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Employer-Employee Dynamics during COVID-19: Normative Beliefs and the Role of Pluralistic Ignorance

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Abstract

Employment relationships are shaped by a network of social norms that implicitly guide expected behavior, particularly when formal contractual arrangements are limited. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced significant shifts, such as increased short-time work and the adoption of home-based work within firms. In this context, our study investigates three key questions: first, whether social norms exist regarding these changes; second, whether there are differences in attitudes between employees and supervisors (misalignment); and third, whether discrepancies exist between individuals' own attitudes and their perceptions of the population's attitudes (pluralistic ignorance). Our findings indicate that shared normative attitudes exist regarding short-time work and home-based work, with only minor differences between supervisors and non-supervisors. Additionally, evidence of pluralistic ignorance emerges, as respondents tended to overestimate or underestimate the consensus within the surveyed population when asked about others' opinions. This phenomenon can sustain norms even when individuals privately disagree, potentially affecting both the quality of employment relationships and organizational functioning. Overall, our results highlight that social norms play a critical role in labor market analysis, particularly during periods of change.

Keywords: Working from home, Employment relationship, Pluralistic ignorance, Short-time work, Social norms

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Introduction

Employment relationships extend beyond mere economic exchanges, as they are embedded within broader societal contexts and shaped by the normative attitudes of employees, employers, and other stakeholders [1]. These attitudes include considerations such as fairness, reciprocity, and authority, influencing behavior beyond the immediate costs and benefits of contractual arrangements [2, 3]. At the collective level, these normative attitudes manifest as social norms [4], reflecting shared expectations about appropriate behavior that individuals feel compelled to follow [4, 5]. Typically, compliance with social norms is reinforced through positive or negative sanctions, such as social approval or disapproval [6], though internalized norms can also motivate adherence, as violations may trigger feelings of shame, guilt, or remorse [7].

Despite their importance, labor market research has often overlooked the normative dimensions of employment relationships. Experimental studies have demonstrated the influence of social norms, such as fairness and reciprocity, on human behavior in general [8] and within labor market contexts specifically [9]. However, empirical evidence is scarce on how these broad normative principles translate into specific, localized expectations for workplace behavior, or how these norms evolve over time. During economic or social crises, social norms often adapt, potentially intensifying existing conflicts or creating new



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ones. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic likely prompted temporary or lasting changes in workplace norms regarding home-based work, short-time work, and the disclosure of private information. From a theoretical standpoint, social norms can help address collective challenges [10, 11], suggesting that the pandemic created a demand for clear workplace norms. At the same time, conflicting interests—such as maintaining productivity, protecting employee health, and respecting private responsibilities—made it uncertain whether norms favoring one group would be accepted by those bearing associated costs. Our study leverages this rapid shift in workplace norms to investigate attitudes toward behaviors that gained particular attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we examine perceptions of the assignment and compensation of short-time work, opportunities to work from home, and the sharing of employees' vacation locations with employers. These cases are noteworthy because they involve behaviors that can mitigate pandemic-related challenges for both employees and employers, while simultaneously highlighting conflicts of interest due to potential costs or privacy concerns. To explore whether these asymmetries influence normative attitudes, we distinguish between employees with and without supervisory responsibilities, assuming that supervisors broadly represent employer interests.

We address three research questions. First, we examine whether consistent patterns among respondents indicate the existence of social norms on these topics (RQ1). Second, we assess potential misalignment between employees and supervisors (RQ2), since differences in norm support could generate workplace conflict [12]. Third, we investigate discrepancies between respondents' own attitudes and their perceptions of others' attitudes (RQ3), which can reveal pluralistic ignorance—situations where individuals contribute to sustaining norms they do not personally endorse [13]. This allows us to assess the extent to which pluralistic ignorance occurs in the context of COVID-19.

Using data from a large-scale, representative sample of labor market participants in Germany, we find that most respondents hold similar normative attitudes regarding employer and employee responsibilities during the pandemic. Depending on the specific question, 60–80% of respondents agree or somewhat agree with statements such as: (i) companies should avoid short-time work if financially feasible, (ii) employers should supplement short-time allowances provided by unemployment insurance, (iii) employers should allow employees—particularly those with children—to work from home even if not all tasks can be completed remotely, and (iv) employees should disclose their vacation location during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, evidence of pluralistic ignorance appears for short-time work and disclosure of vacation locations, with respondents—including supervisors—overestimating the population-level support for norms favoring employee rights. These findings reinforce the notion that social norms regulate employment relationships, which is especially valuable during crises to reduce tensions, conflicts, and uncertainties. The following section reviews the literature on social norms in employment, providing the foundation for our theoretical and empirical analysis.

Norms in Employment Relationships

The employment relationship between employers and employees represents one of the most significant economic interactions in modern societies, with substantial implications for employees' living standards, firms' performance, and overall economic welfare. While labor laws and other institutional frameworks provide formal regulation, these rules often serve as general guidelines rather than detailed mechanisms for handling conflicts. Beyond these formal structures, employment relationships involve substantial informal agreements, discretionary practices, and negotiation, raising questions in labor market and organizational research about how these relationships can be structured to maximize benefits for employees, employers, and society at large.

Over recent decades, research across sociology, economics, and psychology has highlighted that traditional economic approaches often overlook the role of social norms in shaping employment relationships. Drawing on the work of Bicchieri and others [4, 5, 14], social norms can be defined as shared rules of behavior recognized by a sufficient number of individuals, with deviations carrying a positive probability of social sanction. At the individual level, related constructs are referred to as normative attitudes. Central to social norms is the expectation that others will evaluate behavior according to these attitudes, and such evaluations can have consequences. Unlike formal regulations such as laws, social norms are enforced informally, either through social networks or via internalization [15].

Although the existence of social norms is widely acknowledged as a fundamental element of society [10, 11, 16, 17], research explicitly examining norms in employment relationships is limited, fragmented, and spread across disciplines [15]. A small body of studies demonstrates that norms influence processes such as hiring and job matching (e.g., Akerlof and Kranton [18]; Barr *et al.* [19]; Crandall *et al.* [20]), while other research shows that perceptions of fairness and justice affect assessments of layoffs [21–25]. Norms also shape reactions to wages, compensation, and working conditions [23, 26–29]. Beyond compensation, few studies examine social norms in other workplace areas, with notable exceptions including promotion practices [30, 31] and work schedule flexibility, where standard work-hour norms can penalize employees with nontraditional schedules [32–34].

In summary, while social norms are theoretically acknowledged in organizational research (e.g., Ajzen [35]), they are rarely explicitly measured or studied as a key element of employment relationships (Hammer *et al.* [36]). In particular, knowledge

is limited regarding which norms exist and to what extent employers and employees recognize and adhere to them. This study aims to address this gap by examining specific norms that became especially salient during the COVID-19 pandemic. We focus on injunctive norms related to short-time work, the granting of home-based work, and the disclosure of private employee behavior, exemplified by vacation location.

Our first aim is exploratory: we examine whether a clear majority supports each norm and how support varies across norms. Individuals are expected to favor norms more strongly when they align with their personal or financial interests. Our second goal investigates differences between employees with and without supervisory roles. Measures such as avoiding short-time work or allowing work from home typically impose costs on employers, and supervisors, as employer representatives, may perceive these norms differently. We hypothesize that supervisors will be less supportive of norms benefiting employees, reflecting a misalignment between employer and employee perspectives [12], which may generate tensions. Moreover, because employees often have greater protection needs and power imbalances can trigger norms [37], norms favoring employees are expected to enjoy broader support than those favoring employers.

Finally, we explore the presence of information bias regarding the prevalence of norms in the population. Individuals often misjudge the average attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors of others, leading to pluralistic ignorance—situations where a norm is maintained by the group despite being privately endorsed by only a minority [13, 38]. Previous research documents pluralistic ignorance in behaviors such as alcohol consumption [39], foreign policy opinions [40], and romantic relationships [41].

In employment contexts, studies have shown that employees may misjudge the acceptance of flexible work arrangements [42, 43]. For instance, Munsch *et al.* [43] found that individuals overestimate how negatively others view flexible workers, while Miyajima and Yamaguchi [42] observed Japanese men overestimating other men's negative attitudes toward paternity leave, reducing their own willingness to take leave.

In the third part of our study, we assess whether pluralistic ignorance occurs regarding the five normative attitudes examined in our empirical analysis. Theoretically, greater communication about norms may reduce pluralistic ignorance [4, 43]. Since the pandemic increased the demand for employee protections and created new challenges—such as employers' interest in vacation locations to assess infection risk—attitudes and perceptions about others' attitudes may have shifted, potentially generating pluralistic ignorance. Accordingly, we hypothesize that norms related to short-time work, home-based work (with and without children), and disclosure of vacation locations are likely candidates for pluralistic ignorance, with the effect being smaller for topics that received more public attention during the pandemic.

Pandemic-Related and Institutional Background

Our study focuses on the German labor market during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first COVID-19 case in Germany was reported at the end of January 2020, and in March 2020, the government imposed broad restrictions, advising employees to work from home whenever possible. Restrictions eased somewhat during the summer but were followed by a rise in infections, peaking in October 2020. In November and December 2020, stricter measures were reinstated and remained in place during our survey in early 2021.

The pandemic placed significant strain on the German labor market, particularly in the service sector, including gastronomy, while manufacturing faced supply chain disruptions and shortages of upstream products. Despite these challenges, labor demand remained relatively resilient [44], largely due to targeted labor market policies aimed at preventing layoffs [45]. A key instrument was the widespread use of short-time work allowances [46]. Firms could apply for short-time work if at least ten percent of employees experienced a reduction of more than ten percent in their working hours. Affected employees received a portion of their wages from unemployment insurance, ranging from 60 to 87 percent depending on household composition and duration, which mitigated layoffs but entailed some income loss.

While short-time allowances have been used in previous crises [47], the option to work from home was relatively new. Although home-based work proved effective during the pandemic, its implementation sparked debate, ultimately resulting in a temporary legal obligation for employers to allow working from home when operationally feasible (§4 Arbeitsschutzverordnung, January 2021). This measure primarily affected white-collar workers and led to a surge in remote work.

Another issue that arose post-first-wave concerned whether employers have the right to know employees' vacation destinations. Unlike home-based work, this matter was not formally regulated, leaving ambiguity regarding employees' obligations. Labor law experts generally agree that employees must disclose vacations to high-risk areas to protect coworkers, but employers must verify the necessity of this information.

Among the three issues—short-time work, home-based work, and disclosure of vacation destinations—home-based work received the most public attention. Google Trends data show exceptional peaks for the search term “home office & corona”, reflecting both public debate and the legal establishment of the right to work from home [48]. Consequently, we expect that information exchange among colleagues and friends about home-based work was greater than for the other two topics.

Data and Operationalization

We use data from the High-Frequency Online Personal Panel (HOPP) conducted by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) [49, 50]. The panel is based on a random sample drawn from the Integrated Employment Biographies (IEB) [51], which records all periods of: (i) employment (excluding self-employment and civil servants), (ii) unemployment or job search, (iii) receipt of unemployment benefits, (iv) welfare benefit receipt, and (v) participation in labor market programs. Only individuals with at least one IEB spell in 2018 were sampled.

In May 2020, 200,000 individuals were invited by mail to join the online panel, achieving a 5.7% response rate in the first wave (11,331 participants). Panel attrition over time led to a refreshment sample in wave 5 (100,000 additional invitations). Our analysis uses data from wave 7, conducted in January–February 2021, with 6,344 participants, of whom 5,836 consented to link survey responses with administrative records. Calibration weights were applied to adjust for sampling distributions based on rich administrative data [50]. All analyses reported here are based on the weighted sample.

In the seventh wave of the survey, we included specific questions to measure normative attitudes toward employment relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents rated each item on a scale from “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (4). First, participants were asked about their own views on workplace practices that received particular attention during the pandemic (referred to as the coronavirus crisis in Germany). The questions were phrased as follows:

- Employers have a moral obligation to avoid implementing short-time work as long as the company has sufficient financial reserves.
- Employers have a moral obligation to supplement employees’ short-time allowances when financial resources permit.
- Employees without children should have the option to work from home even if not all tasks can be completed remotely.
- Employees with children should have the option to work from home even if not all tasks can be completed remotely.
- During the coronavirus crisis, employees have a moral duty to inform their employer about their vacation destinations.

Subsequently, respondents were asked to assess what they believed to be the opinion of the majority:

"Your own opinion does not always correspond to that of the majority. What do you think most working people would select regarding how employers or employees handle the consequences of the coronavirus crisis?"

The survey also collected information on whether participants held a supervisory role and the number of employees they supervised directly or indirectly. We hypothesized that employees with supervisory responsibilities would align more closely with employer perspectives than those without such responsibilities.

Table 1 presents the variables included in the analysis along with descriptive statistics. Administrative records provided additional information on education, work experience, tenure, establishment size, citizenship, and daily pay. The analysis sample consists of 4,609 observations, including only currently employed individuals who responded to the normative attitude questions and for whom control variables were available.

Table 1. Sample descriptives (weighted)

	All		Supervisors		Nonsupervisors	
	Mean	Std. dev.	Mean	Std. dev.	Mean	Std. dev.
Female	0.48	0.50	0.36	0.48	0.51	0.50
Age	43.70	12.40	45.75	10.92	43.26	12.66
Child under 18 in hh (0/1)	0.36	0.48	0.39	0.49	0.35	0.48
Short-time allowance (0/1)	0.10	0.30	0.11	0.31	0.10	0.30
Possibility for working at home (0/1)	0.43	0.50	0.54	0.50	0.41	0.49
Education: No vocational Training	0.09	0.28	0.05	0.21	0.10	0.30
Education: Vocational training	0.50	0.50	0.48	0.50	0.50	0.50
Education: Upper Secondary	0.05	0.21	0.04	0.20	0.05	0.22
Education: Upper Secondary + voc training	0.15	0.36	0.15	0.36	0.15	0.36
Education: University or FH	0.22	0.41	0.28	0.45	0.20	0.40
Experience (yrs)	17.91	10.89	20.73	10.21	17.29	10.94
Tenure (yrs)	5.21	6.59	7.18	7.20	4.78	6.38
No. of employees in establishment (2019)	925.21	3679.13	879.02	3075.38	935.20	3797.41
Daily pay in € (2019)	100.09	63.41	138.32	62.35	91.82	60.54
Foreign citizen (0/1)	0.08	0.26	0.07	0.26	0.08	0.27
Observations	4609		1010		3599	

Source: HOPP, wave 7

Empirical Results

Table 2 provides an overview of respondents’ answers to the five questions measuring normative attitudes. Odd-numbered columns report the average values on the original four-point scale. Even-numbered columns show a simplified binary version, where “agree” and “strongly agree” are combined into a single positive category, and “disagree” and “strongly disagree” are

combined into a negative category, with percentages indicating the share of respondents who selected “strongly agree.” The first 2 columns summarize the full sample, the next two focus on employees without supervisory responsibilities, and the final two columns present results for employees holding supervisory positions.

Table 2. Agreement towards the Five Normative Attitudes (Weighted)

Normative Statement	All (1–4 scale)	All (Strongly/Agree %)	Nonsupervisors (1–4 scale)	Nonsupervisors (Strongly/Agree %)	Supervisors (1–4 scale)	Supervisors (Strongly/Agree %)
Employers should avoid introducing short-time work	2.88	69.28	2.90	70.86	2.77	62.02
Employers should supplement short-time allowances	3.00	76.69	3.03	78.35	2.87	69.05
Employees without children should work from home even if tasks are incomplete	2.69	59.54	2.71	60.77	2.60	53.87
Employees with children should work from home even if tasks are incomplete	3.13	82.60	3.14	82.91	3.09	81.18
Employees should disclose vacation destinations during the pandemic	2.74	61.87	2.73	61.27	2.80	64.61
Observations	4609	4609	3599	3599	1010	1010

Source: HOPP, wave 7

To address our first research question (RQ1)—whether social norms exist on these topics—we examined respondents’ personal attitudes toward the five statements. In every case, a clear majority endorsed the statement. Support was particularly strong for preventing short-time work (69%), the employer’s duty to provide wage top-ups (77%), and the right to work from home for employees with children (83%). For these issues, a substantial majority shared the same normative expectations. Support was somewhat weaker, though still majoritarian, for working from home when no children are present (60%) and for employees’ moral obligation to disclose their vacation destination (62%). Supervisors showed a similar pattern but were slightly less favorable toward employee-friendly positions and somewhat more supportive of employer interests.

Up to this point, we have treated a simple majority endorsement within the reference group as evidence of a social norm—a relatively lenient criterion. A more rigorous approach draws on methodological insights from research on when individual-level data can legitimately be aggregated to represent higher-level constructs, such as group or organizational properties [52]. For instance, individual perceptions of psychological climate are often aggregated to infer an organizational climate only when sufficient within-group agreement exists. Analogously, we can ask whether individual normative beliefs are sufficiently shared within a reference group to justify speaking of the group’s social norms. Following Chan’s [52] direct consensus model, interrater agreement statistics—specifically *rwg* scores—provide a formal indicator of such consensus. The *rwg* index compares the observed variance in responses within a group to the variance expected under a null model of random responding (typically assuming a uniform/rectangular distribution). Higher *rwg* values signal stronger within-group agreement.

We therefore explored whether distinct social norms might exist for nonsupervisory employees versus supervisors by calculating separate *rwg* scores for each subgroup across the five items (**Table 3**). The magnitude of these scores can be interpreted as reflecting the strength (or at least the degree of consensus) of the putative norm. Descriptively, two patterns stand out. First, agreement tends to be higher among nonsupervisory employees, possibly because some supervisors still identify partly with their own subordinates or see themselves as “first among equals” rather than fully aligned with management. Second, the notably low *rwg* values for the fifth item (disclosure of vacation location) suggest that any norm here is at best emergent or may not yet (or ever) qualify as a genuine shared norm. Overall, however, the *rwg* results align closely with the simpler majority-based analysis, reinforcing our initial conclusions about the presence and relative strength of these normative expectations.

Table 3. Within-Group Agreement Scores (*rwg*) for Nonsupervisory and Supervisory Staff

Item	Supervisory Staff (<i>rwg</i>)	Nonsupervisory Staff (<i>rwg</i>)
Support for preventing short-time work	0.3807	0.4741
Obligation to supplement wages for short-time workers	0.4855	0.5182
Permission to work from home when tasks remain incomplete (without children)	0.4271	0.4744

Permission to work from home when tasks remain incomplete (with children)	0.5127	0.5563
Requirement to disclose vacation destination	0.0862	0.0646
Number of responses	1,010	3,599

Computations are based on a rectangular (uniform null) distribution

Source: HOPP, wave 7

Our second research question (RQ2) examines whether employees and supervisors differ in their normative attitudes. Descriptive statistics in **Table 2** indicate that supervisors consistently adopt a stance closer to the employer's viewpoint across all five items. By "employers' perspective," we refer to a tendency to reject employer obligations (Items 1–4) and favor employee obligations (Item 5), although the majority opinion—aligned with the obligations for all 5 items—remains consistent between employees and supervisors.

To explore this further, we conducted separate linear regressions for each item, treating the four-point response scale as the dependent variable. Results reported in **Table 4** show that, even after accounting for establishment characteristics and respondent demographics, supervisors are significantly more inclined than nonsupervisors to reject employer obligations and endorse employee obligations across all five items. Nonetheless, the magnitude of this effect is moderate, with absolute differences ranging from 0.10 points (for employer duties to subsidize short-time work and permit working from home when children are present) to 0.17 points (for the obligation to allow working from home when no children are present) on the four-point scale.

Table 4. Linear regression of attitudes on a rich set of covariates (weighted)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Support for preventing short-time work	Obligation to supplement wages for short-time workers	Permission to work from home when tasks remain incomplete (without children)	Permission to work from home when tasks remain incomplete (with children)	Requirement to disclose vacation destination
Supervisor (0/1)	– 0.118*** (0.032)	– 0.097*** (0.030)	– 0.171*** (0.031)	– 0.098*** (0.029)	0.151*** (0.040)
Female	0.065* (0.026)	0.069** (0.025)	0.114*** (0.025)	0.092*** (0.023)	0.131*** (0.034)
Education: No vocational Training	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Education: Vocational training	– 0.011 (0.082)	– 0.147* (0.073)	– 0.054 (0.080)	– 0.054 (0.074)	0.091 (0.115)
Education: Upper Secondary	– 0.229* (0.093)	– 0.284** (0.086)	– 0.012 (0.093)	– 0.040 (0.088)	0.132 (0.129)
Education: Upper Secondary + voc training	– 0.088 (0.082)	– 0.241** (0.074)	– 0.044 (0.081)	– 0.016 (0.074)	0.129 (0.116)
Education: University or FH	– 0.152 (0.080)	– 0.289*** (0.071)	– 0.018 (0.079)	– 0.000 (0.072)	0.047 (0.112)
Foreign citizen (0/1)	0.197* (0.082)	0.009 (0.081)	0.029 (0.081)	– 0.094 (0.076)	0.047 (0.110)
Age	– 0.010 (0.012)	– 0.004 (0.012)	0.004 (0.011)	– 0.012 (0.011)	– 0.010 (0.015)
Age sq./100	0.008 (0.013)	– 0.003 (0.012)	– 0.007 (0.012)	0.009 (0.011)	0.014 (0.016)
Experience (yrs)	– 0.001 (0.007)	0.004 (0.007)	– 0.016* (0.007)	– 0.003 (0.006)	– 0.004 (0.009)
Experience (yrs) sq./100	0.004 (0.014)	– 0.001 (0.014)	0.026 (0.014)	0.002 (0.013)	0.006 (0.019)
Tenure (yrs)	0.001 (0.005)	– 0.007 (0.005)	0.008 (0.005)	0.001 (0.004)	0.005 (0.007)
Tenure (yrs) sq./100	0.000 (0.019)	0.019 (0.018)	– 0.030 (0.020)	0.003 (0.016)	– 0.016 (0.026)
0–9 Employees	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
10–20 Employees	0.002 (0.059)	0.071 (0.056)	– 0.144* (0.059)	– 0.099 (0.055)	– 0.052 (0.074)
21–50 Employees	0.064 (0.052)	0.062 (0.051)	– 0.066 (0.052)	– 0.067 (0.049)	– 0.078 (0.067)
50 + Employees	0.022 (0.043)	0.079 (0.043)	– 0.055 (0.043)	– 0.013 (0.041)	– 0.094 (0.055)
Child under 18 in hh (0/1)	– 0.002 (0.028)	0.010 (0.027)	– 0.066* (0.028)	0.073** (0.026)	0.137*** (0.037)
Daily pay in €100 (2019)	0.032 (0.026)	0.040 (0.024)	– 0.017 (0.024)	– 0.037 (0.023)	– 0.026 (0.033)

Short-time allowance (0/1)	− 0.263*** (0.047)	0.019 (0.043)	− 0.037 (0.045)	− 0.059 (0.042)	− 0.176** (0.058)
Possibility for working at home (0/1)	− 0.015 (0.028)	− 0.008 (0.027)	0.181*** (0.028)	0.191*** (0.025)	0.034 (0.037)
Constant	3.148*** (0.224)	3.220*** (0.221)	2.843*** (0.214)	3.470*** (0.200)	2.824*** (0.295)
Observations	4609	4609	4609	4609	4609
R ²	0.022	0.018	0.041	0.040	0.014

Dependent var: Individual attitude towards the item

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: HOPP, wave 7

The observed significant differences between employees and supervisors in the expected direction could suggest potential sources of tension or conflict in employment relationships, as employees may anticipate that supervisors adhere to the same norms and vice versa. Nevertheless, the overall misalignment appears to be minor, and for all five attitudes, the majority opinion is consistent across both groups. In essence, supervisors share largely the same normative views as employees, which substantially limits the likelihood of conflicts arising over these norms.

Looking at the control variables in the regressions reported in **Table 4**, structural factors—such as establishment size or the level of education—do not significantly affect agreement with the statements. However, evidence supports the influence of self-interest: respondents with children at home and those who have the option to work remotely show small but significant positive effects regarding attitudes toward the right to work from home. Additionally, women appear slightly more supportive of all normative statements, which may reflect the greater impact of the pandemic on women in the labor market [53]. The lack of further significant correlations indicates that these attitudes are generally unaffected by respondents' age, education, or establishment size.

In summary, the findings for RQ1 and RQ2 indicate that nonsupervisory employees and supervisors largely share similar normative attitudes across the five items. Support is particularly strong for the three items addressing pressing employee needs—namely, income protection during short-time work and balancing work and family under pandemic conditions (working from home with children). The lowest agreement occurs for the employer's desire for private information, which may reflect either the stronger salience of employee-protective norms compared with employer-oriented norms, the short timeframe in which this issue was relevant, or the potential normative pressure stemming from coworkers' protection.

Addressing our third research question (RQ3), we examine whether the degree of agreement with individual normative beliefs among respondents differs from their perception of the majority's attitudes within the workforce, thereby assessing the presence of pluralistic ignorance for the five normative attitudes. **Table 5** presents the means on the full 1–4 Likert scale and the differences between respondents' own attitudes and their estimates of the majority position.

Table 5. Differences between respondents' attitudes and assessed majority attitudes, 1–4 scale (weighted)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	All			Nonsupervisors			Supervisors		
	Majority	Respondent	Diff.	Maj.	Resp.	Diff.	Maj.	Resp.	Diff.
Prevent short-time work	3.23	2.88	0.35***	3.24	2.90	0.33***	3.22	2.77	0.45***
Subsidize short-time workers	3.30	3.00	0.30***	3.29	3.03	0.26***	3.34	2.87	0.46***
Working at home even if tasks unfulfilled (w/o child.)	2.79	2.69	0.10***	2.77	2.71	0.06***	2.89	2.60	0.29***
Working at home even if tasks unfulfilled (w/child.)	3.18	3.13	0.05***	3.18	3.14	0.04*	3.20	3.09	0.11***
Disclose vaca-tion location	2.19	2.74	− 0.55***	2.20	2.73	− 0.54***	2.18	2.80	− 0.62***
Observations	4609	4609	4609	3599	3599	3599	1010	1010	1010

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, two tailed t-tests were used to test the statistical significance of the difference

Source: HOPP, wave 7

For all five normative attitudes, we find statistically significant differences between respondents' own positions and their estimates of the majority opinion in the workforce. For the first four items, respondents generally overestimate the prevalence of support for these norms, indicating a tendency toward pluralistic ignorance. The somewhat larger discrepancies observed among supervisors can be attributed to their lower personal support for these norms, although their estimates of the majority's attitudes align with those of employees. This suggests that, despite holding different personal views, supervisors are aware of the prevailing social norms and are likely to consider potential reactions to norm violations when interacting with employees. Notably, the two items concerning working from home show statistically significant but very modest differences (0.04 and 0.06 points), suggesting that respondents' perceptions of the majority are relatively accurate. This aligns with the expectation that topics widely discussed in public discourse allow individuals to form better-informed judgments about collective

attitudes. Indeed, working from home was a heavily debated topic in both public and political spheres, likely enhancing the accuracy of respondents' estimates of majority opinions.

The item regarding disclosure of vacation locations presents a special case. Here, respondents' personal attitudes diverge from their perception of the majority: 62 percent support providing this information to the employer, but only 34 percent believe that most employees share this view. This could either represent a unique instance of pluralistic ignorance—where individuals comply with a perceived norm despite personal disagreement due to fear of social sanctions—or indicate that respondents recognize their attitude differs from the majority but do not anticipate any consequences, suggesting the absence of a widely shared social norm. Without data on expected sanctions, which are critical to defining a valid social norm [4, 5], it is impossible to determine which interpretation holds.

Conclusions

This study investigated normative attitudes toward selected behaviors that became prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. To our knowledge, it is the first to examine this topic systematically, focusing on attitudes toward employer-assigned short-time work, its compensation, the right to work from home, and the sharing of private information about employees' travel plans.

Our first research question examined whether consistent majority opinions exist, indicating the presence of social norms. We found that a majority of both employees and supervisors supported the normative statements, reflecting a shared understanding of expected behaviors in these situations. The second question explored potential misalignment between employees and supervisors. Lower support for employee-oriented norms among supervisors could be a source of conflict [12]. Our findings confirm such misalignment across all five items, though the majority position remains consistent between the two groups.

The third question addressed pluralistic ignorance by comparing respondents' personal attitudes with their perception of majority opinion. While a general tendency toward pluralistic ignorance was evident for all items, the effect was small for the two work-from-home items. For short-time work, overestimation of normative support may contribute to the persistence of these norms even among individuals who personally disagree. The findings on vacation disclosure were inconclusive, suggesting either pluralistic ignorance or the absence of a widely recognized norm.

Overall, these results highlight the broader role of social norms in regulating workplace behavior and mitigating conflict. Employees at all levels appear to share these norms, even when they entail costs for either the employee or the employer—a crucial condition for norms to effectively guide behavior in challenging situations.

Several limitations should be noted. First, our study captures only attitudes, not actual behavior. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents analysis of how norms and attitudes evolved over time during the pandemic. Third, measurement of pluralistic ignorance may be biased if respondents predisposed to support norms were more likely to participate; however, the survey's consent and weighting procedures reduce the likelihood of substantial bias.

Future research could explore reactions to norm violations—for instance, how employees respond if denied the option to work from home, whether through protest, reduced performance, or job change [54].

Despite these caveats, our findings illuminate how normative attitudes shape employment relationships. Individuals form beliefs not only about appropriate behaviors for employees and supervisors but also about the perceived majority opinion. This understanding forms the foundation of social norms, allowing for regulation of behavior through informal mechanisms such as esteem, disapproval, or public indignation. Supervisors' awareness of these norms, even if they do not fully share them, suggests that such norms influence personnel decisions in practice.

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