

The Midnight Hustle of Virtual Assistant Parents: A Phenomenological Study

Maria Romina Sajulan

Samar State University

ABSTRACT: Virtual assistance has become a significant source of income in the Philippines, particularly for parents in search of flexible employment opportunities. Among them, virtual assistant parents working the graveyard shift face distinct challenges as they strive to fulfill professional obligations while simultaneously managing childcare and household responsibilities. This qualitative study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of virtual assistant parents, with particular attention to how they navigate the demands of nocturnal employment alongside their familial roles. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed to identify key emergent themes: Burden of Graveyard Work, Negotiating Time and Roles, and Carrying the Load with Care. Findings highlight the resilience and adaptive strategies of virtual assistant parents, who utilize time management, flexible role allocation, and coping mechanisms to maintain a work-life balance despite the challenges associated with night shift work. These challenges primarily include adverse effects on physical health, interpersonal relationships, emotional well-being, and productivity under pressure. The study further underscores the importance of support systems in sustaining this unconventional work arrangement. Thus, this research contributes to the broader discourse on remote work, parenting, and non-standard employment hours, offering insights for developing policies related to labor protections and family-friendly workplace practices.

KEYWORDS: virtual assistant, remote work, parents, graveyard shift, nocturnal employment

INTRODUCTION

The rise of work-from-home and remote work has brought a significant impact to the modern workforce, with virtual assistants playing a crucial role in supporting businesses across various industries. Among them are parents who, driven by financial necessity and the flexibility of remote work, navigate the challenges of balancing their professional and parental responsibilities. A virtual assistant is an independent contractor who provides administrative support to clients while working remotely, rather than from the client's office (Karnik, 2024). According to Graves and Karabayeva (2020), virtual assistants—responsible for tasks such as administrative support, customer service, content management, and technical assistance—are increasingly prevalent across professional, scientific, and technical service sectors due to advancements in digital platforms and communication technologies. This employment model offers flexibility and accessibility, making it an attractive option for parents seeking to balance work and family life.

Existing research highlights both the benefits and challenges of being a working parent. According to the Pew Research Center (2013), 38% of working parents feel that balancing work and parenting has made it harder for them to be good parents. Additionally, flexible work arrangements have been shown to help parents adjust their schedules to achieve better work-life balance (Songsayongs & Iamamporn, 2020). Furthermore, Patil et al. (2024) emphasize that the widespread adoption of remote work is one of the most significant transformations redefining traditional notions of workspaces.

However, the effects of remote work on work-life balance and employee productivity are multifaceted and complex. Fernandes (2022) noted that while remote work offers flexibility, it can also disrupt personal-professional boundaries, with key factors influencing productivity including technology and communication. Additionally, Flores (2019) identified key challenges in remote work, including isolation, communication barriers, and work-life balance struggles, highlighting the importance of implementing clear communication strategies and employer support systems to improve remote work experiences.

For parents working as virtual assistants, particularly during evening or night shifts, additional challenges arise. Weinshenker (2018) observed that partnered mothers who work remotely, specifically at night, report higher life satisfaction when they do so for personal reasons. However, this effect is not evident among single mothers or partnered fathers. Furthermore, Kaiser, Li, and Pollmann-Schult (2017) found that when both mothers and fathers work at night, their children are more likely to show emotional and behavioral problems. This effect seems to be partly explained by parents adopting stricter and more controlling parenting styles.

Health consequences are also a concern for people who work graveyard shifts. Dumont and Paquet (2014) examined that

The Midnight Hustle of Virtual Assistant Parents: A Phenomenological Study

consecutive days of simulated night shifts result in a decline in melatonin levels, which negatively impacts sleep quality, cognitive function, and overall well-being. Similarly, Potter et al. (2016) highlighted that disruptions to the circadian system have profound metabolic consequences, emphasizing the need for interventions to realign the circadian system and improve sleep quality.

Despite these challenges, job satisfaction remains a critical factor influencing productivity among virtual assistants. Veto et al. (2025) established a significant positive relationship between job satisfaction and productivity among virtual assistants—indicating that as job satisfaction increases, so does productivity. This suggests that individuals who experience higher levels of fulfillment, motivation, and job satisfaction are more likely to demonstrate enhanced performance and greater efficiency in their tasks.

While existing literature explores the economic contributions and general challenges of online work, there is a clear gap in existing researches regarding the lived experiences of virtual assistant parents and their lived experiences in working night shifts, particularly in balancing work responsibilities with parental life.

This phenomenological study delves into the lived experiences of virtual assistant parents, uncovering the silent struggles and unseen resilience of those who power the global digital economy from their homes during night shifts. By exploring their narratives, the research aims to shed light on the complexities of balancing professional responsibilities with parenting, offering insights into the challenges and coping mechanisms inherent in this dual role.

The findings will contribute to discussions on sustainable remote work practices and labor protections. Additionally, this qualitative study aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, which advocates for decent work and economic growth. Through a deeper understanding of the realities faced by virtual assistant parents, this study seeks to inform policies and workplace strategies that promote a more inclusive and supportive digital workforce

OBJECTIVES

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of virtual assistant parents working the graveyard shift, focusing on the challenges, coping strategies, and impact on their work-life balance and overall well-being.

Specific Objectives: Specifically, this study intends to:

1. To examine the professional and personal challenges faced by virtual assistant parents working the graveyard shift, including their effects on their health, relationships, and productivity.
2. To analyze how virtual assistant parents navigate time management, parental responsibilities, and well-being while sustaining their professional roles.
3. To identify the coping mechanisms and support systems that enable virtual assistant parents to maintain work-life balance and mitigate the challenges night shift work.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter will present several research processes that enclose the methodological aspects of the study, from research design to research method that will further discuss the data analysis and ethical considerations.

Research Design

This qualitative study adopted a phenomenological research approach to examine the lived experiences of virtual assistant parents working the graveyard shift. Phenomenology, as defined by Flood (2010), is a philosophical attitude and research approach that holds that the deepest human truths can only be understood through personal experience and that individuals are deeply connected to their surroundings. The study aims to uncover the nuanced realities faced by virtual assistant parents, focusing on the intersection of their professional responsibilities and parental duties.

The main objective of this study is to delve into the unique challenges and coping mechanisms that these workers employ, particularly within the constraints of nocturnal employment and familial obligations. As Gergen et al. (2015) argue, phenomenology provides an invaluable lens through which researchers can access the subjective experiences of participants, offering rich insights into the social, psychological, and emotional dimensions of their lives. By interviewing virtual assistant parents who work the graveyard shift, the study explored how they navigate their professional tasks while managing childcare, domestic responsibilities, and maintaining personal well-being.

Participants

This study utilized non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling, to ensure the inclusion of individuals with relevant experiences and characteristics. According to Stewart (2024), purposive sampling enables researchers to intentionally select participants based on specific population characteristics and the objectives of the study. The participants in this study met the following criteria: 1) currently employed as remote virtual assistants working the graveyard shift, 2) a parent with at least one child aged 18 years or younger under their care, 3) a minimum of one year of experience working the graveyard shift, and 4) a willingness to participate and share their lived experiences. This selective approach facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the participants'

The Midnight Hustle of Virtual Assistant Parents: A Phenomenological Study

unique perspectives on balancing professional responsibilities during the night shift with parenting duties during the day.

In this study, data saturation was reached at the tenth participant, at which point additional interviews yielded no new insights, thereby ensuring that no critical information was overlooked (Guest et al., 2006). Saturation also served as an indicator of sample adequacy, as no further relevant data were anticipated. According to Guest et al. (2006), saturation occurs when no additional themes or insights can be identified, and further coding becomes unproductive. The attainment of data saturation in this study confirmed that the data collected were sufficient to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Data Gathering

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of virtual assistant parents. The interviews were conducted both in person and via Zoom, providing a comfortable setting that encourages open discussion. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews, coupled with the accessibility of online platforms, will allow researchers to capture rich, detailed narratives and enable participants to freely share their experiences (Kallio et al., 2016).

The interview guide was validated by an expert in the field prior to data collection to ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and process, and informed consent was obtained before the interviews, including approval for recording and transcription. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of participants' narratives. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was employed to interpret the findings.

Data Analysis

The data gathered in this study were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method, a commonly employed approach in transcendental phenomenology. This method was chosen to provide a structured and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of virtual assistant parents working the graveyard shift. This includes the following: 1) transcription; 2) epoché (bracketing); 3) identification of significant statements; 4) removal of redundant data; 5) clustering of related Meanings; 6) textural descriptions (What Was Experienced); 7) structural descriptions (How It Was Experienced); 8) synthesis.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher is committed to adhering to ethical principles that prioritize the well-being of participants. Ethical considerations include the protection of participants and conducting research in accordance with established ethical standards (Pietilä). A fundamental ethical principle is ensuring that participants voluntarily engage in the research, with a clear understanding of the nature and scope of their involvement (Xu, 2020).

Informed consent is a key aspect, ensuring participants receive sufficient information to make an informed decision about their participation, free from coercion. Participation is entirely voluntary, and individuals have the right to withdraw at any time without facing adverse consequences. Furthermore, the researcher must remain vigilant for signs of distress, and participants must be informed that their data will remain confidential (Walker, 2007). Ensuring confidentiality protects participants' privacy and prevents unauthorized access to sensitive information.

The researcher adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined by Gajjar (2013), emphasizing honesty, openness, and confidentiality. All data, results, and methods were reported accurately, without misrepresentation. Confidentiality was maintained, with participants' identities and personal information securely protected. Additionally, the study adhered to principles of non-discrimination, ensuring that all participants, regardless of sex, race, or ethnicity, were treated fairly and with respect. These ethical considerations are designed to uphold the integrity of the research while safeguarding the rights and dignity of all individuals involved.

RESULTS

The study identified three major themes from the data analysis: (1) The Burden of Night Shift, (2) Balancing Personal and Professional Roles, and (3) Coping and Support Systems. Each theme presents an in-depth look into the experiences of virtual assistant parents during the night shift, supported by relevant literature and studies. Together, these themes will shed light on the multifaceted challenges, coping mechanisms, and sources of strength that shape how they manage their personal and professional roles.

Theme 1: The Burden of Graveyard Work

Participants consistently mentioned the negative impact of working the night shift on their overall well-being and work performance. Almost all of the interviewees shared experiences of disrupted sleep, exhaustion, anxiety, and increasing pressure, yet they remained productive despite the fatigue. The demands of graveyard shifts, combined with household and parenting responsibilities, often resulted in strained relationships and physical and mental health issues.

Subtheme A: Physical and Mental Fatigue

Many participants showed extreme tiredness due to major shifts in their schedules, which were completely upturned, leading to irregular sleep patterns. This often resulted in sleep deprivation, tension headaches, and muscle pain. These physical strains were

The Midnight Hustle of Virtual Assistant Parents: A Phenomenological Study

frequently accompanied by mental fatigue, making it difficult for them to concentrate and causing irritability that sometimes led to emotional exhaustion.

“Physically, mabilis ako mapagod. Minsan parang wala na akong motivation gumalaw.”

(Physically, I get tired easily. Sometimes, I feel like I have no motivation to move).

“I started experiencing chest pains and fatigue. I think it’s because of the irregular sleep and constant pressure.”

“Mental health ko sobrang apektado. Feeling ko palagi akong anxious at may times na umiiyak ako kahit wala namang rason.”

(My mental health is badly affected. I constantly feel anxious and there are times I cry for no reason).

These findings are supported by Kazemi et al. (2017), who reported that night shift work is associated with sleep deprivation, sleepiness, reduced cognitive performance, increased human error, and fatigue. Similarly, Columbia Psychiatry (2022) found that insufficient sleep increases negative emotional responses to stress and reduces positive emotional experiences.

Subtheme B: Strained Relationships and Emotional Toll

Many participants expressed that their night shift work negatively affected their relationships with family members, particularly their partners and children. The lack of synchronized schedules often led to limited quality time and communication breakdowns. Emotional detachment and irritability stemming from exhaustion further strained these relationships.

“I miss a lot of family dinners and bonding time. Sometimes my spouse gets upset kasi parang wala ako sa mga important moments.”
(...because it feels like I’m not there during important moments.)

“My kids sometimes feel neglected kasi lagi akong tulog pagdating nila sa bahay...” *(...because I’m always asleep when they get home.)*

These accounts highlight how the demands of night work disrupt daily family interactions and contribute to emotional distance at home. Silva and Costa (2023) found that the impacts of shift and night work are not limited to the workers themselves but extend to their families. Similarly, Boekhorst and Burke (2017) hypothesize that high work intensity contributes to emotional exhaustion, which may further affect personal relationships.

Subtheme C: Productivity Under Pressure

Participants described the constant pressure to maintain productivity despite experiencing fatigue, distractions at home, and shifting parental duties. The demands of night shift work required sustained mental focus, often without adequate rest or recovery time. Many expressed feelings of being overwhelmed but compelled to perform efficiently to meet client expectations and retain employment.

“Kahit puyat na puyat na ako, kailangan ko pa rin magdeliver kasi baka mawalan ako ng client.”

(Even when I’m extremely sleep-deprived, I still have to deliver because I might lose a client.)

“Minsan wala ka sa mood or sobrang pagod ka, pero kailangan mo magpanggap na okay ka sa calls.”

(Sometimes you’re not in the mood or too exhausted, but you have to pretend everything’s okay during calls.)

Sandi Mann (2004) noted that individuals are expected to engage in significant emotional management, conveying appropriate emotions to clients or customers even if they do not genuinely feel them, while suppressing inappropriate emotions. Winkler et al. (2024) found that employees often use various coping mechanisms to manage work-related stress, supporting their ability to remain in their positions.

Theme 2: Balancing Personal and Professional Roles

Participants highlighted the importance of support systems, self-care strategies, and personal motivation in managing the demands of night shift work while fulfilling their parenting roles. Despite the challenges, many relied on partners, family members, and small restorative practices to sustain their well-being and work performance. This theme explores how participants navigated caregiving responsibilities and work pressures through external support and internal resilience.

Subtheme A: Managing Time and Shifting Roles

Data show that parents manage their time each day by shifting roles—from working the graveyard shift to performing their parenting duties during the day. Most of them described how they carefully divide their time to fulfill both professional and parental responsibilities while still trying to get adequate sleep and rest.

“I try to nap in the afternoon para may energy pa ako sa gabi and may oras din ako sa anak ko sa umaga.”

(I try to nap in the afternoon so I still have energy at night and can spend time with my child in the morning.)

“Pinipilit ko na mag-multitask. Minsan habang nagluluto, nag-aayos din ako ng report.”

(I force myself to multitask. Sometimes while cooking, I’m also working on a report.)

Majin et al. (2023) emphasized that by adopting and implementing appropriate time management strategies, employees can aspire to achieve a more harmonious and fulfilling integration of their professional and personal lives.

Subtheme B: Finding Balance between Work and Parenting

While time management and multitasking were common strategies, participants also reflected on the deeper challenge of maintaining emotional presence and connection in both their roles. Finding balance was not just about fitting tasks into a schedule—it was about making sure neither their children nor their work felt neglected. Many described the internal pressure to be fully present for their families despite being physically and mentally drained.

The Midnight Hustle of Virtual Assistant Parents: A Phenomenological Study

“Inaayos ko schedule ko around sa school hours nila. Tinutulungan ko sila sa assignments bago ako pumasok.”
(*I adjust my schedule around their school hours. I help them with their assignments before I log in for work.*)

“I have a routine sa bahay. Sa umaga, I try to really bond with my children. Pagpumasok na sila sa school, yan ang oras ng pagtulog ko. Sa gabi naman after silang pakainin at tulungan sa kanilang mga assignments, ako naman mag-prepare for work.” (*I have a routine at home. In the morning, I try to really bond with my children. When they go to school, that's when I go to bed. At night, after feeding them and helping them with their assignments, I prepare for work.*)

These results also align with studies highlighting the importance of effective time management in balancing personal and professional life. In the study of Eddleston and Mulki (2015), they stated that flexible scheduling allows work-from-home (WFH) parents to maintain their work-life balance.

Theme 3: Coping and Support Systems

Different coping mechanisms and support systems used by virtual assistant parents were identified in the data analysis, showing how each of them managed the demands of the graveyard shift while still fulfilling their household and parenting responsibilities. These self-developed strategies and sources of support played an important role in sustaining their physical, emotional, and overall well-being, allowing them to carry the burden of dual roles with resilience.

Subtheme A: Coping Mechanisms

The results revealed various coping strategies used by virtual assistant parents to manage the stress and emotional demands of balancing work in the cyber environment with household and parenting responsibilities. These strategies—including taking short naps, spending time alone in a quiet or cool space, meditating, engaging in light physical activity, and chatting with someone—help create a sense of control and stability, which reduces stress and promotes overall well-being.

“Kapag pagod na ako, I take short naps para mabuhayan kahit saglit lang.”

(*When I get tired, I take short naps to recharge even just for a while.*) “Minsan, nag-mi-meditate ako para ma-relax yung isip ko...”
(*Sometimes, I meditate to relax my mind...*)

The findings show the importance of coping strategies in overcoming stress and pressure while fulfilling parental and professional responsibilities. Gaudioso, Turel, and Galimberti (2017) highlighted that effective coping mechanisms can reduce exhaustion and help individuals manage stress and daily challenges more effectively.

Subtheme B: Support Systems

Participants highlighted the critical role of support systems in sustaining their ability to balance work and family responsibilities. Most of the participants credited their spouses, extended family members, and even online communities for providing emotional encouragement, practical help, or simply a sense of understanding and connection.

“Support from my husband really helps. He encourages me and reminds me why I started this... Lagi siyang nandyan para tulungan ako kahit pagod din. We work as a team.”

(*...He's always there for me even when he's tired. We work as a team.*)

“I talk to my fellow VAs online kapag feeling drained ako. Nakakagaan ng loob when you know there are people there who understand you.”

(*...when I'm feeling drained. It feels lighter when you know there are people who understand you.*)

Water et al. (2022) found that parental well-being is directly linked to the level of household support received. Similarly, Garmendia et al. (2023) reported that the positive experience of social support is associated with greater relaxation, which may lead to a decrease in emotional exhaustion and an increase in job satisfaction.

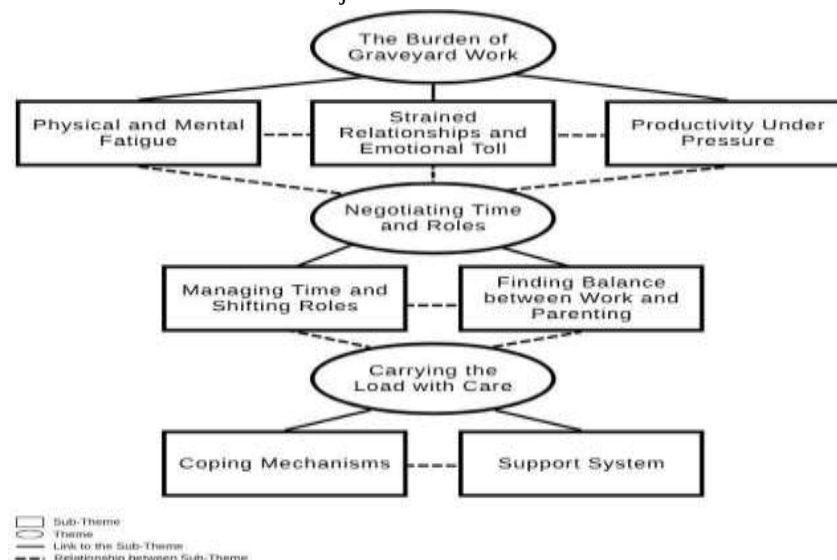


Figure 1: Lived Experiences of Virtual Assistant Parents Working the Graveyard Shift

The Midnight Hustle of Virtual Assistant Parents: A Phenomenological Study

Figure 1 shows the framework of the study “The Midnight Hustle of Virtual Assistant Parents: A Phenomenological Study.” It captures the themes and sub-themes that reflect the experiences of virtual assistant parents working night shifts. The study outlines their journey from burnout to adjustment and finally resilience. The framework starts with The Burden of Graveyard Work. This part highlights their initial challenges, which include Physical and Mental Fatigue, Strained Relationships, Emotional Toll, and Productivity Under Pressure. As participants faced these difficulties, they moved into the phase of Negotiating Time and Roles—as they looked for balance between work and parenting. This phase includes the sub-themes Managing Time and Shifting Roles and Finding Balance Between Work and Parenting. This development leads to the theme Carrying the Load with Care. This theme shows their resilience through Coping Mechanisms and a Support System. The entire framework illustrates how virtual assistant parents adjusted to the demands of night shift work and parenting—it highlights the importance of time management, role negotiation, and both internal and external support systems.

DISCUSSION

Virtual assistant parents working the graveyard shift face significant challenges to their health, relationships, and productivity due to the demands of nocturnal labor and daytime parenting.

These challenges reflect not only physical exhaustion and sleep deprivation but also deeper emotional strain and relational disconnect. Working at night disrupts the body’s natural rhythm, as shown in Kazemi et al. (2017), who linked night work to decreased cognitive performance and increased human error. In this study, parents reported not just fatigue but emotional numbness and heightened anxiety—echoing Columbia Psychiatry (2022), which highlighted the emotional toll of sleep deprivation. Additionally, the lack of synchronous time with family created emotional gaps and weakened familial bonds, aligning with Silva and Costa (2023) who emphasized that night shifts affect both the worker and the household. Compounding this is the pressure to remain professionally competent while battling fatigue, a burden intensified by the emotional labor required to “perform” at work despite internal exhaustion (Mann, 2004). These overlapping burdens illustrate how graveyard shift work creates an unsustainable rhythm that compromises both personal and professional domains.

Despite the strain, virtual assistant parents develop intentional time management strategies and role transitions to maintain both work responsibilities and parenting duties.

Rather than giving in to the rigidity of their circumstances, participants actively made schedules that allowed even for small actions that maintained family engagement. These strategies were less about achieving perfection and more about dynamic adjustment—sleeping in segments, bonding during early hours, or multitasking through household routines.

This confirms Majin et al. (2023)’s finding that time-management flexibility can foster better combination of work and personal life. However, the balance they were looking for was not just logistical, it was also emotional. Many emphasized the importance of being mentally and emotionally present for their children—an important factor of parenting that cannot be measured in hours but in attentiveness. Eddleston and Mulki (2015) argue that flexible scheduling enhances parental role, which resonates with participants’ efforts to adjust their schedules and routines around their children’s needs. The tension between fatigue and presence underscores how virtual assistant parents strive not just to “do it all,” but to “be there” meaningfully.

Coping mechanisms and social support systems are central to virtual assistant parents’ ability to sustain their dual roles and preserve well-being.

Participants demonstrate self-initiated coping strategies—from short naps and rest to structured daily routines—that fostered a sense of control amidst stress. This reveals a proactive stance toward stress, rather than a reactive stance. Gaudio et al. (2017) support the idea that internal strategies can reduce stress and exhaustion to workers. At the same time, external support systems played a crucial role. Emotional encouragement from their family and friends and a sense of shared experience in online communities allowed the virtual assistant parents to feel seen. Water et al. (2022) and Garmendia et al. (2023) both emphasize that social support correlates with reduced emotional exhaustion and greater job satisfaction. The combination of self-care and support system reflects a dual anchor—internal and external—that makes it possible for virtual assistant parents to continue fulfilling their roles despite the demands of graveyard shift work.

The gathered experiences of the virtual assistant parents highlight the urgent need for structural solutions. While individual strategies and support networks offer relief, they do not replace the necessity for responsive organizational policies. Flexible client expectations, mental health support, and institutional acknowledgment of parenting roles within remote work environments are important. Without such systems, virtual assistant parents remain dependent on personal endurance—a resource that, as this study shows, is often stretched to its limit.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study contribute to the growing literature on the non-traditional and remote work especially regarding the lived experiences of the virtual assistant parents. While virtual assistant parents used various coping strategies, such as time management, emotional regulation, and support systems, the physical, emotional, and relational burdens of graveyard shift work were still present and deeply seen. These challenges often caused fatigue, strained family relationships, and a constant struggle just to stay productive.

The Midnight Hustle of Virtual Assistant Parents: A Phenomenological Study

This aligns with previous studies by Jin et al. (2024) and Ha (2021), which highlight the long-term impact of night shift work.

Although the focus of this study was on challenges and adaptation, some participants recognized benefits, like income stability and the ability to work from home. As noted by Saleem and Khan (2024), remote graveyard work can provide practical advantages for parents when there are sufficient personal and structural supports. Overall, the findings indicate that while graveyard work poses significant challenges, it might be more sustainable when combined with flexible work arrangements, mental health resources, and institutional support. Moreover, workplace interventions that prioritize work-life balance, reduce social isolation, and improve overall well-being are crucial to lessen the negative effects of this job setup, especially for working parents.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that companies—particularly those employing virtual assistants—develop and implement targeted support programs that address the unique challenges faced by graveyard shift workers who are also parents. These may include: (a) a comprehensive wellness program to mitigate the physical and mental effects of irregular sleep patterns; (b) specific interventions for parents managing dual roles of nighttime work and daytime caregiving; (c) the establishment of virtual communities to provide peer support and reduce feelings of isolation; and (d) institutional policies that prioritize employee well-being, including adjustments that address both mental and physical stress.

Companies should also revisit and revise their organizational structures and policies to align with the conditions and labor standards of the countries where their virtual assistants are based. Doing so may help alleviate the burdens caused by time zone differences, lack of support systems, and inadequate rest periods.

Lastly, it is recommended that future research explore the long-term impact of graveyard shift work on family dynamics and career progression. Comparative studies between day-shift and night-shift virtual assistants, as well as cross-regional analyses, may offer deeper insights and broaden the understanding of virtual assistant parents' lived experiences.

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The Midnight Hustle of Virtual Assistant Parents: A Phenomenological Study

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