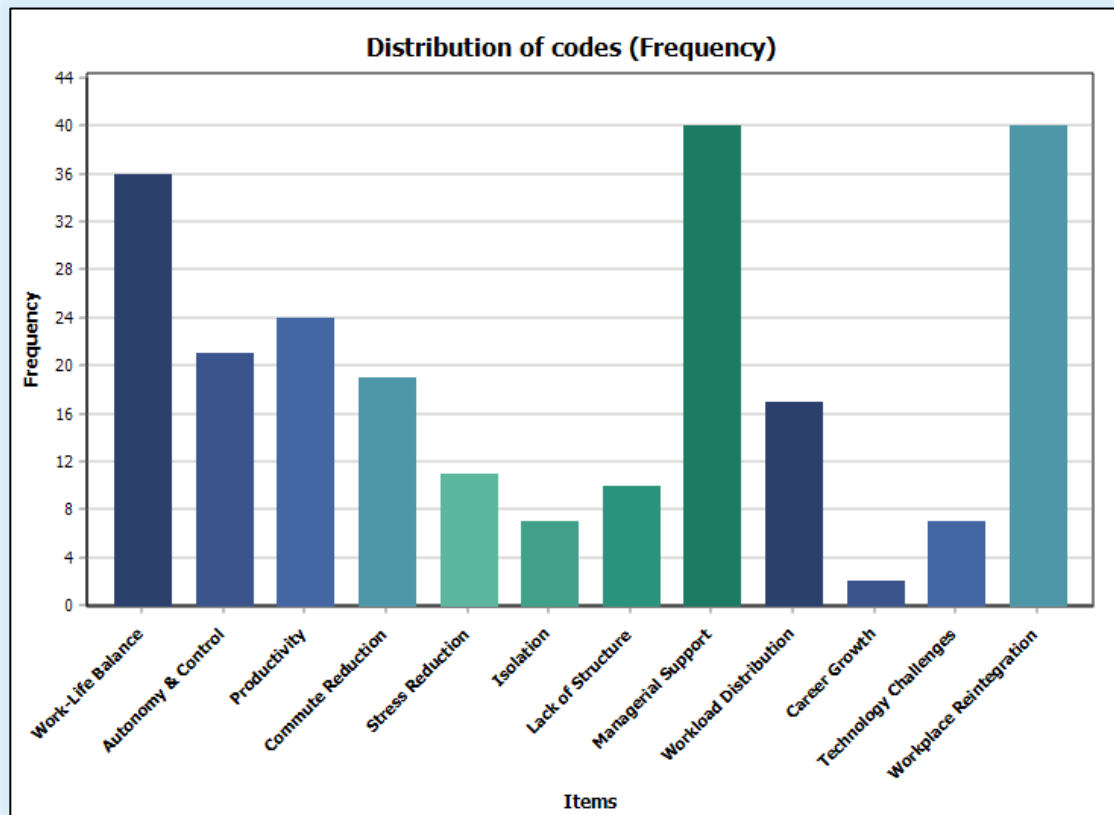
*Note:* The table summarizes demographic information about the study's participants, including their age, gender, race, and length of service in the government.

For this investigation, 36% of government workers fall within the age bracket of 36–55. The following breakdown of federal employee experience was found among the participants: 9%

with less than 5 years, 18% with 5-10 years, 55% with 11-15 years, and 18% with 16-20 years. Furthermore, the gender distribution of participants was approximately equal, with men comprising slightly more than half of the sample and women slightly less than half. Among the participants, 55% identify as Black, 36% as White, and 9% as belonging to another ethnic group.

In qualitative research data analysis, codes are generated through a systematic process that encompasses several key steps (Gomes et al., 2023). Islam et al. (2021) asserted that coding is an essential phase in qualitative data analysis, facilitating the categorization and segmentation of raw data into meaningful units. Each code represents a distinct concept or idea derived from participants' comments, enabling systematic categorization and analysis of the extensive qualitative data collected (Savin-Badien & Major, 2023).

Codes were generated directly from the data, without predefined categories in mind. For example, as themes emerged during the data review, codes were created to represent these emerging categories (Figure 5), revealing patterns in how government employees perceived and experienced AWS. This process laid the foundation for understanding the complexities of this phenomenon within the federal sector. The frequency of the codes indicates which aspects of AWS are most important to federal employees. This approach provided essential insights into the beneficial effects of AWS on job satisfaction, as well as potential obstacles and barriers that federal employees might face.

**Figure 5***Distribution of Codes*

*Note.* The data analysis revealed twelve codes, identified using NVivo. These codes enabled providing a comprehensive background for understanding the impact of alternative work schedules on job satisfaction among government employees.

The codes are as follows:

1. **Work-Life Balance:** The equilibrium between professional responsibilities and personal life, emphasizing the importance of flexible work arrangements and opportunities for individuals to reconcile their work obligations with their personal and family commitments (Rhee et al., 2020). This concept underscores that achieving a healthy

work-life balance involves managing time effectively and having access to flexible work arrangements that accommodate individual needs and preferences.

2. **Autonomy & Control:** The extent to which employees have discretion over how to conduct their tasks (Mohammed et al., 2022). This includes the ability to decide when to perform tasks, decisions about work-related matters, and the freedom to choose how to complete tasks.
3. **Productivity:** A set of behaviors exhibited by workers that can be evaluated, monitored, measured, and assessed, aligning with the established goals of the organization (Austin-Egole et al., 2020). For example, individuals contribute to organizational objectives by delivering quality and quantity in their tasks while working efficiently with minimal resources and supervision.
4. **Commute Reduction:** Characterized by a decline in the overall number of trips made to and from the workplace, a trend that has gained momentum with the rise of remote work and flexible scheduling arrangements (Su & Wang, 2020). This shift transforms the daily routines of employees.
5. **Stress Reduction:** To effectively reduce stress, individuals must access sufficient resources within and beyond the workplace (Haines et al., 2020). For example, work-life balance policies and social support can mitigate conflict and alleviate strain, resulting in better-quality health outcomes.
6. **Isolation:** Reduced opportunities for in-person engagement can lead to a lack of social interactions with coworkers and supervisors (Brunelle & Fortina, 2021). As many employees transition to remote work models or flexible schedules, the absence of face-to-face interactions can result in a profound sense of disconnection from the workplace. This

is particularly concerning given that many individuals spend much of their work time outside the office.

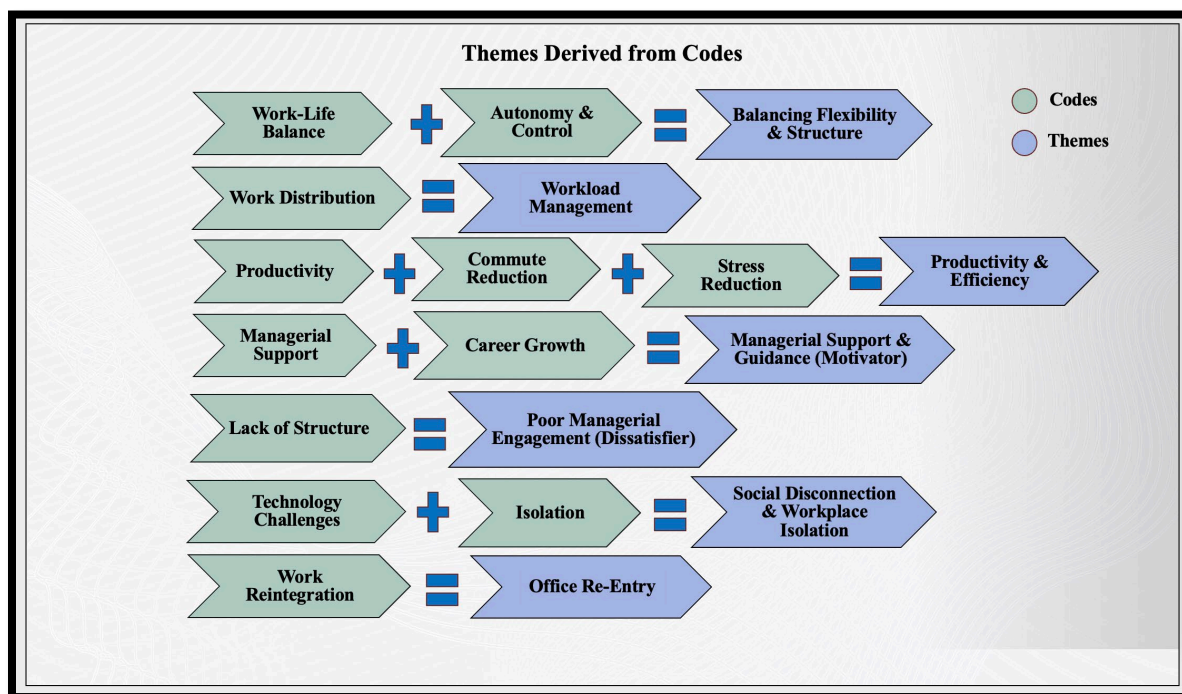
7. **Lack of Structure:** In the context of AWS, a lack of structure in the AWS framework refers to the ambiguity and uncertainty that can arise when employees do not have clear guidelines and expectations about their work arrangements (Ballantine et al., 2022). This can include unclear work-hour policies, communication protocols, deliverables, and performance metrics. When a work structure is ineffective, employees may struggle to navigate their roles and responsibilities, leading to confusion and frustration.
8. **Managerial Support:** Refers to the assistance and understanding that supervisors provide to their employees (Jacobson, 2023). This support encompasses various aspects, including actively listening to employees, treating them respectfully, and addressing their needs and concerns. When supervisors take the time to engage with their team members, they foster a positive workplace culture where employees feel heard and appreciated.
9. **Workload Distribution:** Refers to the assignment and oversight of tasks among employees (Buruck et al., 2020). Efficient workload distribution promotes fairness and equity in task allocation and ensures employees can manage their responsibilities without experiencing excessive stress. By thoughtfully delegating tasks based on individual strengths, skills, and capacities, organizations can enhance productivity while fostering a more engaged and satisfied workforce.
10. **Career Growth:** This encompasses the potential for increased recognition and prestige, significantly contributing to overall career success (Spurk & Straub, 2020). This progression is not just about ascending the corporate ladder; it also includes various facets that empower individuals in work efforts.

11. **Technological Challenges:** Numerous technological challenges highlight the need for extensive strategies and investments (Abulibdeh, 2020). These issues encompass unreliable internet connections, trouble joining video calls, inconsistent call performance, microphone noise, slow device and application responses, difficulties accessing organizational data remotely, and potential security risks when using personal network devices.
12. **Work Reintegration:** The process of reintegrating employees back into their jobs following a period of absence (Shaw et al., 2020). This process can be multifaceted and is influenced by numerous factors. It requires careful planning and collaboration to ensure a smooth transition back to work. Constructive communication between supervisors and returning employees helps ensure that expectations are clear and that any necessary accommodations are discussed openly.

Coding the data was essential, as it guided the research in effectively meeting the study's objectives. This process organized qualitative data into manageable segments, enabling identification of recurring themes and essential concepts within the gathered information (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). This preliminary work sets the stage for more in-depth analysis to identify key themes.

Using the coded data, seven emerging themes were identified that underscored the study's core components. Figure 6 presents the themes alongside their associated codes. The themes include balancing flexibility and structure, workload management, productivity and efficiency, managerial support and guidance (as a motivator), poor managerial engagement (as a dissatisfier), social disconnection and workplace isolation, and office re-entry.

Figure 6

*Themes Derived from Codes*

*Note.* Seven themes emerged from the twelve codes and served as the basis for this investigation.

The association between the seven themes and twelve codes is as follows:

1. **Balancing Flexibility and Structure:** This theme emerged from the interplay between codes, work-life balance, autonomy, and control. Employees in alternative work schedule (AWS) arrangements often appreciate the increased flexibility, which enables them to manage personal and professional responsibilities more effectively. However, this flexibility can inadvertently create challenges in maintaining a structured work environment. Employees who juggle various commitments—from family obligations to personal interests—may struggle to establish a consistent routine. The absence of a traditional office structure can blur the boundaries between

- work and personal life, leading to uncertainty about when and where to draw the line between professional responsibilities and personal time.
2. **Workload Management:** Emphasized the importance of effectively distributing tasks among employees to maintain overall satisfaction and performance in the workplace. This theme emerged from the analysis of the code work distribution, indicating that employees highly valued fair task allocation and manageable workloads. Employees noted that a balanced distribution of responsibilities is crucial in preventing feelings of being overwhelmed and burned out. When workloads are not shared evenly, some individuals may become overloaded while others can be underutilized, resulting in feelings of frustration, lowered morale, and reduced productivity. An imbalanced workload can also impede collaboration and teamwork, as those weighed down with excessive tasks may find it challenging to connect with their colleagues.
  3. **Productivity and Efficiency:** This is derived from an analysis of the code's productivity, commute reduction, and stress reduction within the context of AWS. Participants pointed out notable differences in productivity levels across various work settings, revealing that while some individuals thrive in flexible environments, others struggle to stay productive without the structure provided by a traditional office. This theme emphasizes recognizing and accommodating different working styles to enhance overall productivity. Some employees excel in remote or hybrid settings, benefiting from reduced commute times that allow them to dedicate more hours to focused work or personal well-being. Eliminating lengthy commutes saves time and can lead to lower stress levels, enabling employees to start their workdays feeling refreshed and ready to engage.

4. **Managerial Support and Guidance (as a Motivator):** Managerial support aligned with motivational factors in H2FT, contributing positively to job satisfaction. It enhanced employee engagement, particularly evident in managerial support and career growth codes. Participants noted that ongoing and constructive support from managers is essential for fostering employee motivation. Adequate managerial backing boosts morale and inspires employees to take initiative. Furthermore, managerial support is closely tied to career development. When managers actively engage in their employees' professional growth by providing guidance, mentorship, and advancement opportunities, they help cultivate a sense of purpose and ambition. Employees are more likely to feel motivated and strive for excellence in their roles when they see a clear path for career progression, especially when they recognize that their managers are genuinely invested in their success.
5. **Poor Managerial Engagement (as a Dissatisfier):** Poor managerial engagement is reflected as a hygiene factor, resulting in dissatisfaction and a toxic work environment, primarily related to the lack of structure. Participants voiced considerable frustration when managerial engagement fell short, emphasizing how ambiguity and uncertainty can arise when employees do not have clear guidelines and expectations for their work arrangements. A lack of defined boundaries can lead to confusion regarding roles, responsibilities, and performance metrics, ultimately impeding employees' ability to navigate their work effectively.
6. **Social Disconnection and Workplace Isolation:** This theme emerged from the codes of technology challenges and isolation. Some employees reported feelings of isolation due to the lack of in-person interactions, emphasizing a yearning for the camaraderie

that often thrived in traditional office environments. Furthermore, technological challenges exacerbated these feelings of separation. While tools like video conferencing and chat platforms are intended to enhance communication, they can also create obstacles. Certain employees felt that dependence on technology can inhibit genuine connection, as conversations may seem more transactional and less personal. Technical difficulties, such as poor internet connectivity or unfamiliarity with software, further complicate interactions and can leave employees feeling frustrated and disconnected. The emotional toll of workplace isolation can be significant, impacting job satisfaction.

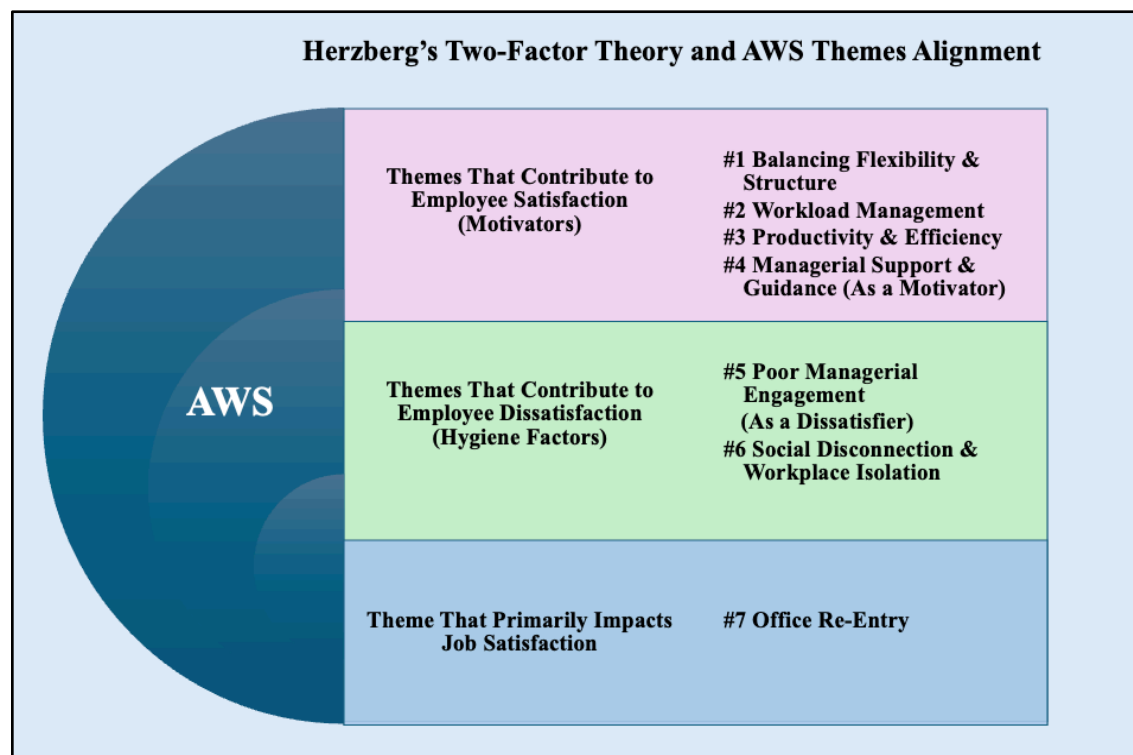
7. Office Re-Entry: The final theme emerged from the work reintegration code. As employees transition back to the office, AWS represents a pivotal moment for federal sector workers, significantly shaping their perceptions and job satisfaction. This theme highlighted the complexities and multifaceted nature of this process. Employees expressed a wide array of needs and concerns about returning to traditional workplace models, emphasizing that this forced transition is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Many employees had grown comfortable with remote work and may feel apprehensive about re-entering a conventional office environment. Participants noted feeling uneasy about readjusting to commuting or managing work-life boundaries that were more easily maintained during remote work arrangements.

By examining these themes, the aim was to clarify the intricate workings of federal employment dynamics and the influence of AWS on employee job satisfaction. Leveraging H2FT (Figure 7) provided a comprehensive framework that enhanced understanding of how different motivational and hygiene factors affect job satisfaction. This approach improved the

interpretation of emerging themes, offering insights into the complex interplay of factors that shaped employee experiences.

**Figure 7**

*Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and AWS Theme Alignment*



*Note.* The study's themes are arranged in categories based on H2FT. Four themes were identified as motivators, two as dissatisfiers, and one theme was the key factor having a direct impact on job satisfaction.

H2FT classified AWS factors into hygiene (dissatisfiers) and motivators (satisfiers) (Herzberg et al., 1959). Herzberg asserted that hygiene elements are essential for reducing dissatisfaction, but they do not directly increase motivation or satisfaction; in contrast, motivator variables actively enhance motivation, leading to higher employee job satisfaction. This categorization of themes allowed for a better understanding of AWS in the federal sector. By labeling themes as motivators and dissatisfiers, one could more effectively analyze how AWS

impacts job satisfaction. Recognizing themes within these two categories is vital for addressing research questions one and two effectively.

### ***Research Question 1***

What motivators regarding AWS practices influence federal employees' job satisfaction?

Four themes associated with AWS, according to Herzberg's theory, were identified as motivators. These themes contributed to federal employee job satisfaction. The themes included balancing flexibility and structure, workload distribution, productivity and efficiency, and managerial support and guidance.

**Theme 1: Balancing Flexibility and Structure.** Federal employees found that AWS significantly enhanced their job satisfaction due to the balance between flexibility and structure that these schedules provided. Many employees appreciated the autonomy to customize their work hours, which allowed them to accommodate personal obligations alongside their professional responsibilities. For example, participant 1 reflected on their experience, saying, "It's been very helpful. I did a 4/10 schedule when I did my second master's degree, and that was fantastic for my work-life balance because I was able to work my 40 hours a week in four days." This illustrates how flexible scheduling arrangements can facilitate personal development and education, contributing to an overall sense of job satisfaction.

Similarly, participant 3 reinforced the importance of a hybrid work environment. The respondent stated the following:

Um, one point is that we come into the office when necessary, and as long as we can carry on our work duties from home, we can stay at home and utilize and balance our work and our family life while we're carrying on our work duties.

This suggested a collective viewpoint among employees that a fluid transition between remote and in-office work improves their capacity to balance personal and professional responsibilities, hence resulting in increased job satisfaction.

Furthermore, participant 4 emphasized the idea of personalized work arrangements. The participant indicated, “A perfect work schedule would be one when I'm meeting the obligations that I have to do, regardless of whether I do it from home, in the office, or a combination of both.” This reaction highlighted the importance of clearly defined workplace rules regarding flexibility, emphasizing that tailored work environments that accommodate individual needs enhance worker satisfaction.

Additionally, participant 6 elaborated on the effectiveness of remote work in their overall job satisfaction. The participant replied:

So, I think it is beneficial. A perfect alternative work schedule would be utilizing remote work as much as possible, making sure that when there was a point or time needed to come into the office, it made sense, that it was needed, that it served a business function.

This emphasized the idea that successful AWS implementations corresponded not only with personal preferences but also with organizational objectives, making them an important aspect of ensuring job satisfaction.

Achieving an optimal balance between structure and flexibility was a primary objective influencing government employees' job satisfaction with AWS procedures. Participant feedback indicated that flexible work arrangements were essential for meeting personal and professional needs, hence enhancing job satisfaction. AWS enabled federal personnel to manage their time efficiently, balancing professional duties with personal commitments.

**Theme 2: Workload Distribution.** Another key motivator regarding AWS that influenced federal employees' job satisfaction was the opportunity for effective workload distribution. Employees appreciated the flexibility to organize their work responsibilities around their peak productivity times, personal commitments, and family obligations. This capability not only enhanced their overall well-being but also contributed positively to their health by allowing for better time management and improved work outcomes.

Participant 1 emphasized the benefits of AWS with the statement, “Take a one-day breather every two weeks. Have a three-day weekend where if you wanted to take a little short vacation without taking a day off, it makes it much more convenient, right for you.” This demonstrated how prolonged weekends enhanced job satisfaction by offering employees essential time to rejuvenate, hence increasing mental and physical well-being.

In addition, Participant 2 shared, “The beauty of the flexible work schedule is it allows you to flex in the direction where you can utilize and balance the workload that you need to do when you can do it.” This answer demonstrated a common trend among participants, who noted that the option to tailor their work hours improved job satisfaction by aligning their schedules with their optimal productivity periods. Being flexible optimized work efficiency and fostered a healthier work-life balance.

Moreover, Participant 7 emphasized the influence of several scheduling alternatives on stress levels, stating, “Honestly, I think that with varied schedules, either the option to glide or a compressed schedule. It gives me a lower level of stress, so that offers a positive impact for sure.” This statement highlighted how AWS may substantially alleviate the constraints of a fixed work schedule, hence enhancing worker satisfaction.

The factors associated with AWS practices that affect government employees' job satisfaction primarily revolved around efficient workload distribution. Participants' feedback demonstrated that scheduling flexibility enabled them to more effectively synchronize their work with personal and professional requirements. As a result, employees encountered enhanced work performance and an increased sense of job satisfaction.

**Theme 3: Productivity and Efficiency.** Another noteworthy motivator associated with alternative work schedules (AWS) that affected federal employees' job satisfaction was the enhancement of productivity and efficiency. The implementation of nontraditional employee management strategies, including abbreviated workweeks, remote work, and customized scheduling alternatives, promoted a work environment in which employees could adjust their work patterns to suit their own requirements. This autonomy enabled individuals to optimize job satisfaction by performing tasks at their optimum production hours, leading to enhanced efficiency and improved work results.

Study participants consistently indicated a substantial enhancement in productivity when permitted to work during their peak hours of effectiveness. As Participant 2 noted:

I find that you're a lot more productive, you're a lot more able to manage your time, and you're a lot more able to concentrate. You're in an environment where it's conducive for work and conducive for your work-life balance.”

This statement emphasized the significance of a supportive work environment, be it at home or in the office, as a crucial element in improving job satisfaction.

Similarly, Participant 6 noted, “Ironically, you are able to focus on your work at home more directly than if you're in the office.” This autonomy enabled individuals to tailor their work environment to their personal preferences, enhancing their ability to concentrate and perform

tasks during their most productive hours. By capitalizing on this flexibility, employees could optimize their efficiency, which in turn led to improved work outcomes. Ultimately, this alignment between work practices and individual productivity not only cultivated a more effective work experience but also significantly contributed to overall job satisfaction.

Furthermore, Participant 8 expressed a strong preference for independence in their scheduling, stating, “Honestly, I think the definition of a perfect work schedule for me would be one that would allow me to work the hours that I'm most productive.” This perspective reflected a widespread belief among participants that autonomy in work schedules, aligned with their natural productivity rhythms, led to enhanced job satisfaction. Such autonomy empowered employees to manage their time in a way that maximized their efficiency and engagement, reinforcing the idea that personalized work arrangements could significantly enhance job satisfaction.

The correlation between flexible scheduling and increased productivity was further underscored by Participant 9, who remarked, “I feel way more productive because of my work schedule because I'm able to telework or be home and then, like, be online. I don't drop time, and all day that makes sense.” This statement highlighted how remote work minimizes commuting time and facilitates a more efficient allocation of work hours. By eliminating the stresses and time lost to daily commutes, employees could focus more on their tasks and responsibilities, leading to higher productivity and, consequently, greater job satisfaction.

Ultimately, Participant 10 highlighted the benefits of shortened journey duration in their commentary, asserting that:

So to me, the regular work schedule when I was in the office every day, I was productive, yes, but working from home and having the flexibility to telecommute offers that absence of the commute; it gives additional productivity, in my opinion.”

This insight reinforced the idea that eliminating commuting time led to substantial increases in both productivity and job satisfaction. By freeing employees from the constraints of daily travel, remote work not only enhanced their ability to focus on tasks but also created job satisfaction.

In brief, the motivators related to alternative work arrangements (AWS) that affected federal employees' job satisfaction were closely connected to productivity and efficiency. Participant feedback showed that when employees are empowered to work during their peak performance times and given the autonomy to manage their schedules, they experience higher levels of job satisfaction and productivity. This flexibility allowed employees to choose when and where they work, helping them align their tasks with their individual strengths and preferences while boosting job satisfaction in federal settings.

**Theme 4: Managerial Support and Guidance (as a Motivator).** Managerial support played a pivotal role in influencing job satisfaction among federal employees engaged in AWS. According to Herzberg et al. (1959), such support served as an important motivator; employees often looked for validation and guidance from their managers to effectively handle flexible work policies. When employees felt supported, it created a sense of security and greatly improved their overall job satisfaction.

Study participants stressed the importance of solid management in AWS initiatives, noting that it helps them better navigate the challenges commonly found in unpredictable work environments. For example, Participant 2 mentioned:

I believe they did well since they have several ways to inform us. We receive E-department notices and a daily blast. Admittedly, I'm among those who often overlook it, but they communicated effectively, in my opinion.

This example demonstrated that effective communication from management not only aided the successful implementation of AWS but also fulfilled employees' need for sufficient information, thereby increasing job satisfaction.

Participant 5 commended the conscientious approach adopted in the integration of AW, by stating the following:

I think they've done it quite slowly, which has been very much appreciated. They did not just forcefully tell everybody the next day to come in five days a week, which was very much appreciated by us. So, I know I'm very happy with it.

This gradual implementation allowed employees to transition into new work arrangements without feeling pressured, fostering a sense of stability and ultimately enhancing their job satisfaction.

Participant 7 articulated how thoughtful leadership affects personal job satisfaction: "I think that my job satisfaction totally increased because I felt more comfortable that leadership actually considered what would work for people and not to give a full culture shock." This recognition illustrated how attentive leadership served not only as a motivational driver but was also essential for maintaining high job satisfaction among employees.

The decision-making processes surrounding AWS also received significant emphasis from participants. Participant 8 mentioned:

At the same time, our senior leadership, local senior leadership, were in different work groups and meetings trying to determine what would be the best way for what would

work for our organization within this bigger organization. So, it was really a lot of information. A lot of meetings were held. A lot of Q and A sessions were held. By the time we were able to go back into the office, we were very well informed.

This level of engagement and open communication highlighted how crucial executive support is in preparing staff for operational changes, which in turn boosted job satisfaction.

Furthermore, Participant 11 illustrated the management's proactive approach to employee involvement, sharing that:

They collected surveys to figure out the time frame of the core work hours that work best for individuals returning back to work in order to implement a more streamlined, flexible work schedule for employees; again, everyone's needs can be met.

This initiative reflected management's effort to tailor work arrangements to accommodate varying employee requirements, further solidifying an environment conducive to increased job satisfaction.

Employees emphasized the importance of management that is considerate of their needs and responsive to their concerns. They also pointed to the value of involvement in decision-making processes, which ensured that employees feel heard and valued within the organization. Proactive management efforts, such as soliciting employee input through surveys, further illustrated a commitment to creating a work environment that meets diverse employee needs. Collectively, these elements underscored how supportive management contributes to overall job satisfaction among federal employees engaged in AWS work practices.

## ***Research Question 2***

What aspects of AWS practices are dissatisfying?

Two themes related to AWS, according to Herzberg's theory, were identified as dissatisfiers. These themes contributed to job dissatisfaction among federal employees. The themes included poor managerial engagement, as well as social disconnection and workplace isolation.

**Theme 5: Poor Managerial Engagement (as a Dissatisfier).** Poor managerial engagement contributes to a major source of dissatisfaction among federal workers and employees regarding AWS. Although AWS enhanced flexibility and work-life balance, the absence of robust managerial engagement transformed this potential benefit into a source of frustration. Employees noted that insufficient communication and engagement from managers can create an environment of uncertainty. Without clear guidelines, employees felt hesitant to fully embrace the flexibility offered by AWS, fearing that they might fall short of expectations or miss key deadlines. This ambiguity contributed to job dissatisfaction, as employees may have been reluctant to utilize AWS without the reassurance of managerial backing.

As Participant 4 noted:

I do think that I get much less supervisor time, which, to me, is not necessarily a problem, but I could see it becoming a problem if there was additional tasking that I was given and I needed direct additional guidance. I do not believe that they provide the same amount of availability to staff because they may not have such a detailed view as they would in the office of what it is that we're doing.

Employees agreed that lower management interaction in an AWS environment impaired performance and led to dissatisfaction.

Moreover, the lack of communication extended beyond direct supervision. Participant 8 pointed out:

Generally, it would be your frontline supervisor who would notify you of what types of schedules are available, and they would make those arrangements for you to work that particular schedule and not provide the employee an option.

This inefficiency in the management of work schedules underscored a critical gap in support that employees encounter, contributing to feelings of dissatisfaction as they are left without the autonomy to choose what works best for them.

Additionally, Participant 10 shared that they felt a bit withdrawn from their role, by stating:

So, it's five o'clock on the nose, and I'm shutting down at five o'clock on the nose. I'm not going to give any minute longer because there's no additional consideration that's ever given towards me.

This perspective revealed how a perceived lack of recognition from management can lead employees to disengage from their responsibilities. When workers felt undervalued and unsupported, they were less inclined to put forth extra effort, which diminished productivity and overall job satisfaction.

Dissatisfaction with AWS stemmed from inadequate engagement and communication from supervisors. The theme of poor managerial engagement highlighted a vital challenge facing federal employees who utilized AWS. Federal employees have raised concerns about their supervisors' limited availability and engagement, which could be particularly concerning in a flexible work setting, where workers often require more autonomy and guidance in managing their schedules and responsibilities.

**Theme 6: Social Disconnection and Workplace Isolation.** When addressing the theme of social disconnection and workplace isolation. One of the primary challenges highlighted by participants is the reduced face-to-face interaction that accompanies AWS practices. For employees working at AWS, the opportunity for spontaneous conversations and casual exchanges that contribute to team bonding is severely diminished. Such informal interactions are essential for nurturing workplace relationships and fostering a sense of belonging. Without daily in-person connections, employees felt disengaged and disconnected from their teams and the broader organizational culture.

In addition, isolation could have emotional and psychological repercussions. Employees who worked in solitude for extended periods may have experienced feelings of loneliness that could have negatively impacted their mental well-being. Even so, social connections in the workplace were linked to higher job satisfaction and overall morale. When employees felt isolated, they were less inclined to engage in discretionary efforts, such as volunteering for new projects or supporting their colleagues, further contributing to a lack of dynamism and enthusiasm in the work environment. The feedback from participants highlighted the crucial role of in-person interactions and effective communication in fostering a fulfilling work experience:

Participants in the study voiced their concerns regarding this gap in communication and connection. For example, Participant 2 articulated the frustration stemming from a disconnect between employees and managers, particularly those less comfortable with technology. They stated, “I mean, the disconnect that people oftentimes feel again is linked to the managers...they're the type of personality where they feel they need to have you right in their face to talk to you.” This highlighted how managers' reluctance to embrace remote

communication tools could lead to significant breakdowns in dialogue, perpetuating feelings of isolation among team members.

Similarly, Participant 6 noted, “The thing that a lot of people miss about being in the office is the socialization with my coworkers when I’m home.” This observation emphasizes the critical importance of face-to-face interactions in cultivating a sense of belonging and community within the workplace. In remote work settings, these vital opportunities for spontaneous conversations and social engagement were reduced, often leading to feelings of loneliness and disconnection among employees. Teamwork and job satisfaction suffered without in-person collaboration.

Additionally, Participant 11 expressed concerns about colleagues who have increasingly distanced themselves from the team, noting, “I have experienced some of the individuals that work in my section that they do disconnect; they become loners.” This observation highlighted a troubling trend where individuals may retreat into isolation, impacting not only their job satisfaction but also the entire team's morale. A disparity in social involvement resulted in misunderstandings or irritation among team members, as the want for connection conflicts with a propensity for isolation. This led to a disorganized work atmosphere, impairing collaboration and unity and diminishing overall job satisfaction.

While AWS provides flexible work arrangements that significantly benefit employees, organizations need to be aware of the potential risks of social disconnection and workplace isolation, which can lead to dissatisfaction. A lack of synchronized work hours often causes misunderstandings and a sense of disconnect within teams, as employees miss chances to brainstorm and give immediate feedback. Addressing these issues requires team collaboration,

and improving connectivity is essential to reduce social isolation linked to AWS, ultimately boosting employee satisfaction and team unity.

### ***Research Question 3***

How do the aspects of AWS practices impact job satisfaction amidst the return-to-work initiative?

AWS practices have a direct link with employee job satisfaction, especially for the return-to-work initiative. This seventh and final theme highlighted the challenges employees who have adapted to AWS's flexibility and autonomy faced. Employees expressed discontent arising from mandated return-to-work directives, as overall job satisfaction decreased because of the transition.

**Theme 7: Office Re-Entry.** The impact of AWS on job satisfaction became increasingly pronounced as employees navigated the complexities of office re-entry following extended periods of remote work. The transition back to in-office environments has led to widespread frustration and anxiety among employees in the federal sector. Participants voiced concerns regarding expectations and policies, heightening their anxiety about returning to a traditional work environment. Without clear guidance, the shift away from AWS's flexibility created anxiety about effectively managing personal and professional responsibilities.

AWS practices are designed to prioritize flexibility, accommodate individual needs, and foster a sense of trust and empowerment among employees. However, current challenges revealed that when individuals are not equipped with defined pathways or options for maintaining a healthy work-life balance during office re-entry, their job satisfaction decreased significantly. Introducing rigid policies made employees feel their preferences and circumstances were not respected or valued by management.

For instance, Participant 3 expressed confusion about returning to the office, emphasizing that they had previously been able to perform their duties effectively while working remotely. They stated, “The reasoning wasn't there, you know? The explanations weren't clear and didn't make sense to us because we could carry on our duties as before without having to come in more than once a week.” This sentiment reflected a broader dissatisfaction with the policies surrounding work conditions, illustrating how an imbalance in AWS implementations could intensify feelings of discontent.

Further validating this theme, Participant 5 noted, “Um, I think [the return to the office] impacted it a little bit negatively... it makes you wonder, why am I here?” This sentiment aligns with H2FT, which suggested that when hygiene factors—such as effective management and clear communication—were lacking, they could detract from overall job satisfaction. The experience of questioning the necessity of in-office work highlighted a disconnect between organizational expectations and individual job roles, which led to employee confusion and frustration.

Another significant factor contributing to dissatisfaction was the stress associated with commuting. Participant 6 said, “We work to live. We shouldn't live to work. So, losing hours of your life every week to commute makes you anxious.” This statement underscored the anxiety stemming from lengthy commutes and raised health concerns about returning to crowded urban environments. Participant 6 further criticized the rationale driving the return-to-office push, highlighting the need to prioritize individual well-being over economic incentives.

Moreover, the emotional toll of readjustment became apparent through the experiences shared by participants. As Participant 7 recounted:

It was a difficult transition, and tough. I think the biggest part is that I've been able to manage tasks, communicate with colleagues, and do all of those things completely at home and with more autonomy.

This sentiment signaled that the enforced transition to a more rigid work environment disrupted previously established productivity and satisfaction levels, underscoring the importance of autonomy.

Health and safety concerns, particularly considering the COVID-19 pandemic, were also significant in shaping employees' attitudes toward the return-to-office strategy. Participant 8 expressed worries about how others in the workplace would adhere to safety protocols, stating, "One of the biggest concerns...was how unserious people would take the health scare." This anxiety reflected a broader societal concern about health responsibilities and rightly pointed to a critical factor that organizations must address to mitigate employee dissatisfaction.

Lastly, two other participants observed a decline in overall job satisfaction tied to new policies governing work schedules. Participant 9 noted, "I think it decreased, but that is not a product of the alternative work schedule. It's more about the change in policy." At the same time, Participant 10 emphasized, "Bringing people back and not leaving it up to individuals about their schedules changed the way we felt about the job overall." These insights underlined how mandates for in-office work resulted in a loss of autonomy and, therefore, a setback in job satisfaction.

Employees faced numerous challenges, including unclear policies surrounding the return-to-work initiative, the stress of commuting, health concerns mainly related to COVID-19, and a notable reduction in autonomy. These issues significantly contributed to workers' discontent.

Addressing these concerns was essential for organizations seeking to enhance job satisfaction and ensure a seamless transition for employees returning to the office.

### **Evaluation of the Findings**

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the dynamics of job satisfaction among federal employees, with a focus on the effects of flexible work options. AWS has emerged as an effective strategy for enhancing job satisfaction within the federal workforce (Ballantine et al., 2022; Kwon & Jeon, 2020). This study investigated motivating and dissatisfying factors associated with AWS among federal employees to understand their impact on job satisfaction regarding the return-to-work initiative following the COVID-19 pandemic. The two-factor theory, developed by psychologist Frederick Herzberg, served as a key framework for understanding workplace motivation.

This research identified seven key themes regarding AWS that significantly influenced federal employees' motivation and satisfaction, anchored in Herzberg's theory of motivation (Herzberg et al., 1959). Of the total, four key themes related to AWS motivate federal employees, based on Herzberg's theory: 1) balancing flexibility and structure illustrated the benefits and challenges of AWS; while some employees appreciated the flexibility that came with these schedules, others often struggled to maintain a structured work environment, 2) workload management, emphasized the importance of effectively managing tasks to prevent burnout, 3) productivity and efficiency, which underscored the need for a work environment that fostered high performance, and 4) managerial support and guidance (as a motivator), which emerged as a vital motivator, as positive reinforcement from managers enhanced employee morale and encouraged proactive problem-solving.

Conversely, this research also identified two key themes related to AWS that dissatisfied federal employees working these schedules: 5) poor managerial engagement (as a dissatisfier), causing employees to feel they lack clarity and support from their supervisors, contributing to discontent and 6) social disconnection and workplace isolation, which arose from the less collaborative nature of alternative schedules, which derived from the less collaborative nature of alternative schedules.

Lastly, theme 7, the return-to-work initiative, underscores the complexities and challenges employees face when transitioning back to physical offices, particularly concerning declines in job satisfaction during reintegration. Collectively, these themes provided a comprehensive assessment of the study's findings, illustrating the double-edged sword of AWS in the federal workforce and offering insights into how organizations could enhance employee satisfaction and productivity. The emerging themes encompassed an assessment of the study's findings:

**Theme 1: Balancing Flexibility and Structure.** The research findings underscored a growing recognition of the importance of balancing flexibility and structure in AWS that enhanced employee job satisfaction. This alignment was consistent with existing literature, which emphasized the value that employees placed on the autonomy afforded by flexible work arrangements. For instance, Mas and Pallais (2020) demonstrated that the freedom to arrange work hours to accommodate personal commitments is a significant factor in employee satisfaction. This notion resonates strongly in today's work environment, where individuals increasingly seek to harmonize their professional and personal lives.

The findings are further supported by Rodríguez-Sánchez et al. (2020), who identified a strong link between work flexibility and job satisfaction. Their research indicated that flexibility

alleviated stress and boosted employee morale, highlighting the essential role of flexible work arrangements in creating a positive organizational atmosphere conducive to employee engagement. Similarly, Dimian et al. (2023) confirmed that allowing employees to tailor their workweeks to their objectives markedly enhanced their overall job satisfaction. This reinforced the assertion that autonomy in scheduling had a direct influence on well-being, aligning with Herzberg's recognition of autonomy as a motivational factor that could enrich job satisfaction.

Furthermore, the importance of a well-structured AWS option enabling employees to manage their professional and personal obligations effectively cannot be overstated. Chambel et al. (2022) argued that such options offered essential guidelines that prevented employees from becoming overwhelmed while still enjoying the benefits of flexibility. This perspective aligned with Herzberg's distinction between 'hygiene factors'—which needed to be addressed to avoid dissatisfaction—and 'motivators'—which enhanced satisfaction. Organizations that successfully integrated flexibility with a robust structural framework could effectively minimize hygiene-related issues while maximizing motivational factors, thereby fostering a committed workforce, as illustrated by Austin-Egole et al. (2020).

The study's findings increasingly revealed the reciprocal benefits of achieving this balance. The emerging theme highlighted that integrating flexibility with a strong organizational structure within AWS was critical for addressing employees' diverse needs and increasing job satisfaction. This integration ensured that employees felt empowered and valued and aligned their individual aspirations with organizational objectives, creating a synergistic effect that enhances overall job satisfaction.

The results were broadly consistent with existing research and H2FT. They illustrated that while flexibility is a crucial motivator, structure, akin to hygiene factors, was essential in

creating a supportive environment that fosters employee satisfaction. By acknowledging and addressing the interplay of these elements, organizations could cultivate an engaged and motivated workforce that thrives under AWS.

**Theme 2: Workload Management.** The findings related to workload management underscored its critical role in facilitating work-life balance and enhancing employee well-being, aligning closely with existing research in the field. In today's organizational landscape, where mental health is essential for productivity and job satisfaction, recent studies highlighted a strong interconnection between workload distribution and overall employee well-being. According to Ray and Pana-Cyan (2021), prioritizing work-life balance profoundly impacted employees' mental health. Their work revealed that fostering a supportive work environment significantly reduces burnout and anxiety, leading to a more engaged and healthier workforce. This assertion was consistent with H2FT, which categorized the absence of support or recognition as a hygiene factor; when these basic needs are met, employees experienced greater satisfaction linked to motivators like meaningful work and job autonomy.

Furthermore, the study by Inegbedion et al. (2020) supported the idea that fair workload distribution encourages a sense of value among employees. When workloads are managed evenly, employees are more likely to feel respected and appreciated, fostering a culture that boosts morale and job satisfaction. This finding reinforced Herzberg's theory, where feelings of recognition and respect are key to increasing intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction.

Superman's (2024) exploration of workforce flexibility added another layer to this theme. The freedom employees have to manage their tasks—deciding when, where, and how to work—naturally reduces stress, which was often a result of successful work-life balance initiatives. This autonomy contributed to higher job satisfaction and fostered a commitment to the organization,

reflecting Herzberg's emphasis on motivation through meaningful engagement and autonomy in work settings.

These studies establish a comprehensive framework demonstrating the significance of effective workload distribution in nurturing a healthy work environment. They reveal that organizations committed to supporting work-life balance and equitable workload practices not only enhanced employee mental health outcomes but also significantly boosted job satisfaction. By implementing strategies that prioritize these aspects, businesses cultivate a more engaged, productive, and resilient workforce, ultimately leading to increased job satisfaction.

Overall, the results closely matched existing research and H2FT's fundamental principles. The focus on hygiene factors (such as fair workload distribution and supportive work environments) and motivating factors (like job autonomy and flexibility) showed how organizations can create a positive work culture that boosts employee satisfaction. By addressing these factors together, organizations are better able to keep their workforce engaged.

**Theme 3: Productivity and Efficiency.** The productivity and efficiency findings highlighted AWS's pivotal role in enhancing employee satisfaction and organizational performance. Emerging research supported this theme, which aligned seamlessly with H2FT. This theory differentiated between factors that led to job satisfaction (motivators) and those that prevented dissatisfaction (hygiene factors).

Rahman and Arif (2021) highlighted productivity as a key measure for assessing the success of flexible work arrangements. Their claim that productivity results align with business goals showed that organizations should see productivity not just as output but as an indicator of how well their strategies meet workforce needs. This view matched Herzberg's framework,

which states that an organization's ability to create conditions that motivate employees—such as effective scheduling that considers their needs—leads to higher productivity and job satisfaction.

Petak (2022) further substantiated this notion by demonstrating that personalized scheduling significantly enhanced job satisfaction and overall organizational efficiency. Customizing work arrangements to fit individual preferences fostered a sense of belonging and satisfaction among employees. Herzberg posits that factors such as recognition and the ability to perform meaningful work were essential for job satisfaction; thus, aligning work schedules with employees' preferences directly correlated with fulfilling these motivating needs.

The collective works of Williamson et al. (2022), Choudhury (2021), and Barrero et al. (2021) underscored the importance of worker autonomy in managing schedules. Their findings show a strong correlation between employees having control over their schedules and increased engagement levels. This empowerment allows employees to tailor their workflows to their natural productivity patterns, leading to greater emotional investment in their roles. According to Herzberg's theory, such autonomy and personal investment are key motivators that enhance job satisfaction by fostering a sense of ownership and fulfillment in one's work.

This research presented a clear narrative that productivity and efficiency, driven by flexibility and autonomy, are essential contributors to creating a satisfied workforce. By prioritizing flexible work arrangements, organizations could effectively tap into the full potential of their employees, thus enhancing job satisfaction and overall performance. The ability to adapt work schedules to evolving employee needs not only addressed hygiene factors—such as work-life balance—but also significantly boosted motivational factors that led to employee engagement and satisfaction.

The results are consistent with prior research regarding the foundational principles of the H2FT. The relationship between effective AWS and increased productivity highlights the importance of addressing both hygiene factors (such as fair workload distribution and support) and motivational factors (such as autonomy and engagement) to improve overall job satisfaction. By creating an environment that promotes flexibility and employee empowerment, organizations can achieve higher productivity and a more committed workforce, ultimately benefiting both employees and the organization objectives.

**Theme 4: Managerial Support and Guidance (as a Motivator).** The findings regarding managerial support and guidance as a motivational factor strongly align with existing research and H2FT. This theme emphasizes the crucial role of supportive managers in promoting employee job satisfaction, especially in the context of AWS.

Research by Albrecht et al. (2021) identifies that managerial support regarding AWS significantly enhances job satisfaction. When employees perceive that their supervisors actively advocate for flexible work arrangements, it fosters a sense of trust and appreciation. This finding aligned with Herzberg's theory, which categorized recognition and support from management as key motivators that drive satisfaction. By recognizing employees' needs for flexibility and work-life balance, managers not only mitigate dissatisfaction but also enhance motivation, leading to improved job satisfaction.

Maan et al. (2020) further bolster this understanding, illustrating how intrinsic motivation thrives in environments where employees feel supported by their leaders. The perception of managerial support created a positive feedback loop that encouraged employees to engage more deeply with their work and contributed to overall motivation. Herzberg's framework underscored how recognition and conditions that facilitate personal growth serve as powerful motivators,

reinforcing the importance of managerial support as a critical element of job satisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959).

The role of managerial support in promoting effective work-life balance is emphasized by Jacobson (2023), who highlights that managers are integral to employing strategies that nurture an environment conducive to the well-being of employees in flexible work settings. This is particularly relevant in AWS, where the ability to manage time and responsibilities effectively played a crucial role in enhancing job satisfaction (Koziol & Koziol, 2020). When managers facilitated this balance through clear communication, support, and active encouragement, employees were better equipped to meet their performance targets, enhancing their job satisfaction.

These findings collectively illuminated the 'significant influence of managerial behaviors on employee morale and satisfaction. The positive correlation between managerial support and employee motivation accentuated organizations' need to prioritize supportive managerial practices, especially given the increasing demand for flexibility in the workplace. As employees navigated the complexities of balancing work and life in an evolving environment, a consistent focus on managerial support enhanced individual experiences. It contributed to organizational effectiveness and overall job satisfaction.

The results matched existing research and reaffirmed H2FT (Herzberg et al., 1959). Albrecht et al. (2021) observed that organizations build a more engaged and satisfied workforce by focusing on managerial support as a key motivating factor. Effective management that emphasizes support, recognition, and appreciation greatly contributed to higher job satisfaction, ultimately benefiting employees who work alternative schedules (Man et al., 2020).

**Theme 5: Poor Managerial Engagement (as a Dissatisfier).** The insights about poor managerial engagement and direction as a source of dissatisfaction strongly aligned with existing research and H2FT. Poor managerial engagement is a key hygiene factor that causes dissatisfaction and greatly affects employees' overall job satisfaction.

According to Brunelle and Fortina (2021), dissatisfaction caused by inconsistent managerial engagement can weaken team cohesion and erode trust in the workplace. This supported Herzberg's claim that hygiene factors, such as good leadership practices and clear direction, are vital in preventing job dissatisfaction. When leaders fail to consistently implement support mechanisms, employees feel unfairly treated and frustrated, which results in decreased productivity and hampers collaboration.

Ramana and Krishna (2022) emphasize the importance of consistent policies and clear rationale in implementing flexible work practices. Without coherence in managerial engagement, employees may feel disoriented about expectations, making it challenging to achieve engagement while working at AWS. Effective communication regarding AWS policies is highlighted to facilitate smoother transitions for employees, especially as they reintegrate into traditional offices.

Managerial engagement remains necessary for ensuring employees perceive their work environment as equitable and supportive (Albrecht et al., 2021; Ramana & Krishna, 2020). When managers fail to convey expectations and support during transitions, they exacerbate feelings of uncertainty and exclusion (Brunelle & Fortina, 2021). The difficulties related to returning to a conventional workplace—such as employees' hesitance to forfeit the independence of flexible schedules—underscore the relationship between motivators and hygiene factors as defined by Herzberg's theory (Alrawahi et al., 2020; Soga et al., 2022; Thant & Chang, 2020). While the

desire for flexibility and work-life balance is a motivator, insufficient managerial engagement can become a significant dissatisfier that overshadows these positive aspects (Fragala et al., 2022). As employees transition back to a physical workspace, their fears of losing independence and concerns about jeopardizing their well-established work-life balance may increase anxiety and dissatisfaction if not adequately addressed by leadership (Mobach, 2023).

The findings regarding managerial engagement in the context of AWS aligned well with existing research and H2FT. If not adequately addressed, this hygiene factor led to dissatisfaction. Ultimately, when managerial engagement was ineffective and failed to prioritize the needs of employees working in AWS, it could create an environment where hygiene factors became problematic.

**Theme 6: Social Disconnection and Isolation.** The results surrounding the theme of social disconnection and isolation resulting from the transition to AWS aligned with existing research and bolstered the insights provided by H2FT. While AWS offered numerous advantages, such as flexibility and potential work-life balance improvements, it posed significant challenges regarding interpersonal relationships and workplace engagement.

Research conducted by Cheng et al. (2023) supports the assertion that the lack of in-person communication negatively affects employees' ability to forge and maintain meaningful connections. This finding was consistent with Herzberg's framework, emphasizing that social relationships and a sense of belonging were fundamental to employee satisfaction. When workers were deprived of spontaneous interactions, critical for nurturing professional relationships, they were more likely to experience feelings of isolation. Thus, social disconnection could lead to a decline in job satisfaction and engagement, illustrating Herzberg's

notion that hygiene factors (such as social interactions) could significantly influence motivation and overall job satisfaction.

Sellar and Peris (2021) further enhance our understanding by pointing out that workplace relationships develop through shared experiences and consistent communication. The absence of these critical interpersonal opportunities, particularly in an AWS context, could hinder employees' engagement and their ability to build rapport and trust, which were essential elements for effective teamwork. Such dynamics illustrated Herzberg's distinction between motivators and hygiene factors. In contrast, flexibility and autonomy (motivators) were beneficial; they did not compensate for dissatisfaction from a lack of social connection (hygiene factor).

The implications of isolation on employee morale, as outlined by Kaluza and Van Dick (2022), further illuminate the issue. Employees who perceived themselves as disconnected from their workplace likely struggled with motivation and engagement, especially those who thrived in social environments. The frustration and dissatisfaction that arose from the absence of regular interaction underscored Herzberg's argument that while motivation could be influenced by intrinsic factors (like autonomy and achievement), external factors like social interactions played a critical role in preventing dissatisfaction.

In summary, the findings on social disconnection and workplace isolation caused by AWS aligned with existing research and H2FT, highlighting the need for organizations to consider the potential negative effects of flexible work arrangements on social connections. To address these challenges, fostering virtual communication opportunities, encouraging informal interactions, and promoting team-building activities could be key strategies to boost employee morale and job satisfaction. Therefore, organizations must have recognized the dual roles of

motivators and hygiene factors to create a more balanced and fulfilling work environment within the context of AWS.

**Theme 7: Office Re-Entry.** The findings about the effect of office reentry on job satisfaction became more important as federal employees dealt with the difficulties of returning to the office after remote work. Many workers who enjoyed the flexibility of remote setups during the pandemic now faced a return to in-person work that often lacked the scheduling choices they valued greatly. This change caused significant frustration, negatively impacting job satisfaction across various federal agencies.

These findings aligned closely with Frederick Herzberg's theory, which asserted that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction arose from two distinct categories: hygiene factors and motivators. In this context, the process of office re-entry functioned as a hygiene factor that could cause dissatisfaction if it failed to meet the needs of federal employees. For example, when employees were required to return to rigid work schedules without sufficient consideration for flexibility or work-life balance, it could harm their overall job satisfaction. Such neglect of employee preferences and well-being could further intensify feelings of frustration.

Research by Fragala et al. (2022) underscored that job dissatisfaction often arises from uncertainties regarding new expectations, policies, and employee role shifts. This aligned with Herzberg's theory, which highlighted that hygiene factors—such as clear job expectations and a supportive work environment—were crucial to avoiding dissatisfaction. When employees returned to the office with unclear or ambiguous role expectations, they were more likely to feel unprepared to meet new demands, creating a breeding ground for discontent.

Mobach (2023) further supports this perspective, noting that the shift back to traditional office settings can exacerbate feelings of job dissatisfaction. Employees who have adapted to

flexible schedules may find transitioning back to a structured work environment particularly jarring. This finding is consistent with Asaba et al. (2022), who pointed out that many workers have come to better appreciate managing personal time and obligations—an essential component of work-life balance. The enforcement of rigid work hours and physical presence requirements clashed with the flexibility employees have become accustomed to, breeding resentment and disengagement.

In this context, Herzberg's model articulated the dual challenges faced during reintegration. The desire for a balanced work-life dynamic is a big factor that enhances employee satisfaction (Asaba et al., 2022; Da et al., 2022; Fan & Moen, 2023). However, the sudden shift back to structured work environments could disrupt this equilibrium, as a hygiene factor that fosters dissatisfaction (Alrawahi et al., 2020; Soga et al., 2022; Thant & Chang, 2020). The misalignment between employees' needs for autonomy and organizational demands created significant stress and anxiety, leading to increased job dissatisfaction and a decline in overall morale and productivity (Göktaş & Özdiñç, 2022).

Research showed that employees had become used to a high level of flexibility and independence during remote work, leading to expectations that might not have matched the strict structures of traditional office settings (Alrawahi et al., 2020; Soga et al., 2022; Thant & Chang, 2020). A key finding of this study was that the desire for flexible work arrangements had become deeply rooted among employees. This change in workplace dynamics underscored the potential challenges organizations might have faced when shifting back to in-person work environments. In this context, this study emphasized the need to acknowledge and address these evolving employee expectations. As remote work had become more prevalent, employees had experienced increased control over their schedules, work environments, and even the pace of their tasks. This

autonomy had, in many cases, led to higher job satisfaction and productivity levels. However, the return to traditional office settings influenced federal employee dissatisfaction.

### **Summary**

This study on AWS provided valuable insights into employee satisfaction among federal employees, especially as they returned to traditional work hours. These results aligned with existing research and supported H2FT, which distinguishes between motivators that boost job satisfaction and hygiene factors that can cause dissatisfaction. The main goal of the research was to assess employee satisfaction with AWS and explore how the return-to-work initiative affected job satisfaction in the federal sector.

Using Herzberg's Motivational Theory, this study identified four key themes that greatly enhanced employee satisfaction: 1) balancing flexibility and structure, 2) effective workload distribution, 3) productivity and efficiency, and 4) managerial support and guidance. The research showed that employees excelled when they had the freedom to manage their schedules while having clear expectations and boundaries set by their organizations. Fair workload distribution also fostered a sense of fairness among teams and helped prevent burnout. In an environment that promoted efficiency, workers were more engaged when they could see the tangible results of their efforts. Adequate managerial support was essential for boosting employee satisfaction. The study found that employees who received regular feedback and guidance from their managers tended to have higher levels of job satisfaction.

Conversely, the research identified two main themes contributing to employee dissatisfaction: 5) poor managerial engagement and 6) social disconnection and workplace isolation. When managers did not provide the necessary support, employees could feel undervalued. The study found that poor managerial engagement could lead to frustration and

significantly decrease employee satisfaction. Additionally, the rise of remote work and flexible arrangements, while offering autonomy, could cause social disconnection and feelings of isolation among employees. The study also highlighted how non-traditional hours could hinder communication and collaboration, further reducing job satisfaction.

Finally, the key theme that emerged from the study, office re-entry, functioned as a primary hygiene factor and a major source of dissatisfaction among all federal employees. Returning to structured office environments conflicted with the flexibility and work-life balance provided by AWS, highlighting the complex factors that influenced federal employees' job satisfaction with these schedules. One of the main benefits of AWS noted in the research was its flexibility, which helped employees better manage their work and personal lives. As a result, employees experienced higher job satisfaction, lower stress levels, and a more positive overall work environment.

This study's findings highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of AWS adoption. Additionally, it examined job satisfaction, especially the adaptation to more traditional work environments. Consistent with previous research, the findings supported H2FT and illuminated the factors that contributed to workplace satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Chapter 5 discussed implications, recommendations, and conclusions related to this study.

## Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This chapter presents the implications, recommendations, and findings of an exploratory study on how alternative work schedules (AWS) affected job satisfaction among federal employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Returning to pre-pandemic work conditions created challenges for federal workers, primarily due to fewer AWS options as agencies shifted back to traditional practices (Ng et al., 2021). The goal of this research was to identify the factors that led to a 7% decline in work satisfaction among public sector employees during this period.

A qualitative approach was employed to explore the dynamics of job satisfaction among federal employees within the context of the return-to-work initiative, gathering factors that influence individual attitudes and behaviors. The study employed a phenomenological design, allowing for an examination of participants' experiences. The phenomenological method proved effective for understanding federal employees' experiences related to AWS and its effects on job satisfaction. Eleven federal employees who had used alternative work schedules before, during, and after the COVID-19 outbreak were interviewed. A semi-structured interview served as the primary data collection tool to gain insights into federal employees' views on alternative work schedules, their understanding of the protocols, and how this affected job satisfaction. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method was applied for data processing, renowned for its rigor in qualitative research. This approach involved analyzing participant responses, identifying recurring patterns and themes, and conducting a thorough analysis to understand participants' perspectives.

This study's findings revealed a significant correlation between AWS and employee job satisfaction, highlighting both the positive and potential negative impacts of AWS. This connection fits with H2FT (1959) and earlier studies on flexible work schedules (Gangwar et al.,

2022; Nafe & Alizadeh, 2023; Thant & Chang, 2021). In AWS and job satisfaction, factors like balancing flexibility and structure, workload distribution, productivity, efficiency, and managerial support serve as motivators. The reported flexibility allows employees to manage their schedules around family duties, health needs, and personal interests (Chambel et al., 2022; Quy & Zhu, 2024). This autonomy is linked to higher job satisfaction, as employees can organize their work to match their values and lifestyle preferences (Dimian et al., 2023).

Challenges related to poor managerial engagement, social disconnection, and workplace isolation, identified as hygiene factors, led to federal employee dissatisfaction. Effective managerial engagement is necessary to create a supportive work environment (Albrecht et al., 2021; Brunelle & Fortina, 2021; Ramana & Krishna, 2022). Social disconnection and a lack of social support contributed to feelings of loneliness and alienation, thereby exacerbating dissatisfaction (Cheng et al., 2023; Sellar & Peris, 2021). Workplace isolation hindered employees' willingness to share ideas or seek assistance in a disconnected environment (Kaluza & Van Dick, 2022). Addressing these hygiene factors can lead to a more fulfilling work experience, enhancing overall job satisfaction and fostering a motivated, productive workforce.

Additionally, the return-to-work transition generated adverse emotions. During that time, federal employees reported that the elimination of AWS affected morale, underscoring the importance of preserving autonomy in alternative work scheduling. Flexibility is essential to employee job satisfaction. Therefore, promoting an adaptable work culture is necessary to sustain employee satisfaction.

This study offers insights into AWS in the federal sector while recognizing significant limitations that hinder a full understanding of AWS and its impact on government employees. The data collected highlights participants' job satisfaction with their AWS experiences, revealing

how AWS dynamics influenced this specific moment in time. Job satisfaction is inherently fluid and was shaped by personal motivational factors.

This chapter summarizes the factors influencing job satisfaction, especially regarding the experiences of the federal workforce with alternative work schedules during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. As federal agencies adapted to the challenges posed by social distancing guidelines, they implemented flexible work arrangements that allowed employees to balance their professional responsibilities with personal commitments. The shift to remote work during the COVID-19 epidemic highlighted the importance of work-life balance and improved job satisfaction among government employees during a critical time. Ultimately, this chapter added to existing literature on job satisfaction by highlighting the vital role AWS plays in creating a positive work environment and guiding future discussions on the changing nature of work within the federal sector.

### **Implications**

This chapter examines implications from an exploratory study on how alternative work schedules (AWS) affected job satisfaction among federal employees during the COVID-19 pandemic drawdown. The transition posed challenges for employees, worsened by a reduction in AWS options as agencies shifted back to traditional work routines. Using a qualitative approach to explore factors influencing employee attitudes and behaviors regarding the return-to-work initiative, this research uncovered the main reasons for declining job satisfaction.

The study's findings underscored the benefits of AWS in increasing job satisfaction through greater autonomy and flexibility. This strategy allowed employees to better manage their personal and professional responsibilities, fostering an environment where they can succeed both at home and at work. When employees were able to set their own schedules, they often reported

higher job satisfaction because they felt more in control of their time and tasks. Research indicates that this autonomy can boost morale and engagement, ultimately leading to a more productive workforce (Autin-Egole et al., 2020; de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021; Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020).

This research revealed negative impacts of AWS, such as poor managerial engagement, social disconnection, and workplace isolation. These issues affected productivity, weakened organizational cohesion, and restricted open communication, which could threaten the advantages of flexible work arrangements. The findings highlighted the need for organizations to implement effective strategies to improve connectivity and support among employees by utilizing alternative work schedules.

This study found that poor managerial engagement and support led to increased feelings of alienation, lower morale, and reduced workplace productivity. Agache et al. (2022) suggested that poor managerial engagement can negatively impact productivity, reduce organizational cohesion, and hinder open communication, potentially jeopardizing the benefits of flexible work arrangements. Overall, the federal sector must recognize the importance of alternative work schedules in enhancing employee well-being and organizational effectiveness. Potential benefits include higher productivity and greater job satisfaction (Petak, 2022; Rahman & Arif, 2021).

This study also revealed the negative effects of returning to office work environments. Studies showed that employees experienced anxiety and widespread frustration (Asaba et al., 2022; Fragala et al., 2022; Mobach, 2023). Additionally, this research highlighted how employees navigated this transition, with some individuals expressing concerns about strict workplace re-entry restrictions that affected their overall job satisfaction. The results of this study inform initiatives to improve job satisfaction among federal workers.

The implications of this research focus on improving individual employee experiences while offering institutional benefits. An efficiently organized AWS framework can boost productivity, reduce absenteeism, and enhance worker satisfaction. Additionally, by aligning work practices with the preferences and needs of federal employees, agencies position themselves as desirable employers in a competitive labor market. This research offers a framework for future studies on work-schedule flexibility and underscores the importance of adaptive workplace practices within the federal sector.

### ***Research Question 1***

#### ***What motivators regarding AWS practices influence federal employees' job satisfaction?***

The data indicated that flexibility, structure, workload distribution, productivity, efficiency, and managerial support and guidance were key motivating factors for AWS. Instead of existing as separate elements, these factors highlighted different aspects of alternative work schedules that enhanced job satisfaction. Collectively, these components improved the effectiveness of AWS and provided a comprehensive approach to enhancements within the federal sector.

Because of a balance between flexibility and structure, federal employees reported higher job satisfaction when working for AWS. Previous studies showed that AWS's flexibility and structure were beneficial and that their use might have influenced workers' experiences. For example, research by Campo et al. (2021) found that flexibility in work hours and responsibilities increased employee morale and job satisfaction. Their findings emphasized that organizations that formalized AWS policies while maintaining open communication channels built employee trust and boosted overall job satisfaction. Shanker (2022) added that a well-

implemented AWS framework could foster an environment where flexibility and structure coexisted harmoniously.

Similarly, Dee et al. (2020) emphasized the crucial balance between structure and flexibility in the workplace, highlighting that a clear framework was essential for maximizing the benefits of flexible work arrangements. Their research showed that while flexibility enabled employees to adjust their schedules to better meet personal and professional needs, having clear guidelines and expectations was necessary to prevent confusion or a drop in productivity.

This study extends prior research by demonstrating that federal employees with greater control over their work schedules exhibit higher job satisfaction. The structured elements of AWS, such as clear principles and standards, enhanced this sense of freedom by providing staff with a framework for managing their roles effectively. This mix of flexibility and structure created a positive work environment and increased employees' commitment to their organization. The link between AWS's flexibility and greater job satisfaction underscored the importance of implementing supportive policies that allowed employees to manage their work hours independently. Therefore, organizations could foster a more engaged and dedicated federal workforce by promoting autonomy while providing a supportive framework.

Workload management is a motivational factor that improves employee satisfaction by providing individuals with increased autonomy and control over their duties, thereby enhancing overall job satisfaction (Shanker, 2022). Research by Superman (2024) supports this idea, showing that effective workload management strategies are positively linked to higher employee engagement and motivation. When employees adeptly manage their responsibilities, they experience greater control and empowerment, resulting in heightened job satisfaction (Dee et al., 2020). Ray and Cyan (2021) also found that managing workloads helps reduce employee stress.

Stress reduction is important because lower stress levels are directly linked to improved job satisfaction and productivity, fostering a healthier work environment. Furthermore, a study by Inegbedion et al. (2021) indicated that organizations employing effective workload management strategies enabled employees to achieve a better work-life balance. Such techniques allow workers to fulfill personal and professional obligations, thereby fostering a constructive workplace culture that improves overall morale (Shanker, 2022). An equitable workload enhances employee well-being and fosters an atmosphere where individuals feel appreciated and supported (Inegbedion, 2021).

This research aligns with existing frameworks by emphasizing how work distribution affects government employees' job satisfaction. Providing employees with the flexibility to complete daily tasks during peak periods of productivity to manage workloads underscores the importance of effective strategies tailored to individual needs. This research improves understanding of how workload management contributes to employee satisfaction in the public sector.

Federal workers' job satisfaction was influenced by productivity and efficiency. According to research by Rahman and Arif (2021), employees who frequently used AWS showed higher output. Because workers could plan their tasks around peak production times, job satisfaction was closely related to efficiency and productivity, just as with workload management.

Petak (2022) examined how standardized AWS procedures boosted efficiency by establishing clear expectations and goals, reinforcing this connection. According to his research, workers reported increased job satisfaction and productivity when they clearly understood their goals within an AWS framework. His structured approach helped individuals manage their time

more effectively, align with company objectives, and maintain job satisfaction. Barrero et al. (2021) emphasized that AWS-specific work environments were crucial. Workers who could choose whether to work from home or in an office were more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, which improved working conditions and increased output.

This study's findings on productivity and efficiency added to the growing evidence that workers benefited from more predictable and adaptable work schedules during peak performance hours, leading to improved job satisfaction and output. In a broader context, this research highlighted the advantages of AWS in boosting productivity and efficiency. It also helped explain how such factors could result in a more satisfied federal workforce.

Managerial guidance and support were the final motivating factors highlighted in this study, further reinforcing the idea that AWS dynamics influenced federal employees' job satisfaction. Previous research by Buick et al. (2024) indicates that management's support and guidance affect AWS's effectiveness. The study's findings demonstrated that flexible scheduling was even more effective when managers kept workers informed and trusted their abilities to manage their workloads. This suggested that employees felt more empowered, and the motivational impact of AWS increased when strong managerial support was provided.

Additionally, Albrecht et al. (2021) supported this idea by emphasizing the importance of effective communication among managers and staff to maximize the benefits of AWS. Their research indicated that employees were more likely to accept flexible work arrangements, which improved workplace happiness and productivity, when they felt supported and received regular guidance from their managers. Furthermore, Maan et al. (2020) underscored the importance of trust in the manager-employee relationship, showing that when supervisors trusted their staff to complete their tasks, it encouraged workers to take pride in their work and be responsible for

their actions. This strengthened the link between management support and the positive outcomes of AWS practices by increasing employee engagement and motivation.

This study emphasized the importance of managerial guidance and support in influencing job satisfaction related to AWS. For organizations to successfully implement AWS, they needed a solid management strategy. Previous research had shown that when managers provided positive reinforcement and assistance, employees were more likely to succeed in flexible work environments. Through regular engagement, clear communication, and consistent feedback, managers fostered an atmosphere of trust and empowerment among employees, thereby increasing job satisfaction.

Additionally, a supportive environment is necessary for AWS's success, as it is associated with higher employee satisfaction. Therefore, managers play a role in creating thriving AWS environments. By promoting a flexible culture with strong management support, organizations improve the overall effectiveness of AWS initiatives and increase job satisfaction among government employees. Lastly, this research indicated that AWS helped employees achieve a better work-life balance, which was essential for federal employee job satisfaction. When given autonomy, workers can better balance work and personal interests. By applying these principles, public sector organizations can create work environments that enhance employee satisfaction. Federal agencies can build on the 7% decline in employee job satisfaction seen across public service agencies.

### ***Research Question 2***

What aspects of AWS practices are dissatisfying?

This study's data emphasized how poor managerial engagement, social disconnection, and workplace isolation contributed to AWS-related dissatisfaction. These issues highlighted

concerns within the federal sector and aligned with findings from earlier research, demonstrating how these factors could negatively affect employee job satisfaction. Addressing these factors can help reveal the challenges federal employees face when using these work schedules.

This study builds on existing research by showing that federal employees on alternative schedules with poor managerial engagement experience job dissatisfaction. Recent research indicates that employees on alternative work schedules can face poor managerial engagement. For example, Ramana and Krishna (2022) reported that employees view their supervisors as disengaged, which can lead to feelings of undervaluation and job dissatisfaction. According to Brunelle and Fortina (2021), employees reported lower job satisfaction when their managers were poor communicators and did not actively engage in their work.

Wang et al. (2021) noted that individuals who engaged in teamwork and used flexible work schedules might have experienced disconnection, particularly in the absence of managerial support. Sharma (2021) concluded that poor managerial engagement for team members could have heightened feelings of isolation. By examining how federal employees' experiences were negatively affected by poor managerial support, this study supported earlier research on alternative work schedules. Additionally, since this study suggested that federal employees who used alternative work schedules were affected by poor managerial support, organizations should prioritize effective leadership strategies in such cases.

AWS-related dissatisfaction also stemmed from social disconnection and workplace isolation. According to Cheng et al. (2023), employees may have felt isolated and detached because of physical separation from coworkers, especially when social interactions were fewer, which could occur as organizations adopted more flexible work methods. Additionally, Kaluza and Van Dick (2022) argued that employees were less satisfied with their jobs if they lacked a

personal connection to their colleagues. Their research showed that workplace isolation hampered open communication and the exchange of ideas, leading to a less cohesive work environment. Cheng et al. (2023) also noted that effective work cultures promoted cooperation and collaboration, which were weakened by such isolation. Sellar and Peris (2021) emphasized the importance of social ties at work, noting that their absence could lead to alienation and lower job satisfaction. This investigation builds on previous findings by deepening understanding of how specific AWS can increase social disconnection and workplace isolation among federal employees, ultimately leading to a decline in job satisfaction. The insights from this research lay a foundation for exploring the complex relationship among AWS practices, social disconnection, and workplace isolation among federal employees. Recognizing the fundamentals of AWS and its effects on federal workers is vital to developing targeted interventions to reduce the negative impacts of employee isolation, thereby actively fostering connections among employees and improving their overall work experience in alternative work arrangements.

Overall, this study suggests that as federal organizations gradually adopt AWS practices, it is crucial to proactively address sources of employee dissatisfaction to improve satisfaction. Additionally, prior research emphasizes the importance of social connections in reducing job dissatisfaction, indicating that providing employees with ample opportunities for meaningful interaction is necessary to maintain job satisfaction (Cheng et al., 2023; Kaluza & Van Dick, 2022; Sellar & Peris, 2021). In line with previous studies, this research identifies factors that led to job dissatisfaction and offers a framework for developing strategies to enhance employee experiences within the federal sector.

### ***Research Question 3***

How do AWS practices impact job satisfaction amidst the return-to-work initiative?

The data from this study showed how the return-to-work initiative worsened dissatisfaction related to AWS. This drop in satisfaction highlighted the complex challenges in the public sector after the pandemic. Many employees were nervous about returning to a physical workspace due to concerns about the difficulties of readjusting to a regular office environment after an extended period of remote work.

This study expanded on previous research about remote work. For example, Fragala et al. (2022) observed that returning to the office could generate uncertainty and anxiety among employees, especially those used to remote work's flexibility and work-life balance. The loss of flexibility often caused dissatisfaction as employees found it difficult to adjust to new expectations and routines. Likewise, Mobach (2023) noted that the shift back to the office can challenge employees who appreciate the benefits of remote work, such as shorter commutes and increased personal productivity. Such resistance can lead to decreased morale and engagement, which directly impacts job satisfaction.

In addition, Asaba et al. (2022) highlighted the complex social dynamics of the return-to-office process, emphasizing that the transition went beyond simple logistical issues. The study showed that different employee perspectives, shaped by individual experiences during remote work, led to varying attitudes toward returning to the office. Some employees were eager to reconnect face-to-face with colleagues, while others had concerns about safety or the loss of the flexibility they had gained during remote work. This tension between different viewpoints could have posed challenges for organizations as they tried to create an inclusive environment that met the needs and preferences of all employees.

This study builds on prior research to highlight the importance of understanding the evolving dynamics of the workplace, particularly in the federal sector, following the pandemic.

Employees' experiences during that transformative time offered valuable insights into what made a workplace satisfying. Due to major changes caused by the pandemic, federal employees developed new expectations around flexibility, collaboration, and work-life balance that needed to be recognized and addressed.

This study also examined employee experiences to highlight the importance of federal agencies improving workplace practices and policies. The transition to AWS required a thoughtful strategy that considered employees' diverse preferences and the challenges they faced in adapting to these changes. Agencies had to recognize that fostering a healthy work environment involved more than offering flexibility; it required creating a culture built on trust, support, and open communication, where employees felt encouraged to share their needs and concerns.

Addressing this challenge is essential for improving overall employee job satisfaction, which has been affected by the disruption of the pandemic. As federal agencies manage the complexities of post-pandemic directives regarding AWS, a proactive and responsive approach to employee feedback is essential to reverse the 7% decline in overall job satisfaction among federal workers. By listening to employees' concerns and involving them in discussions about return-to-office plans, agencies can foster greater engagement and support, leading to a smoother transition back to the workplace and higher employee satisfaction.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Drawing on insights from federal employees' experiences with alternative work schedules, a series of recommendations is proposed for federal legislators and organizational leaders (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021; Kocot et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2021). These suggestions aim to improve job satisfaction, enhance staff well-being, and optimize the effectiveness of AWS

initiatives. Federal agencies can establish policies that encourage flexibility by supporting more adaptable work arrangements and ensuring that AWS initiatives are accepted and promoted as standard workplace practices (Ng et al., 2021; OPM, 2021). Enhancing the use of AWS through environmental modifications can significantly increase its success (Campo et al., 2021; Jacobson, 2023; Vyas, 2022). Because AWS policies address diverse needs and unique situations, agencies can operate more confidently (Chambel et al., 2022; Ramana & Krishna, 2024).

Federal agencies must set clear productivity and performance objectives for AWS (Dee et al., 2020; Mobach, 2022; Rahman & Arif, 2021). By defining specific productivity and performance criteria aligned with AWS regulations, organizations can empower employees to take ownership of their responsibilities while ensuring alignment with broader organizational goals (Chambel et al., 2022; Ramana & Krishna, 2024). Clear objectives and metrics help employees prioritize tasks effectively and leverage the benefits of flexible scheduling, which is essential for promoting accountability and creating reciprocal advantages for both employees and the organization (Shanker, 2022; Superman, 2024).

Overall, a collaborative approach to AWS can significantly improve work-life balance and strengthen the connection between organizations and their employees. These strategies provide flexibility, support, and a sense of belonging (OPM, 2021). Organizational leaders and government lawmakers contribute by creating an environment where individuals can flourish on AWS by advocating for more flexible standards, enhancing organizational culture, and setting clear goals for productivity and effectiveness, ultimately leading to increased job satisfaction within the federal sector (Chambel et al., 2022; Ramana & Krishna, 2024).

In this post-pandemic era, hybrid and remote work seem to be more common; however, there is no solution that works for everyone (Vyas, 2022). Traditional work practices that have

been established for a long time continue, and offices are not completely gone (Vyas, 2022). The federal sector has resumed its pre-pandemic work procedures, and AWS options are still available yet limited in scope (OPM, 2023).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study focused exclusively on federal employees in the Mid-Atlantic region. While this geographic focus enables in-depth analysis within a specific context, expanding the research to include a broader geographic area can offer several advantages. By analyzing data from different locations, further research can provide a deeper understanding of the impact of AWS by considering factors that may influence employee experiences and outcomes (Das, 2024). Additionally, examining a larger geographic area makes it possible to evaluate how regional cultural differences affect the effectiveness and acceptance of AWS.

The qualitative sample of eleven participants may not fully represent the diverse experiences of all federal employees. Ahmed (2025) asserts that a larger and more varied sample would inevitably capture a broader range of experiences because of the federal workforce's many positions, responsibilities, and cultural contexts. Therefore, including participants from different roles, geographic locations, and levels of government service could reveal unique challenges and successes in implementing AWS across the federal landscape.

Additionally, restrictions existed on contacting government employees in other departments. However, by including additional federal agencies with different purposes, cultures, and operational frameworks, the research could gain insights from a broader range of government organizations, making workers' experiences with AWS more comprehensive and relevant. Furthermore, the North Atlantic region was the sole focus of the research. Nonetheless, expanding the geographic scope could provide a broader range of opinions from federal

employees in different regions, resulting in more diverse experiences and perspectives (Das, 2024). As a result, this would enhance understanding of alternative work schedules and their impacts.

This research was conducted over a brief period. A longitudinal approach could provide a more comprehensive dataset, enhancing understanding of patterns and fluctuations (Riggle & Taylor-Robinson, 2024). Therefore, a longitudinal approach could improve knowledge of changes in job satisfaction related to AWS by offering insights into employees' adaptation to alternative work schedules and shifts in the workplace environment over time. Additionally, Gates et al. (2023) suggest that a longitudinal approach could offer further insights, creating a more detailed framework for analyzing the data and making well-informed recommendations.

The study's scope limits the generalizability of its findings to the broader federal sector or other organizational settings. There is variation among federal agencies, as each operates under unique mandates, such as public health, environmental protection, and national security, which influence how AWS is implemented and perceived. Further research on applying AWS across different operational structures and organizational goals could provide important insights, especially when considering external factors like flexibility, work-life balance, and personal circumstances.

This study's reliance on self-reported data has limitations due to social desirability bias, participants' perceptions of workplace culture, and their current circumstances, which can affect their responses. This dependence might obscure the true nature of their relationships with AWS and how AWS influences their job satisfaction (Montgomery, 2023; Mwita, 2022; Rodda et al., 2024). Future research using a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative methods could overcome this limitation by providing a more comprehensive

understanding of the federal workforce's experiences with AWS and its impact on job satisfaction.

This study also provides valuable insights into alternative work schedules in the federal sector, but acknowledging its limitations underscores the need for further research. Future studies should use mixed-methods approaches, include longitudinal designs, and aim for larger, more diverse participant samples. Additionally, integrating data from the FEV survey would be advantageous. This study is released annually and provides insights into the government sector. These efforts could improve understanding of AWS's effects on public-sector employees and support initiatives that benefit both employees and the organizations they serve.

## **Conclusion**

Public sector employees have often managed complex workloads alongside personal commitments. Flexible scheduling options can boost job satisfaction (Agache et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022). This study at contribute to dissatisfaction and their impact on the return-to-work initiative. Therefore, it guides the creation of more effective, employee-centered AWS policies. It also adds to the literature on workplace flexibility and its impact on employee experience in public sector organizations (Bal & Izak, 2021; Ballantine et al., 2020; Ray & Cyan, 2022).

This study aimed to examine the 7% decrease in job satisfaction following the return-to-work initiative. It also enhances the current literature on alternative work schedules (AWS) and job satisfaction by providing empirical evidence that both supports and challenges established theoretical frameworks, including H2FT. Herzberg's theory states that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are caused by two separate factors: motivating factors that boost satisfaction and hygiene factors that, if lacking, lead to dissatisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959). This study explores how Amazon Web Services (AWS) impacts government employees, enhancing the

understanding of how flexible work arrangements can serve as a motivational element that greatly affects job satisfaction.

These results collectively addressed the core issues identified in the study's problem and purpose, supporting H2FT on job satisfaction with evidence that could guide public sector institutions. This research added to existing knowledge about how AWS affected job satisfaction, based on qualitative data from federal workers. By exploring how these schedules influenced job satisfaction, this study closed a notable gap in the literature on federal employment and alternative work conditions.

The qualitative data gathered in this study deepens understanding and offers practical insights for policymakers and agency managers seeking to enhance work environments for federal employees. Building on earlier research outlined in Chapter 2, the findings deliver valuable employee perspectives on AWS within federal agencies and its impact on job satisfaction. A primary insight is that flexibility is essential for boosting job satisfaction. The study demonstrates that AWS enhances work-life balance, suggesting that the federal sector has the capacity to develop a more satisfied workforce.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Email



#### National University IRB

9338 Lightwave Ave., San Diego, CA 92123

[irb@nu.edu](mailto:irb@nu.edu)

My name is Sandra Cole, and I am a doctoral student at National University. I am conducting a research study to understand how satisfied federal employees are with their AWS arrangements considering the return-to-work initiative following the COVID-19 pandemic. I am recruiting individuals who meet all these criteria:

1. You are age 22 and over.
2. You have served at least 4 years as a federal employee.
3. You actively participated in an alternative work schedule before COVID-19 and the return-to-work initiative.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Join a 45- to 60-minute private online interview using Zoom.
2. Be observed during the interview.
3. Review the interview transcript via email for 10-15 mins.

Participants in this study will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card via email after the interview. If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at [S.Cole4063@o365.ncu.edu](mailto:S.Cole4063@o365.ncu.edu)

Thank you for considering participating in this voluntary research!

Sandra Cole

## Appendix B

### Consent Letter



**National University IRB**  
9338 Lightwave Ave., San Diego, CA 92123  
irb@nu.edu

My name is Sandra Cole, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU). I also am a management and program analyst at the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Overseas Building Operations, Arlington, VA.

I'm asking you to take part in a research study about how satisfied federal employees are with their AWS arrangements considering the return-to-work initiative following the COVID-19 pandemic. The name of this research is "The Impact of Alternative Work Schedules on Job Satisfaction in the Federal Sector: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study."

You may participate in this research if you meet all the following criteria:

1. You are age 22 and over.
2. You have served at least 4 years as a federal employee.
3. You actively participated in an alternative work schedule before COVID-19 and the return-to-work initiative.

**What you will be asked to do:** If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Join a 45 to 60-minute private online interview using Zoom.
2. Be observed during the interview.
3. Review the interview transcript via email for 10-15 mins.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about

AWS practices were revitalized because of the COVID-19 outbreak; however, research is currently being carried out to acquire a better understanding of how this phenomenon has directly influenced or impacted federal workers, as well as how workers manage tasks and comply with standards to meet organizational goals.

**Risks:** There are little or no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

**Benefits:** This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this study.

**Recording:**

will audio/video record your responses and/or actions with video camera on Zoom during the 1:1 interview

**Compensation:** After you complete the survey, interview, and research activities, you will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card via email.

**Confidentiality:** The researcher will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. However, I cannot guarantee confidentiality of your research data. In addition to me, the following people and offices will have access to your data:

- My NU dissertation committee and any appropriate NU support or leadership staff
- The NU Institutional Review Board

This data could be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent from your or your legally authorized representative.

The researcher will securely store your data for 3 years, after which they will delete the electronic data and destroy the paper data.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

**If you have questions, please** ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, contact me at [S.Cole4063@o365.ncu.edu](mailto:S.Cole4063@o365.ncu.edu) or 202-421-9430.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at [irb@nu.edu](mailto:irb@nu.edu).

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Guide**

**Introduction:** I would like to express my gratitude for your voluntary participation in this study. You are here entirely of your own free will; if you feel uneasy or want to leave at any time, you are free to do so. For data analysis purposes and to guarantee comprehensive documentation of your responses, this interview discussion will be audio-recorded via the Zoom application. Now is the time to start asking the questions I have prepared. Do not hesitate to ask any further questions you may have. Occasionally, I will inquire further.

#### **Starting the Interview:**

I would like to have a more in-depth conversation with you regarding alternative work schedules.

#### **Interviewer's Notes:**

In this section, I will ask about the participant's background and use this information to encourage interaction to help participants feel comfortable with me, thus setting the tone for the interviewer-interviewee relationship.

#### **Demographics**

1. Age
  - a. 22-29
  - b. 30-37
  - c. 38-45
  - d. 46-53
  - e. 54 and Over

2. Identity
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Other
  - d. Prefer not to say
3. Ethnic group
  - a. White/Caucasian
  - b. Hispanic/Latino
  - c. Brown/African American
  - d. Asian/Pacific Islander
  - e. Other
4. Academic Background
  - a. High School diploma or equivalent
  - b. Bachelor's degree
  - c. Master's Degree
  - d. Doctorate
  - e. Other (Please Specify)
5. Status of Employment
  - a. Full-Time
  - b. Personal Service Contractor
  - c. Third-Party Contractor

## Interview Questions

This compiled set of questions will direct the inquiry into the effects of alternative work schedules on the job satisfaction of federal employees. Understand their experiences and level of exposure to such arrangements.

*Insights into the factors that motivate AWS practices that impact job satisfaction among federal workers can be gained from these questions.*

6. What is your extent of knowledge regarding flexible work schedules?
7. What is your definition of the perfect work schedule?
8. How has AWS impacted your work-life balance?
9. How has your organization supported the facilitation of alternative work schedules?
10. How has utilizing alternative work schedules affected your overall job satisfaction?
11. How would you rate your satisfaction with your current work situation regarding your alternative work schedule on a scale from one to ten?

Offer the participants an opportunity to provide any additional comments or suggestions related to motivators regarding AWS practices influencing federal employees' job satisfaction.

*Insights into the aspects of AWS practices that are dissatisfying among federal workers can be gained from these questions.*

12. What are some problems you have encountered with an alternative work schedule versus a regular work schedule?
13. What specific challenges have you encountered when utilizing alternative work schedules?

14. To what extent did alternative work schedules limit a sense of connectedness to the organization?

15. How has your level of overall job satisfaction been impacted by any dissatisfying factors linked to alternative work schedules?

*Insights into the aspects of AWS practices that impact job satisfaction amidst the return-to-work initiative can be gained from these questions.*

16. How did the return-to-work initiative alter your work schedule?

17. How were the policies and guidance communicated to the employees?

18. What were some of your concerns when returning to the office?

19. How did AWS practices impact your sense of support, engagement, and well-being during the return-to-work initiative?

20. How has your overall experience during the return-to-work initiative impacted your overall job satisfaction?

**Conclusion:** I appreciate you taking the time to participate. Your answers are considerably valued. At this juncture, I will wrap up this interview. Should you have any further inquiries, please contact me using the contact details provided. Thank you.