

Drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments

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ABSTRACT

Employee engagement is an important driver of business performance and success. Accordingly, many extensive studies have been conducted on the drivers of employee engagement in the workplace. However, there exists limited research on the drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a great impact on organisations drastically increasing the number of employees working remotely. This shift continuously introduces new challenges for employees and organisations, which impact employee engagement and ultimately business performance. With many employees favouring remote work and flexibility, and organisations forced to embrace this new norm, this is the future of work. Therefore, it is imperative for organisations to understand what drives and maintains a remote worker's engagement levels.

This research contributes to and enhances the existing literature by employing a qualitative, inductive, and exploratory approach to explore the insights through the lens of HR professionals. Twelve in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from varying sectors and organisations in South Africa.

Key findings from the study indicate that the critical factors and drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments are communication, tools and resources, leadership, and culture. There is an unexpected finding regarding the agility and adaptiveness of organisations in today's fast-evolving environment and how their response speed greatly impacts employee engagement. A framework is presented, highlighting the critical drivers impacting employee engagement in remote working environments.

This study was limited to HR professionals in South African based organisations.

KEYWORDS

employee engagement, remote working, covid-19, employee well-being, leadership

DECLARATION

I declare that this report is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.1 Introduction

This study follows an inductive approach to investigate the drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments.

1.2 Background to the research problem

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed our way of life, the way business is done and our ways of working. The pandemic and its effects have brought about a change in the working dynamics of many businesses. To keep employees socially distanced and safe in these times, remote working has become the norm, with all work and communication being conducted virtually (Dixit and Ranjan, 2020).

New workplace policies and procedures have been put in place with radical changes, such as remote working to limit contact (De-la-Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2021). Most employees are also affected by the rising Covid-19 cases and the economic impact, which could negatively impact their job security (Chanana and Sangeeta, 2020). Remote working has raised numerous issues, such as how to manage productivity and well-being; more specifically, this new world of working poses employee engagement challenges for the employer (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). This is the main focus of this research. Engaged employees are critical to the creation of new and innovative ideas for the organisation (Gupta and Chowdhury, 2018). Such ideas facilitate business growth and success. Therefore, employee engagement is of great significance to any business and its leadership, for whichever environment they find themselves in (Gupta and Chowdhury, 2018).

Organisations are constantly evolving and adapting to the dynamic environment they operate in. Prior to the pandemic, new types of employment emerged, such as part-time and flexible work arrangements, which came about from the arising 4-IR requirements and the volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous (VUCA) environmental impacts on business (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). There has been an increase in virtual workplaces due to globalisation and technological advancements (Poulsen and Ipsen, 2021). During the pandemic, we have seen a huge move for most businesses to remote working, driven by necessity for many organisations. A few employers, who have embraced these new ways of working, have declared that this

will be the new norm and all employees will permanently work remotely, for example, Slack and Atlassian (Stoller, 2021). Some organisations had already introduced remote working before the pandemic hit, suggesting the separation of work from the place as a growing trend (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). This would likely only have implemented after conducting a lot of research, planning, and preparation. About 50% of employees currently working remotely have indicated that they would prefer to continue working remotely (Gallup, 2020). Therefore, the new workplace will be more complex and dynamic, with teams comprising of employees in the office and remote working spaces (Gallup, 2020).

However, not many businesses are prepared for this new world of remote working. Many organisations must quickly learn how to manage their employees remotely. Where engagement, in the past, was dealt with face-to-face and intimately, business leaders are now required to keep employees engaged and from a distance (Kurter, 2020). In the new business context, organisations have to manage virtual workplace performance and culture, where they could previously manage it by walking around; now employers rely on online tools for face-to-face interaction (Kurter, 2020).

Notably, some employees have reported online fatigue and burnout from constant virtual meetings, hence opting to switch off their video cameras or not showing up at all (Kurter, 2020). This makes it even harder for the employer to be able to derive the same value and connection they would have in physical interactions with employees. In addition, in the South African context, because of poor connectivity and high internet data costs, most employees opt to switch off their video cameras for bandwidth purposes. As the traditional nine-to-five working routine of employees who share workspaces and see each other daily has changed, new challenges have been introduced with remote working, which impacts employee engagement and organisation performance (Gallup, 2020).

Some of the challenges highlighted and discussed in-depth in this research include the difficulty of building cohesive teams as a result of limited physical connection or contact; mental well-being issues (related to isolation); work-life balance issues (associated with working remotely); and the impact on the management of people. Ultimately, all these challenges impact the organisations' ability to sustain a high-performance culture and employee engagement and threaten the employees' loyalty to the organisation.

Remote working, however, also comes with numerous benefits, such as reduced commute time; an opportunity for better work-life balance; and a reduction in operating costs for employers (ILO, 2020). It is anticipated that even post-pandemic, the option to continue with remote working will be available for many employees, or a hybrid approach (ILO, 2020). This renders this study even more relevant and important for organisations as this work arrangement becomes a popular option for many employees going forward.

Engaged employees care for the organisation and its long-term survival and are willing to invest discretionary effort (Swarnalatha and Prasanna 2013) without being coerced. Therefore, the most important focus of organisations should be on how to achieve such an engaged workforce, from a distance.

1.3 Research problem

Employee engagement is an important driver of business performance and success (Gupta and Sharma, 2016). This is because these employees go the extra mile and are energised and driven to assist the success of the organisation. This translates into productivity and positively impacts performance (Swarnalatha and Prasanna 2013). It is even more crucial during times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, as these factors result in psychological pressure, which impacts employee engagement and performance (De-la-Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2021).

Employee engagement is a workplace commitment — by employees — to the organisations' goals and values (Chanana and Sangeeta, 2020). Gallup (2020) has also reported that higher levels of engagement result in increased productivity and the best financial outcomes. Therefore, engagement is a source of competitive advantage for organisations. Bedarkar and Pandita (2014) support this by stating that as companies strive to survive in turbulent times and in a very competitive environment, the well-being of their employees and their engagement will be their competitive advantage.

Organisations that understand employee engagement and its importance have translated this strategy into behaviours and in their culture, which is the way they do things daily (Flint and Hearn, 2015). For example, Google has been intentional about focussing on a culture of transparency and freedom as they understand that this produces an engaged workforce (Flint and Hearn, 2015). This cultivates creativity in

their organisation and a commitment from employees as they are in the know, without any hidden agendas from the organisation, and employees have a sense of belonging.

The same can be said of the Hyatt Hotel Group; in an industry with high turnover they have managed to attain high employee retention rates (Flint and Hearn, 2015). According to the same research, this is because of driving a culture of developing talent and internal promotions, as well as empowering innovative problem-solving. These two examples highlight the importance of leveraging employee engagement as a competitive advantage, hence, understanding what your employees require in their environments and meeting those needs. As a result, these businesses have achieved great success, which is sustainable as it is embedded in their employees.

The current business environment faces great challenges because of the Covid-19 pandemic and other related technological advances (Hunter, 2019). Remote working has become increasingly popular, driven by globalisation, social trends, and cultural changes, as employees now require and expect greater flexibility to achieve a better work-life balance (Hunter, 2019). As a result of the pandemic and the increasing need for a safe and protective environment, most employees now frequently work from home (ILO, 2020).

This changes not only the environment in which employees work but also affects the ways of working. With family and work lines being blurred, this has introduced a new complexity for organisations and their employees (Duxbury, Stevenson, & Higgins, 2018). Employees find themselves having to be productive whilst the world is going through a tremendous loss of life due to the virus. As family and friends (and people around them) are fighting this virus, they still need to find ways to connect and work from home. This disruption has also posed a threat to employees' general well-being.

Mental, physical, and emotional wellness is challenged by numerous complications, such as loss of colleagues and loved ones, separating work demands from home life, as well as psychosocial risks, such as isolation from the world as we know it (De-la-Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2021). Employees are experiencing anxiety and depression, and other negative impacts include difficulty sleeping or eating, increases in alcohol consumption or substance abuse (Panchal, Kamal, Cox and Garfield, 2021). Other challenges include increased communication gaps because of limited contact with colleagues and clients, leading to feelings of being

disconnected from colleagues (Kaushik and Guleria, 2020). Employees also find themselves having to manage home-life interferences during working hours because of either not having dedicated or quiet workspaces or having to home-school their children, whilst also delivering on their work tasks. All these factors, and many more unmentioned examples, negatively impact employee engagement.

Based on the above analysis of the importance of employee engagement and some of the challenges posed by remote working, it is therefore important to understand the drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments. With productivity and performance linked to employee engagement (Kaushik and Guleria, 2020) and organisations calculating how to succeed in this new world of work, it is imperative to understand what it will take to drive employee engagement.

Dixit and Ranjan (2020) state that “employees in the modern era constantly seek organisations which provide and actively improve the levers of engagement which provides them with both purpose and satisfaction of meaningful contribution” (p. 943). This means there is a greater need for employee-focussed management and understanding what employees — as individuals — need. There is a pressing need to improve leadership in organisations to create more adaptive systems for the remote worker, such as performance management, remunerations and rewards, recruitment, and other employee-centric driven policies to be more agile (Komm, Pollner, Schaninger and Sikka, 2021). This is not possible if engagement in remote workers is not understood, sustained, and managed.

Employee engagement is a multi-dimensional construct and with numerous studies having been conducted on engagement, the literature published on this topic is plentiful. However, it is mostly centred on workplace-based employees, typically in the same location and working in proximity. There is still limited literature on employee engagement in the new age of remote working arrangements in comparison to engagement in the traditional office (Lee 2018). Therefore, this research aims to provide sound guidelines to address the problem of employee engagement in remote working environments by equipping organisations to thrive in challenging times, such as the current pandemic, but also for a world of remote workers. This study also aims to add to the limited existing body of literature on the problem by exploring and understanding remote working challenges and how organisations can respond to them to sustain employee engagement.

1.4 Research aim and objectives of the study

This study aims to answer the question of “what drives employee engagement in remote working environments?” through investigating the following objectives:

- (a) Examining the current challenges of remote working that are impacting on employee engagement;
- (b) Exploring how organisations can overcome these challenges;
- (c) Exploring and prioritising the key success factors for employee engagement in remote working; and
- (d) Understanding how organisations can sustain employee engagement amongst remote workers.

1.5 Contribution to academia and business

This study is necessitated by the requirement for people to shift to remote working as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and new emerging business imperatives. Although trends, prior to the pandemic, had already indicated that the future of work would be largely flexible and remote, the current transition has been drastic and fast.

The purpose of this research is to gain insight and a deeper understanding of how businesses can achieve employee engagement whilst working remotely, and the drivers of engagement. It highlights the risks and challenges associated with remote working and the relevant resources and support required by employees to perform their jobs well (Adisa, Ogbonnaya and Adekoya, 2021). This study also aims to add to the limited body of literature in the area of employee engagement in the context of remote workers. The objective is to examine the current challenges of remote working that impact employee engagement and explore how organisations can overcome these challenges. The aim is to identify the “what” and the “how” of the changes that may be required. Therefore, this study intends to assist organisations in understanding the employee engagement initiatives, which are necessary for a successful remote working environment.

Although there is limited literature on employee engagement for remote workers, studies indicate that even post-pandemic, many organisations will permanently move

to remote working or to a hybrid approach where employees can work at the office and from home based on the increased efficiencies and perceived cost benefits that have seemingly emerged in the short time (Erasmus, 2020). Several employees may prefer a hybrid working arrangement and another significant number of employees may prefer to continue working from home because of the increased flexibility, greater work-life balance, as well as time and cost savings attached thereto (Erasmus, 2020).

This study is, therefore, also important as we realise and appreciate that the opportunities posed by remote working also bring a different set of challenges, which can be detrimental to the survival of the organisation if not sufficiently understood and addressed (Kurkland and Bailey, 1999). Ultimately, this study can equip businesses on how to make remote working a part of their competitive advantage by focusing on employee engagement (Gallup, 2020).

1.6 Research scope and structure

The research scope is within the South African context and is not limited to any industries or sectors because the research aims to capture the vast and varied experiences across the nation on remote working and can be generalised to any organisation and employee in remote working environments.

The researcher focuses on Human Resource (HR) professionals who have been involved in the transition to, and management of, remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic, as they have more in-depth and relevant information on the office-based environment, the remote working environment, and the impact on engagement. HR professionals' primary role is that of a strategic partner leading, managing change, and dealing with challenges faced by the knowledge worker today (Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015). Their role is also to guide, advise, and coach managers on people issues (Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015). As such, HR professionals are ideal for this study to understand the challenges that come with remote working, as well as the impact on employee engagement. Qualitative data has been collected through semi-structured interviews.

This research comprises of seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research project problem and its objectives. It also discusses the potential contribution to business and academia. Chapter 2 details the literature review of the constructs of

employee engagement and remote working. Chapter 3 formulates the research questions related to the research problem. Chapter 4 describes the research methodology used to research the research questions. Chapter 5 provides the results of the interviews conducted. Chapter 6 discusses the analysis of the results from the research. Chapter 7 concludes this research by discussing the main findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for organisations, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Remote working

Remote working, also referred to as virtual working or teleworking, is the ability to physically work away from dedicated office spaces and away from other employees, whilst using advanced technology to communicate and to coordinate work tasks from any location (Hislop, Axtell and Daniels, 2008). It is a flexible work arrangement that allows workers to do their job from a distance or out of their work environment (Elshaiekh, Hassan and Abdallah, 2018).

Flexible work arrangements and the ability to work remotely have always been available for the privileged few; those who are able to negotiate for flexibility as a part of their employment perks. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, remote working was not yet widespread or embraced in many organisations. In organisations where flexibility existed, it was limited (Gratton, 2021). Remote working, therefore, is not a new phenomenon and has recently become popular — borne out of necessity as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This sudden change, for a lot of organisations and many employees, has had a huge impact on the management of employees but more specifically on the management of employee engagement. As mentioned, the concept of remote working is fairly new with limited literature. However, the researcher believes it is gaining traction with a lot of opinions and research articles being published as a result of the times that we find ourselves in.

Typically, the organisations that have resisted flexibility, or not embraced it, have been said to lack trust in their employees to be productive when working away from the office (Parker, Knight and Keller, 2020). One of the main reasons for this resistance from organisations is the notion that managers need to see their employees at their desks, otherwise, they struggle to trust that the employees are working (Parker, Knight and Keller, 2020). Many organisations are rooted in the traditional ways of working, which requires employees to attend work physically. In addition, most, if not all, management theories are based on face-to-face management principles, such as management by “walking around” a Hewlett-Packard management practice which dates back to the 1970s. Most managers are trained for face-to-face interactions and now find themselves having to adapt to the

new way of managing talent — quickly and without training (Parker, Knight and Keller, 2020).

In recent years and with the advancement of technology, we have seen a rise in collaboration tools and systems that allow for remote working. Therefore, although remote working is not a novel concept, it is not popular either. Gallup (2020) reported that 29% of those who work from home all, or nearly all, of the time report higher burnout than those who are office-based or sometimes work from home. Recent research and articles indicate that it is the future of work, with more people opting for a more hybrid approach to work, which is a balance between remote and office-based work arrangements (ILO, 2020).

2.1.1 Benefits and challenges associated with remote working

According to recent studies, there are positive and negative implications associated with remote working. When most workers and organisations were thrust into the remote working world (as the Covid-19 pandemic hit), it seemed like the perk many people had not anticipated. The idea of working from home meant flexibility, balance, and autonomy for many employees (Vital smarts, 2020).

For employees, it also meant reduced commute times and costs associated with work travel. According to Flores (2019), having more flexible hours was ranked highest in terms of the benefits of working from home. For many, this means that they can finally achieve a work-life balance and manage their time efficiently; and this form of working is attractive (Hislop, Axtell and Daniels, 2009). Conversely, for employers, remote working is associated with cost savings as well as employee satisfaction and motivation. Organisations have also expected increased productivity and improved staff retention because of the perceived benefits attached to remote working (ILO, 2020).

However, as a result of the flexibility and ability for one to manage their own work and pace, this has impacted collaboration and communication, which Flores (2019) highlights as the most encountered challenge related to remote working. Remote working has created disconnection from co-workers and has left others feeling isolated, especially as a result of lockdowns and social distancing (Kovacs, van der Lippe and Szaszi, 2021), thereby impacting employee morale and engagement. This is supported by Sirota's three-factor model of engagement, which states that

employees are motivated by camaraderie, which is the “fundamental desire to work collaboratively” as it is the basis upon which teamwork is created and sustained (Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer, 2005, p.7).

Furthermore, employees’ greatest source of motivation and engagement is when they can interact as a team, working towards a common goal (Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer, 2005). Other employees have also stated that loneliness from a lack of contact with colleagues and separation in the workplace made them feel “left out” (Elshaiekh, Hassan and Abdallah, 2018). Therefore, a lack of effective communication and feeling connected can negatively impact engagement.

The benefits of remote working include minimum physical necessities, like driving to work and dealing with traffic, which consumes time and the availability of greater concentration times (Elshaiekh, Hassan and Abdallah, 2018). However, some research indicates that people are now faced with the challenge of “blurred lines”. Where commuting to work and being “stuck in traffic” gave them a break between home and work, remote working does not offer the same breaks. Elshaiekh, Hassan and Abdallah (2018) highlight that employees are struggling with time management and found that they are spending more time than usual working, and find it difficult to “switch off” at the end of the day. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, workers could use commute time between home and work to unwind physically, psychologically, and emotionally. Hunter (2019) adds that employees have been increasingly demanding more flexibility to achieve a better work-life balance (Hunter, 2019).

However, studies indicate that there is now a thin line between working from home and “living at work” as separating work and home life is the most difficult part of remote working (Flores, 2019). People have expressed that they struggle to take the necessary breaks they would usually take whilst at the office. One has to consciously create their own “break times”, like lunch and establishing clear start and stop times (Flores, 2019), which is not always possible as other responsibilities have to be juggled at those times (like home-schooling for employees with children).

Therefore, as much as working remotely has increased quality time spent with family, it has drastically limited the face-to-face engagements between colleagues, which is greatly required by many to thrive in their work lives. It has also broken the routines that made time for break-times, which are very necessary for employee engagement (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli, 2001). In addition, in their work on

flexible work arrangements and work-family conflict, Beigi, Shirmohammadi, and Stewart (2018) opine that there are inconsistencies in qualitative research regarding the relationship between flexible work arrangements and work-family conflict. They assert that support is required from employers to improve the work or life balance of employees who, for instance, work remotely.

With the rapid shift to working from home, some organisations quickly transitioned to make sure that employees were properly geared with suitable and enough resources and tools to work from home. However, in the South African context, a unique set of problems make remote working a challenge. Not all employees have a suitable and conducive workspace and, therefore, cannot productively work remotely. It is not every employee who has the privilege of extra rooms in their house to convert into a safe, quiet, and ergonomically apt workspace. Power supply problems and poor internet connectivity are also a challenge that hinders optimal remote working arrangements (Osoba and Linder, 2021).

In addition, a key element that has surfaced from the above discussion is that there was, and still is, a great need for a similar response on how to help employees acclimatise to the new way of working, focussing on emotional and psychological aspects (Gallup, 2013). The above-mentioned challenges pose a huge risk to employee engagement. Remote working is different for everyone. Whilst others live alone and have the space to work without disturbances, they can find themselves feeling lonely and disconnected. Others find themselves having to coexist with their families as they work from home, and must balance their work and their personal life (Iqbal, Suh, Czerwinski and Teevan, 2020). Each remote working setup has the potential to impact an employee's mental well-being.

As mentioned, the challenge of creating boundaries, and striking the balance of completing work tasks whilst responding to family and personal commitments can impact one's physical and mental well-being (Iqbal, Suh, Czerwinski and Teevan, 2020). Ultimately, this has a great impact on employee engagement. In an article in Gallup, Witters (2020) highlights the striking relationship between employee engagement and well-being, and how greatly it impacts the employee's productivity and performance. Witters (2020) emphasises the role of leaders in this regard, in making sure that the employees' psychological needs are being met and that they are positively experiencing their lives at home and work.

Remote workers' physical, emotional, and mental well-being is crucial to the sustenance of business operations and performance (Poulsen and Ipsen, 2017). This echoes what is further explained in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model of engagement below; job demands, and resources have a great impact on an employee's performance and levels of engagement.

Managers of knowledge workers have also been thrust into distance management, which is a new and complex experience for not only the employees but for the managers as well (Kirchner, Ipsen and Hansen, 2021). The many challenges posed by remote working have intensified the need for managers to learn and understand how to operate in this new world of work (Kirchner, Ipsen and Hansen, 2021). Some of the challenges that they currently face are the management of performance and productivity from a distance and employees' well-being. With teleworking having been around for a while, albeit unpopular, the biggest challenge linked thereto has been performance management, which according to Cascio (2000) requires managers to "define, facilitate, and encourage performance" (p. 87). These have always been important in office-based work but are even more important in remote and virtual work (Cascio, 2000).

As a result of the lack of face-to-face interaction and with the flexible ways of working brought on by people juggling different personal commitments, managers need to manage differently. There is a need for much more frequent communication and feedback as well as coaching to ensure productivity and engagement in employees who work remotely (Gallup, 2013).

2.2 Employee engagement

2.2.1 Understanding employee engagement

Employee engagement is a widely researched construct in business and academia, and the research in this field has grown immensely in the past decade (Fletcher, Bailey, Alfes and Madden, 2020). The definition of employee engagement is grounded on (the founding father of engagement) William Kahn's theory of engagement to understand the concepts of employee engagement and disengagement.

Employee engagement was defined by Kahn (1990) as employees bringing their whole selves to their work roles and being involved “physically, cognitively and emotionally” (p. 694). Another definition of employee engagement by Wellins, Bernthal and Phelps (2005) refers to how much employees enjoy their work and believe in what they do, and feel valued for it. This suggests that employees will be excited to not only show up but to also execute their duties as required, because they understand their tasks and why they are performing them, and that they also feel a sense of belonging.

Robbins and Judge (2013) defined employee engagement as “an individual’s involvement, satisfaction and enthusiasm for the work that he does” (p. 111), alluding to an employee being absorbed in their job, deriving joy and energy from it.

Therefore, these definitions show a great need for organisations to successfully drive employee engagement to increase motivation and enthusiasm amongst employees to execute on the business objectives. Similarly, Swarnalatha and Prasanna (2013) define employee engagement as the extent to which employees commit to roles in the organisation; the effort invested in their work; and how this impacts their tenure in the organisation. Thus, if employees are engaged they are highly committed to their roles and are likely to stay longer in the organisation. This is evident in their productivity levels and the output of their efforts, and ultimately promote retention of talent (Swarnalatha and Prasanna 2013).

The study conducted by Kahn (1990) was based on the premise that people show up to work physically, emotionally, and cognitively. The more individuals can be themselves in these areas and draw from their true being, the better their performance and engagement. Taneja, Sewell and Odom (2015) view employee engagement as a long-term commitment between employees and the organisation, each relying on the other for long-term commitment and sustainability. This suggests a two-way dependency by which both the employee and the organisation have a role to play in increasing and sustaining employee engagement for a mutually beneficial outcome.

2.2.2 Levels of employee engagement

In understanding employee engagement, it is also important to understand what the opposite of engagement is and how to deal with it. According to research from Gallup

(2013), there are three levels of engagement, which they describe as the three personas of engagement. These employees are described as (1) fully engaged; (2) not engaged; and (3) actively disengaged. Cascio (2011) highlights that the level of engagement impacts the employee's behaviour and performance, thereby also affecting the organisations performance.

Fully engaged employees do more than what is required of them in their jobs. They go the extra mile to achieve results that will add value to the organisation. This is expressed by Robinson, Perryman and Hayday (2004) as being one step ahead of commitment. They are very enthusiastic about their work and involved in their organisation. Gallup (2013) also states that these are "psychological owners" and the people who will meet the high-performance expectation and drive innovation within the business.

Nortje (2007) adds that truly engaged employees are adaptable and open to new ideas and experiences within the organisation. They also take initiative and are ready for any change required, responding appropriately to any organisational changes (Nortje, 2007). Some other characteristics include a positive outlook, emotional maturity, and self-efficacy. However, these are not a pre-disposition of engaged employees.

Nonetheless, Macey, Schneider, Barbera and Young (2009) highlight the dangers of the unintended consequences of high levels of engagement, which could result in stress and burnout. Harter and Gandhi (2021) support this by stating that according to recent Gallup studies, employees who are engaged at work but are not thriving in their overall lives often, or always, report a 61% higher rate of burnout.

When job demands are high it causes exhaustion and these job demands can be present despite employees being fully engaged in their work with all that they require to be present (Macey, Schneider, Barbera and Young, 2009). This raises the role of leadership in employee engagement in remote working environments, which is further discussed below. Harter and Gandhi (2021) also add that resilience and work-life balance support for employees should be the priority for all leaders.

Employees that are not engaged are described as "psychologically unattached" to their work and have no attachment to the organisation (Gallup, 2013). This is a result of their engagement needs not being met. Various needs may be neglected by the

organisation regarding remote workers, such as giving regular feedback, making sure that they have the right tools to work remotely or even support. As a result, an employee may do their job, albeit without energy or passion.

Blush (2020) explains that this disengagement can be recognised in employees contributing less or producing mediocre to poor quality work. They do not actively participate in meetings and give or add minimal to no value (Blush, 2020). Actively disengaged employees are unhappy, demotivated, and do not enjoy their work (Gallup, 2013). They are similar to the “not engaged” employee except that they are resentful that their needs and expectations have not been met by the organisation and their resentment is evident in their behaviour and work output. Their unhappiness is very apparent and even sabotages the efforts of other employees in the organisation (Gallup, 2013). The characteristics of this behaviour in remote employees would be high absenteeism, not answering calls, regular sick leave, missing work, and/or not completing work duties.

2.2.3 Importance of employee engagement to organisations

Research in this area acknowledges that employee engagement is important for the success and growth of any organisation. Many studies indicate how people are the greatest asset of any organisation and that they are the main drivers for success and business performance (Wellins, Bernthal and Phelps, 2005).

The Gallup Report (2013) states that employee engagement impacts the organisation’s bottom line and engaged workers are the lifeline of organisations. However, Wellins, Bernthal and Phelps (2005) opine that success takes more than employees showing up and doing the jobs. The engagement of those employees is critical to the success of the business.

There exists extensive research on the drivers of employee engagement, mostly conducted in workplace-based environments. However, with remote working environments recently becoming more popular, this exposes the gap in the literature in addressing the challenges regarding employee engagement posed by remote working. For instance, Gallup’s World Poll found substantial increases in daily stress, worry, sadness, and anger amongst workers, globally, during 2020. As a result, employee engagement has declined (Harter and Gandhi, 2021).

In addition, although remote working has major benefits for employers, such as decreased overhead costs, the costs associated with disengaged employees working remotely are even higher (Lee, 2018). Managers now need to find ways to manage and respond to employees' needs differently from how they would have managed them in an office-based environment (Lee, 2018). The management of employee engagement required in the two environments is not the same (Lee, 2018).

With an ever-evolving business landscape, filled with complexity and uncertainty, engaged employees are an organisation's competitive advantage (Macey, Schneider, Barbera and Young, 2009). It is in any organisation's interest to make sure that their employees remain engaged. The Aon Hewitt model of engagement (2015) reflects a relationship between employee engagement and the financial performance of a business. The same study shows that engaged employees say, stay, and strive. This means they have positive things to say about the organisation; they are loyal and stay in the organisation longer; and they aim to deliver maximum effort and value for the organisation's success (Aon Hewitt, 2015). All of these factors are important for the organisation's performance, brand, and sustainability.

As discussed on the levels of engagement, employees can be disengaged and actively so. When this happens, they start to sabotage the organisation (Gallup, 2013). Therefore, employee engagement is imperative for the organisation's success.

2.2.4 Theoretical perspectives of employee engagement

Kahn (1990) describes employee engagement as the pushes and pulls of one, away and towards their work, as "calibrations of self in role" (p. 694). These calibrations that help employees cope with internal and external conditions are described as personal engagement and personal disengagement (Kahn, 1990). Personal engagement refers to the behaviours and extent to which an employee brings their authentic self to work and in their performance (Kahn, 1990). This is evident in their task behaviours as they are present physically, cognitively, and emotionally.

"People who are engaged keep themselves within the role" (Kahn, 1990, p. 700). This means they fully embody the role and can freely express themselves within it. This premise is based on the understanding that people have different layers and sides to them and depending on which circumstances they find themselves in, they

can either show up as their preferred self and express their thoughts and feelings freely or decide to withdraw according to what they are faced with.

When they start to withdraw, to any extent, this is what Kahn termed “personal disengagement”. This is the extent to which a person withdraws themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally from their role (Kahn, 1990). They are not their true self, they do not express freely, and “hide their true identity, thoughts and feelings during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p. 701).

The three-factor theory of human engagement in the workplace states that the three factors that build employee enthusiasm, or what Kahn (1990) termed “personal engagement”, are equity or fairness, achievement, and camaraderie (Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer, 2005). This model states that this is what most employees want, and they are universal across cultures and the same over time (Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer, 2005). They maintain that if an organisation achieves in meeting these factors, there will be high morale and performance (Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer, 2005). They also highlight that these factors are what employees seek in any employment situation and, therefore, apply even in remote working conditions.

According to Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer (2005), these three factors are what the majority of employees want and are relevant across cultures. Equity and fairness refer to equal treatment of employees and respect (Sirota and Klein, 2014) concerning basic conditions, such as physical working conditions, job security, workload, compensation, communication, and the consistency of their management’s words and actions (Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer, 2005).

According to this model, Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer (2005) state that to establish equity, the four fairness elements must be met, which are: (1) physiological safety; (2) economic security; (3) fair compensation; and (4) physiological health. The framework also defines achievement as the need to do important, useful, and value-adding tasks, which employees are proud of and can be recognised for (Sirota and Klein, 2014). The research indicates four requirements for people to feel a sense of achievement, which are: (1) providing an enabling work environment; (2) providing challenging work; (3) using feedback, recognition, and reward; and (4) an organisation of purpose and principles.

The employee experience of camaraderie is realised through healthy and pleasant relationships with peers and leaders that create a sense of community and belonging (Sirota and Klein, 2014). Therefore, for the organisation to foster, support, and encourage camaraderie they need to have a partnership culture where employees feel a sense of community, teamwork, and belonging.

In remote working, effective communication and collaboration have been impacted by the flexibility introduced by this work arrangement and with each employee having a different work-life schedule compared to their other teammates. This may impact the camaraderie factor as described in the model and result in disengagement.

On the other hand, Kahn links three conditions that lead to employee engagement, namely (1) psychological safety; (2) psychological meaningfulness; and (3) psychological availability. Kahn states that employees experience psychological safety with other employees when they can relate and see themselves in their role performances and are provided with basic needs and support to apply themselves fully to these role performances (Kahn, 1990).

Basic needs in the workplace start with clarity of expectations as well as basic materials and equipment being provided (Harter, Schmidt, and Keyes (2003). Therefore, for remote working, this would mean having the adequate space and tools to work remotely and to be able to collaborate and participate in one's work effectively. This, as a result, makes an employee's work and role meaningful to them, according to Kahn (1990). When work is meaningful it means that it fulfils one and adds value to one's life and well-being, similar to the assertion by Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer, 2005) that such work increases engagement. Employees become psychologically available, which refers to when employees absorb themselves into their role performances to enhance their work contribution (Kahn, 1990).

Therefore, Kahn's definition of employee engagement suggests that it is a complex construct but applicable in any context as long as these conditions are met. Kahn maintains that the more of our authentic (or real) "selves" we give to a role, the more fulfilled and comfortable we are in the way we carry out these roles. It is this fulfilment that helps employees to thrive in what Kahn (1990) dubbed "psychological meaningfulness". This is when employees find their tasks and roles meaningful, fulfilling, and value-adding.

In the context of the challenges discussed above, one is inclined to understand how employees can be empowered to participate authentically and give their whole self to their jobs and remain engaged whilst dealing with the mental issues and challenges posed by remote working. How does the organisation and its leaders manage this and motivate their employees?

Bakker (2010) states that employees who experience work engagement create their own great places to work. Therefore, it is to the organisation's benefit when employees take the initiative to craft their work demands and resources to meet their needs. This highlights that employee engagement is not only created and driven by organisations for employees but also by employees for themselves, further supporting Taneja, Sewell and Odom's (2015) shared responsibility view.

Similarly, the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (by Bakker and Demerouti (2006) who emphasise the importance of the work environment on employee engagement) asserts that when a job has high demands with few resources or positives associated with it, then the outcome is stress and burnout. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines burnout as an occupational mental health condition characterised by an employee experiencing energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from their job, feeling cynical or negative about their job, and reduced professional efficacy in their daily tasks (Hoffman, Garner, Koong and Woodward, 2020).

Job demands are defined as physical, social, or organisational factors of the job that require physical and psychological effort, thereby impacting an employee's well-being (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli, 2001). Some examples of these stressors, which may or may not be unique to the South African context of remote working include (1) an uncomfortable work environment; (2) time pressures experienced whilst attempting to balance home life and work requirements; (3) inadequate or poor work spaces; (4) power outages and poor connectivity making collaboration difficult; and (5) "blurred lines" pertaining to work routine and employees finding it difficult to establish and commit to start and stop times, *etcetera*.

Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) support this and assert that organisations (during turbulent times) can keep employees focussed and engaged by making sure that they have appropriate and sufficient resources and equipment to work. They add that

organisations should allow employees to do what they do best, recognise them for their efforts, and show employees they are valued (Chanana and Sangeeta, 2020).

On the other hand, when there are more resources or positives linked to the job outweighing the demands, this may mitigate the risk of stress and lead to motivation and employee engagement. Job resources and positives are defined as the physical, social, and interpersonal relationships and organisational factors, such as performance management, feedback, and development, which help reduce stress and increase engagement if they are available (Shaik and Makhecha, 2019).

Beer, Tims and Bakker (2016) also contend that job resources support the successful completion of one's work and they also aid in reducing job demands. Some job resources cited include support, increased autonomy, and involvement in decision-making (Beer, Tims and Bakker, 2016). However, in the same vein, they have also found that challenging job demands positively stimulate employee engagement and motivation (Beer, Tims and Bakker, 2016).

As discussed, remote working poses challenges, such as physical distance from co-workers, thereby creating feelings of loneliness and disconnection. This diminishes strong interpersonal relationships (Shaik and Makhecha, 2019). Remote working has also surfaced challenges that managers face about not knowing how to manage productivity in a distributed workforce. This impacts performance, discussions, and feedback to employees, contributing to the disengagement of an employee. This contributes to the stress of employees in remote working environments.

The emotional toll that remote working can bring onto an individual can result in burnout, and ultimately high absenteeism and high turnover (Gallup, 2013). Research highlights some issues related to remote working and personal life balance resulting in stress, specifically relating to job-related stress and work overload in a multi-role environment (Duxbury, Stevenson, and Higgins, 2018).

Bakker and Demerouti (2006) further state that when there are limited work resources, compared to the demands, this causes strain and stress and leads to burnout. Therefore, the demanding and complex environment that employees currently experience in recent remote working environments has led to an increase in stress and burnout as reported by the WHO (Hoffman, Garner, Koong and Woodward, 2020). Furthermore, Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli

(2001) state that when job resources are insufficient to meet job demands it leads to withdrawal, which, in the long-term, becomes disengagement.

Based on the three views and contributions by Kahn, Sirota and Bakker, there is something to be said about the psychology of work and more importantly, the impact of one's work environment on their engagement. There is also a strong emphasis from the literature on the role and strength of leadership that is required and imperative for the creation and sustainability of employee engagement.

2.2.5 Drivers of employee engagement

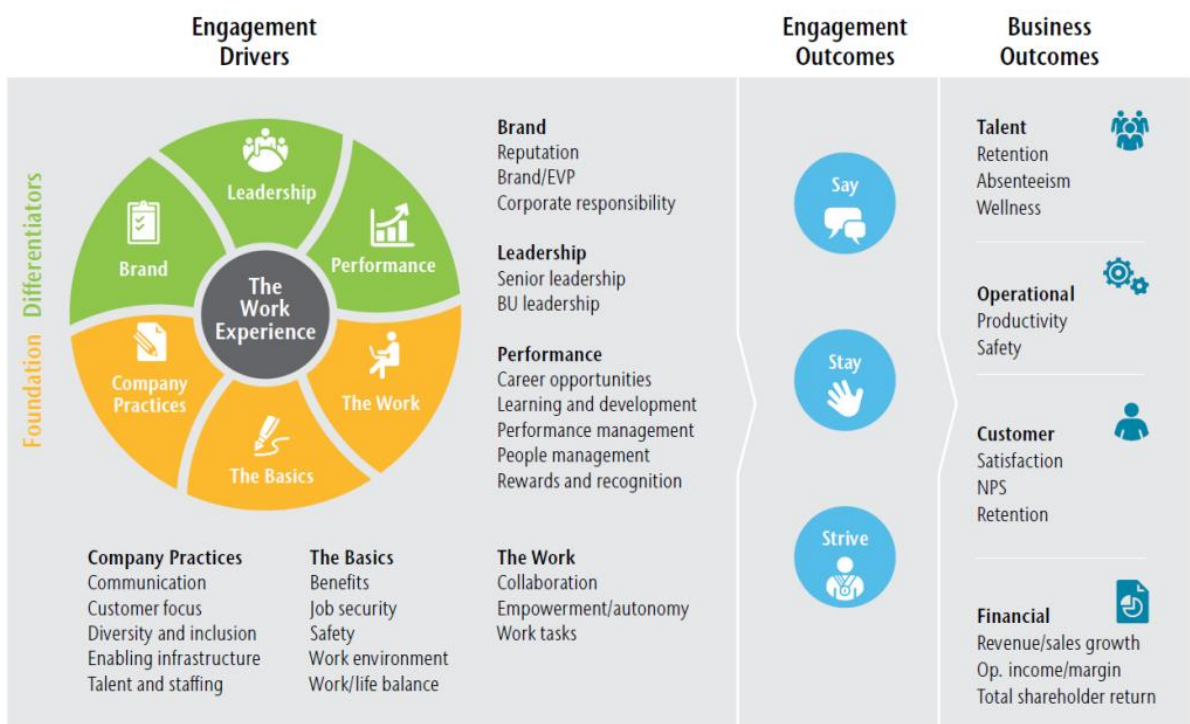


Figure 1: The Aon Hewitt Employee Engagement model (2015)

The Aon Hewitt engagement model (2015) highlights the drivers of engagement and the outcomes on employee behaviour and the business. The model divides engagement drivers into foundation and differentiator drivers. The foundation drivers of engagement consist of company practices. This can also be referred to as culture, which is the way of life for in an organisation, ways of working, behaviours, and norms (Flint and Hearn, 2015).

The basics, as depicted in the model, are the benefits, job security, safety, work environment, and work-life balance. Similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, these

are the basic physiological and safety needs. Last on the foundation is the work and actual tasks. These include collaboration, autonomy, and work tasks.

The differentiators are consist of performance leadership and brand. Performance includes career opportunities that are available to the employee, learning and development, performance management, rewards, and recognition. Brands are inclusive of the employee value proposition of the organisation and the organisation's reputation. The researcher finds the differentiators part of the model very similar to Maslow's love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation needs. Once the basics are met, the differentiators help maintain engagement.

This model states that in the presence of the above drivers of engagement, the outcome is that employees will be empowered to say, stay, and strive (Aon Hewitt, 2015). This means they speak positively about the organisation internally and externally (Aon Hewitt, 2015). In addition, they have a sense of belonging and loyalty to the organisation, resulting in longer staying ability (Aon Hewitt, 2015). "Strive" is explained as the motivation and effort they have towards the business' success. All three are described by Aon Hewitt (2015) as an indication of engaged employees.

The above drivers of engagement, however, raise a number of questions on how remote working can impact these key drivers of employee engagement. If people work from home, does this affect company practices and ultimately the organisational culture, thereby rendering it unimportant to keep remote workers engaged? What kind of leadership is required for remote workers to be engaged? Is it the same leadership styles and approaches that we know and are accustomed to? These are some of the questions that the researcher aims to clarify in this study by determining the drivers of employee engagement in remote workers.

2.2.6 The role of leadership in employee engagement

According to Osbourne and Hammoud (2017), employee engagement is a by-product of leadership. The chances are greater for improved employee engagement when the leaders have a relationship with their employees (Osbourne and Hammoud, 2017). Therefore, as stated by Komm, Pollner, Schaninger and Sikka (2021), there is great urgency for organisations to up-skill their leaders for them to adapt to the new world of working and the relevant management style required.

Bakker, Albrecht, and Leiter (2011) state that the role of leadership in cultivating employee engagement in their organisations and teams has received limited attention. In a world where the business environment is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, the role of leaders becomes even more critical (Bakker, Albrecht, and Leiter, 2011). Therefore, leaders should be more human, empathetic, and focussed on people’s well-being and not just the job at hand.

In a study on what drives engagement and what employees really want, Gallup (2020) identified the following drivers for engagement: purpose; development; coaching; ongoing conversations, and feedback; and focusing on one’s strengths and one’s life. The study mentions that a big discovery was the emphasis on who drives engagement. This is the manager or team leader and they account for 70% of the variance in team engagement (Gallup, 2020). Most of the elements highlighted in Figure 1 illustrate Gallup’s findings and indicate the huge role the leader plays. All of the factors are driven by the employee’s leader or manager.



Figure 2: Drivers of employee engagement: What people really want and need (Gallup, 2020)

Gupta and Chowdry (2018) share some practices that managers can adopt to engage employees. They mention that managers should take initiative as employees are influenced by their leaders and that clear vision, mission, and values show leadership commitment and buy-in from their teams (Gupta and Chowdry, 2018). They also state that an employee is not “just another HR thing” and that managers should take accountability for employees. Furthermore, Gupta and Chowdry (2018)

add that when managers promote two-way communication it allows employees to express themselves freely and thus co-create solutions that work for the organisation and the employees. Such participative decision-making not only creates a sense of belonging for the employees but increases engagement (Gupta and Chowdry, 2018).

2.2.7 Employee well-being and engagement

Harter, Schmidt, and Keyes (2003) maintain that employee well-being is in the best interest of the organisation and the community as employees spend most of their lives working. As such, organisations need to make sure that they invest in employees' well-being as it is also closely linked to business performance and has an impact thereon.

Parker and Griffin (2011) state that a positive state of mind drives employee engagement and organisational performance. This positive psychological state was defined as having vigour and dedication to one's role in the organisation (González-Romá, Schaufeli, Bakker and Lloret, 2006). Parker and Griffin (2011) thereby advocate for organisations to pay closer attention to the type of work performance that is stimulated and sustained by engagement. They also state that it is important to consider how both an employee's context and individual circumstances impact the link between engagement and performance (Parker and Griffin, 2011).

This means that as a result of the different and varying remote working environments and circumstances each employee is exposed to, tailored responses are required from the organisation to support an employee's well-being.

2.3 Remote working and employee engagement

To understand what drives engagement in employees who work remotely, there is a need to understand and appreciate the challenges that arise from remote working and how to manage remote workers (Cook, 2019) as well as the current engagement drivers in the workplace.

Sirota's three-factor model of engagement theory, for example, highlights that the three factors required for individual and team engagement and enthusiasm are (1) equity or fairness; (2) achievement; and (3) camaraderie (Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer, 2005). In a recent study, Wang, Liu, Qian and Parker (2020) identified four

key challenges posed by remote working amongst Chinese workers, which include work-home interference; ineffective communication; procrastination; and loneliness.

This raises the question of whether Sirota's model alone, for example, can respond to the findings of Wang, Liu, Qian and Parker (2020) regarding the challenges of work-home interference, ineffective communication, procrastination, and loneliness. It also indicates that unlike employee engagement in the workplace, which has been tackled by many scholars (with models approaching it from all angles), engagement in remote working still requires more focussed research on it.

Because of the vast research on employee engagement, some of the literature may tackle the issues pertaining to remote working. However, there is still a great need for deliberate research in the area. As mentioned by Dixit and Ranjan (2020), employees are human beings, dynamic, and impacted by factors, such as changes in the work environment, mental health issues, and more. As a result, we cannot measure and compare employee engagement as we have known it to engagement in remote working environments.

Nortje (2007) also asserts that leaders have to be proactive in identifying these issues and developing employee engagement in their teams. An engaged employee (as we know them in the workplace) does not necessarily mean that he or she will be equally engaged as a remote worker.

Clearly, the most extensive research conducted in the area of employee engagement does not sufficiently cover the context of remote working and the different challenges employees may face, which hinders engagement. Fletcher, et. al (2019) state that "despite a wide range of evidence regarding broadly applicable antecedents and outcomes of engagement, there is a distinct lack of consideration of the specific contextual issues that may be fundamental in shaping the experience of engagement within a particular context" (p. 39).

Therefore, it is important to be more contextually and critically minded when researching employee engagement (Fletcher, et. al, 2019), specifically in remote working environments, as this is a vastly different context to the workplace as we know it. Based on this understanding and the theoretical views on employee engagement explored above, the researcher proposes the below framework to study if the same drivers of engagement are relevant in remote working environments. The

framework is a summary of the literature reviewed in this chapter. The aim is to also identify which drivers of engagement yield high success for organisations and their employees and require greater focus for an engaged remote workforce.

2.4 Conclusion

In light of the above discussion, it is important to further investigate what really drives employee engagement in remote working conditions. It may include the same drivers previously identified and mentioned. However, regarding the new challenges that employees currently face as they work in isolation, it is important to help businesses understand how they can mitigate the risk of employee disengagement.

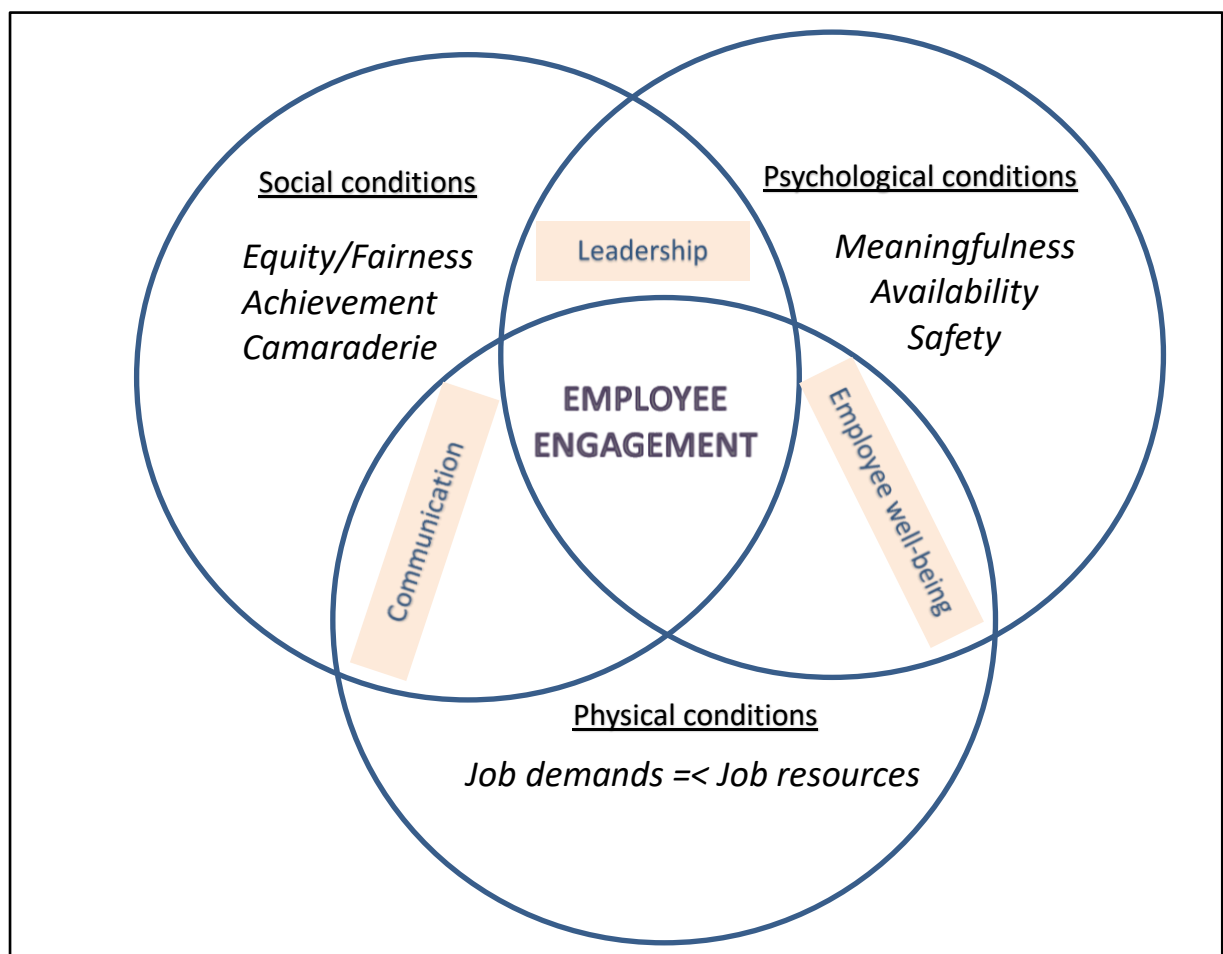


Figure 3: Summary of literature

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research intends to explore the overarching question of what the drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments are by exploring the research questions (derived from the literature review presented in Chapter 2) as well as the following objectives.

3.1 Research objectives

- (a) To examine the current challenges of remote working that are impacting employee engagement;
- (b) To explore how organisations can overcome these challenges;
- (c) To explore and prioritise the key success factors for employee engagement in remote working; and
- (d) To understand how organisations can sustain employee engagement amongst remote workers.

3.2 Research questions

The following research questions have been developed for this study to attempt and understand the drivers of employee engagement in remote working. These research questions are informed by the extensive literature review conducted above. The researcher was also guided by Clough and Nutbrown (2012), on how to structure the questions. They state that research questions should be fairly open and not too broad, rendering more valuable information and rich responses.

3.2.1 Research question 1

How did organisations manage the transition to remote working?

This question aims to explore how organisations transitioned employees from office-based working to working from home. It also aims to explore the preparedness and agility of the organisation and whether the employees had all the resources and support structures and materials required to work from home. The interview questions were as follow:

- (a) How did your organisation manage the process of transitioning employees to working from home?
- (b) What were the challenges faced by the organisation during the transition process?
- (c) What new policies and initiatives were put in place and what were they trying to achieve?

3.2.2 Research question 2

What have been the remote working challenges experienced by employees?

This question aims to gain an understanding of what challenges the employees have been faced with and how the organisation has responded thereto. The interview questions were as follow:

- (a) What have been the challenges for employees working from home?
- (b) How has this impacted the employees?
- (c) How has the organisation responded to these challenges?

3.2.3 Research question 3

How has employee engagement been impacted by the change to remote working?

The objective of this question is to understand what employee engagement in the organisation entailed pre-pandemic, and what it looks like now. It also aims to understand how the challenges faced by the employees have affected the organisation. The interview questions were as follow:

- (a) How would you describe employee engagement in your organisation before the pandemic and remote working?
- (b) How have the challenges faced by employees impacted employee engagement?
- (c) How has this impacted the organisation?

3.2.4 Research question 4

What are the critical success factors in achieving high employee engagement in remote working environments?

Research question four (RQ4) aims to explore the critical factors required to achieve high employee engagement in remote working environments. This is attempted by understanding the key learnings from organisations on what they could have done to better prepare employees for this change. It also intends to investigate how they are currently responding to the challenges impacting employee engagement. The interview questions were as follow:

- (a) What could your organisation have done better to maintain or increase engagement during the transition?
- (b) How can remote working be improved to increase employee engagement?
- (c) What are the critical factors required to achieve employee engagement in remote workers?

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This Chapter describes and justifies the research methodology employed in this study to answer the research question in Chapter 3.

4.2 Research method and design

This study is of an exploratory nature to investigate and gain a better understanding and new insights on the drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). This is derived from the view of HR leaders and practitioners who have recently dealt with the transition to remote working environments in their organisations.

As stated by Zikmund, Babin, Carr, and Griffin (2013) “exploratory research is conducted to clarify ambiguous situations or discover potential business opportunities” (p. 54). Therefore, this study is exploratory in approach. It assists in clearly understanding remote working and its impact on employees. The subjects involved assist in acquiring more substantial insights to build on theory and understanding of the research focus areas. In addition, exploratory studies are a valuable tool to formulate open questions for further information and to gain insights on the focus topic (Saunders and Lewis, 2018).

A phenomenology strategy is used as it allows the researcher to focus on the participants’ experiences, recollections, and interpretations of those lived experiences (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). This study adopts an interpretative analysis of employee engagement in remote working environments as there existed only limited literature in this area at the time of the study. The study is also underpinned by the philosophy of interpretivism, which attempts to interpret social reality through the subjective viewpoints of the participants as “social actors” within the context of the reality being studied (Saunders and Lewis, 2018, p. 109). The researcher aims to understand employee engagement from the viewpoints and experiences of HR professionals who worked in organisations that transitioned to working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The study is a mono-method qualitative study, using only semi-structured interviews to collect and analyse the data. As the research involves engaging participants for their viewpoints and observations on employee engagement in remote working environments, an inductive approach is used. This approach is appropriate for extracting themes and patterns from these interactions and data was collected to reach conclusions and generate theory (Saunders and Lewis, 2018).

An inductive approach is appropriate as it is for theory development, to not only build theory but to also gain a richer theoretical perspective of existing literature around remote working and employee engagement (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). The research is a cross-sectional study as data was collected at a specific point in time because of time constraints. The data was also collected over a period of six weeks due to (Saunders and Lewis, 2018).

4.3 Population

Saunders and Lewis (2012) describe a population as a complete set of members of a group. The target population for this study are HR professionals working in organisations that were involved in transitioning employees to work remotely during the current pandemic. In order to answer the research questions, the criteria for the population is that they must be HR professionals and work in organisations with remote working arrangements.

They are an ideal population to engage on the issue to understand current challenges and drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments. As HR practitioners were and continue to plan on what the future of work will look like for their organisations, this renders them the ideal target population (as this issue is currently a priority for many business leaders).

4.4 Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis for this study is the individual participants categorised as HR professionals and their responses, insights, and experiences regarding the constructs of employee engagement and remote working.

4.5 Sampling method and size

A sample is a segment of the population that is selected and investigated, as it is not possible to test the entire population (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Non-probability purposive sampling is the most suitable technique to meet the research requirements and was used to select the participants. Purposive sampling also allows for the understanding of concepts and making inferences of logical generalisations (Saunders and Lewis, 2012).

The sampling frame for this study are HR professionals in any South African based organisation, both private and public entities, which had to transition their organisation to remote working as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The researcher targeted the participants from various industries to obtain as much objective and representative data from the population. The researcher approached HR professionals from different levels (ranging from junior to senior levels in their careers). This allows for greater objectivity and perspectives on the issues researched. Another important factor about the sample is that the HR professionals interviewed were all employees in their respective organisations and, therefore, they had also experienced remote working from an employee perspective. As a result, they offer objective and holistic insights and well informed regarding the organisation.

The sample consists of twelve participants who were identified through the researcher's personal network of HR leaders and professionals. These are individuals with whom the researcher has worked with in various organisations or has met in network forums, such as the annual South Africa HR Indaba. Another useful source was a mentorship group that the researcher joined, which included HR industry leaders and HR professionals of different professional levels.

Towards the end of that data gathering process, the researcher employed the snowball sampling method to secure two participants that met the criteria of the study sample required (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). These were referrals made by the other existing participants. As a result of the pandemic and national lockdown regulations, many potential participants were remotely working and social distancing.

Therefore, it was difficult to secure interviews with participants as they had prior commitments and were unable to participate in the interview process. The work-life balance struggle is also a phenomenon that is discussed in this research as it poses

a challenge faced by employees whilst remote working. In addition, many organisations were downsizing and restructuring. Hence, the initial network the researcher intended to rely upon was not entirely available as some had lost their jobs due to downsizing and restructuring. Therefore, the snowball sampling approach serves as an appropriate and useful method to secure participants.

An interesting and somewhat limiting factor is that the researcher has an all-female sample. The searcher acknowledges the disadvantages of this in the limitations part of the study.

Table 1: Description of sample

Participants	Industry	Sector	Role	Gender	Level	Interview length (minutes)
P1	Mining	Private	HR Consultant	Female	Middle	20
P2	Chemicals	Private	Talent Acquisition Lead	Female	Senior	18
P3	Financial Services	Private	HR Business Partner	Female	Middle	40
P4	Financial Services	Private	HR Divisional Head	Female	Senior	66
P5	IT	Private	HR Officer	Female	Middle	29
P6	Food and Beverages	Private	HR Officer	Female	Junior	15
P7	Financial Services	Public	HR Business Partner	Female	Middle	25
P8	Financial Services	Private	Group Head of Talent Management	Female	Senior	22
P9	Financial Services	Private	Lead: Employee Engagement and Wellness	Female	Senior	12
P10	IT	Private	HR/Talent Lead	Female	Senior	17
P11	Education Management	Public	HR Specialist	Female	Senior	22
P12	Management Consulting	Private	Group HR Business Partner	Female	Middle	19

4.6 Measurement instrument

The measurement instrument used for this research is a semi-structured interview. With the nature of the study being explorative, semi-structured interviews allow for the researcher to ask specific questions but also allow flexibility for questions that clarify recurring themes and identified patterns (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). Semi-structured interviews are useful for this study regarding the gathering and understanding of data on employee engagement in remote working environments as it allows the researcher more freedom to probe and guide the participant to provide relevant information. It is also a useful instrument to generate data for theory development (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). Below is the interview guide that indicates the questions that were asked for each of the research objectives.

Table 2: Interview questions mapped to research questions

Research questions	Interview question
(1) How did organisations manage the transition to remote working?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did your organisation manage the process of transitioning employees to working from home? 2. What were the challenges faced by the organisation during the transition process? 3. What new policies and initiatives were put in place and what were they trying to achieve?
(2) What have been the remote working challenges experienced by employees?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. What have been the challenges for employees working from home? 5. How has this impacted the employees? 6. How has the organisation responded to these challenges?
(3) How has employee engagement been impacted by the change to remote working?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. How would you describe employee engagement in your organisation before the pandemic and remote working? 8. How have the challenges faced by employees impacted employee engagement? 9. How has this impacted the organisation?

<p>(4) What are the critical success factors in achieving high employee engagement in remote working environments?</p>	<p>10. What could your organisation have done better to maintain or increase engagement during the transition?</p> <p>11. How can remote working be improved to increase employee engagement?</p> <p>12. What are the critical factors required to achieve employee engagement in remote workers?</p>
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4.6.1 Pilot interview

The interview guide was tested for clarity and relevance before the interviews were conducted through a pilot interview. This awarded the researcher an opportunity to refine and make appropriate amendments before officially commencing the process of data collection. The pilot participant was chosen on convenience and availability (Creswell, 2007).

The pilot interview also tested the tool to be used for conducting the interview online and it was also recorded for testing the functionality of the tool. The researcher was also able to practice the interview technique and test how long the interview could take. Based on the feedback received, the researcher improved the effectiveness and efficiency of the data collection process, by identifying the ideal online tool for interviewing and recording as well as the transcribing tool.

4.7 Data collection process

The researcher commenced the process by identifying the HR professionals to approach and to send the participation invitations, information and requests. All participants were first approached via email. Once they indicated interest and availability, the researcher sent follow-up emails containing the consent forms and calendar invites for 60 minutes each. The researcher used the Zoom video communications software for conducting and recording the interviews.

As anticipated in the research proposal, the researcher had to conduct the interviews virtually given the Covid-19 restrictions at the time of collecting data. All participants were comfortable with the chosen tool and were given the option to have their cameras either on, or off. The twelve interviews lasted an average of 25 minutes each and were conducted between August and early September 2021.

The researcher used the interview guide (refer to appendix 3) containing the planned, open-ended questions posed to each participant, and in the same order for consistency. Each interview was recorded on Zoom; the researcher informed each participant before recording and received verbal consent before recording.

Each recording was imported into Otter.ai software for transcription into Microsoft Word (.docx) format. The researcher also perused each recording and transcript in an attempt to correct any mistakes and fine-tune the transcripts to be as accurate as possible. This is also to retain the information collected and prevent any loss of valuable data in transcription inaccuracies.

After about ten interviews, the researcher had anticipated a stage of data saturation, whereby the process would come to a halt. The researcher collected data until a point where no new insights or information was coming presented. This is known as data saturation (Bryman and Bell, 2011). This was realised at the time of interviewing participant nine. However, the researcher continued collecting data and decided to halt the process after participant twelve as it was evident that no new insights or themes were brought forth.

4.8 Analysis approach

This researcher employed a thematic analysis approach to analyse the collected data. It is described as the finding of patterns in data, creating codes, categorising data, and the creation of themes to group the categories (Braun and Clarke, 2008). This involves transcribing and word processing the recordings from the interviews into text-data (Saunders and Lewis, 2018) by using an online transcribing tool called Otter-ai.

The tool assisted the researcher by converting the recordings into Microsoft Word transcripts. The researcher employed Atlas.ti software to import the Microsoft Word transcripts and code the data. The codes were then exported into Microsoft Excel to arrange the data into meaningful categories and themes. (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). Lastly, the researcher described, interpreted, and discussed each category and theme in Chapters 5 and 6 (Saunders and Lewis, 2018).

Table 3: Phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2008)

Phase	Process researcher followed
(1) Familiarising yourself with the data	The researcher familiarised the data during the interviews, and also made short handwritten notes during each interview. This aided in understanding and interpreting the data. Thereafter, the researcher thoroughly read the transcripts after the interviews, whilst making transcription corrections. The researcher identified the initial ideas and patterns, which were easily recognisable.
(2) Generating initial codes	The researcher commenced with the generating and assigning of codes to the collected data in a systemic way (via Atlas.ti). The researcher coded all documents in the order they were interviewed. The number of new codes per transcript were recorded to evaluate saturation.
(3) Search for themes	The codes were exported into Microsoft Excel so as to easily group the codes into higher order categories.
(4) Reviewing the themes	The final step was to identify and finalise the themes that emerged from the categories.
(5) Defining and naming the themes	The defining and naming of the themes were informed by the identified categories and the researcher grouped the categories that are closely linked into themes. The naming convention was guided by the participants and how they explained certain sentiments.
(6) Producing the report	Thereafter the researcher used the themes to guide the final report. The themes are grouped per research question and explained according to each question.

Below is the process from coding to theming. The researcher started with 207 codes, created 30 categories, and identified ten themes from the collected data.

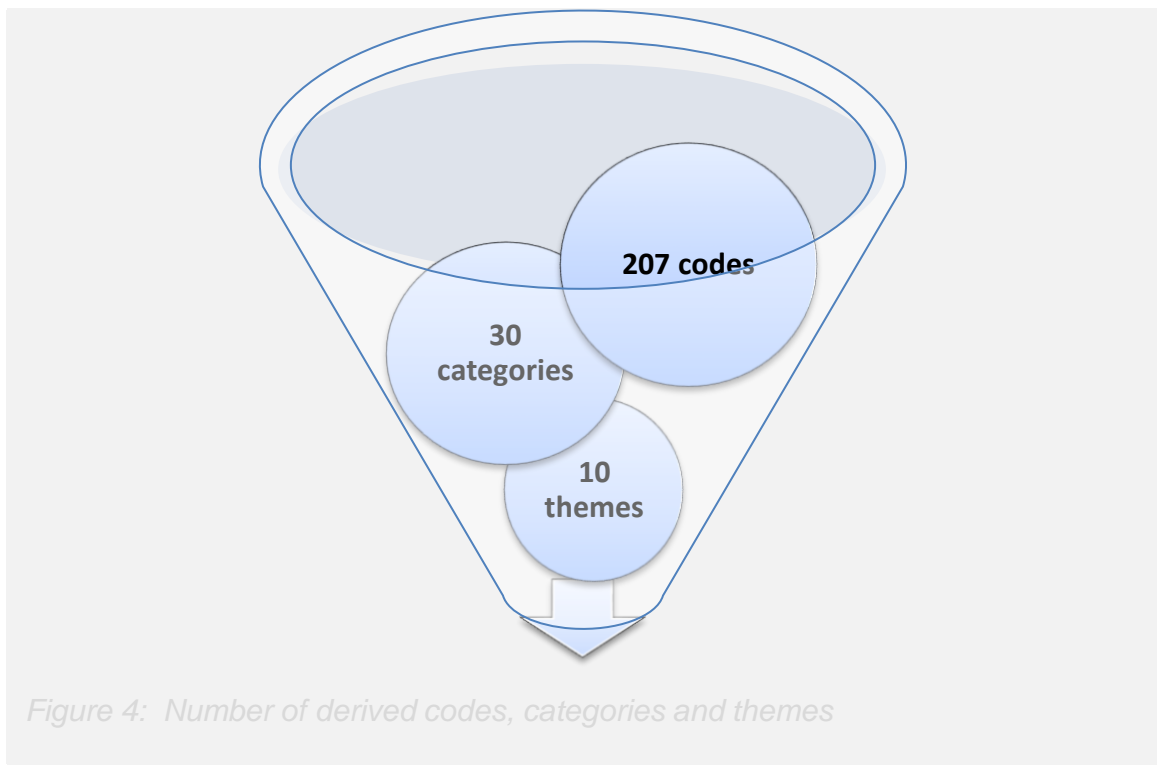


Figure 4: Number of derived codes, categories and themes

4.9 Quality controls

4.9.1 Credibility

Whilst the trustworthiness of qualitative research is questionable because it cannot be explained in the same way in naturalistic work, according to Shenton (2004), a qualitative researcher's equivalent concept to validity is credibility. For the researcher to achieve credibility, there must be trustworthiness and congruence of research findings and reality (Shenton, 2004, p. 63).

Therefore, the researcher followed the correct methods for a qualitative study to attain methodical coherence by adopting the well-established research methods in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). The researcher was guided by the extensive literature review conducted to structure the interview questions. This literature guidance aided in the credibility of the content of the interviews. The researcher also ensured honesty from the participants by giving them the opportunity to refuse or decline to participate (Shenton, 2004).

To further ensure credibility, the researcher's subject selection for the study consists of subject experts and HR professionals in varying levels of their careers, who have formed part of organisations that have transitioned from the workplace to remote working. This is to ensure that the research population is represented (Saunders and Lewis, 2018), thereby accurately collecting and measuring what is intended.

4.9.2 Dependability

Data reliability is the consistent accuracy of findings, regardless of when the information is collected or by whom (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). Although it is a challenge to produce the same results because of the changing nature of circumstances in qualitative research, the aim is to achieve the equivalent of reliability, which is dependability (Shenton, 2004). The researcher aims to achieve dependability by sharing a detailed research design plan and its implementation process, detailing how the data was collected and recorded every detail and by "evaluating the effectiveness of the process of enquiry undertaken" (Shenton, 2004. p. 72).

4.9.3 Data storage

The responsibility of collecting and storing data lies with the researcher. This is important to protect the participants. The researcher intends to safely store and keep all collected data confidential before publication (Kaiser, 2010). Personal information will be kept confidential and anonymous. Each participant's data shall be stored against a code or number as to not disclose their names (Kaiser, 2010). Interview notes and recordings are stored in their original form for five years from the completion of the project on a secure cloud storage system that only the researcher has access to (Kaiser, 2010). The researcher also keeps clear and accurate records of all processes and procedures followed in case there is a need (in future) to demonstrate that the correct research practice that was followed (Kaiser, 2010).

4.10 Limitations

Although the non-probability sampling method used may assist in answering the research questions, the results from the small sample cannot be generalised and do not represent the entire population (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). Another limitation is the researcher's subjectivity or biases, based on experience in the area of employee

engagement in the workplace and having some pre-conceived notions on the subject.

Amongst the participants there were some senior HR leaders who may have shared more positive feedback as opposed to negative feedback, primarily because they led the transition to remote working and/or were involved from a strategic point of view. Therefore, there may exist unconscious or conscious biases in some of their responses. These may emerge during the study. With remote working being a new way of life for many organisations, employee engagement — in this context — may be fairly new.

Therefore, a cross-sectional study may impact the quality of the conclusions reached. As stated by Saunders and Lewis (2018), longitudinal studies have the main advantage of tracking and studying change and development over time. Another limitation of the data collection process refers to the fact that the participants comprised of females only. Therefore, the lack of diversity in the sample may, to an extent, hinder objectivity.

The researcher acknowledges that they may have conducted interviews in such a way as to derive more information. The interview technique and skill comes with experience and training, which the researcher (at that time) did not possess. Therefore, this may have impacted the amount or quality of responses received. Five of the twelve respondents were from the financial services industry. Two of the twelve participants were from the information and technology (IT) industry and rest were from other industries. It may have been more useful to have less participants from the financial services industry to create more diversity pertaining to thoughts and insights.

4.11 Ethical considerations

The researcher enforced the following ethical considerations:

- (a) Before collecting data, the researcher obtained ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee (appendix 3);
- (b) Interview participants were supplied with a consent form to confirm their acceptance to participate and provide consent for the researcher to use their responses in this study;

- (c) The purpose of the study was highlighted and explained in the consent form;
- (d) All responses were kept confidential;
- (e) Participants were given the option to opt out of the process at any stage.
- (f) Respondents were kept anonymous and allocated identifier codes (P1 to P12).

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

This Chapter presents the findings obtained from the twelve interviews conducted with HR professionals. The twelve interview questions asked guided the interview, informed by the four research questions. The findings are presented according to the order in which the questions were asked, as depicted in Chapter 3. This order was followed for each participant to ensure consistency.

The researcher collected the data through in-depth interviews via the Zoom video communication software. The sample used include HR professionals from various organisations and industries. The interviews were semi-structured and relatively informal and relaxed, thereby allowing the researcher to probe and allowing the participants to share as much information and experience as possible. The researcher found that most participants would answer some of the questions before the researcher had posed the questions. Coding was used to make sure that the relevant data collected was noted for the relevant questions.

This Chapter presents a description of the participants in the study. This is followed by a data analysis and a presentation of the findings from the qualitative analysis. This is according to the themes derived from the findings, for each research question.

5.2 Description of sample

Interviews were conducted with twelve HR professionals, who are in organisations that dealt with a transition from office-based to remote working. The sample was from various industries, namely mining, chemicals, IT, education management, management consulting and financial services. Although 40% of the participants were from the financial services industry, they did work in organisations that vary in focus, such as banking, investment management, or asset management. The main advantage of this sample was that, although they are HR professionals who have experience in employee engagement before and after the transition to remote working, they are also employees who were impacted by the shift. This meant that the researcher could obtain a glimpse of the employees' experience by interviewing experts who also form part of the group of employees.

The individuals interviewed ranged from junior to senior management, with experience in the field ranging between three to twenty-one years. An interesting realisation post the interviews is that all the participants were female. As discussed in the methodology chapter, the researcher used purposive sampling and therefore gender had not been a focus. This lack of gender diversity is discussed in the limitations.

Each participant was allocated an identifier code between P1 to P12 to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 4: Description of participants

Participants	Industry	Sector	Role	Gender	Level	HR experience (years)
P1	Mining	Private	HR Consultant	Female	Middle	+4 years
P2	Chemicals	Private	Talent Acquisition Lead	Female	Senior	+14 years
P3	Financial Services	Private	HR Business Partner	Female	Middle	+13 years
P4	Financial Services	Private	HR Divisional Head	Female	Senior	+12 years
P5	IT	Private	HR Officer	Female	Middle	+6 years
P6	Food and Beverages	Private	HR Officer	Female	Junior	+3 years
P7	Financial Services	Public	HR Business Partner	Female	Middle	+7 years
P8	Financial Services	Private	Group Head of Talent Management	Female	Senior	+20 years
P9	Financial Services	Private	Lead: Employee Engagement and Wellness	Female	Senior	+21 years
P10	IT	Private	HR/Talent Lead	Female	Senior	+8 years
P11	Education Management	Public	HR Specialist	Female	Senior	+9 years
P12	Management Consulting	Private	Group HR Business Partner	Female	Middle	+14 years

5.3 Results for research question 1

RQ1 – How did organisations manage the transition to remote working?

The aim of this question is to understand the efforts and processes business went through to transition their organisations and employees to remote working. It also aims to understand the challenges faced and, policies and initiatives that were put into place, as well as the intended goals and outcomes thereof. The main themes derived from the interviews are depicted in Figure 5 below. By understanding how the transition was managed, the researcher can appreciate the strengths and gaps in the processes and how they might have impacted on employee engagement.

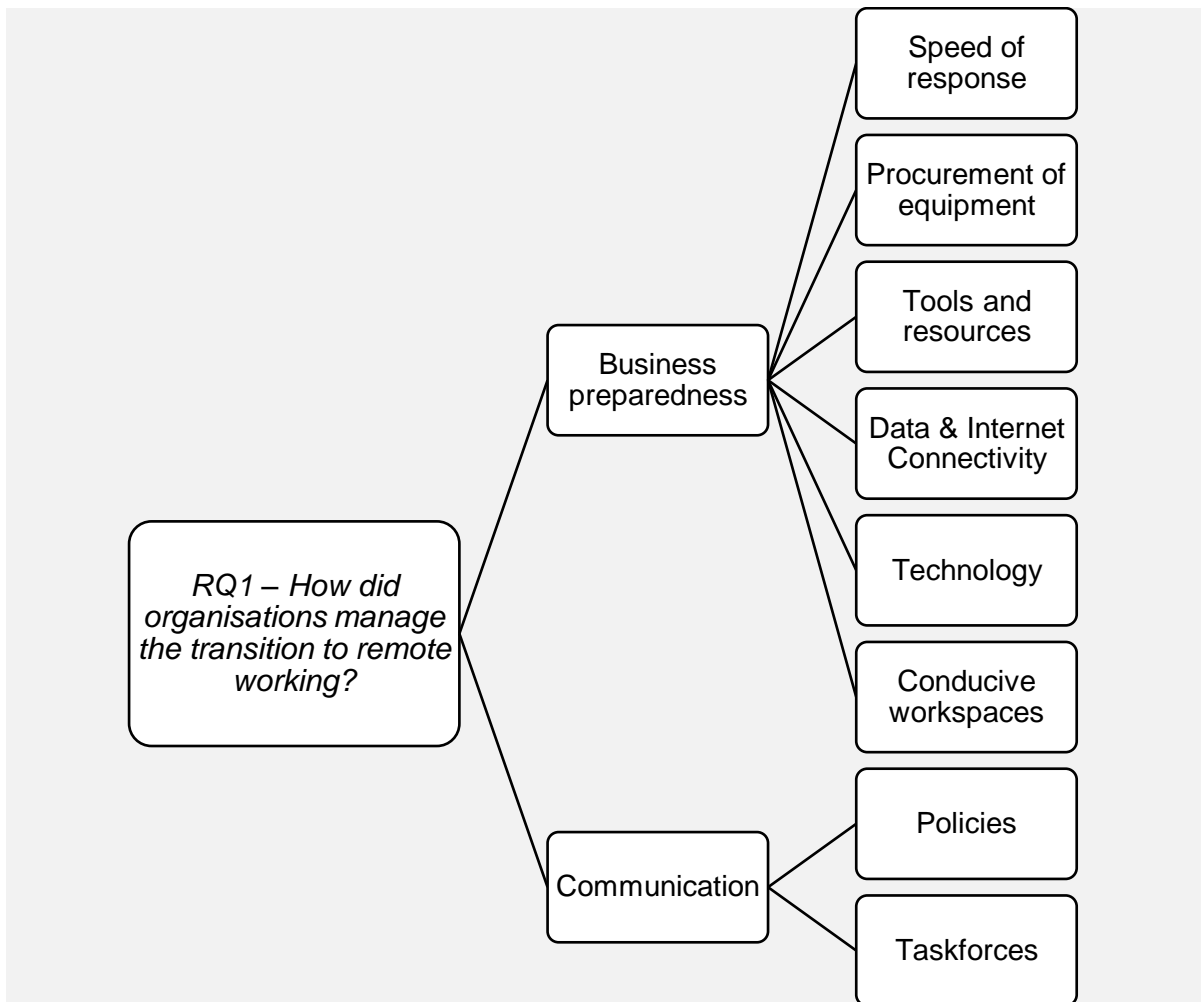


Figure 5: RQ1 Findings

5.3.1 Business Preparedness

Most of the HR professionals interviewed stated that their organisations were not prepared for the shift to remote working. The business complexity posed by the

Covid-19 pandemic, and the sudden transition to remote working, caught a lot of organisations off guard. They had not equipped their teams with sufficient information, equipment, policies, and other relevant input to be able to work remotely, effectively, and efficiently. This affected the response speed to the situation as leadership was dealing with a complex and unique situation. Only one participant stated that they decided to transition their employees to working remotely even before the official government announcements on lockdown. This was a result of them being a multinational and with other offices in the other countries having closed in January, they followed suit. They did not wait for the South African government to announce the national lockdown regulations (the other eleven participants reportedly did). P1's organisation responded much quicker.

P1:" I think for our organisation, the transition was a bit quicker with people going into lockdown, and some of the employees that we work with were already accustomed to lockdown. So I think just having that global presence helped with the transition".

The other eleven participants are an indication of extent to which business leaders today are not equipped to deal with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. More of this is discussed in the results to follow, highlighting managers' gaps that were realised when they were required to manage remotely, which is an entirely new and complex way of management. A few of the respondents stated that their organisation already had flexible work policies and, therefore, this made the transition to remote working fairly smooth and their response to the situation was a lot quicker.

A few of the participants mentioned that they did not have the required equipment to enable employees to work remotely. This meant they had to procure the equipment and even that was a difficult task because of the pandemic and affected supply chains. One participant mentioned that technologically they were nowhere near prepared to enable their employees to work from home.

P11: "So now the thing was - getting people working from home, was very difficult infrastructure-wise, because now we had to sort out things, like VPN, so that they can connect and we didn't have enough VPN licenses. So it was hectic. Secondly, IT infrastructure-wise, people that were still working on desktops, most junior people."

The same participant also shared that not everyone had been “tech-knowledgeable”, therefore, many struggled with online collaboration tools, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams software. This meant that sometimes they would not mute and would cause disruptions during the meeting. The business had not prepared employees with proper remote working etiquette, such as muting when one is not contributing as well as the hand-raising function when you do want to contribute. Another participant shared that the business had been trying to train employees to move them from Skype to Microsoft Teams but did not get much buy-in. When the move to remote working happened, this was one of the focus areas the organisation had to quickly focus on to train employees.

P3: “We moved from having face-to-face meetings to having online meetings. so strangely enough, we always had Microsoft Teams, right. And we had business guy all the time. And people usually tell me used Skype for chatting because of the chat functionality and people never really use Teams we tried. IT guys tried to kind of entice people to use it and utilize teams in the and had to have training for people to be shown them how to actually use Teams”.

Above is another example of business unpreparedness and slow responses to what would have helped employees settle in quicker to the new ways of working. Seven out of the twelve participants stated that they were prepared with the tools of the trade required to work remotely.

P7: “Okay. So the benefit was that we had capacitated the majority of our staff, to have phones, 3g cards, including laptop, so literally anybody that works at their desk including administrators. So when COVID started, we weren't impacted in terms of tools of trade”.

Eight of the twelve participants highlighted the problem of internet data and internet connectivity in South Africa. A huge challenge during the transition was deciding how much data and cell phone allowance to give employees and how to manage usage. In addition, because of the poor infrastructure to support remote working and with employees working in different locations, some were affected by poor networks and connectivity issues. How can organisations manage and solve this? This was a huge challenge for organisations during the transition. It was such a prominent problem that three out of the twelve respondents shared that their businesses have

transitioned people back to work from the office. Most organisation responded by making provisions for their employees to ensure that they are connected from home, enabling them to work. They would give employees either a data allowance or Wifi dongles for connectivity.

P3: “We needed to make sure people had internet connectivity at home. So for some people who didn't have for example, they would put in claims, or those who didn't have allowances, we either give them allowances, if you've got Wi-Fi, we'll give the allowance if or if you've got internet connectivity. Those without we would make provision for a dongle, for example”.

Another issue which organisations had to manage was that not everyone had a conducive remote working space, and this varied to certain extents. For example, not everyone had an ergonomically appropriate desk or chair to work from at home. Some organisations responded by allowing employees to take their office equipment, chair, and/or desk, and use it remotely.

P3: “So there was the physical stuff, for example, a simple thing, like chair from an ergonomics perspective, it was important that if people wanted to use the chairs, they can come and take the company chairs, of course, there was a whole procurement process around making sure that we keep tabs on what equipment people have taken out of office”.

However, others do not have the space at all and live in crowded homes. Organisations had to realise that not everyone has the luxury of remote workspace or even an extra room to work from home. Therefore, some provisions were depending on their roles. Either the business accepted that some employees could not at all work during the “hard” lockdown periods, and when the lockdowns were lifted, they would allow them to go and work from the office, in compliance with social distancing requirements. This is the stark reality of our continent and how they can impact employee engagement in remote workers.

P11: “And another thing was the conduciveness of the area. Because not everybody has an extra room to make an office. Some people live with multiple family members. And there is actually no space to sit

down and say, Can I have a meeting? So that was also a challenge that people used to have. And some people live in townships where it's noisy outside, you might have your own room, but just next door to you is somebody who's playing the music, whatever. So it's very difficult to concentrate”.

5.3.2 Communication

Communication was mentioned by all participants as a transition management tool. This was done either through policies to help guide and inform on how to work remotely or through taskforces or task teams that were formed (and responsible for all business updates during the pandemic and lockdown). Participant nine (P9) mentioned that their organisation created a committee that had various stakeholders who would support the organisation with specific action points.

This committee consisted of people who could address issues, such as equipment required and the distribution thereof; work from home guidelines for line managers and employees; how to set up a workstation remotely; how to manage your time; and addressing support offerings, such as counsellors and psychologists. They also gave direction in terms of COVID-19 communication. Hence, there were various stakeholders from various parts of the business that formed the committee and drove this work and communication. This sounds ideal, especially for remote workers to be kept updated and abreast with what is going on in the organisation as well and in the environment that affects them.

Eight out of the twelve respondents also highlighted that there were policies that were put in place to guide employees. Additionally, there were also education and awareness initiatives to particularly help employees to manage themselves in remote working environments. This included how to manage their routines and how to manage their personal well-being by switching off and balancing work and life.

P2: “We had policies to address questions, such as so who do you inform when you are ill? How long should you stay home after you've been to a funeral? How long should you stay home after you've contracted? COVID-19? What else? You know, like rooms, obviously things, like rooms managing that how many people can be in a room at the same time”.

P5: “The other new policy that they extended is by affording people ten days extra of sick leave, if you tested positive for COVID. And you're sick that means you can apply for ten days of COVID sick leave.

The above policies and initiatives are reflect a responsive and caring organisation, which amends and adapts people policies according to emerging business conditions and what is happening in the environment. This drives employee engagement in the right direction.

Unfortunately, not all organisations were this responsive or communicated properly. Others communicated late, only after observing what other organisations were doing. P12 stated that they did not have policies or initiatives put in place. The rest of the interview went on to unearth many issues that resulted due to poor communication.

P12 went on to state: “So there weren't a lot of policies put into place. And I think it's because this is this was very new to them. And so, you know, there was a lot of teething problems”.

5.4 Results for research question 2

RQ2 - What have been the remote working challenges experienced by employees?

The aim of research question two (RQ2) is to understand the challenges that employees have experienced whilst working remotely, the impact thereof, and how organisations have responded to these challenges. This question helps to identify the challenges that may affect employee engagement and how organisations can ideally respond to them, eradicate them, and maintain employee engagement.

The main themes that emerged from the data analysis of this question are work-life balance; poor management; and employee well-being.

5.4.1 Work-life balance

One of the most popular responses to the challenges faced was that of work and life balance. All respondents shared how they struggled to manage to work from home and also manage their various life commitments. The lockdown introduced a new challenge of home-schooling for parents. This meant that most parents could not attend to their work the same way they would if they were at the office.

P8: “You know, if you've got to go attend to the kids, in the middle of a meeting, you can excuse yourself, if sometimes your children are interrupting meetings is there patience and also understanding? You know, I remember in my own team, somebody said, they've got to home school the whole morning. So they'll attend to the work schedule from the midday and to the evening. Yeah, and those are the examples of practical examples that I've heard”.

Family dynamics were also impacted as suddenly employees had to spend their days with family whilst working. Other family activities and time were also impacted by working from home during strange hours due to trying to balance everything.

P1 stated: “It seems the people who experienced the most challenges are people who have children, and school going children, because then you do not have help at home. Because then I think there were restrictions about movements, so you don't have the help or support that you normally get. And to now have to home-school the kids, so it's trying to balance between home-schooling and your own personal work. So you'd find that a lot of the people during the day they are busy trying to home-school their kids, then they start working at night when they put the kids down to bed. And it was it. Yeah, it was it was very difficult for a lot of the employees that have families. And I think most of us know for other things, I think it's just a family dynamic when you're not used to being home 24/7”.

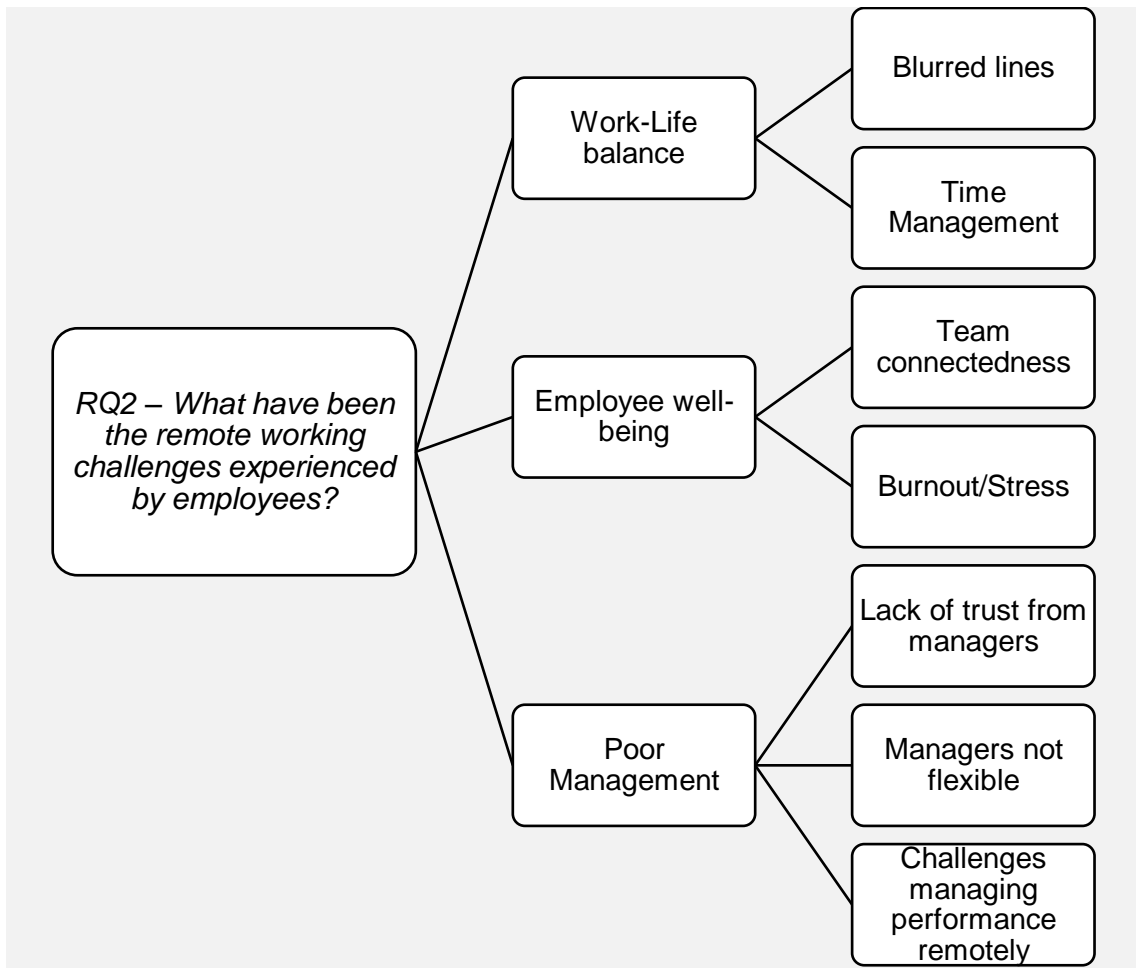


Figure 6: RQ2 Findings

The participants also shared that employees had struggled with “switching off”. As a result of working from home, there were “blurred lines” on start and stop times. Most employees were now “living at work” because they found that they would work longer hours than they would at the office. The break times presented by driving to time and having lunch with colleagues were suddenly non-existent.

In addition, employees working at different times of the day and this flexibility posed a collaboration challenge. When one was online their teammate may be offline and only respond late in the evening. Therefore, there were team dynamics that were also challenged by remote working. Participant seven (P7) stated that they saw an increase in grievances, as a result of miscommunications and the negative impact on ways of working and team dynamics. Many people struggled with being physically away from their colleagues for such a long time and missed the team connection.

P7: “I think I was sitting with about five grievances. And I believe they actually got worse because obviously, the dynamic change around

miscommunication, you know, mixed messaging, who said what, how people are frustrated, anything is an issue everything and anything is an issue. So a lot of it was really people not being okay, health wise, psychologically, which then impacts team dynamic team cohesion, dysfunction, that sort of thing”.

5.4.2 Employee well-being

The challenges mentioned above impacted the well-being of employees. Employees experience burnout and stress, as well as other mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety. The uncertainty of the environment and pandemic as well as the loss of lives experienced added to the mental health challenges that employees faced. Many employees reported that they became the sole breadwinner after their spouses and loved ones lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.

P9: “Personal stress became a big, big challenge and the personal stresses because, you know, we are younger population. So it's about the impact that the COVID had on the family members, the impact of family members losing their jobs, and the financial implications for them as a young consultant employee that had to take on additional financial burdens.

In addition to the work-life balance challenges described above, all twelve participants stated that there were a lot of online meetings and those would consume a lot of time. After these meetings employees were expected to then work and implement the outcomes of the meetings, leading to them working longer hours. This is not sustainable and has a direct impact on the employee’s overall well-being.

P7: “So, what we started seeing was people were started falling sick. And by sick, I'm talking more around sicknesses related to fatigue, right? Because, you know, there were a lot of meetings”.

Nine of the participants stated that their organisations responded by offering their employees employee assistance programmes (EAP), psychologists/counsellors, and other support, such as webinars and information sessions on how to manage their well-being.

P9: “But more on the fact that I can set my boundaries, like I'm working longer, harder hours to me seem to be working. So sustainability comes in. And that's where we would implement well-being webinars to help them in terms of anxiety in terms of work life integration, in terms of, like, other webinars have beat the burnout. So we continued putting in lamentation of webinars to support them in how they manage or support themselves during this period”.

The other three participants stated that their organisations either struggled to support their employees through the challenges or did not even attempt to do so. One participant stated that there was not a lot of support across the board from leadership because everybody was stuck and caught-up in the challenge. This, again, contributes to the challenge of leadership to manage and lead when faced with complexity. The inability to support employees highlights a huge gap in the leadership skills required to manage remotely. P10 indicated that no support was provided for employees because it was not the business' focus and the focus was on keeping the business alive during the pandemic.

P10: “There is nothing honestly, they can do. Look, I'm looking at the culture of the company as themselves. So how can I put it? It's a sales driven company for sales given and you know, well, most of sales driven companies. Employee motivation, including mental wellness and that is not top of that list”.

This highlights the importance of culture as it speaks to our ways of working, behaviours, and values. By valuing profit over people, P10's organisation did not see the need to support their employees and their well-being as they shifted to remote working.

5.4.3 Poor management

According to all the participants, poor management was a huge issue. Managers were unequipped and struggled with issues of managing employees remotely. A popular challenge was the managing of productivity and performance from a distance. Many managers did not know how to do this without visual supervision of their employees. As a result, managers required many online meetings for almost every task and interaction with employees. This increased the time spent in

meetings, requiring employees to spend more time after working hours doing actual work. This largely contributed to issues of employee well-being as depicted in the information from interviewed the participants.

The issue of trust was also highlighted as a great challenge that frustrated many employees as managers reportedly started micromanaging employees. Managers also created anxiety as they reportedly had no boundaries and would send emails very late at night, thereby creating an impression that they expected employees to also be working that late. The concern from the HR professionals interviewed is that management was failing to model the ideal behaviours that contribute to a healthy remote working environment. By failing to respect the employees' time boundaries and not allowing flexibility, managers contributed negatively to low morale and job dissatisfaction.

P9: "And then the other third one was now you no longer just the worker, you are now having to be a cook. And kids, teacher and, you know, breakfast lunch supper. Hmm. So that impact was all too overwhelming for a lot of people. So there was a need for more flexibility as employees could no longer just dedicate saying eight to five, but having to stretch the day".

One participant mentioned that their organisation already had a challenge of weak managers, which was exacerbated by remote working. As a result, they were either absent when they were required, or they failed to lead appropriately. When employees needed to hear from them for guidance and assurance during the pandemic, they too were figuring out what was going on and were not engaging employees. By creating psychological safety, managers make it possible for employees to discuss any and all issues. In the absence thereof, they create the risk of missing important people issues, such as their struggles, well-being challenges, work frustrations, and other issues that could hinder their performance.

P3: "Managers must talk to the employees more, you know, because people are feeling very, very uncertain".

Regarding supporting employees with wellness initiatives, one respondent made the following remark from their 'traditional' CEO:

P7: "I mean, for example, HR, we put together many proposals to go and they shut it down because, like I said, He's traditional. So his view is why am I paying these people? What's the point?"

5.5 Results for research question 3

RQ3 - How has employee engagement been impacted by the change to remote working?

The objective of this question is to understand what employee engagement looked like in the organisation before the pandemic, and what it looks like now (in remote working). It also aims to understand how the challenges faced by the employees have affected the organisation and how those ultimately impacted employee engagement.

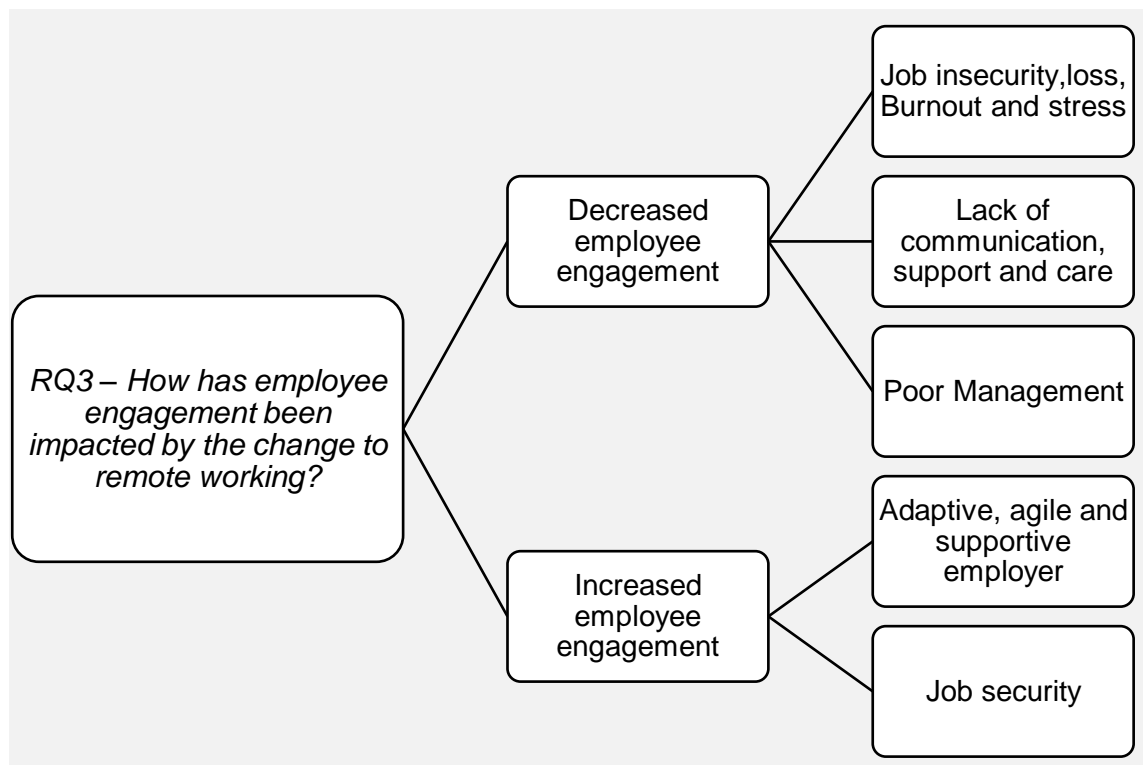


Figure 7: RQ3 Findings

5.5.1 Decreased employee engagement

Eight out of the twelve respondents reported decreased and low employee engagement since the change to remote working. It is important to note that only two participants confirmed that their organisations had conducted surveys to measure the engagement. The rest were responding based on feedback from employees on

the challenges they had faced and the increase in employee well-being issues reported. The rest of the participants stated that they did not conduct surveys as they reportedly had many other pressing issues.

P3: “We had a very good overall engagement survey score. So we did our employee engagement survey every two years. So when COVID hit us, it was year two. So we actually we end up not doing it year two, because obviously, there was a lot going on”.

The same participant mentioned the shift in focus from employee engagement to employee well-being and measuring that and supporting employees. It highlights the importance of focussing on employee (remote workers) well-being and mental health. There is something to be said about this and how this may be the driver of employee engagement.

P3: “We did dipsticks, like, you know, How you feeling today? And, you know, where you finding yourself? Do you want to come back to work, you know, just to measure people's levels of anxiety. All of a sudden, we were not so bothered about engagement, we were more interested about mental well-being and health. And are you just okay? Like, are you okay? Are you are you coping. So it's so funny, because the organization just changed in terms of the focus, it was not so much about, I want an engaged employee who's going to deliver work, it was just about, are you okay? Are you surviving? Or are you healthy, because we also lost a lot of employees, right?”

Most respondents highlighted that the impact on engagement was mainly a result of job insecurities, loss of lives during the pandemic, burnout, and stress. Employees are said to have been living in fear of losing their jobs once remote working commenced because of the pandemic. Others suddenly became the main breadwinner when their spouses or loved ones were retrenched or lost their jobs. This impacted heavily on employees as they had to carry the financial burdens of their families, all whilst worrying about losing their own jobs. There were also employees suffering from survivors' remorse after organisations retrenched their colleagues. This also impacted employee engagement.

P2: "There's less people. We've been through interview process, people have got the jobs, how do they feel about that is there survivor's guilt. I think there's still going to be quite a bit to do, but I really cannot necessarily speak on where we where they are now".

The loss of lives due to Covid-19, as well as the loss of loved ones and colleagues, was another contributor to the decrease in employee engagement. Many struggled with showing up and engaging at work as the world experienced great loss and most were also impacted personally.

P11: "We took our wellness seriously, before it was like we're taking numbers. But now we actually made an effort to say, hey, people really need this, people are going through a lot. And despite us losing our colleagues, people actually lost family members. There's lots of people that lost family members, between I mean last year up to now. So wellness was one of our biggest, biggest, biggest responses".

Burnout from the "blurred lines" presented by remote working, the struggles with work-life balance, and the long hours of working with no defined start and stop times resulted in low engagement according to the respondents.

Lack of communication, support, and care was highlighted as another reason for low employee engagement. Even in organisations that had historically had high levels of employee engagement, the data indicates that the absence of organisations keeping employees updated with information, or organisations that did not focus on supporting employees with their remote working needs, saw a decrease in employee engagement. This makes sense as when employees have no information and feel undervalued by their employers, it is natural for them to withdraw from their jobs in one way or another. Participant six (P6) shared how their organisation implemented salary cuts, however, the organisation continued to make a profit and employees were very unhappy. The lack of information left a gap that employees filled with negative assumptions and ultimately these negatively impact employee engagement.

P6: "So a lot of people are very demotivated. And they also didn't understand. Well, they did understand that sales are low, but they still don't understand. But we're still making somehow money. It was it was

really a challenge to get everyone to understand the thinking behind this decision that we have to sacrifice now in order for everyone to still have jobs retrench going forward”.

The above is an example of an organisation making a decision for long-term sustainability but failing to communicate it effectively.

This point leads to poor management, which was an area that was raised by the participants as a reason for the decreased engagement. The ineffectiveness of management in a complex and tough environment, the lack of adequate information, and the lack of support from management to their employees negatively impact engagement.

5.5.2 Increased employee engagement

The participants that reported high or increased employee engagement alluded to organisations that were adaptive to the changes in the environment and responded speedily and well. They also stated that such employers were agile and therefore implemented remote working successfully. They also had supportive managers that were in touch with their teams, engaged them frequently, and offered support and flexibility as they worked remotely. The focus on employees also emphasises shared value, where employers realise that a healthy workforce is an engaged workforce, which results in positive business performance. The data also indicates that employees are more motivated by well-being initiatives and employee-focussed management than money or rewards.

P11: “So, before, employees’ engagement was basically based on reward, you know, but now it has changed that, and let's take care of itself off each other, you know, let's take care of our wellness and see us grow together as the company and the employees as well”.

An interesting insight from the data was that those employees who experienced job security also had a seemingly high level of engagement. The researcher believes that this could be because of the tough environment the pandemic has presented. With many people losing their jobs, those remaining employed were grateful and worked extra hard to maintain job security.

P11: "It is strange, because now they are engaged. I don't know whether it is because they know that a lot of companies are downsizing as retrenchments going on, you know, or maybe as management being there for them, you know, throughout this COVID process or period is actually proven to them, that it goes beyond your duties and responsibilities. You know, it just goes beyond that. And, yeah, yes, I don't want to say it was a blessing in disguise.

5.6 Results for research question 4

RQ4 - What are the critical success factors in achieving high employee engagement in remote working environments?

Research question four (RQ4) was formulated to understand the lessons learnt in organisations with remote workers on how their processes could have impacted employee engagement, as well as how to improve remote working to increase employee engagement going forward. It also aims to understand what critical factors are required to achieve employee engagement in remote workers. Below are the four themes that highlight the critical factors identified for organisations to achieve and maintain employee engagement.

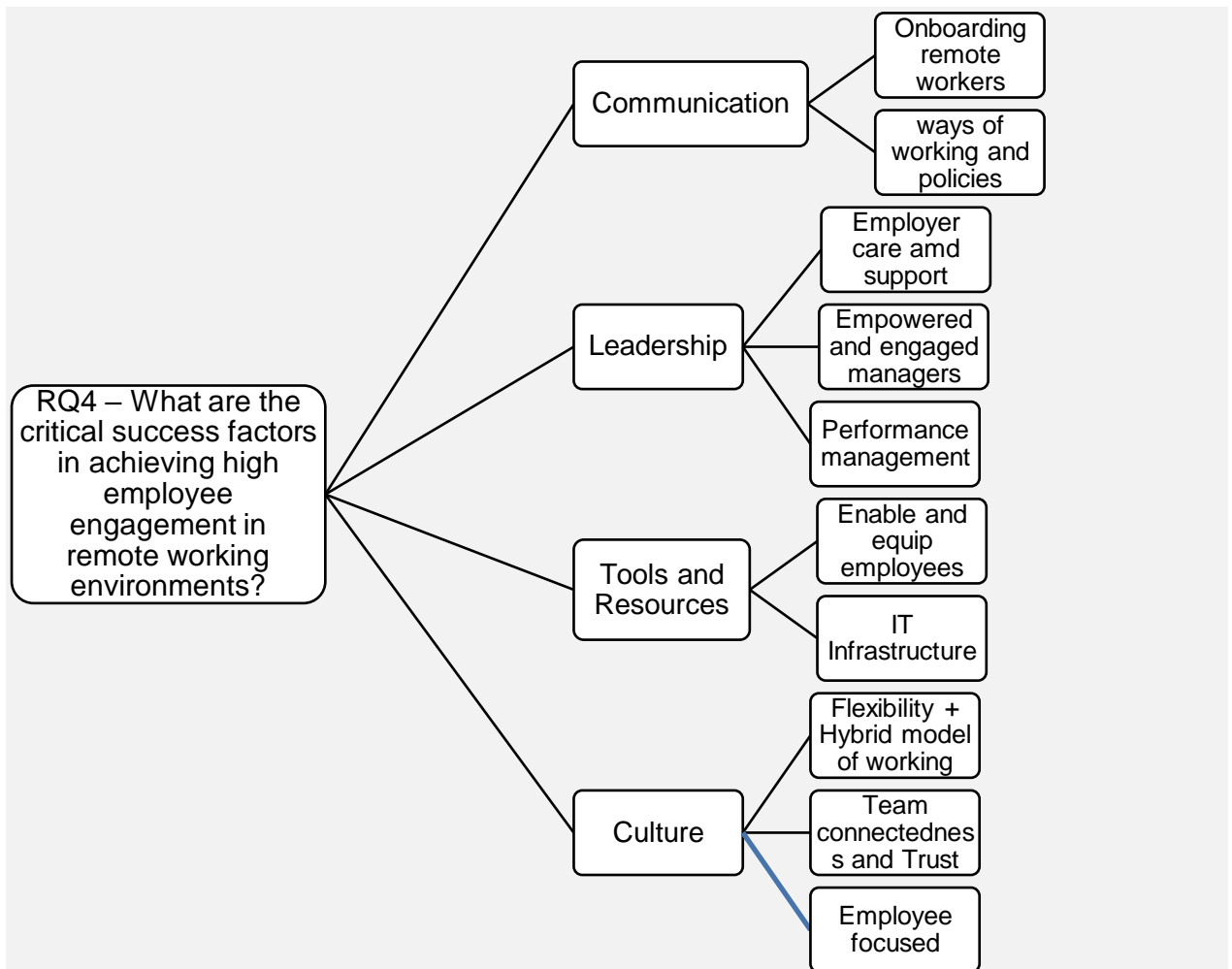


Figure 8: RQ4 Findings

5.6.1 Communication

Communication was highlighted by all participants as an important factor for engagement in remote workers. In fact, most of twelve respondents mentioned communication first before listing the other factors. On-boarding remote workers were raised as important, for new and existing employees. Two participants mentioned the importance of creating an impactful and memorable on-boarding for employees, especially for remote workers. More effort is required in this regard as employees will need to appreciate culture and ways of working without being physical present at the offices of the organisation. Effective communication aids employees to successfully adapt and quickly assimilate into the new working environment and adapted work culture.

P3: “I think for me, actually, and I forgot to mention it somewhere in your questions, but it would also it would be on-boarding. I think as HR

practitioners, we know that on-boarding is critical, but it's that much more critical when it's remote work. You know, the company would have to find creative ways of revamping and creating a memorable on-boarding experience. But it doesn't only have to be memorable. It's it would have to be one way you are providing the critical information that's going to enable this individual to be able to navigate”.

For existing employees, it is important to have clear and constant communication with remote workers. Participants maintained that this helps employees feel a sense of belonging when they are in the know of what is going on in the business. Policies and clarity on ways of working remotely were also mentioned as they create awareness of expectations from the organisation. Open lines of communication also allow employees to openly share challenges, which can be responded to swiftly by the organisation. This is reflected in P3's statement below:

“I think there has to be a conversation around well-being. Because it's health, physical health, but with mental health, because in the last 18 months, what we've seen is a rise in mental health issues. And when you have an employee who is not ok, whether physically or mentally, they can't perform, they can't be engaged, they are not able to be productive. So it's about creating that platform and space for people to say I'm not okay, today, I actually am tired, I need any time out”.

In addition, silence or irregular communication breeds anxiety in employees as shared by one participant. P1 went on to say that over-communication is better than it's opposite, especially in such a volatile and uncertain time — employees need to hear from their leaders.

5.6.2 Leadership

Employer care and support was a recurring response with regards to the leadership's role in achieving employee engagement in remote workers. The ability to manage and support employees remotely featured as a huge gap in the information collected and is emphasised as being necessary for a healthy remote workforce. When leaders are in touch with reality and the impact it has on employees, e.g. COVID-19, and by engaging employees genuinely and empathetically, they show that they value their talent. The impacts on employee well-being were discussed and, therefore, the

question that remains is what is the role of leadership in mitigating this risk from negatively impacting performance at an individual and organisational level?

It is clear from the interviews that managers must be equipped to effectively manage employees; shift their traditional mind-sets and approaches to adapt to current issues; and show sympathy, empathy, compassion, and support for their employees. The ability for managers to build and maintain authentic relationships and care for their employees has a great effect on employee engagement according to P2.

P2: “I think it's the relationship with the line that is probably the most critical. So yes, everybody else can be communicating, but the relationship with your line manager has to be quite rock solid”.

Empowered and engaged managers are also critical to achieving employee engagement as they know what they are doing, how to do it, and guide their teams appropriately. The findings from the twelve interviews reflect that one of the main frustrations for employees was incompetent managers who were not equipped to manage remote workers, performance, and productivity. As a result, they frustrated employees by scheduling lots of meetings, thereby exemplifying their mistrust for remote employees. This also highlights a gap in training and development for managers. This must be addressed with regards to remote management techniques and practices.

Performance management was also highlighted as an important focus for managers. This is said to include clear targets, regular feedback, and management of employees' output. With employees working remotely, feedback helps guide them on how they are performing and areas of improvement requiring their attention. It also gives direction and creates alignment between a manager and an employee. P3 mentions that their organisation could have been proactive in equipping managers with the capability to manage from a distance.

“How you manage people remotely could have been dealt with sooner rather than later. And to also capacitate, and empower our managers or leaders to deal with complexity. And to manage people in remote working.

5.6.3 Tools and Resources

Tools and resources for remote working were identified as a challenge for South African organisations. With poor or infrastructure affecting internet connectivity and the high cost of cellular/mobile data, remote working enlarges the complexity of the arrangement. Lack of conducive workspaces is also identified as a hindrance to remote working, which may require an investment from organisations to adequately equip employees. Without proper tools and resources, employees struggle to work effectively and efficiently from home. In fact, two participants mentioned that they eventually returned to the office once lockdown regulations were relaxed by the government. They returned to the office because they were not adequately equipped to work remotely.

5.6.4 Culture

Culture was mentioned in all the interviews as a critical factor in supporting the achievement of employee engagement. The shared belief is that with the right culture, managers and employees do not have to struggle with issues, such as trust, flexibility, and productivity. This must be incorporated into the work environment to support the success of remote working.

P1: “Behind the success of remote working is trust. So if you can build trust within your team, then you have employees who are open about the challenges that they're facing. And also, management who are accommodating to different working needs, or working cycles, we cannot stick to a standard nine to five for everyone. Because working from home, that doesn't necessarily work with everyone. But that doesn't mean to say because someone didn't work from nine to five, they don't commit the eight hours or ten hours needed from them in a day”.

5.7 Conclusion

The results from the twelve interview questions are presented under each of the four research questions in this Chapter. Ten themes emerged in the data from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants. Chapter 6 discusses in detail the findings shared above.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Introduction

This Chapter serves as a discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 5, concerning the literature review in Chapter 2. The main aim of this study is to understand the drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments. The researcher discusses the results per research question, comparing and contrasting it with the information in the literature review for a robust conclusion to each question. The research findings have highlighted some imperative drivers of employee engagement for remote workers.

6.2 Discussion of results for Research question 1

RQ1: How did organisations manage the transition to remote working?

Research question one (RQ1) seeks to understand the transition of organisations from office-based work arrangements to remote working arrangements. The aim is to understand the triumphs and challenges experienced and to assess the policies and initiatives that were put in place, as well as what they were trying to achieve. The researcher believes that understanding this would highlight what needs to be in place to render remote working successful. It also serves to understand the lessons learnt for organisations during the transition and how those instances impacted engagement. To investigate the abovementioned objectives, the following interview questions were posed:

- (a) How did your organisation manage the process of transitioning employees to working from home?
- (b) What were the challenges faced by the organisation during the transition process?
- (c) What new policies and initiatives were put in place and what were they trying to achieve

The main themes and constructs that emerge from the data are the importance of business preparedness and communication in transitioning employees to remote working arrangements.

6.2.1 Business preparedness

The study reveals that it is important for organisations to be prepared for the complexity that comes with remote working. This includes ensuring that employees have sufficient tools and resources required to work effectively and efficiently. The absence of these causes frustration, which can lead to low engagement. This finding is supported by literature and the JD-R model (2015), which emphasises the importance of sufficient resources to meet the demands of a job and to maintain employee engagement. Gallup (2013) also supports this finding. They state that when employees do not have the right support or tools to work remotely they become psychologically unattached as their basic needs are neglected.

The speed of response to the ever-changing business environment was raised by the participants as a requirement for them to perform meaningfully. This raises the issue of business agility. As most of the participants corroborating the unpreparedness of their organisations in facilitating remote working environments, the issue of agility goes beyond adequate tools and resources. Agility is not highlighted or well supported by the literature review — although its importance is clear in this study.

Conducive workspaces, reliable power, and internet connectivity are also identified as a challenge for remote workers. This is supported by Osoba and Linder (2021), who also identified the same factors as hindrances to remote working arrangements. This is also the harsh reality in the South African context, where this study was conducted. As a result of poor connectivity, high costs of data, unreliable power connections, and conducive spaces in one's home, remote working becomes a very complex problem for organisations.

6.2.2 Communication

This study identifies communication as being critical for transitioning organisations to remote working. The implementation of policies and taskforces were popular responses in terms of guiding employees and keeping them informed. This is supported by the study by Gallup (2013), which stated that frequent communication ensures productivity and engagement in remote workers. This is also supported by Wang, Liu, Qian and Parker (2020) who found ineffective communication as a key challenge for remote workers. Gupta and Chowdry (2018) also maintain that healthy

communication allows for employees to open up and engage in how they feel and also allows them to have a say on how the organisation can do better.

6.2.3 Conclusion to research question 1

Research question one (RQ1) shows that business preparedness and communication are the most important aspects of transitioning employees from office-based working to remote working. This is mostly supported by the literature review conducted, with a gap in the literature on the role of organisations' agility in business preparedness for effective remote working environments.

6.3 Discussion of results for research question 2

RQ2: What have been the remote working challenges experienced by employees?

This question seeks to understand the challenges employees have been facing whilst remote working. The importance of this question is that it unearths issues that would make organisations aware of how to support their remote workers and facilitate successful remote working arrangements. Depending on how the organisation responds to these challenges, this will impact the employee's engagement either positively or negatively, as already discussed.

To investigate the abovementioned objectives, the following interview questions were posed:

- (a) What have been the challenges for employees working from home?
- (b) How has this impacted the employees?
- (c) How has the organisation responded to these challenges?

The themes and constructs that are derived from the data include work-life balance; employee well-being; and poor management.

6.3.1 Work-life balance

As discussed in the findings, the issues of "blurred lines" and time management were highlighted as the biggest challenges for remote workers. Blurred lines are the inability to separate work and personal life, thereby causing frustrations from each

area to spill into the other. This is because of failing to “switch off” and set boundaries that allow employees to focus on each area appropriately. An assertion can be made that this is because they did not have the right support from their organisation and the lack of leaders modelling the right remote working behaviours. Therefore, employees are spending more time than usual working. Elshaiekh, Hassan and Abdallah (2018) support this assertion and finding, and also contend that, as a result, remote workers struggle with time management.

This finding was expected and is further supported by Flores (2019) as alluded to in the literature review; remote workers face the challenge of creating the necessary break between work. Such breaks are important and easy to take in an office-based job as colleagues can encourage each other to take breaks and often take them together and are necessary for engagement (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli, 2001). For the remote worker, the findings indicate that when they are supposed to be taking breaks they are usually using that time to work or do other personal errands, hence, not getting any time to rest. This negatively adds to the next construct, which is employee well-being. This is a challenge as most literature asserts that remote working provides the opportunity for flexibility, balance, and autonomy (Vital smarts, 2020).

Beigi, Shirmohammadi, and Stewart (2018) opine that there are varying and inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between remote working and work-life balance. They find that remote workers require interventions to assist them in balancing both worlds (Beigi, Shirmohammadi, and Stewart, 2018). Therefore, there is an opportunity for organisations to support employees in striking and maintaining the perceived work-life balance, which is attached to remote working.

6.3.2 Employee well-being

The challenges identified in this research relate to employee well-being, including burnout and stress, as well as challenges, such as depression and anxiety. Duxbury, Stevenson and Higgins (2018) also find this to be true and maintain that issues related to remote working and personal life balance result in stress, specifically around job-related stress and work overload from this act in a multi-role environment. The pandemic and the loss experienced also contribute to some of these challenges. In addition, the increase in online meetings and back-to-back meetings consumes a great amount of time and leads to employees feeling fatigued.

All of these factors negatively impact the remote employees' overall well-being. This is largely supported by the literature review. Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner and Schaufeli (2001) refer to the above physical, social, or organisational factors of the job, which require physical and psychological effort, as job demands. The results also indicate that some organisations provide supported in terms of an employee assistance programme. Others, however, do not. Support or tools for employees to handle the well-being challenges they face are referred to as job resources and are positive as they help reduce stress and increase engagement, as discussed by Shaik and Makhecha (2019).

Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner and Schaufeli (2001) state that when such support is insufficient to meet job demands (as found in this research data) it leads to withdrawal, which in the long-term manifests as disengagement. According to the results, another key element of employee well-being and support is expected to come from the manager. Therefore, below is a discussion on poor management, which is a big contributor to the challenges faced by employees who work remotely. Bedarkar and Pandita (2014) also support the well-being of employees by stating that as companies strive to survive in turbulent times and competitive business environments, the well-being and engagement of their employees will be their competitive advantage.

De-la-Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez (2021) state that the world as we know it has changed and employees are battling a host of psychosocial issues, which would affect their productivity and output if they do not get the necessary and appropriate support from their organisations. Parker and Griffin (2011) make an important addition to support the importance of employee well-being and engagement — the struggles of one employee are not the same as those of their colleagues. Therefore, even though an organisation may offer an employee assistance programme or financial support, if it is not what an employee needs (or if it does not satisfy their direct needs) then it is an ineffective intervention.

This is evident from this research where one organisation supported staff by offering psychologists and financial assistance; however, decreased engagement was still reported. This indicates the role of the manager to investigate what their employees are struggling with and tailor responses accordingly.

6.3.3 Poor management

Poor management is evident in several areas as raised by the participants. Managers were said to lack the ability to manage complex situations, thereby frustrating employees and contributing to disengagement. This assertion is supported by Parker, Knight and Keller (2020) who claim that Covid-19 has thrust many leaders into remote management, which requires a different skill set than face-to-face management; a skillset that many leaders do not possess. It is also highlighted that they struggle to manage productivity and performance remotely, which results in little to no feedback for the employee and increases a lack of clarity on expectations. The long meetings and increase in online meetings, as a result of lacking trust in employees or failing to manage flexibly, are a great challenge for employees. Employers' lack of boundaries infringes on employees' personal time, affecting their work-life balance as well as well-being. This is supported by the literature and expected by the researcher. Parker, Knight and Keller (2020) assert that managers who cannot "see" their direct reports sometimes struggle to trust that their employees are indeed working.

Kirchner, Ipsen and Hansen, (2021) also support the claim that managers are struggling because of the new and complex management experience. Their struggles are visible in the challenges faced by remote working employees. Kirchner, Ipsen and Hansen, (2021) also believe that it is critical for managers to learn and understand how to manage remotely. Concerning top performance management, Cascio (2000) echoes similar sentiments to those of the participants and states that managers are required to define, facilitate, and encourage performance, thus, creating clarity on expectations and higher chances for engagement.

Many employees are struggling to perform at the level they used to before the pandemic and before remote working was institutionalised in their organisations. As a result, this requires a discerning manager, who leads with empathy to be able to identify these issues and to be supportive. Otherwise, as found in this study, manager mistrust grows and leads to micromanagement and further hinders positive employee engagement (Parker, Knight and Keller, 2020).

In addition, one of the three factors in the theory of engagement (Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer, 2005) highlights achievement as an important driver of employee

engagement. They describe achievement as the need to do important, useful, and value-adding tasks, which employees are proud of and are recognised for. This makes the role of performance management and ongoing feedback very important to driving employee engagement in remote working environments.

6.3.4 Conclusion to research question 2

The discussion finds similarities between the finding for research question two (RQ2) and the literature review conducted. The main challenges that employees experience in remote working are also highlighted and supported by theory.

6.4 Discussion of results for research question 3

RQ3: How has employee engagement been impacted by the change to remote working?

The importance of this question lies in understanding how employee engagement levels are impacted by the shift to remote working. This question aims to highlight the real differences between office-based and remote working and how those differences impact engagement. Again, this information will aid managers in appreciating what is crucial for engagement to be realised and sustained in remote working environments. The questions that were posed to the participants are as follow:

- (a) How would you describe employee engagement in your organisation before the pandemic and remote working?
- (b) How have the challenges faced by employees impacted employee engagement?
- (c) How has this impacted the organisation?

There was a mixed response from participants as some either experienced decreased employee engagement and others an increase in employee engagement.

6.4.1 Decreased employee engagement

Most of the participants indicated that decreased employee engagement was the impact of the challenges faced by remote workers. Job insecurities due to the pandemic and fear of retrenchments impact negatively on employee engagement. In

addition, the burnout and stress due to the poor ways of working experienced by some remote workers also impact engagement. Duxbury, Stevenson, and Higgins (2018) attribute such burnout and stress experienced by employees working from home to the multi-role environment. This highlights the need for employee support and communication from organisations to empower employees with the right information and help put them at ease.

As discussed under heading 6.2.2, and as shared by the participants, an organisation that communicates helps remote employees feel connected to the organisation and aware of what is taking place, especially during a time of uncertainty, such as the pandemic. Sirota and Klein (2014) support this and affirm that when there is effective communication and collaboration, this enriches the employee experience by creating a sense of community and belonging through healthy, pleasant, and transparent relationships with peers and leaders. This translates into engagement and morale amongst remote employees.

Poor management is also highlighted as the main contributor to the decrease in employee engagement. As discussed under heading 6.3.3, there is a great role that managers can play to support, motivate, empower, and lead remote workers effectively. Therefore, the literature supports the findings as discussed and emphasises the urgency of the interventions described, in achieving remote working employee engagement.

6.4.2 Increased employee engagement

It is found that adaptive and agile organisations that had responded quickly to the changes in the environment and supported their employees during the times of uncertainty experienced increased employee engagement. As previously mentioned, there was no literature reviewed to support the theme of agile and adaptive organisations — although this is an obvious imperative for successful change in organisation in today's environment.

Supportive managers, who afforded employees flexibility as they worked remotely, also contributed to the increased engagement. Bakker (2010) alludes to this flexibility and its benefits by maintaining that it is to the organisation's benefit when employees take initiative to craft their work demands and resources to meet their needs. As a result of employees having different work and life commitments, allowing them to

tailor their work is evidence of support from their organisation, resulting in increased engagement. It is also evident that even though some of these organisations froze salary increases and bonuses, or even cut salaries, employees were still engaged if well-being initiatives and support were in place. This indicates that employees value employers that care for their well-being and appreciate their valued.

The literature supports this finding and Wellins, Bernthal and Phelps (2005) state that employees will show up in their roles and are enthusiastic if they feel valued and have a sense of belonging. As result of feeling like a part of the organisation, they give their best for the success of the company. Therefore, a sense of belonging and making employees feel valued is imperative for an engaged remote worker. Similarly, Aon Hewitt (2015) also lists a sense of belonging that results in loyal employee and increased employee retention.

6.4.3 Conclusion to research question 3

The findings for research question three (RQ3) are greatly supported by the literature review. The main challenges that employees experience in remote working are highlighted and are supported by theory. However, the theme of agile and adaptive organisations and their role in employee engagement is also raised and the researcher acknowledges that there is not sufficient theory in the literature review to support this finding.

6.5 Discussion of results for research question 4

RQ4: What are the critical success factors in achieving high employee engagement in remote working environments?

This last question contributes greatly to understanding the critical factors required to achieve employee engagement amongst remote workers from an HR perspective. Because of the recent challenges they witnessed and experienced in their organisations with remote working, they are an ideal group of participants to share these factors. In addition, the findings are important for organisations to understand what to prioritise for remote workers; and what is relevant and what is not. The questions that were posed to the participants were as follow:

- (a) What could your organisation have done better to maintain or increase engagement during the transition?

- (b) How can remote working be improved to increase employee engagement?
- (c) What are the critical factors required to achieve employee engagement in remote workers?

Dixit and Ranjan (2020) state that “employees in the modern era constantly seek organisations which provide and actively improve the levers of engagement which provides them with both purpose and satisfaction of meaningful contribution” (p. 943). Therefore, this question is of great importance. The main critical factors raised in this study are communication, leadership, tools and resources, and culture. This is discussed below in comparison to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

6.5.1 Communication

Communication is once again mentioned as a critical factor or driver for employee engagement in remote working environments. Although this is discussed under heading 6.2.2, it is important to add that most participants shared the same sentiments around clear and constant communication, stating that this created clarity of expectation, alignment of goals, and removes any uncertainty which remote workers may experience. This includes efforts to properly onboard remote workers, new and existing, to the ways of remote working within the organisations. In addition, Elshaiekh, Hassan and Abdallah, (2018) state that employees have highlighted that loneliness from a lack of contact with colleagues and separation in the workplace made them feel “left out”.

Kaushik and Guleria, (2020) add that the challenge of communication gaps is a result of less contact with colleagues and clients leading to feeling disconnected from colleagues. Therefore, communication helps bridge this gap of feeling disconnected. Whether it is informal online check-ins or team sessions to share information, work-related or not, this communication creates a feeling of belonging. It not only unifies the team but also creates opportunities for clarifying any uncertainties or fears that one may be experiencing, alone in their remote location. An example from the results is that many employees report struggling with fear of losing their jobs or a fear of the unknown. Communication is the ideal and appropriate tool to aid employees by sharing the organisation’s plans.

As stated by Gallup (2013), there is no such thing as over communicating and this is required to ensure productivity and engagement, especially in remote workers. When employees are involved “physically, cognitively and emotionally” (as Kahn (1990) put it), then they will be engaged. Communication is also alluded to by Taneja, Sewell and Odom (2015). They refer to engagement as a two-way dependency with both the employee and the organisation having a role to play. As such, organisations ought to communicate effectively and the employee ought to do the same.

Therefore, communication creates some psychological safety for employees to be able to also open up and share their concerns, fears, joys, and all-round feedback, which can advance the relationship with their organisations to thrive. Regular feedback — a form of communication — is also raised in the literature review as an employee need, which must be met so that they are psychologically attached and engaged (Gallup, 2013). Therefore, all the issues found in the study around communication as a driver for employee engagement are supported by the literature and makes it one of the non-negotiables for engagement in remote working environments.

6.5.2 Leadership

The research findings highlight the common theme of the impact of leadership on employee engagement. Osbourne and Hammoud (2017) support this by stating that employee engagement is a result of leadership. The research provides substantial evidence that when leaders lack empathy and requisite management skills to manage remotely, they negatively impact employee engagement. Lee (2018) supports this and maintains that need to find ways to respond to an employee’s changing and evolving needs, and the cost of disengaged employees, is high. Bakker, Albrecht, and Leiter (2011) maintain that leaders need to be more empathetic and employee-centric. All participants shared that employer care and support through leaders, as well as empathy and the skills to manage performance in remote workers, is essential. Gallup (2020) supports the findings and asserts that leaders are the drivers of employee engagement through their relationships with employees and how they manage employees.

The results indicate that some leaders still operate in a traditional manner, requiring employees to be online as a “sign” that they are working, or for employees to work until late. This shows a clear lack of trust in remote workers. In turn, this is a reflection

of a leadership that has not evolved with the times nor adapted their style of managing in this complex environment. As such, this frustrates and diminishes the employee's morale and energy, and, ultimately, low engagement is the result. Komm, Pollner, Schaninger and Sikka (2021) assert that there is a pressing need in organisations for improved leadership to create adaptive systems for remote workers.

6.5.3 Tools and resources

Aon Hewitt (2015) mentions an enabling infrastructure as a driver for employee engagement. Similarly, in this study, the findings emphasise the importance of enabling remote workers with the tools and resources required to work remotely. The absence of such resources negatively impacts the employee's engagement. As indicated in the literature, South Africa is plagued with challenges that make remote working difficult. Osoba and Linder (2021) mention poor internet connectivity and power outages as examples. Other participants stated that they did not have access to technologies to allow them to collaborate or to be able to work efficiently (for example, not enough VPN licences). The basic needs refer to the basic materials and equipment provided (Harter, Schmidt, and Keyes (2003). Therefore, there is sufficient support from the literature on the importance of sufficient resources to support the engagement of a remote worker.

6.5.4 Culture

Culture, according to Flint and Hearn (2015), is the way of life in an organisation, including the ways of working and interacting, values, behaviours, and norms. The culture of an organisation is what informs the way things are done. The culture elements that are highlighted in the study are discussed in this chapter. These include a supportive and employee-focussed management and organisation; flexible ways of working; team connectedness; and trust. The participants raised these as the main cultural elements required to achieve employee engagement in remote working environments.

Aon Hewitt (2015) refers to culture as the company practices and maintains that these form a part of the foundation required to drive employee engagement. This is even more important when employees are physically disconnected, and the only connection is their organisational culture and how the organisation maintains those

working practices even remotely. The literature supports this assertion and Sirota and Klein (2014) establish that the employee experience of camaraderie is realised through relationships with peers and leaders, which creates a sense of community and belonging. The role of leadership in cultivating culture is highlighted in the above statement. However, it also shows the importance of the role of the employee in also supporting the organisational culture.

6.5.5 Conclusion to research question 4

Research question four (RQ4) is a critical question to anchor the purpose of the study. The findings show that the critical factors required to achieve employee engagement in remote working environments are, to a large extent, covered in the literature review. The importance of agility and adaptive organisations continues to prevail in the results, and this requires more emphasis in literature to support this finding. It makes sense why organisation agility comes out strongly in the data collected as this highlights the flexibility of an organisation to embrace and adapt to change. It also shows the flexibility in ways of working that mirror the changes in the environment. Employees, therefore, require such speed of responsiveness from organisations as they enable them to work meaningfully, effectively, and appropriately.

In addition to discovering the drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments, the aim was to also identify which drivers of engagement yield high success for organisations and their employees and require greater focus for an engaged remote workforce. These were highlighted as leadership, communication, tools and resources and culture. Therefore, in presenting the proposed framework for driving employee engagement in remote workers, the researcher will merge the literature and the findings that have emerged in this study. This framework will be presented in chapter 7. In conclusion, a summary of the findings for each research question and the relevant sources from the literature review are presented in the table below.

Table 5: Summary of findings

Research question	Main findings/themes	Sources
1. How did organisations manage the transition to remote working?	Business preparedness; communication	Bakker and Demerouti (2006); Gallup (2013); Osoba and Linder (2021); Gupta and Chowdry (2018); Wang, Liu, Qian and Parker (2020)
2. What have been the remote working challenges experienced by employees?	Work/life balance; employee wellbeing; poor management	Elshaiekh, Hassan and Abdallah (2018); Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli, (2001); Beigi, Shirmohammadi, and Stewart (2018); Vital smarts (2020); Duxbury, Stevenson, and Higgins (2018); Shaik and Makhecha (2019); De-la-Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez (2021); Parker and Griffin (2011); Parker, Knight and Keller (2020); Kirchner, Ipsen and Hansen, (2021); Cascio (2000); Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer (2005)
3. How has employee engagement been impacted by the change to remote working?	Decreased employee engagement; increased employee engagement	Duxbury, Stevenson, and Higgins (2018); Sirota and Klein (2014); Bakker (2010); Wellins, Bernthal and Phelps (2005); Aon Hewitt (2015)

<p>4. What are the critical success factors in achieving high employee engagement in remote working environments?</p>	<p>Communication; leadership; tools and resources; culture; Organisational agility</p>	<p>Dixit and Ranjan (2020); Elshaiekh, Hassan and Abdallah, (2018); Kaushik and Guleria, (2020); Kahn (1990); Taneja, Sewell and Odom (2015); Gallup, (2013); Osbourne and Hammoud (2017); Lee (2018); Bakker, Albrecht, and Leiter (2011); Komm, Pollner, Schaninger and Sikka (2021); Aon Hewitt (2015); Osoba and Linder (2021); Harter, Schmidt, and Keyes, (2003); Flint and Hearn (2015); Sirota and Klein (2014)</p>
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CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

The purpose of the study was to understand the drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments. With remote working becoming increasingly popular and fast becoming a norm, it was essential for the researcher to unearth how this would impact organisations and employees, particularly with regards to employee engagement. Although many studies have indicated and proven the role of employee engagement in organisation performance (Gupta and Sharma, 2016), as well as the drivers of employee engagement in office-based workplaces, very few studies of this nature had been conducted with a focus on remote workers.

The aim of the study was to contribute to academia and business, as the researcher believed the challenges posed by remote working to be detrimental for organisations if they are not understood and addressed. The research objectives were to examine the current challenges of remote working that are impacting on employee engagement, to explore how organisations can overcome these challenges, to explore and prioritise the key success factors for employee engagement in remote working; and, to understand how organisations can sustain employee engagement amongst remote workers.

The researcher explored this through four research questions that focused on the management of the transition to remote working by various organisations, the remote working challenges that were experienced by employees, and how remote working has impacted employee engagement. The last question was based on what the participants believed to be the critical success factors in achieving high employee engagement in remote working environments.

The study found that the drivers of engagement in the workplace, as mentioned in theory and several studies, are largely relevant and important in remote working environments as well. Four drivers emerged to be of greater important in remote, and these prominent findings were leadership, culture, work tools and resources and communication. There was one interesting finding and insight that was highlighted as of importance to engagement in remote workers, which was not highlighted in the literature review. Organisation agility and adaptiveness, which points to an

organisation's speed of response to the changing environment, was surfaced as a very important driver for remote worker's engagement levels.

7.2 Proposed Framework

The below framework is a summary and depiction of the literature review and the findings from the research process conducted.

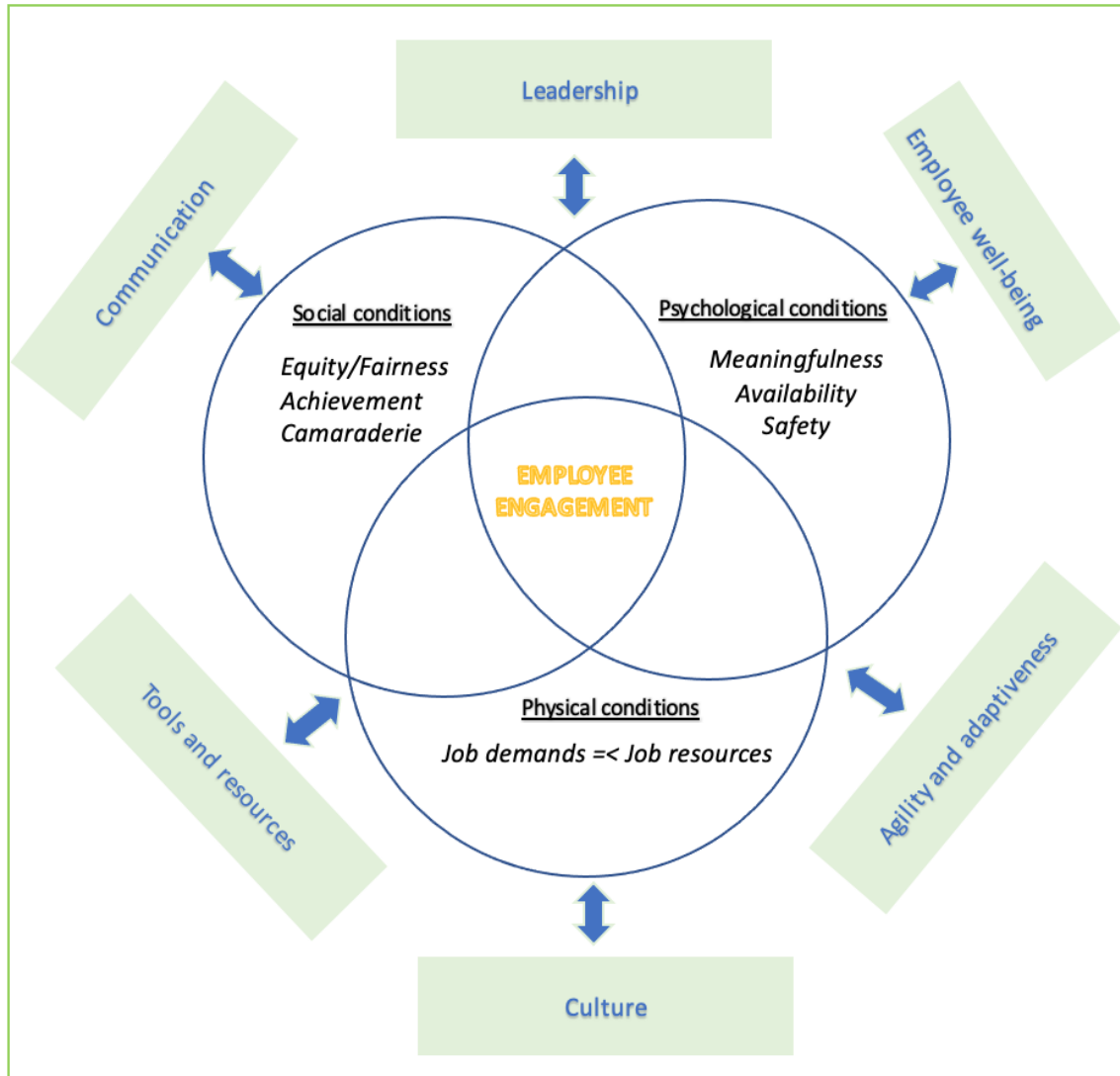


Figure 9: Framework for drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments, (Author's own)

The above framework builds on the literature summary framework (figure 2) that was shared in chapter 2.4. It was re-engineered to accommodate the findings as shared and discussed in chapter 6, to complete an ideal framework that organisations can refer to in driving employee engagement in remote working environments. In addition

to the four main themes and findings of what the drivers are, the researcher added the emerging theme of an agile and adaptive organisation as a driver of employee engagement. This speed of responsiveness is highlight of the study as it adds to how organisations can sustain employee engagement in remote working environments

The framework demonstrates that the direct influencers of engagement are the psychological factors (Kahn, 1990); the physical condition of job demands in comparison to job resources (Bakker and Demerouti (2006) and the social conditions as discussed by Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer (2005). The big blocks surrounding the circles are the drivers of employee engagement that directly influence the psychological, physical, and social conditions of an employee and ultimately impact engagement, either positively or negatively.

7.3 Recommendations for organisations and leaders

Based on the findings discussed, below are some recommendations for organisations and leaders.

Employees value a transparent and open leadership style as shown in the research. Therefore, communication continues to be an important and irreplaceable driver of employee engagement. More so nowadays where we live in an ever-changing environment. When employees know what the organisation vision and plans are with every change, they feel more secure, valued and a part of the organisation. When they feel uncertain or unclear, this breeds fear and leads to low engagement.

It is important that organisations prepare remote workers adequately and equip them sufficiently to be able to work effectively. With the issues raised of poor connectivity, power cuts, expensive data, poor or no infrastructure for internet in some areas, this raises challenges that organisations need to solve for considering the new ways of working that we find ourselves in today. Without the proper tools or resources, employees cannot engage fully and effectively, resulting in low employee engagement. It is important to raise that some organisations have resorted to fully returning employees to the office because of the challenges mentioned. This is highlighted in the research as some participants mentioned they are back to working fully at the office. The challenge this poses is that employees have experienced the

advantages of remote working, and for some this is an ideal work arrangement. For organisations to implement a 'blanket' approach for all employees and return everyone to office-based work may negatively impact employee engagement. It is important to weigh the challenges and the advantages that remote working presents and co-create solutions that work for the organisation and the employee as well.

Employee wellbeing is imperative for an engaged remote worker to thrive in their job. Therefore, organisations must be more mindful about how to prioritise their employees' wellbeing, holistically. This is primarily the manager and HR's role, who would be the gatekeepers of their teams and the organisation's health. Recently there has been many discussions around mental wellbeing and how this may be another pandemic in our generation. Therefore, this issue is an organisational issue as they rely on human beings to help them deliver their objectives. Management today, requires vulnerable, transparent, caring, and supportive leaders. In return, employees will feel safe enough to also be vulnerable, transparent, and honest, thereby creating a safe environment for all to succeed. There needs to be tailored leadership development and training to suit the shift in management styles required to be a remote manager. The researcher believes that based on the findings, such management training should prioritise issues of trust; managing performance remotely; accommodating flexibility within teams and tailoring management to suit each individual and their specific needs.

Culture is important in driving employee engagement in remote workers, as indicated in the findings. It is therefore important for organisations to focus on how to cultivate the organisation culture and maintain it even as employees work from various remote locations. Organisations need to think about how to keep people connected and always 'plugged into' the culture. This impacts on how new ways of working are crafted and implemented, the behaviours required to drive actions remotely and the roles of leaders and employees in driving culture. Organisations can also recognise and appoint change champions, in addition to HR, that can help with the remote working culture journey.

Finally, the role of leadership was emphasised throughout the research as an important driver for employee engagement in remote working environments. All the other factors and drivers of engagement that were raised, are managed by leaders,

thereby highlighting the need for leaders to own and focus on employee engagement. Organisations that value employee engagement will need to train managers on how all facets of their role impact on employee engagement, especially in remote working environments.

7.4 Limitations to research

The following limitations were noted in the study, in addition to the limitations discussed in section 4.10 of the study:

- As a result of the Covid-19 restrictions, the researcher was limited in engaging more participants than the twelve that were interviewed.
- The small sample size makes it difficult to generalise the findings
- The study was only focused on South African based organisations, also impacting the ability to generalise to other contexts
- The limited time within which the study was carried out impacts the opportunity to assess any new insights that could have emerged over time.
- The researcher only interviewed HR professionals which limits the possible diversity of insights and thoughts from a mixed group of participants.
- All the participants were female, which may have impacted diversity of thought and insights. A more gender representative sample would have been beneficial.
- The inexperience of the researcher coupled with conducting the interviews online may have impacted the quality of data collected.
- There was a wealth of information gathered in the interviews and the researcher is aware that important insights may have been neglected/omitted because of time and scope limitations.

7.5 Suggestions for future research

Future research should be focused on the following:

- Drivers of engagement in remote working environments from an employee perspective for more diverse insights
- Quantitative research in the future will help ascertain the strength of relationships between employee engagement in remote working environments and the drivers found in this study

- A study to investigate employee engagement in a hybrid model of work as this approach is currently conversational and being adopted by many organisations
- A study on the best practices for a remote and/or hybrid workforce model
- A research study to explore management competencies that enhance employee engagement in a remote workforce
- The impact of organisation agility and adaptiveness on employee engagement

7.6 Conclusion

This research achieved the overall aim and objective of answering the question of what drives employee engagement in remote working conditions. The literature review conducted, coupled with the findings that emerged, clearly show the role of 4 main themes in driving employee engagement in remote working environments. These are clear and consistent communication; adequate and appropriate tools and resources; an equipped and empowered leadership, and a well cultivated culture. The issue of organisational agility and adaptiveness emerged from the study as another imperative driver of employee engagement in this context. Further conversations and research are required to continue building an adequate body of literature and theory on the area of engagement in remote working environments, especially with the new and topical issue of hybrid model of work that many organisations are considering for adoption.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM



Informed Consent

I am currently a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science and completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA. I am conducting research across industries to understand the drivers of employee engagement in remote working environments, and I am trying to find out more about this specifically from HR professionals.

Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. The interview is expected to take approximately 30-45 minutes.

All data will be reported without identifiers. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below

Researcher Name: Loraine Ncube

Email: 20802855@mygibs.co.za

Phone: 073 876 0639

Supervisor: Andre Vermaak

Email: andreppv@mweb.co.za

Phone: 083 308 0235

Signature of participant:

Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Details

Date:

Start time:

End time:

Job title of interviewee:

Function:

Research Question 1: How did organisations manage the transition to remote working?

How did your organisation manage the process of transitioning employees to working from home?
What were the challenges faced by the organisation during the transition process?
What new policies and initiatives were put in place and what were they trying to achieve?

Research Question 2: What have been the remote working challenges experienced by employees?

What have been the challenges for employees working from home?
How has this impacted the employees?
How has the organisation responded to these challenges?

Research Question 3: How has employee engagement been impacted by the change to remote working?

How would you describe employee engagement in your organisation before the pandemic and remote working?
How have the challenges faced by employees impacted employee engagement?
How has this impacted the organisation?

Research Question 4: What are the critical success factors in achieving high employee engagement in remote working environments?

What could your organisation have done better to maintain or increase engagement during the transition?
How can remote working be improved to increase employee engagement?
What are the critical factors required to achieve employee engagement in remote workers?

APPENDIX 3: ETHICAL CLEARANCE

GIBS ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPLICATION FORM 2021/22

G. APPROVALS FOR/OF THIS APPLICATION

When the applicant is a student of GIBS, the applicant must please ensure that the supervisor and co-supervisor (where relevant) has signed the form before submission

STUDENT RESEARCHER/APPLICANT:

29. I affirm that all relevant information has been provided in this form and its attachments and that all statements made are correct.

Student Researcher's Name in capital letters: LORAINÉ NCUBE

Date: 05 Jul 2021

Supervisor Name in capital letters: ANDRE VERMAAK

Date: 05 Jul 2021

Co-supervisor Name in capital letters:

Date: 05 Jul 2021

Note: GIBS shall do everything in its power to protect the personal information supplied herein, in accordance to its company privacy policies as well the Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013. Access to all of the above provided personal information is restricted, only employees who need the information to perform a specific job are granted access to this information.

Decision:

Approved

REC comments:

Date: 27 Jul 2021

APPENDIX 4: ATLAS.TI CODEBOOK

A lot of time is spent teaching people how to use technology
Delayed acceptance of new normal.
So a lot of people didn't couldn't afford to set up a home office.
Environments were not entirely conducive for them to be able to focus and work from home.
Ergonomics
Change management required
Low engagement due to change
To change and adapt quickly
A lot more collaboration managers are checking in on us more regularly via the virtual world.
Employee grievances
Clear communication required
Communication
Communication increases employee engagement
communication is critical to successful remote working
Communication is key
Communication to reduce anxiety and speculation
Constant communication
increase in grievances due to poor communication
leaders to hold more communication sessions
open lines of communication
Opened up communication channels for struggling remote workers
putting together an external communication plan
Wellness/wellbeing communication shared
Constant communication of values and culture
Big focus on wellness and communication thereof
Pushed communication a lot
Communication and direction given by covid taskforce
Guidelines put in place to guide managers and employees with remote working
Not sure if managers engage their employees frequently
employees were highly frustrated due to miscommunication amongst teams
Align existing policies to new world
Had no policies in place to guide people on how to operate in remote working
leave of absence policies

No policies or tools to work from home
Old policies no longer relevant for remote working
Performance management, reward policies around bonus allocation
Policies in place to actually encourage certain behaviours
Update your health and safety policies
Updated ways of working policies
We didn't have a lot of policies or initiatives
Created Policy on travel during COVID
Policy on tax for remote workers outside SA
Use of landlines hindered communication
Fear of retrenchments
Insulated from retrenchments
Repurposing talent, avoiding retrenchments
Retrenchments
A lot of uncertainty
Employees experienced uncertainty and fear
Good feedback from our employees about communication in times of uncertainty
a lot of education and awareness
COVID education initiatives for employees
COVID policy
COVID taskforce
Create awareness around the need for a balanced work life
Education and awareness
Re-looked performance targets to cater to covid impacts
Impactful onboarding to enable remote workers
Look at what impact the context has on the ways of work
Memorable onboarding experience
How do we create team connections
Increase leader-employee connection times
There's less of the physical connection
Virtual initiatives to drive team connection
Work done around creating connections online
Beautiful culture
Critical is to instil the culture in remote working
Culture is a big critical factor

Poor culture
Unresponsive culture
Work being done around culture
Employees engaged for the wrong reasons before, money
Comfortable with flexible working
flexible management
Flexible work times caused a clash in expectations
Flexible working policy is important
Had flexible working arrangements policy but it was not practiced
Had flexible working arrangements policy before pandemic
had to introduce flexible working
incorporated flexible working arrangement approach
Leadership did not want flexible working until board intervened
Crucial to have flexibility of working together
formalizing a hybrid structure
Freeze increases and bonuses
There's no strict, stringent environments, like at the office
Slowly accepting new operating model and understanding it
Introduced hybrid model
Creating digital connections
Employees faces collaboration challenges
Feeling disconnected from team
Feeling lonely and not belonging
introduced our virtual coffee sessions
Isolation
Need to connect
Trust and flexibility on the part of management especially will help improve working from home
Trust creates open and honest employees
Build trust
And also that was hectic in the sense that people were waking different times
balance between working from home and working in the office
Higher engagement when we were working from home
Hybrid approach
Hybrid working approach helped increase engagement
Impacts on other people's work routines

Management boundaries

People were more productive when they were working from home

concerns around letting go of staff

Employee Assistance Program

Increase in employee fatigue

And just the risk of burnout was heavy.

Employees suffered from burnout

Engagement has decreased, impacted by burnout

Have had webinars to guide and empower employees to deal with anxiety and burnout

Some employees fell into depression

Introduced EAP

Issues around our EAP programme - not much uptake

No EAP or support was available

Low engagement due to the impact of covid and work from home

Good rewards

Merit based rewards

where you need to repurpose skills. That's what we do never retrench

Engagement has gone up with remote working

Accustomed to remote working

Can get a lot of learnings from other companies around what they are doing for their employees

Can now attract talent that can work remotely and transform business

Did not actually transition to working from home because of challenges

Employees were already capacitated to work remotely

Had been already resourced to work from home

Trusted that the company values would drive performance from wherever an employee is

Better EE than other organisations

Because I feel we held on to the belief that things would go back to normal initially.

Moving back to office as we struggled with remote working

They were grateful, they still had jobs

Became a caring organisation focused on people

Get leaders to show empathy

Leaders put people first and could not get increases

Leaders to be intentional in how they help employees

We partnered with an institution higher education institution that offered an online solution

Wellbeing initiatives improved engagement
And how you manage people remotely could have been dealt sooner rather than later.
Critical to learn how to manage productivity
issues with management of productivity
There was also a lot of problems around productivity
Managers did not know how to measure productivity
Challenges of how to manage engagement from a distance
Challenges of how to manage productivity from a distance
managers struggled managing remotely and needed to see people
Think about the employee as holistically in terms of everything that touches their lives
Employees more engaged as they realise job security and employer care
Employers showing care
Leaders to show care
Policies to ensure our employees were well taken care of
Put together 'we care' packages for employees
Caring managers helped increase employee engagement
Managers to model the right behaviours for remote working
Managers to encourage healthy work life balance
Managers to lead by example, show right behaviours
Employees needed to know if they were performing
had to drive a lot of the 360 feedback
Proactive Talent management
capacitating the leaders is crucial
encouraged leaders to communicate more than ever
how do I measure productivity
leaders need to be a bit more intentional,
option to receive shares in place of the cash incentive, just so if there is need for cash.
People needed more empathy
performance was declining
Upskill leaders to be able to lead in remote working
A lot of managers started micromanaging
issues faced were micromanaging
meetings with videos on every morning
Micromanagement
struggled from suppliers to have laptops available

Cloud sharing capabilities created
Issues around Eskom
Wifi was a challenge
Big challenge was the IT infrastructure and set up
Fix the infrastructure
Need the proper IT infrastructure
Poor IT infrastructure and connectivity for others
We could have responded faster to the changes, i.e. IT infrastructure
Internet connectivity issues
No cloud access
We didn't invest a lot in technology. I think we could have done better there.
Cell phone and data policy
Data challenge
How to manage employee data usage
Organisation struggled to handle the data challenges
Organisation did well in terms of capacitating people to be able to work from home.
Behind the success of remote working is trust
Blurred lines were a challenge
Help employees manage time and 'blurred lines'
Another issue was not being able to separate from home life
Frustrations with multiple roles whilst working at home